

Study 20. 1 Cor 12:31-13:13

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Big idea: love is more important than gifts

Introduction

This passage has three main parts, which can be summarised like this:

- vv1-3 The Priority of love (over gifts)
- vv4-7 The characteristics of love
- vv8-13 The permanence of love (over gifts)

Paul's main point is that love is more important than gifts, and that should show itself in the way the church worships.

Observation, interpretation and implications

Because of the nature of this passage, we are breaking with our normal structure (Observation/Interpretation then Implications) and instead considering the three sections one by one and thinking about their implications along the way.

Read verses 1-3

- Why does Paul specifically mention tongues, prophecy, knowledge and faith in these verses? (Consider the context in the letter)
- What is the problem with the exercise of gifts without love?
 - What does Paul mean when he says 'I am nothing' and 'I gain nothing'?
- In pairs or groups of three, discuss:
 - What would it look like to exercise gifts with and without love? (Think in particular of your own gifts). Try and be specific about the difference.
 - Do you think we tend to prefer to have great gifts, or great love? Why?

Read verses 4-7

There are fifteen descriptions of love here, and you probably won't have time to consider each in detail.

In groups of 2-3, take one or two descriptions of love and unpack it:

- What does it mean to be (patient, kind, not boastful, etc.)?
- What other Bible passages or themes will inform our understanding of this characteristic?
- In what ways is this also a description of God?
- What Bible passages will inform your understanding of that?

Some examples:

God is patient

Exodus 34:6 says the Lord is 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...'

God is kind

Titus 3:4 - 'But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.'

Luke 6:35 - 'love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'

In Christ, God keeps no record of wrongs

2 Cor. 5:19: 'that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.'

- Do you tend to think of God in this way? Why/why not?

- What will help you grow in love?

The three tips from Sunday were to:

- a) Remember that God is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. towards us.
- b) Remember that he is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. towards people we need to love.
- c) Remember that he is patient/kind/slow to anger, etc. even when we struggle to love.

- In what ways can you imagine this helping?

Report back to the whole group what you've learned.

Read verses 8-13

- How does love compare with gifts in this section? What distinction is Paul emphasising?
- When will the gifts of tongues, knowledge, prophecy end, and why?
- In what way can we say that love is the greatest of the virtues?

Prayer ideas

Pray for one another to grow in love, as individuals and as a group.