

BIBLE BACKGROUND

1Corinthians 12:31b; 13:1-13

Verse 31b

Yet, I will show you the highest way of all.

The apostle, having discussed spiritual gifts and the unity of them all in the body of Christ, with special regard for the persons with humbler gifts, he now proposes the **Highest way**, gives us our word for hyperbole. Love is not a replacement of spiritual gifts but the way they should be used, as Paul said in 12:7,25.

The structure of chapter 13 is:

Extraordinary gifts without love is worth nothing (1-3)

What love is and is not (4-7)

Gifts are limited and temporal but love is eternal (8-13)

Verses 1-3

If I speak in the languages of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to be burned but do not have love, I gain nothing.

One could have great spiritual gifts but if no love then Christian activity is prone to being boastful, or a cold performance of duty, as was the case for the older brother in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Love is directed at a person. We can be task-driven or gift-driven and forget the people we are to serve. **Speaking in the languages of men or of angels** (14:2) refers to known languages and heavenly languages. He has in mind not normal speech but oratorical skills and mysterious, heavenly utterances. Yet, without love, their use is lost and they become empty **clanging** sounds. **The gong** is a translation of the literal copper or brass. Temple worship both Jewish and pagan, employed such instruments. Paul employs the verb ηχων, **ringing out**, to emphasize a dramatic sound that draws attention to the performer but in the end is not useful or helpful.

It can be seen here that **prophecy** is a gift of revelation; there was a more direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit that provided the church with a foundational theology and understanding of the gospel (Eph 2:20). Hence, Paul speaks of mysteries and knowledge. Prophecy would have been a prized gift and Paul urged people to seek it (12:31; 14:5). Along with such an extraordinary gift, Paul lists **faith**, the kind of **faith that can move mountains** (Mk 11:23). Without love, the extraordinary Christian is **nothing**. Again, Paul says that he would **gain nothing** if he had exceptional generosity and **gave all he possessed to the poor** or was endowed with such courage the he could be martyred through **burning**.

Certain people at Corinth were seeking status through emphasizing their gifts and skills exercised in the church. If there is pride and the desire for recognition when exercising spiritual gifts rather than the love that leads to building people up, then not only are the actions compromised but there is present self-idolatry. Between the person and the person served, is Christ. Actions must proceed from the through him so that they become actions of love. It is this sense that **nothing** ουθέν and ουδέν is to be understood. The actions are good ones and contribute greatly to the church and the Father's mission but on the personal level, there is something fake. The Christian lacks authenticity because the vital inner disposition of love is absent. Without love, self-glorification takes its place when all actions must be motivated by love to count before God (16:14). Why is this? Because of Christ. He showed believers that love proceeds from the gospel and is the inner change that the Holy Spirit grants to them, displaying itself in humble service (Jn 13:34; Phi 2:2-5)

Verses 4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy; love does not boast; it does not puff up. It does not behave disgracefully, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in injustice but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, trusts all things, hopes for all things, perseveres in all things.

Love is patient, love is kind. Love is personified here with two opening statements about it, expressed positively (Gal 5:22). **Patience** has to do with enduring others who may be difficult, showing forbearance. Kindness is self-explanatory but amongst some of the believers, pride may have made them rough and sharp-tongue or their party spirit may have led them to honour some but despise others.

The next three negatives: **It does not envy; love does not boast; it does not puff up**, have to do with seeking recognition and the admiration of others. **To envy** is to seek something a person believes is missing in his life and based on a false admiration of personal qualities or status. Love will gladly acknowledge the achievements of others and their giftedness. **Boasting** is clear and the word for **puff up** φυσιοῦται gives us the word physical and its cognates. The image is of a chest being puffed out.

Another five negatives follow. **It does not behave disgracefully** has been translated as rude but is much deeper here. Paul is thinking of loveless behaviour that dishonours people, shows disrespect and puts people down. This applies in the sexual area or indeed, where shame is a possibility. **It is not self-seeking** is straight forward and reminds us of Paul's injunctions to not seek one's own interests but consider others above yourself (Phil 2:3; Rom 12:3,10). The third and fourth negatives are connected: **it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs**. The wrong use of anger includes quick-temperedness and over sensitivity, which lead to sudden and sometimes unprovoked flare-ups. The Christian is exhorted to not settle scores, to keep a mental list of infringements (Eph 4:26). The fifth negative closes with a positive, adversative statement: **It does not delight in injustice but rejoices with the truth**. Unfair interaction, unethical behaviour or unfair contracts and agreements may have been behind the need to settle matters in secular courts (6:6). Delighting in an advantageous deal at the expense of a more vulnerable believer, is condemned here. There must be truth between Christians, no deceptive behaviour but complete transparency. Deals will, then, be carried out in love.

In short, love is never abusive, nor touchy or explosive or mean but generous, complimentary, well-mannered and respectful, doing everything to build up the other.

In verse 7 we see the triad of faith, hope and love expressed in four positive statements. Love is built on faith in Christ's saving work and the hope of salvation. In each situation, love is active continuously so that all things could be translated as always. **It bears all things, trusts all things, hopes all things, perseveres in all things**. **Bears** στέγει all things has the kernel of passing over in silence or covering. There may be much irritation but the loving Christian will speak up or protest in serious situations only. Christians do this because of trust and hope. **Trust** cannot mean gullibility but trust in the Lord's continuing work in the Christian community which enables believers to understand that reacting to everything is not necessary. Trust in the Lord leads to trust in his people who will respond to the word. Putting the best construction of another's actions and assuming good motives are the aims of trust borne of love. Naturally, this leads to **hope** that the best will come emerge from others as the Spirit works. With these three things in place, perseverance can flourish. Endurance is built on the understanding, which is by faith, that Christ is maturing his church. If these four things are meant in a more universal way, outside the church, then it means enduring the insults and hardships imposed by others out of love.

Verses 8-12

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I

became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Paul has spoken of knowledge puffing up the believer but love builds up (8:1). Love is eternal. Other skills and gifts come to an end. Achievements here are incomplete, marred by false motives and bad attitudes. Our projects are not perfect though we have an ideal in mind. Like growing up. In eternity we look back on efforts of any kind the way an adult will be amused by the immature drawings our mothers kept when we were at kindergarten. There will be a time when we face God, when we see Christ exactly as he is and will be made like him.

Yet all things motivated by love will be purified, the imperfections removed and then displayed in heaven. Faith and hope remain for us now while all other things are transitory. But love is the greatest for it creates, builds, improves, grows, develops a person to be like God.

Verse 13

Now, faith, hope and love, these three things remain and endure forever but love is the greatest of them all.

Paul use the tripartite formula elsewhere as a simple but effective way of summarizing the Christian life (Col 1:4,5; 1Thess 1:3; 5:8; Rom 5:1-5; Heb 10:22-24). He has already done this in verse 7. This triad abides since all the other gifts of the Spirit, such as healing and prophesying, will come to an end at the consummation. In one sense, when hope is fulfilled and faith has revealed to it the sight of what it has believed, their need may be thought to cease. However, the light and love of God will still be given and received by saints in glory. The relationship of trust and the hope of God's future goodness and blessings must continue. Hence, **faith endures forever**. This is a translation of abide, literally, remain. Paul could be thinking of how faith will always be present in the Christian's life. When we think of the adverb always, we are stating the eternal quality of faith. It begins in the believer's life now but remains in him or her forever, since God's love in Christ, poured into the heart, remains forever (Rom 5:5).

Faith is the trust the believer has in the person of Christ and his accomplishments to save humanity. Much is said throughout the New Testament about faith. Matthew and Mark in particular see it as the point of entry into Christ's power to heal and to save. It is like a trigger that springs open a door to God's grace in Christ. In John, it is the act of believing in Christ as the very Son of God and which leads to eternal life. In Hebrews, it is a trust in the resurrection power of God that rests solely on the promises of God without the requirement of proof. In Paul, faith is the opposite of works or human effort. It is trust in the accomplishments of Christ and not in the law that gives a person access to God's grace. Faith, and only faith, is the way a person receives salvation, thus confessing that salvation truly is an act of God and a pure gift.

Hope is the certain expectation of salvation, of the lives of believers kept safe in Christ, in God's eternal kingdom. Earlier, Paul said that love always hopes (7). Love has the power to endure adversity, opposition and attack because it hopes for a final victory and resolution to all conflicts.

Hope is like the others side of faith with the element of the future. As such it is one of the three highest gifts of the Spirit and directly comes from God (Rom 12:13; Eph 2:12; 4:4). With love, it can patiently endure the hurt of others, persecution and loss. Considered alone, hope is the firm belief of a benefit in the future (9:10; Rom 8:20). In the Christian sense it is hope of being brought into the glory of God (Rom 5:2). Since future glory already belongs by faith to the Christian at the present time, the hope of glory is actually within the Christian, with Christ himself (Col 1:27; 1Tim 1:1).

Going beyond the glorious presence of God, hope attaches itself to the promise of salvation (1Thess 5:8; Tit 1:1; 3:7), which amplified, includes adoption as sons and daughters of God and the renewal of our bodies (Rom 8:23). This redemption of our mortal and sinful state, existing in our bodies, is part of the manifestation of God as he grants us the righteousness of Christ and

Christians look forward to this becoming apparent in them at the resurrection (2Cor 3:9,12; Gal 5:5).

Because future glory is unseen, hope is required (Rom 8:24). It follows then that hope leads to the fruit of patience in tribulations (Rom 12:12; 1Thess 1:3; Tit 2:13), and boldness from the certainty of the promised transformation to be experienced at the resurrection (2Cor 3:12,18).

In common usage, hope is always tentative and uncertain. Since the resurrection has been secured by Christ, hope is secure in him, which produces great confidence in the believer. More than confidence, hope gives rise to excitement and expectation about sharing in the victory of Christ as Christians wait (Rom 5:5; 8:23; 12:12). Hope can never disappoint a Christian.

Finally, like faith and love, hope remains. This may seem strange when hope is realized at the resurrection and the believer sees God face to face but hope endures forever because of the nature of God. Above, we mentioned that God is hope and Christ is in the believer as the hope of glory. Because God is faithful and he is the God of hope, in glory, the child of God always hopes that God will continue to maintain this glory. Hope in the Christian is in God and is continually open to him and to increasing glory.

Love. What if God being able to speak in languages of the world and the sound of molecules and stars but had no love etc? What would he be? A machine, an intelligence, a prime mover, maybe even evil, satanic?

All that motivated Jesus was love just as all that motivated God was love (Jn 3:16). God is love as John wrote (1Jn 4:8,16). Therefore, Christ became the blue-print of what Christian love is. He spoke of the two chief commandments, which were really the one commandment of love.

Love unites the three great gifts of the Spirit (7). While faith and hope are not generated by human beings, love is. It is a different gift of the Holy Spirit, more like prophecy or healing. Yet **love never ends** (8) and in Paul's mind, it has an eternal quality, like faith and hope. The whole chapter is really about what a Christian is as a child of God. The Holy Spirit is working on the Christian to create something new and like Christ himself. Presently, Christians are only partially constructed **but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears**. Paul is vitally concerned about what Christians will be in eternity. He is answering the question: what will be become in the presence of God and his glory? The answer is, a loving person shaped in the likeness of Christ. It is in this sense of the nature of the Christian's enduring existence in eternity that Paul can say that **love is the greatest of the eternal triad of faith, hope and love**.

Love is the subject of chapter 13, as describe above. It is the very heart of God the Father and motivated his acts of creation and redemption (1Jn 4:16). Since love has been fully displayed and offered in Christ, it is the pattern of behavior Christians adopt in their approach to all aspects of life. It is the outward display of faith and hope; like a chemical reaction from two ingredients. Love has to come from faith and hope (Gal 5:6).

Faith and hope endure as explained above but their importance diminishes even while they continue because they reach their goal and the Christian can say, **I know fully**. But love continues unabated, growing ever stronger and glory transforms the Christian through **seeing face to face**. Paul is thinking of an ineffable and eternal experience of being like God and thus being of God and completely united to him. Love does this, it unites the glorified Christian to his or her Lord. The being of the Christian and the being of God merge yet maintain their distinctions. This is the goal of love.

As Paul explains, love is not a warm, fuzzy sensation, an emotion only, rather, actual practical behaviours and attitudes that have spring from sacrificial giving of oneself. It is being wholly for the other as the Christian is wholly for the Lord, that such unity with Christ and with his children takes place. Not a togetherness but a binding with each other and a bodily union in the one body of Christ (Gal 3:28). Such love starts with concrete actions and in eternity reach their zenith in

such a mysterious way that as Christians serve the other without consciousness of self, they are, indeed, serving Christ himself (Matt 25:40).