



# The Greatest of These Is Love

## *The Power of God's Love*

### About the Story

Today's passage is one of the more famous passages from Paul's letters. The poetic and beautiful love language in this passage has frequently been used in weddings and commitment services, and it has even appeared in several films and been set to music, including Hal Hopson's arrangement "The Gift of Love." However, one might be surprised to learn that Paul was not discussing the love of one another in a union of two lovers, but the importance of the Corinthians placing the love of one another first.

### The Point:

**God's love is the greatest gift we can receive and share.** Paul's poetic description of God's love was written to encourage the young church in Corinth to show God's love to one another. His powerful description encourages them to let go of their squabbles and focus on this vision of the kingdom. We are also called and encouraged to share God's love with one another!

Last week, we learned about the divisions in the Corinthian church. The passage for this week is a direct address to the issues the church is facing. Paul was crystal clear in naming what was happening and what to do about it.

Word had gotten back to Paul that the Corinthians were not expressing love towards each other. They were using their spiritual gifts to one-up each other instead sharing them for the betterment of community life. The Corinthians were being selfish and self-indulgent. They were behaving self-righteously, as if the things that they do will save them. Paul pointed them back to the self-emptying love that Christ poured out for each of them and strongly reminded them this love must come first. In fact, without love, all of these other gifts of the Spirit are nothing.

The placement of this explanation of love comes immediately after Paul exhorts these believers to respect each other's spiritual gifts, and the importance of a variety of gifts.

Paul founded the church in Corinth around the year 50 CE and wrote this letter from Ephesus some time later. There appear to be a series of letters that go back and forth, but we do not know what the Corinthians have written to him or anything else that Paul had previously written.

It is difficult to make wide sweeping assumptions or to make a direct connection to life today with an incomplete picture of what communication has happened. However, the importance of this letter to address real-world arguments or misunderstandings of the gospel has had a long-lasting impact.

Last Week/ Next Week

Last week's reading in Acts showed us the birth of the church at Corinth, and then focused on Paul's encouragement of unity in the face of conflict. In today's reading, Paul shows how love should be the foundation of a church community. Next week, Paul focuses his teaching on clarifying the concept of resurrection. The Corinthians were arguing about this belief, and Paul points out that it is not a matter of just raising the dead, but of new life in God's kingdom.

Opening Prayer

God of love, your spirit helped bind together the Corinthian Church even when they argued and had conflict among themselves. Bind us together in that same spirit, centering us on the never-ending love of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Into the Story

Think of your favorite song about love. It could be a hymn, praise song, or secular song. What is the song saying about love? What themes and loving relationships are commonly sung about? What do you notice about the themes and loving relationships in songs from pop culture? How are "love" songs and hymns about love the same, and how are they different? Go around the room and share your answers.

Learning the Story

*Paul emphasizes the centrality of love to a community experiencing conflict. Then he offers a description by which we will recognize love.*

**Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 – The Gift of Love**

- ❓ Have you heard this passage before? In what contexts?
- ❓ Paul explains what behaviors and expectations a believer in Christ would typically exhibit. He concludes that none of these characteristics matter if we do not have love towards one another. Why do you think love matters so much to Paul?
- ❓ Unfortunately, we do not know what disagreements or incidents were happening in the Corinthian church that Paul was responding to. What type of disagreements do you imagine could have been happening in the Corinthian church that led Paul to write this passage?

**Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7– Qualities of Love**

- ❓ What is love? Remember, this is not a wedding sermon. Think about the words Paul uses to describe love. Imagine he is speaking to your neighborhood. Which words do you need to hear and remember about how you treat your neighbors? What does your neighborhood need to hear?
- ❓ Imagine Paul is speaking to your congregation or small group. What words do you need to hear about how you treat others in your group or church? What does your congregation need to hear?

**Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 – Love Never Ends**

- ❓ Have you heard the expression that the church is the “body of Christ?” This language comes from 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul explains there is “one body, many members.” As the body of Christ, there is an understanding that each person has different gifts. What do you think Paul is suggesting by saying that different gifts will not last forever?
- ❓ In verses 11-12, Paul talks about being a child and seeing in a mirror. What do you think he means by these metaphors?
- ❓ Do you agree with Paul’s assertion that out of faith, hope, and love, love is the greatest? Why or why not?

**Bible Connections**

- ✚ Paul’s planting of the church in Corinth and the subsequent leaders who served there are discussed in Acts 18:2 and 18.
- ✚ The author of 1 Peter encourages the community to love one another (1 Peter 4:1-11).
- ✚ Moses sees God face to face (Exodus 33:11).

**Living the Story: Fellowship**

Form a circle. Pick one person to start. That person looks at someone in the circle and says, “\_\_\_\_ [person’s name], I love you! I am grateful that you are here!” Then that person turns to someone else in the circle and says the same thing. Continue until everyone has gone, with the last person saying the message to the first person who went. After everyone has gone, take a moment to discuss how it made you feel. How often do you tell people that you love them outside of family and/or romantic contexts?

**Closing Prayer**

For the closing prayer, select a hymn or praise song about love and read or sing it together as your closing prayer. Some suggestions: “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” “What Wondrous Love Is This?” “The Gift of Love,” or “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love.”

**Closing Prayer Supplies**

- ✚ Enough hymnals or songbooks for each person present
- ✚ Alternatively, printed out lyrics to a pre-chosen song

**Bible Nuts & Bolts: What Are the Epistles?**

The Epistles are a collection of 21 books in the New Testament. An epistle is a letter, and many of the epistles were letters written to churches to help solve problems or to encourage them in their ministry. These letters are often called occasional letters because they were written to address specific situations (occasions). The first 13 epistles were written by Paul, or by someone writing in his name. Writing in someone else’s name was common during this time because it gave added authority to the letter. The anonymous Book of Hebrews is usually called an epistle, though some consider it to be a sermon instead. The remaining epistles are called the Catholic Epistles because they were written to a general audience.

At Home

- ✝ As you go about your week, pay attention to how you hear love being talked about, whether it is on television, a song on the radio, or in a book. Reflect on how love is understood in our culture and how it may be similar or different to the love talked about in today's reading.
- ✝ Write a poem or short piece of prose about how you experience God's love in your life and community.
- ✝ How can you share God's love with others? Make a list, and then try to follow through with the list this week!

Daily Readings**Sunday – Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

Paul declares that the greatest of these is love. Call or send a letter to someone you know going through a rough time and tell them how much you love them.

**Monday – Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-33**

Paul writes about building community through worship. How does worship build your church community?

**Tuesday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

Paul proclaims the resurrection of Christ Jesus. How can you proclaim Jesus through your actions? Think of something you can do, then do it!

**Wednesday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-19**

Paul elaborates on the resurrection. Say a prayer for someone you know who has recently lost a loved one.

**Thursday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26**

Death is destroyed. Sing or read a favorite Easter song as a prayer.

**Friday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:30-41**

Paul speaks about the resurrection of the body. What do you think heaven will be like? Write a poem, make a collage, or draw a picture.

**Saturday – Read 1 Corinthians 15:42-50**

Paul continues his discussion of the resurrection. Say a prayer of thanksgiving for all that God has done, and most of all, for sending his Son, Jesus Christ!