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The Necessity of Love

12:31b to 13:3

The necessity of love DIG: Based on Paul's opening words in this passage, why is love so important? Why are even the best gifts worthless if they aren't given in love? The love that Paul describes in this passage is selfless and always faithful. Why is it so difficult to demonstrate that kind of love? What does Paul say about the need for spiritual maturity?

REFLECT: What does exhibiting true love require on your part? What are some things that keep believers from showing their love for others? What can you learn from Messiah's example about loving without limits? How would you describe unconditional love? When have you seen that in your life? In what ways can the love of ADONAI free you to love others?

The loveless person produces nothing, is nothing, and gains nothing.



Gregory Nazianzen, one of the three celebrated Capadocians of the fourth century, a defender of the Nicene faith, and one of the most celebrated orators of the early Church, writes in regard to this chapter on **love** that here we may read what **Paul** said about **Paul**. It is true: only a man in whose heart **the Spirit of God** has kindled a faith like **Paul's** could evidence a **love** like **Paul's** and on the basis of **his** own experience of that **love**, record **its** glories in what may be called **the Psalm of Love**. **Paul's** heart lies open in this chapter. Here is the power, faith working through **love**, that sent **him** over land and sea to preach to

others the unsearchable riches of **Yeshua Messiah**. Here is the inner strength that sustained **him** amid all **his** labors, burdens, trials, sufferings, and persecutions. Here is what enabled **him** to overcome hunger and hardship, false friends and bitter foes, bodily injury and dangers of death. We cannot understand this **man** unless we understand **his** faith and its fruit of **love**. All of **his** great joys and abilities, **his** high and holy apostleship in the Church, **his** amazing task and **his** astounding success - all of it came to be as a result of **his love**. This we must realize when **he** tells **the Corinthians** that besides the instruction of the spiritual gifts themselves, **he** now shows **them** the inner, spiritual power that must energize all of these gifts if they are to be of any real benefit to the Church.³⁹³

But now I will show you the best way of all (12:31b). Chapter 13 is the great “love chapter,” just as **Hebrews 11** is the great “faith chapter.” **Paul’s** shift to the first person, **I**, is significant. It keeps **his** words from the appearance that **he** is scolding **the Corinthians** for **their** deplorable failure to **love** one another (although that was certainly true enough). **He will show** (Greek: *deiknumi*) **them the best way of all**, **he** intends to illustrate love from **his** own apostolic life rather than offer snappy little sound bites about **it**. Each verse here begins with a conditional clause (Greek: *ean*, a conditional particle meaning *if*) stressing the use of hyperbole. Each verse concludes with **a negative consequence**. The last two use the word **nothing, I am nothing**, and **I gain nothing**. This does more than invalidate the gift; it touches a person’s very being.³⁹⁴

1. Tongues without love are nothing. As stated above, **Paul** used hyperbole to emphasize **his** point. **He** made several extreme statements to underscore the absolute priority of loving others. **If (ean) I speak in the tongues of men, even angels (13:1a).** **Paul** is saying, “**If** I could do this.” **He** wasn’t saying that **he** did, **he** was merely using exaggerated language to make a point. However, many believe otherwise, suggesting **the gift of tongues** involves some angelic or heavenly language. Indeed, most charismatics believe that **the gift of tongues** is a private prayer language, a heavenly language, known only to **God**. But there is no basis in the text for such a view. **Paul** was making a hypothetical case, just as in the subsequent verses, where he speaks about knowing **all mysteries and knowledge** (even **Paul** could not make that claim), giving all **his** possessions to the poor, and giving **his body to be burned**. **Paul** was speaking theoretically, suggesting that even if those things were true (which they were not), without **love** they would be meaningless. To make **his** point about the necessity of **love**, **Paul** was trying to stretch **his** examples to the extreme. Besides, there is no evidence in Scripture that **angels** use a heavenly language. When **angels** appear in the Bible, **they** communicate in normal language (**Luke 1:11-20, 26-27** and **2:8-14**).

Nowhere does the Bible teach that **the gift of tongues** is anything other than human languages. Nor is there any suggestion that **the true gift of tongues** described in **Corinth** (to see link click [Do - Tongues are a Sign](#)) was any different from the miraculous **signs** described in the book of **Acts** (see the commentary on [Acts AI - The Ruach Ha'Kodesh Comes at Shavu'ot](#)). The Greek word in both places is *glossa*. At **Shavu'ot** it is clear that the disciples were speaking in known **languages**. Unbelieving **Jews** who were in Jerusalem for **Shavu'ot** were **confused, because each one heard the believers speaking in their own language (Acts 2:6)**. **Luke** went on to name some fifteen different countries and areas whose **language** was being spoken. In order to be a meaningful **sign**, **these** must have been Gentile foreign **languages**, not some kind of heavenly language.³⁹⁵

Paul's strategy was to place in center stage the gift that **the Corinthians** prized the most and that was causing the greatest disruption in their public worship, and bring it down several notches by showing its emptiness without **love**. **But if I lack love, I have become merely a blaring brass or a cymbal clanging (13:1b)**. It becomes a hollow performance that falls flat. Those who speak in **tongues** without **love** become something other than what **they** intended.³⁹⁶ In other words, **tongues** apart from **love** are just a bunch of noise.

2. Prophecy, knowledge, and faith without love are nothing. Continuing **his** hyperbole, **Paul** tells us that even **the great gift of prophecy** must be ministered to in **love**. **If (ean) I have the gift of prophecy**. The most gifted believer is not exempt from the mitzvah of **love**. If anything, he is even *more* obligated to do so. **From someone to whom people entrust much, they still ask more (Luke 12:48)**. Of all people, **the prophet** should **speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15)**.

Balaam was a **prophet of God**. **He** knew the true **God** and **he** knew **God's** truth, but **he** had no **love** for **God's** people. With little hesitation **he** agreed to curse **the Israelites** in return for a generous payment by Balak, king of Mo'ab. Because **God** could not convince **His prophet** not to do such a terrible thing, **He** sent **an angel** to stop **the prophet's donkey (Numbers 22:16-34)**. Several other times **Balaam** would have cursed **Isra'el** had he not been prevented from doing so by **God**. But what **the prophet** failed to do through cursing **Isra'el** **he** accomplished by misleading **them**. Because **he** led **Isra'el** into idolatry and immorality, **Balaam** was put to death (**Numbers 31:8 and 16**). **Balaam** knew **God's Word**, spoke **God's Word**, and feared **God** in a self-protecting way, but **he** had no **love** for **God** and no **love** for **His people**.

Jeremiah's ministry was in stark contrast to **Balaam's**. **He** was the weeping prophet, not because of **his** own problems, which were great, but because of the wickedness of **his**

people, because of **their** refusal to turn to **ADONAI**, and because of the punishment **he** had to **prophesy** against **them**. **He wept** over **them** much as **Yeshua** would later weep over **Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44)**. Early in **his** ministry **Jeremiah** was so moved by the spiritual plight of **his people** that **he** cried out: **My grief has no cure, I am sick at heart . . . the daughter of my people (Jerusalem) is broken, and it's tearing me to pieces; everything looks dark to me, horror seizes me . . . I wish my head were made of water and my eyes were a fountain of tears, so that I could cry day and night over the slain of the daughter of my people (Jeremiah 8:18 and 21, 9:1)**. **Jeremiah** was a **prophet** with a broken **heart**, a spiritual **heart**, a **loving heart**.³⁹⁷

Paul employs hyperbole in referring to **knowing all mysteries**. **He** understands some **mysteries (Romans 11:25; First Corinthians 15:51)**, particularly **the mystery of God** revealed in the cross (**2:1** and **7, 4:1**), but **he** does not **know all things (Romans 11:33-35)**, or have all **knowledge**, since **he** concedes that **we know only in part and prophesy only in part (13:9)**. But even if **Paul** were to have this prized **knowledge** revealed to **him** by **ADONAI**, it becomes meaningless information without **love**. Only **love** can understand the wisdom of the cross. **I may know all mysteries, know all things, have all faith - enough to move mountains; but if I lack love, I am nothing (13:2)**.³⁹⁸ That sums it up very well.

3. Benevolence and martyrdom without love are nothing. *Agape love* is always self-sacrificing, but self-sacrifice does not necessarily come from **love**. Throughout the history of the Church certain groups and movements have believed that self-denial, self-humiliation, and even self-affliction, in themselves, bring spiritual merit. Many cults and pagan religions place great emphasis on the giving up of possessions, on sacrifice of various sorts, and on religious acts of supposed humility, self-deprivation, suffering, or isolation. Even for believers, however, such things are more than worthless without **love**. In fact, without **love** they are anything but selfless. The real focus of such practices is not **God**, nor others, but self - either in the form of legalistic fear of not doing those things or for the praise and imagined blessing for doing them. The motive is self, and is neither spiritual nor **loving**.

If (ean) I give away everything that I own to feed the poor would not be a spiritual deed if not done out of genuine **love**, no matter how great the sacrifice or how many people were **fed**. In the Torah there are three main tithes which equaled about twenty-five percent (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Cx - Do Not Neglect the Levite**), so **Paul's** illustration suggested unheard of generosity. Even so, the people who received such generosity would have full stomachs, but the giver would **gain nothing** if not done in **love**. Both his bank account and his spiritual account would be empty. **Yeshua's** command to give secretly (see

the commentary on **The Life of Christ Do - When You Give to the Needy, Do Not Do It to be Honored by Others**) helps to protect us from being tempted by some of those false, unscriptural and unloving motives. Benevolence with **love** is of great worth; benevolence without **love** is **nothing**.³⁹⁹ The supposed self-sacrifice of giving away all of one's possessions is intensified by the extreme illustration of **giving away** one's own **body**. Finally, **Paul** says: **If I even hand over my body to be burned; but if I lack love, I gain nothing (13:3).**

When reading 13:4-7, replace the word "love" with your name. What actions do you need to take to make what you just read to be true?