

EXEGETICAL GUIDE



1 Corinthians 13



BE UNITED
IN CHRIST

Be United in Christ

Exegetical Guide

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

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Exegetical Guide 1 Corinthians 13:1–8
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Be United in Christ

Exegetical Guide

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

A Loving Foundation

Jesus said to His followers, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). But love can be defined many different ways. A Biblical definition of love is critical to have and live out.

If one has the right outward signs of a right relationship with God, that person is nothing if he does not show love to others. Love was the motivation for Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Sacrifice without love is of no benefit. It is only through a proper understanding and application of how God wants us to love one another that we can Be United in Christ.

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HOW TO USE A BE UNITED IN CHRIST EXEGETICAL GUIDE

An exegetical guide models how to study a passage of Scripture. The Introduction provides the context, while **Connection to Be United in Christ** highlights the text's importance for Christian unity. The Passage presents the Biblical text being studied.

We begin by **Studying the Passage** because God's messengers must convey God's words accurately. The Passage Comparison presents the text in its original Greek or Hebrew alongside seven English translations. Comparing translations allows for a better understanding of the passage and provides insight into the intent of the original Biblical manuscripts. The Structural Layout divides the passage into its component parts, because to understand what God said we must understand how He said it. It is an essential step in Bible study, but do not be discouraged if this section seems unfamiliar or daunting. The Narrative Flow explains the Biblical author's flow of thought through the passage. The Passage Overview then presents a simple outline that will form the foundation of subsequent outlines and the sermon manuscript itself. The Passage Focus distills the text into a statement that will be the main idea of the sermon. We then identify several Resources to further your study.

Having studied the passage, we are ready to begin **Preparing the Sermon**. Good preaching feeds God's people on God's Word, so our messages must be both healthful and appetizing. This is why this section begins by laying out several Sermon Ingredients that will be used to prepare a nutritious and appealing message. We must present God's Word accurately and clearly so that God's people will understand it with their minds, embrace it in their hearts, and apply it to their lives. The Passage Outline presents the passage's structure and flow, while the Passage Details provide the grammatical, historical, and theological information needed to understand and teach the passage. The message is then fortified with Applications and seasoned with Illustrations. These ingredients are combined to prepare a spiritual meal to feed God's children. The Sermon Outline rephrases the Passage Outline to make it more understandable to an audience. The Sermon Manuscript for Your Use then offers an example of how the passage might be preached. Then we identify several Sermon Examples that model good preaching on the text.

Thus, an exegetical guide presents both a comprehensive analysis of one particular Bible passage and a model for studying and preaching Scripture. We pray that God will use this guide to promote love for Him, fidelity to His Word, and unity in His church.

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INTRODUCTION

The city of Corinth was located on a narrow land bridge between northern and southern Greece. The city had access to harbors on the Asian and Roman sides of the peninsula. These north-south and east-west crossroads made Corinth a wealthy city based on its perfect location for trade. The free flow of commerce, combined with a greedy desire to make money, led to a competitive, prideful spirit in the city as well as in the church. God's people were in need of unity.

The apostle Paul opens his letter with a standard greeting (1 Corinthians 1:1–9). The rest of the first section (1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21) encourages the Corinthians to seek unity, embrace God's wisdom, and put away their pride. In chapters 5–6, Paul addresses several issues that stem from the church's disunity and pride, and in chapters 7–14 he answers several questions about marriage, food sacrificed to idols, and spiritual gifts.

Between the discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12 and the proper use of those spiritual gifts in chapter 14, Paul defines love (1 Corinthians 13:1–8). The placement of this passage reveals his desire to help the Corinthians use their spiritual gifts to truly encourage the church instead of having a reason to boast. They need a proper understanding of love to correctly use their gifts for the good of the whole church.

Paul concludes the body of the letter with a discussion about the gospel message and the necessity of the resurrection to the Christian life (1 Corinthians 15:1–58). He ends with an explanation of his future plans and final greetings to and from various people (1 Corinthians 16:1–24).

Paul addresses numerous issues with the members of the Corinthian church. Pride, disunity, and conflict are at the root of their problems. Allowing love to guide their actions toward one another will stifle the Corinthians' pride, dissolve their disunity, and resolve their conflicts.

Connection to Be United in Christ

The members of the Corinthian church need a foundation stronger than spiritual gifts or wisdom for them to experience Christian unity. They need a Biblical understanding of love, or none of the issues they struggle with will ever be completely solved. The world takes notice of unity based on love (John 13:35). When God's people love one another well despite their differences, the glory of God is revealed throughout the heavens and earth. Paul encourages the Corinthians to practice Biblical love so that they can Be United in Christ.

PASSAGE: 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–8

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.¹

¹ While there are many fine Bible translations, the New American Standard Bible (NASB) is used here for its consistent, word-for-word translation.

STUDYING THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

A Loving Foundation

PASSAGE COMPARISON

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

The Passage Comparison presents the original Greek text alongside seven English translations. Comparing translations allows for a better understanding of the passage and provides insight into the intent of the original Biblical manuscripts.

GREEK	NASB	ESV	KJV
¹ Ἐὰν ταῖς γλώσσαις τῶν ἀνθρώπων λαλῶ καὶ τῶν ἀγγέλων, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, γέγονα χαλκὸς ἢ ἤχων ἢ κύμβαλον ἀλαλάζον.	¹ If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.	¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.	¹ Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become <i>as</i> sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.
² καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν καὶ ἐὰν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη μεθιστάναι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθέν εἰμι.	² If I have <i>the gift of</i> prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.	² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.	² And though I have <i>the gift of</i> prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.
³ κἂν ψωμίσω πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντά μου καὶ ἐὰν παραδῶ τὸ σῶμά μου ἵνα καυχῇσωμαι, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐδὲν ὠφελοῦμαι.	³ And if I give all my possessions to feed <i>the poor</i> , and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.	³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.	³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed <i>the poor</i> , and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.
⁴ Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται· ἡ ἀγάπη, οὐ ζηλοῖ, [ἡ ἀγάπη] οὐ περπερεύεται, οὐ φυσιοῦται,	⁴ Love is patient, love is kind <i>and</i> is not jealous; love does not brag <i>and</i> is not arrogant,	⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant	⁴ Charity suffereth long, <i>and</i> is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

NKJV	NRSV	NIV	NLT
¹ Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.	¹ If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.	¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.	¹ If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
² And though I have <i>the gift of</i> prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.	² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.	² 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.	² If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing.
³ And though I bestow all my goods to feed <i>the poor</i> , and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.	³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.	³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.	³ If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.
⁴ Love suffers long <i>and</i> is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;	⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant	⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.	⁴ Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud

GREEK	NASB	ESV	KJV
⁵ οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ, οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς, οὐ παροξύνεται, οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν,	⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong <i>suffered</i> ,	⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;	⁵ Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;
⁶ οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ·	⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;	⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.	⁶ Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;
⁷ πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει.	⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	⁷ Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
⁸ Ἡ ἀγάπη οὐδέποτε πίπτει	⁸ Love never fails;	⁸ Love never ends.	⁸ Charity never faileth:

NKJV	NRSV	NIV	NLT
⁵ does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;	⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;	⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.	⁵ or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.
⁶ does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;	⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.	⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.	⁶ It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out.
⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.	⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.	⁷ Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.
⁸ Love never fails.	⁸ Love never ends.	⁸ Love never fails.	⁸ But love will last forever!

STRUCTURAL LAYOUT

The Structural Layout shows how the passage fits together. The left column contains the Biblical text divided into its structural elements. Main clauses are aligned left, related elements are highlighted in color, and words added for clarification are placed in brackets. The right column explains how the various elements function in context.

- 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,..... This clause assumes that the apostle Paul practices certain spiritual gifts.
 but do not have love,..... This clause shows what is missing from the spiritual gifts in the previous clause.
 I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal..... This is the first main clause in the opening section of this passage. It explains the state of a believer who does not have love despite having spiritual gifts.
- 2 If I have the gift of prophecy,
 and know all mysteries and all knowledge;
 and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,..... These three clauses suppose that Paul has a special knowledge of God's ways and strong enough faith to work miracles.
 but do not have love,..... This clause reveals what is missing from the knowledge and faith in the previous clauses.
 I am nothing..... This is the second main clause in the first section of this passage. It explains the state of a believer who does not have love despite having special knowledge and great faith.
- 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor,..... These two clauses suppose that Paul is willing to sacrifice his earthly possessions and even his own life.
 and if I surrender my body to be burned,
 but do not have love,..... This clause shows what is missing from the sacrifices made in the previous clauses.
 it profits me nothing..... This is the last main clause in the first section of this passage. It explains the lack of benefit to a believer who does not have love despite sacrificing himself and his possessions.
- 4 Love is patient,..... These two clauses define two positive qualities of love.
 love is kind

- and is not jealous;..... These seven clauses reveal what love isn't
love does not brag and what it does not do.
and is not arrogant,
5 does not act unbecomingly;
it does not seek its own,
is not provoked,
does not take into account a wrong suffered,
- 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness,..... These two clauses show what love does not
but rejoices with the truth; and does rejoice in.
- 7 bears all things,..... These four descriptions demonstrate how
believes all things, love responds in the present based on its
hopes all things, future confidence.
endures all things.
- 8 Love never fails..... This clause summarizes Paul's explanation
of love.

NARRATIVE FLOW

In the first half of the passage, Paul explains that a person who possesses external spiritual qualities but does not have love is actually not spiritual at all. The spiritual gift of tongues without love doesn't communicate anything of value. A person who knows the mind of God and has great faith but does not have love is nothing. The person who is willing to give all he possesses, even his own life, is nothing without love.

In the second half of the passage, Paul defines love by what it does, what it does not do, how it rejoices, and finally, how it responds to present circumstances. He concludes that love never fails.

PASSAGE OVERVIEW

1 Corinthians 13:1–8 has two main sections:

- I. SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT LOVE IS NOTHING (13:1–3)**
- II. THE CHARACTER OF LOVE (13:4–8)**

PASSAGE FOCUS

Love gives meaning, depth, and purpose to the gifts of the Spirit,
and love can be recognized through its actions.

RESOURCES

Basic Resources

Johnson, Alan F. *1 Corinthians*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

MacArthur, John F. *1 Corinthians*. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984.

Morris, Leon. *1 Corinthians*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Intermediate Resources

Carson, D. A. *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996.

Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

Advanced Resources

Garland, David E. *1 Corinthians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.

Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

PREPARING THE SERMON

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

A Loving Foundation

SERMON INGREDIENTS

1 Corinthians 13:1–8

PASSAGE OUTLINE

I. SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT LOVE IS NOTHING (13:1–3)

- A. Speaking in tongues without love means nothing (13:1)
- B. Knowing the mind of God without love results in nothing (13:2)
- C. Sacrificing everything without love profits nothing (13:3)

II. THE CHARACTER OF LOVE (13:4–8)

- A. How love acts (13:4a)
- B. How love responds to others (13:4b–5)
- C. How love rejoices (13:6)
- D. How love perseveres (13:7)
- E. Love never fails (13:8)

PASSAGE DETAILS

1 Corinthians 13:1

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels,

This is the first of three conditional sentences. Each is most likely a simple logical connection. If the first part of each sentence is true but the second is not, then the last clause is the result.

“Tongues” can mean either human language as in Acts 2:6 or an “utterance outside the normal patterns of intelligible speech ... requiring special interpretation,”² as in 1 Corinthians 14:2.³ By saying “men and angels,” the apostle Paul speaks of both normal human language and the spiritual gift of tongues referred to in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.

but do not have love,

“Love” (the Greek word *agape*) means “the quality of warm regard for and interest in another.” Paul uses *agape* almost exclusively in his letters for “love.”⁴ He makes use of a related synonym (*phileo*) only twice. In 1 Corinthians 16:22 he says, “If anyone does not love [*phileo*] the Lord, he is to be accursed.” In Titus 3:15 he says, “Greet those who love [*phileo*] us in the faith.” For Paul, love is often the foundation for his ethical commands.⁵

“But” is not used as a contrast but to note what is missing. In other words, he is saying, “I have the right spiritual gifts and can communicate well, but love is not present in my life.” As we think about how God has gifted us, we should always ask if we are exercising that gift with love.

I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul uses the first person “I” to show that even as an apostle love must accompany his spiritual gifts.

“Gong” is a word used for a piece of metal or something made from metal.⁶ When it is joined with the word “noisy,” it means either an “empty, hollow sound”⁷ or a reverberating, echoing sound.⁸ Both sounds lack the ability to convey meaning. Despite the positive ability of speaking “with the tongues of men and of angels,” not having love means the speaker is no better than the noise made from banging metal together. No benefit exists for someone possessing a spiritual gift if he is communicating noise.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Fredrick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 201. This important reference work is the standard dictionary of New Testament Greek and is commonly referred to as BDAG after its four editors.

³ In Acts 2:6, “tongues” are other languages. The Spirit is miraculously translating for the crowd so that all can hear the gospel in their own language. Whether Paul is referring to this when he says “tongues of men” or referring to the ability to speak well is unclear. In 1 Corinthians 14:2, Paul is likely referring to a spiritual gift in which someone prays to God in an unintelligible language. Without interpretation, this prayer edifies no one in the church except the spirit of the one who is speaking in this tongue (1 Corinthians 14:2–17).

⁴ BDAG, 6.

⁵ Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:13–14; Ephesians 5:1–2; Colossians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 3:11–13.

⁶ BDAG, 1076.

⁷ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 700.

⁸ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1036–1037.

“I have become” is important to note. Paul is not saying that the words he utters cannot benefit someone. God is able to use even our loveless acts for the good of others. The point is that, even as an apostle, without love Paul is no better than noisy clatter. He wants to communicate to the Corinthians that he cannot base his identity on the possession or exercise of spiritual gifts. The gifts themselves don’t make us spiritual; love makes us truly spiritual. Jesus communicates a similar point in Matthew 7:21–23.

1 Corinthians 13:2

If I have the gift of prophecy,

“Prophecy” is the “gift of interpreting divine will or purpose.”⁹ The Old Testament prophets spoke for God to encourage God’s people to walk in His ways. They would speak of coming judgment to encourage God’s people to change their ways (Jeremiah 4:3–9; Habakkuk 1:5–11) and of pending grace or restoration to comfort God’s people (Isaiah 40:1–5; Jeremiah 31:27–34). Despite the future element of many Old Testament prophecies, predicting the future was not the most important part. The primary purpose of prophecies was to change present behavior.¹⁰ Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:3 that prophecy is given not for knowing some future event but for “edification and exhortation and consolation.”

The New Testament writers felt that the gift of prophecy was potentially available to anyone, dependent on the Spirit’s will.¹¹ The potential widespread use (and potential misuse) of prophecy during this time led to Paul writing directions to various churches about its use and evaluation (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).

and know all mysteries and all knowledge;

“Mysteries” are the “private counsel of God” or “God’s secret”¹² and have been described as “that which lies beyond unaided human powers and initiatives.”¹³ While some mysteries have been revealed to Paul, especially things concerning the cross and the church, he is most likely exaggerating here to make his point.¹⁴

“Knowledge” is useful to the church (1 Corinthians 14:6), and Paul says the Corinthians possess this gift (1 Corinthians 1:5). Whether this knowledge includes unknowable facts without the Spirit’s gift or “inspired teaching” for the benefit of the body is unclear.¹⁵ Paul addresses this theme earlier in the book with his statement that “knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies” (1 Corinthians 8:1).

Paul exaggerates his understanding of the full counsel of God for effect. He does not possess just some knowledge or some mysteries, but he possesses them all. He claims he knows the Spirit of God perfectly (1 Corinthians 2:11–12). Paul exaggerates to force the Corinthians to realize that their giftedness, however great, is not the measure of full maturity.

⁹ BDAG, 889.

¹⁰ Fee, 660.

¹¹ When Peter quotes Joel 2:28 in Acts 2:17, he seems to imply the possibility that prophecy will become widespread as all believers are filled with the Spirit (Fee, 660).

¹² BDAG, 662.

¹³ Thiselton, 1040.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 29:29; Romans 11:25, 33–35; 1 Corinthians 2:6–9; Ephesians 3:1–6.

¹⁵ Fee, 657.

and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

“Faith” is the third spiritual gift from 1 Corinthians 12 that Paul mentions. This is not saving faith but the kind of faith that performs extraordinary feats. So, “to remove mountains” was most likely a proverbial saying signifying an impossible task.¹⁶ In Matthew 17:20, Jesus said that faith was necessary to move mountains: “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.”¹⁷

but do not have love, I am nothing.

“Nothing” has the metaphorical meaning here of “worthless.”¹⁸ It is not that the prophecies and knowledge fail to help someone or that faith is ineffective. Paul is arguing that he himself has no value without love. This concept of worthlessness is explored in Acts 19:27 when the merchants in Ephesus feared that the spread of the gospel would rob the Temple of Artemis of worshippers, and it would become worthless. A temple without worshippers, no matter how magnificent its construction, has no value.¹⁹ Paul without love, no matter how magnificent his actions, has no value.

1 Corinthians 13:3

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor,

Paul moves beyond spiritual gifts to personal sacrifice. Like in Jesus’ challenge to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21, Paul presents a scenario where he gives all he has to the poor. He is not talking about having sympathy for those less well off than himself. He is talking about obeying Jesus’ command to serve at one’s own expense. Moving from one’s own experience and proclamation, Paul now speaks about doing something for someone else’s sake.

and if I surrender my body to be burned,

Paul ends with the greatest possible sacrifice: his own life. The willingness to be killed for another is the most humble act one could perform. There are variations in the Biblical manuscripts for this verse. The NIV reads, “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing,” while the NASB translation speaks of martyrdom. The NIV speaks more of willingly enduring torture for the sake of Christ. The idea is not so much that one would boast about the torture but that one has his boast in Christ in the midst of torture.

but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

“Profit” means “help, aid, benefit, be of use.”²⁰

Paul again argues that there is a lack of fruitfulness to one’s actions if love is missing. The point is not that giving money to the poor would not be beneficial if it lacked love. The point is that loveless giving adds no spiritual gain to the giver. Without love, he hasn’t completely followed Jesus’ command to sell all he has and give to the poor.

¹⁶ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 613–614.

¹⁷ See also Mark 11:22–23.

¹⁸ BDAG, 735.

¹⁹ The Temple of Artemis in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

²⁰ BDAG, 1107.

1 Corinthians 13:4–8

In verses 4–8, Paul defines Biblical love. These verses contain sixteen characteristics, and most are listed as adjectives in the English translations. All these characteristics, though, are verbs—words that require action. This passage doesn’t just describe the nature of love; it also describes how love acts and how love does not act toward other people. The Bible says that God is love. If Paul is defining Biblical love correctly, each of these characteristics should be seen in God’s actions toward His people. These are actions Paul expects the Corinthians to adopt.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love is patient,

“To be patient” means “to remain tranquil while waiting,” like when the slave asked his master to have patience with him to repay a debt (Matthew 18:26, 29). It can also mean “to bear up [while being provoked] without complaint.”²¹ Every other use in the New Testament fits the first definition and is most likely Paul’s meaning.²² It is easy to become impatient with people in life. But God, being our example, is “patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

love is kind

“To show kindness” appears once in the entire New Testament and very little throughout other Christian literature. Some feel that Paul invented this word from its noun form to keep his list of verbs consistent.

God displays kindness toward those who do not deserve His kindness. Paul asks the Christians in Rome, “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4). When Christians show kindness, they build bridges that God can use to lead someone to repentance.

and is not jealous;

This is the first of eight actions that love does not do. “To be jealous” means “to have intense negative feelings over another’s achievements or success.”²³ Paul has already stated in 1 Corinthians 3:3–4 that the church’s jealousy over different leaders has caused division. Instead of being jealous of one another, the Corinthians should have been thankful for the servants God sent to them (1 Corinthians 3:5–7).

Jesus was not jealous, and He was grateful when others had success in His name. When the apostle John wanted to keep someone from casting out demons in Jesus’ name, Jesus told John to leave the man alone (Mark 9:38–41). Jesus didn’t need someone to be an intimate follower to be thankful for the work they were doing in His name.

²¹ BDAG, 612.

²² 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 6:15; James 5:7.

²³ BDAG, 427.

love does not brag

“To brag” means having an “inordinate desire to call attention to oneself.”²⁴ This is the only time the word appears in the New Testament. Since love is an action directed toward the whole church, the person who loves does not draw attention to himself.

This action does not directly apply to God. All God’s actions and works in creation are meant to glorify Himself. God is perfect in all His ways and can never exaggerate about who He is or what He does. He desires to draw all men to Himself because He is the only one worthy of worship. We love people best when we point them toward God. The person who draws attention to himself is drawing attention away from God.

and is not arrogant,

“To be arrogant” means “to cause to have an exaggerated self-conception, puff up, make proud.”²⁵ Arrogance was a major character issue for the Corinthians. Paul directly accuses them three times of being arrogant (1 Corinthians 4:18, 19; 5:2).

When believers are arrogant, they seek to make themselves out to be better than they are. Instead, believers should be humble and look to Christ for their self-identify. As believers, our value comes from being in Christ. We know that without Christ we are nothing and can do nothing that has any lasting value (John 15:5; Philippians 3:3–11).

1 Corinthians 13:5

does not act unbecomingly;

“To act unbecomingly” means to “behave disgracefully, dishonorably, indecently.”²⁶ It only occurs twice in the New Testament, here and in 1 Corinthians 7:36. It has the idea of going against the acceptable standards in a community, but we cannot assume that love changes based on what is acceptable at any given time. God sets the standard for all our behavior through His inspired Word. This standard flows from His character.²⁷

While “does not act unbecomingly” applies to all of life, in 1 Corinthians 14:40 Paul uses a related word to tell the church that their worship should “be done properly.” This idea of love acting appropriately means that love does not seek to stand out in corporate worship, which is a large focus of chapter 14.²⁸

it does not seek its own,

Love does not seek its own advantage over another. Love (*agape*) is the opposite of the common Greek form of love (*eros*), which seeks to gratify its own desires at the expense of another. Jesus exemplified the *agape* kind of love: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

²⁴ Fee, 706–707.

²⁵ BDAG, 1069.

²⁶ BDAG, 147.

²⁷ Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 1:15. God also calls all people to repent (Acts 17:30). If God can call people to repent, He must be the one who sets the standard that all men fail to meet.

²⁸ Thiselton, 1050.

is not provoked,

“To provoke” means “to cause a state of inward arousal.”²⁹ Here the verb is passive and means to not easily be “provoked to anger by others.”³⁰ People who love others remain calm even if someone is seeking to make them angry.

Jesus is our model. In the garden at His arrest, He remained calm when His disciples wanted to fight (Matthew 26:52). When He sat before the chief priest and the council after His arrest, He remained calm as they tried to slander Him (Matthew 26:59–64). While He was on the cross, He entrusted Himself to the Father despite the attacks made on Him (1 Peter 2:23).

does not take into account a wrong suffered,

The phrase “to take into account a wrong suffered” is a phrase of two words in Greek that means “to reckon” or “consider” “wrong.”³¹ The verb “take into account” has a wide range of meaning, so this phrase can be interpreted two different ways. It can mean that love does not think about evil. It can also mean that love doesn’t keep track of evil it has suffered.³² It is probable that Paul meant both ideas.

The story of the king forgiving the man a ten-thousand-talent debt in Matthew 18:21–27 reminds us how God refuses to keep track of our debt.³³ Our debt was not financial, but we still could not pay for all the sins and rebellion we committed against a holy God. Jesus’ death paid that enormous debt. This is why Paul tells the Romans, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). We are forgiven like the man who owed ten thousand talents.

1 Corinthians 13:6

does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

“Unrighteousness” means “an act that violates the standards of right conduct” or “wickedness, injustice.”³⁴ Love never rejoices when God’s standards are violated. Love never rejoices in another’s wrongdoing even if it gives us a chance to appear spiritual by rebuking the other person. Love does not even rejoice over an enemy who falls into evil (Proverbs 24:17). It may seem odd that Paul contrasts unrighteousness with truth, but in Ephesians 4:24 Paul connects righteousness and truth. The truth of God leads to righteousness.

Since God Himself does not rejoice in one who “teaches falsehood” or in the “evildoer” (Isaiah 9:13–17), we need to be careful not to rejoice in that which is unrighteous or evil. Jesus says He is full of truth (John 1:14) and is the truth (John 8:32; 14:6). So one way to love those around us is to show them that we rejoice in Christ above all else.

²⁹ BDAG, 780.

³⁰ Fee, 708.

³¹ BDAG, 597–598, 501.

³² If Paul meant this phrase to be paired with “is not provoked,” he probably meant that love doesn’t keep track of evil it has suffered. If Paul meant it to be paired with “does not rejoice in unrighteousness,” he probably meant that love does not think about evil.

³³ One talent is approximately fifteen year’s wages. Ten thousand talents is an amount no one could pay back.

³⁴ BDAG, 20.

Paul concludes with four short statements that contain the word “all.” This word has the sense of “in everything” or “always.”³⁵ It would be impossible for someone to believe all things, for instance. However, Thiselton suggests that writing these verses in a negative way better captures the meaning. “Love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.”³⁶

bears all things,

“To bear” means to “pass over in silence” or “bear up against difficulties.”³⁷ The apostle Peter echoes this first idea when he says, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). When we are hurt or sinned against, it is easy to retaliate. Love is willing to patiently wait, pray, and trust God to work in people’s hearts. Paul does not mean that we should not confront sin—he does that in this letter. He does mean that we don’t need to point out every misstep and hurt that comes our way. Loving people requires us to look past small matters and continue to care for and encourage people.

The book of Philemon provides a specific example of this attitude. Philemon had a runaway slave named Onesimus. Paul meets him while in prison, and Onesimus becomes a believer. Paul sends Onesimus back with a letter encouraging Philemon to accept his runaway slave without penalty. This is what Paul means by “passing over in silence.”

believes all things,

Love always believes, not whatever it wants, but in God and in His ability to change the heart of the most hardened sinner. In the face of impossible odds, love believes and continues to invest in people for their good. Love is a commitment; it is not a fair-weather fan.

hopes all things,

This is related to the previous clause. Love looks for the day when God will set all things right, despite mankind’s fallen state. When we do not see evidence that God is perfecting the people around us (Philippians 1:6), love compels us to “fix [our] hope completely on the grace to be brought to [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). Love always hopes because of the truth of Jesus’ resurrection and the promise of ours (2 Corinthians 1:8–10).

endures all things.

“Endure” means “to maintain a belief or course of action in the face of opposition.”³⁸ Love does not give up or give in. We can apply this truth to all the statements above. Love doesn’t cease being kind. Love always avoids seeking its own. Love never allows itself to be provoked. Love never gets tired of rejoicing with the truth. Love sets its course and stays true despite any wind or wave that tries to push it off course.

³⁵ Fee, 709.

³⁶ Thiselton, 1057.

³⁷ BDAG, 942.

³⁸ BDAG, 1039.

Love never fails.

“Fail” means to “fall down” or “fall to pieces” or “be destroyed.”³⁹ Believers should always strive by the power of the Spirit to live out each of the listed characteristics in all circumstances. We are to show kindness even when we don’t feel like it. We should never let ourselves be provoked even in the midst of persecution. We never stop rejoicing in the truth even when the world no longer believes in the truth.

But this is not all that Paul means, because sometimes we do fail to love. Sometimes we are impatient. Sometimes we do rejoice in unrighteousness, and we aren’t kind. The good news is that even when our love may falter or feel feeble, God’s love does not. We can be assured of His faithfulness to His people. A fitting final statement to the preceding list is “love is never defeated.”⁴⁰

³⁹ BDAG, 815.

⁴⁰ Fee, 712.

APPLICATIONS

- Paul describes the church as a body with many different parts performing many different functions. Despite God being the one who arranged everything the way He wanted, the people in the body must still work together for it to function. Paul says the way we do this is by acting in love toward one another. Loving others in the way Paul describes is the only way to achieve the unity God desires.
- Believers need to recognize that spiritual giftedness alone cannot bring unity. Great wisdom or insight into God's ways does not necessarily bring true Christian unity. Great sacrifice cannot bring about Christian unity. Only love working through those things brings the church together in unity. Having any of those other things without love leaves us as nothing.
- Each believer needs to examine his or her life against the characteristics of love that Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 13:1–8. We need to trust in God's Spirit to work out these aspects of love in our lives. But we must be mindful of what is missing and strive in the power of the Spirit to love others more like Jesus loved us. This list shows us specific ways to love others well.

ILLUSTRATIONS

- A Valentine's Day card carried the message "love brings us together." Is this simple message enough to solve all the divisions we face in our country, families, churches, and souls?
- A group of people got together to create the perfect church building. From the architecture to the art, everything was designed to point people to God. When completed it was the most magnificent, beautiful structure in town. If no one ever showed up to worship, all the effort and time and money would be considered meaningless. In the same way, we may have all the characteristics of a spiritually mature believer. But if we do not have love, we, like the empty building, are meaningless.
- A husband is called to love his wife as Christ loved the church. If he continually sacrifices for her, there is the possibility that she will begin to take advantage of him. A husband who practices Biblical love will persevere in love for his wife despite her response.
- We do lots of spiritual-looking activities. We play useful roles in our churches. We can teach and preach and encourage other believers. But if those things are done without love, we are nothing in the kingdom of God.
- Unlike true Biblical love, we are prone to impatience. We complain when packages don't arrive on time because we are used to free two-day shipping. We become annoyed when people don't answer our texts right away.

SERMON OUTLINE

A Loving Foundation (1 Corinthians 13:1–8)

INTRODUCTION

I. LOVE IS THE FOUNDATION TO OUR SPIRITUALITY (13:1–3)

- A. Love gives meaning to our spiritual gifts (v. 1)
- B. Love gives purpose to our knowledge of God (v. 2)
- C. Love gives value to our sacrifices (v. 3)

II. LOVE IS THE CHARACTER WE DISPLAY (13:4–8)

- A. Act in a loving way (v. 4a)
- B. Respond in a loving way (vv. 4b–5)
- C. Rejoice in a loving way (v. 6)
- D. Persevere in a loving way (v. 7)
- E. Know that love never fails (v. 8)

CONCLUSION

SERMON MANUSCRIPT FOR YOUR USE

A Loving Foundation (1 Corinthians 13:1–8)

INTRODUCTION

A Valentine's Day card carried the simple message: "Love brings us together." What is this love? What force can accomplish this togetherness? As a nation we divide over everything from race to politics and policies. In our daily lives we divide over barking dogs to bond issues for the local school. Amongst our co-workers we divide over our favorite sports teams and whose turn it is to clean the microwave. In our families we divide over where we want to go on vacation and who gets Grandma's antique desk when she passes. As a church we divide over budgets and building programs. In our walk with Jesus we are divided over pursuing sin versus pursuing God—satisfying our own desires or submitting our life to Christ.

Is the Valentine's Day card correct? Can love bring us together? Can love fix what ails us in society or in our families or in our walk with the Lord?

If we open the card, we're likely to see more words about feelings and emotions. Is that the key? If we have the right feelings or the right emotions, will that bring us together? If we have lovely thoughts toward one another, will that bring us together? What if we all were to adopt the idea that we could "love" anyone at any time without the restrictions imposed on us by the bonds of marriage? Would that bring us together?

The answer, of course, is no. Yet the card is still correct in its basic premise. Love can bring us together if, and only if, it is the right kind of love. Biblical love can and will bring us together, and the apostle Paul taught that it would. The Corinthians displayed many problems that had the potential to tear them apart. We learn in chapter 3 that jealousy and strife have infected their fellowship. We learn in chapter 5 that arrogance over sin is present. In chapter 6 we see that lawsuits are common among them. In chapters 8–10, Paul needs to remind them that they can't claim Christian liberty if their actions harm a brother or sister. In chapter 11, they divide by status at the Lord's Supper.

In spite of all these issues that can lead to disunity, in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul discusses how the Corinthian church is one body. But he knows that just having this information is not enough to actually make them a unified body. This is why he says at the end of chapter 12, "I show you a still more excellent way."

The more excellent way consists of two parts. First, Paul says that love must accompany any spiritual gift or action we exercise for us to gain any benefit from it. Second, we must know the nature of this love that is required. If we don't know the nature of this love, we can't correctly apply it to our relationships as we exercise our spiritual gifts.

I. LOVE IS THE FOUNDATION TO OUR SPIRITUALITY (13:1–3)

A. Love gives meaning to our spiritual gifts (v. 1)

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul begins by explaining the necessity of this love, not by defining the nature of love that we need. He gives three examples that highlight his Christian maturity and why it is meaningless without love.

He begins with the gift of tongues, both of men and angels. “Tongues of men” refers either to the supernatural ability to interpret languages as happened in Acts 2:6 on the day of Pentecost or to the ability to speak well and be persuasive. “Tongues of angels” most likely refers to the gift of tongues Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 14, the spiritual gift where a believer prays to God in an unintelligible language, requiring interpretation for the rest of the church to understand. It also carries with it the implication of powerful, persuasive, and beautiful speech—the voice of angels. Paul says that if he possesses these gifts but does not have love, his words are no better than the noise made from banging pieces of metal together.

The purpose of language is communication. Communication requires three components: a speaker, a hearer, and a message. The problem is not with the message or the hearer. No matter how gifted Paul is in his use of language, he has become a poor communicator without love. It’s not that God can’t use Paul’s loveless words in someone’s life. God can certainly do that. But without love, Paul’s communication will be nothing but noise.

It is easy to want to find our identity in what we’re good at or what we do regularly. Paul says if we seek our identity in spiritual giftedness alone, without love, we offer an incomplete and ineffective form of that spiritual giftedness.

B. Love gives purpose to our knowledge of God (v. 2)

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

His second example introduces another area of giftedness that is worthless without love. Paul has been given the gift of prophecy (which infers he can interpret God’s will or purpose and that he is speaking for God), and he has been given the complete comprehension of the mind of God by understanding “all mysteries” and “all knowledge.” With the use of the word “all” in front of both “mysteries” and “knowledge,” Paul is surely exaggerating here to make his point. If someone actually knew the mind of God completely then that someone would have to be divine himself. Paul knows this. He writes in 1 Corinthians 2:11 that “the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” In Romans 11:34 Paul asks, “for who has known the mind of the LORD?” But here in the second example, for the sake of argument and instruction, Paul argues that he does know the mind of the Lord and goes even further.

He also claims to have all faith as well—faith that can do extraordinary miracles like moving mountains, meaning something impossible to do. To drive home his point, Paul makes himself out to be as close to divine as humanly possible. Yet without love, he writes, he is nothing. Not even this godlike ability makes him special in any way.

Love is essential to who we are as believers. Theologians use a term called the “simplicity of God.” This means that God cannot be broken up into parts. He is not partly just and partly loving and partly holy.

All of God is just. All of God is loving. All of God is holy. Every action of God displays every quality of God. To take any of His characteristics away leaves Him as less than God. A perfectly holy being with no justice or love would not be God. That is Paul's point. No matter how Christlike Paul might be, he is nothing without love.

C. Love gives value to our sacrifices (v. 3)

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

The final example Paul presents is a great sacrifice. He either sacrifices all he has for others or is willing to sacrifice himself. But doing either of these sacrificial acts without love provides him no profit. He gains nothing.

Why does Paul talk about profit to himself here? Because Jesus does. In Matthew 19:21 Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give to the poor and then he would have treasure in Heaven. Then, a few verses later, when the disciples spoke of leaving things behind for the sake of the kingdom, Jesus promises them a return of those things in a different form in this life and eternal life to come.

But Paul says that without love, sacrifice for the sake of someone else or even self-sacrifice offers no gain, no profit, no reward. Is love really that important? Can its absence invalidate our sacrifice or generosity? Scripture says yes. We gain neither treasure in Heaven nor earthly benefits if our sacrifice for others does not come from a love for that person.

How does this apply to us? First, we can do lots of spiritual-looking activities. We can use our gifts to help lead worship or clean the church. We can be the best Sunday school teacher the church has. We can tithe 20 percent of our income so the church can do ministry in the community. But if these things are done without love, we are nothing in the kingdom of God.

Second, we also need to be careful that we are not performing actions because of selfish motives. It's easy to try to impress people with knowledge or look for a pat on the back for service to others. A great temptation for Christians is to look spiritual for the sake of selfish gain. Paul warned Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:5 about those who hold "to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power." Jesus warned the crowd in Matthew 6:16 not to fast with a gloomy face so that people would know what they were doing. It's clear from Scripture that selfishness should not motivate you.

Finally, whether it is a pursuit of a great knowledge of God's Word or a willingness to be generous with your gifts and possessions, if these things are not accompanied by love, they have no eternal value. In verses 1–3, Paul presents himself as holding to a great spiritual maturity, a personification of perfection. Yet without love, everything he is and does is meaningless, empty, and void. It is as nothing.

So what is this love that is so necessary to our Christian life? What kind of love adds meaning to our spiritual gifts and identity to our Christlike nature and profit to our sacrifices? It is the love Paul describes in the next five verses. If you truly want to mature in the Christian life, if you want to be the unified church Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 12, then you need to adopt the characteristics of love in verses 4–8 in increasing measure.

II. LOVE IS THE CHARACTER WE DISPLAY (13:4–8)

A. Act in a loving way (v. 4a)

Love is patient,

Our English Bibles often list the characteristics found in verses 4–8 as adjectives, but all sixteen are actually verbs. The kind of love that gives meaning and purpose to our lives is an action more than an emotion or feeling. Paul begins with two positive actions.

Paul says, “Love is patient.” Why? Because life doesn’t go as planned; people don’t meet my expectations. From waiting for the seed I plant to produce tomatoes to waiting for the Spirit to mature my friend to waiting for the city to fix that pothole, waiting is a human experience.

When I express frustration, anger, or disappointment at someone’s failure to meet my time expectations, those emotions do not foster the kind of relationship God wants for me. Paul says that love practices patience, yet we want our technology to overcome any situation that calls for it. We can communicate around the world instantaneously. A truck will deliver almost any item you want to your door the next day. In a world built on convenience, we hate to be inconvenienced.

“Why did that package not arrive on time?” “Why won’t she answer my text? I sent it ten minutes ago.” “Why is he still struggling with that sin? We’ve been talking about it for six months.”

Complaint is our natural tendency. Paul says love remains tranquil while waiting. We show love when we don’t allow others to annoy us with their slowness. Why? It shows that we trust in God to use any situation to draw us closer to Himself. When I trust that God uses all things in my life to make me look more like Jesus, I can relax at the long line at the store caused by the mom with five kids and a box of coupons. I would not give up on a friend who continues to gossip, knowing that God was patient with me while I ignored His love.

When we practice patience, we show the character of God to the world—the character that didn’t give up on us when we refused to yield to His holiness and sovereignty. When we practice patience we develop unity by showing that people are more important than schedules.

love is kind

In addition to practicing patience, love shows kindness. What is it about kindness that makes it an important part of love? Kindness can reconcile people. Paul tells the Romans that it is God’s kindness that leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). When we model kindness to a fellow believer in church, especially one who acts unkindly, it can draw him to us, encouraging him to change and be kind as well.

Solomon encourages a similar attitude in Proverbs 15:1, “A gentle answer turns away wrath.” While gentleness is not exactly the same thing as kindness, the principle applies. Kindness can relieve tension, reduce anger, and encourage communication. Kindness builds bridges that God can use to lead someone to repentance and reconciliation.

Kindness also increases our affections toward other believers. When we treat a brother with kindness, we naturally grow closer to that person. Unfortunately, the opposite is also true. When we treat someone with contempt or hatred, our negative feelings toward that person grow. A root of bitterness grows, creating distance between us. So be kind and grow in your love for one another.

B. Respond in a loving way (vv. 4b–5)

and is not jealous;

After listing two ways that we show love, Paul now lists seven ways love does not respond to the world—seven things you must avoid if you want to model godly behavior and build a unified church.

Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 3:3–4 that the church’s jealousy over different leaders had caused division. But love is not jealous. Instead it is grateful for another’s success. Jesus demonstrated this with His disciples in Mark 9:38–41. John was upset that someone who wasn’t part of Jesus’ inner circle was doing miracles in Jesus’ name. Instead of being jealous of this other person’s success, Jesus was thankful that ministry was happening and that this person was on their side.

The same was true for John the Baptist. As Jesus’ ministry continued to gain followers, John rejoiced that people were going to Jesus: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). When we cheer another believer’s success in the Christian life, the world sees what God’s love looks like, and we build unity instead of division as they see that we press on toward the same goal.

love does not brag

One of the reasons we have trouble cheering the success of a member of God’s family is our desire to be the center of attention. When we clamor to be in the spotlight, we can’t possibly care for one another well. So Paul adds that love does not brag.

When we seek to draw attention to ourselves, we draw people away from the God we are to be united around. The goal of the church is to point people to God. He is the only one worthy of bragging about.

Every time we boast, we do two things. We deny the God who gave us all we have, and we don’t give God credit for that graciousness and generosity. Boasting in anything or anyone but God has no place in the Christian life.

and is not arrogant,

Yet Paul is not just content with the Corinthians refusing to boast. He also tells them that love is not arrogant. To be arrogant is to have an exaggerated sense of one’s own importance. The Corinthians apparently thought so highly of themselves that they showed no sorrow over their sin. One doesn’t have to verbally boast for pride to cause division. The attitude of arrogance affects more than just our words.

Arrogance forces people to make themselves out to be better than they really are. All Christians know deep down that they fail to measure up to God’s standards. But arrogance compels us to put lipstick on the pig, so to speak, to keep up an appearance of being good. Arrogance refuses to admit wrong and repent, so reconciliation never happens. Unity is destroyed.

If you and I look to Christ for our identity, we have nothing to be arrogant about. When Christ is my life, I don’t have to make myself out to be someone I’m not. I am content in God’s approval of me through Christ’s work on the cross. I know that all I have comes from God. This wipes out all traces of pride in me.

does not act unbecomingly;

The Bible is the standard of what acceptable behavior looks like, not the culture. In every age people try to stand out by pushing the boundaries of appropriate behavior. When enough people participate,

society slowly changes to accept this behavior. When Paul tells the Corinthians that love does not act unbecomingly, he means that love does not contradict God's standard for righteous behavior.

While this explanation of love has many applications, it seems here that Paul was thinking of one in particular: behavior in the worship service. He uses a related phrase in 1 Corinthians 14:40 to say that their worship should "be done properly." To act in a way that pushes the bounds of what is acceptable in worship does not show love to those seeking to worship God, especially if the goal is to stand out.

When you come to worship each Sunday, your focus should be on magnifying Christ. Anything you do to draw attention to yourself—from the way you dress to the behaviors you exhibit to the words you say—distracts someone else from focusing on God and worshipping Him. Love doesn't draw attention to itself but makes sure that others are drawn to God.

it does not seek its own,

Not only does a believer who loves others not seek to draw attention to himself, but he also seeks the good of others first. That is why Paul says that love does not seek its own. In Mark 10:45, Jesus says that He came to serve and not to be served. A common form of love in the Greek world sought to satisfy its own desires at the expense of others. This is the opposite of Biblical love. Biblical love serves others. Paul told the Philippians in chapter 2 that they should look out for the interest of others, as Jesus did.

When you prepare to come to church, do you ask God how you can serve a newcomer that morning? Do you ask Him how you can be a blessing to a brother in Christ or help a sister in Christ? When you do that, you love others as Christ did. But sometimes it's hard to love others in God's family when they are mean or unkind.

is not provoked,

Paul says that Biblical love is not provoked. When we love others, we remain calm even if someone else is seeking to make us angry. Love remains calm and gentle in the face of antagonism and even hate. Jesus did it. He remained calm in the garden when His disciples wanted to fight. He remained calm before the council when they sought to slander Him. Most remarkable of all, Jesus remained calm on the cross and even asked the Father to forgive His enemies. Through His love, the church is reconciled to the Father.

We love others by refusing to be provoked. We can point people to Christ's loving example and help reconcile others by refusing to be provoked. We can bring unity to our church body by refusing to argue with others. When someone seeks to stir you up by pointing out the wrongs of others, encourage him away from these conversations. When someone seeks to get you worked up over the latest political scandal, steer her toward a different conversation. Refuse to be provoked. That is how you show love.

does not take into account a wrong suffered,

The final thing that love avoids is taking into account a wrong suffered. Like Christ on the cross, who was willing to forgive others, we can love others by not counting people's sins and holding them over their heads. Are you willing to forgive others as God forgave you?

Refusing to tally up a believer's offenses goes a long way toward promoting unity. If we are constantly dwelling on what a brother in Christ has done to offend, we will never draw close to him. We will be waiting for him to offend us again or waiting for an apology that may never come. Forgiveness allows us to continue to encourage people, trusting in God to change them over time.

C. Rejoice in a loving way (v. 6)

does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

Every day we encounter people and events that point either to God or away from Him. We hear news that celebrates either God's ways or the ways of the world. We wrestle with setting our minds on things above or on the things of the earth. The ways of the world are unrighteous. The ways of God are truth.

As Paul nears the end of his list, he contrasts two ways of responding to life. The world, the flesh, and the devil encourage us to think about and rejoice in unrighteousness. Paul argues that love would never respond like this. God longs for us to rejoice in what is true—His Word and His ways. Love chooses to rejoice in God's truth.

Practically, this means that we don't rejoice in the wrongdoing of a believing brother even if it allows us a chance to appear spiritually mature by rebuking him. Nor does love rejoice over an enemy when he falls. Note Solomon's charge in Proverbs 24:17, "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles." People of God who love like God do not rejoice when someone falls, even when that falling is due to his own sin.

Instead, the people of God delight in Jesus. We must think about and rejoice in things that resemble the nature and character of God. We follow Paul's encouragement in Philippians 4:8 to think about things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and worthy of praise. As the people of God do this together, we draw closer together around Jesus, on whom our gaze is fixed. We unite around our Savior.

Before we move into the last section of Paul's definition of love, you need to be aware of a danger that exists when you practice love the way Paul has been describing it. When you practice love like this, people may take advantage of your love. When you are patient with people, they might continue not doing the things you are waiting for them to do. When you refuse to seek your own way, others may quite naturally fill the void by seeking their own way, demanding that you fall in line. When you cheer another's success, refusing to be jealous, that other person may resort to boasting of his own greatness at your expense.

D. Persevere in a loving way (v. 7)

So what do you do? How do you respond when your love is ignored or spurned or despised? Paul ends this section with four descriptions of how love perseveres, and he adds the word "all" each time. Here "all" does not mean "everything," but "always." For example, it is clear that love can't believe everything, as that would lead to a contradiction. But love does *always* believe that it will prevail.

bears all things,

First, love always bears the challenges that God brings into our lives. Love knows that when we respond to the difficulties and trials of life with trust in our Savior, the world sees His glory working through our weakness. When others sin against us, it is easy to retaliate. Love is willing to wait, pray, and trust God to work in people's hearts.

Paul does not mean that we don't confront sin. He does that in this letter. He does mean that we don't point out every misdeed we encounter. Loving people requires us to look past small matters and continue to care for and encourage people.

believes all things,

Second, love believes all things. God can't be defeated, and no matter how stubborn our enemies (or our friends) may be in rejecting our love, love perseveres by always believing it is the right thing to do. Jesus continued to love even to the cross. Love believes in God's ability to change the heart of the most stubborn. Is Paul not an example for us in this? Who would have thought that the man who approved Stephen's death in Acts 7–8 would be the man who would plant so many churches in the Roman world?

But this also means that love gives others the benefit of the doubt. Even when people fail or disappoint us, we continue to believe that their repentance is genuine. When Peter asked Jesus in Matthew 18:21–22 how many times he should forgive his brother, Jesus answered, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” He meant that we keep forgiving and keep believing that our brother or sister will change.

hopes all things,

Third, love always hopes because the resurrection promises that God will one day set all things right (Romans 8:18–25; 1 Peter 1:3–4). Sometimes we do not see evidence that God is perfecting the people around us. Yet love compels us to “fix [our] hope completely on the grace to be brought to [us] at the revelation of Jesus Christ” as we read in 1 Peter 1:13. Love always hopes because of Jesus' resurrection and the promise of ours.

The fact that God will one day set all things right also means that we remain hopeful in all things regardless of our circumstances. We trust in God's power to resurrect us just as much as we trust in His power to resurrect someone else. But what does this have to do with love? When we remain hopeful despite our circumstances, we are encouraging the body of Christ to do the same. Any time we point people to our hope we are showing them love because we are showing them Christ.

endures all things.

Finally, love endures all things. Hoping and believing and bearing are hard. We face opposition from within and without. It is easy to just stop trying. But love does not give up or give in. It maintains its course regardless of the force of the winds that beat against it. This truth can be applied to all the statements about love. Love doesn't cease being kind. Love always avoids seeking its own way. Love never allows itself to be provoked. Love never gets tired of rejoicing with the truth.

One Bible scholar says that writing these last four clauses in a negative way better captures their meaning: “Love never tires of [giving] support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.”⁴¹

E. Know that love never fails (v. 8)

Love never fails.

Paul's last reminder to believers is that love never ceases to act. Therefore, we must not cease to act. To love others means we show kindness even when we don't feel like it. It means we never stop rejoicing in the truth even when the world no longer recognizes that truth and especially when the world rejects that truth. It means we never succumb to the temptation to boast even when no one ever recognizes the sacrifices we make for the good of others.

⁴¹ Thisleton, 1057.

But what if we fail to love? People do fail, after all. We can grow weary. We believe lies and rejoice in unrighteousness and become impatient with our spouse or neighbor or co-worker. We arrogantly believe we are above some rule or regulation or, worse, some other person.

“Love never fails” also means that God’s love never fails. He is not like us. He does not grow weary of loving His people. This is good news for us who are weak and prone to fail. We can be assured of His faithfulness because He is love. God never fails so love never fails, God is never defeated, so love is never defeated.

CONCLUSION

“Love brings us together.” This is as true in life as it is on a Valentine’s Day card—if the love is a Biblical love as Paul describes in this passage. When we model these characteristics, we are showing each member of the body of Christ that he or she is important—important enough to put aside our desires in favor of his or her good. This love produces love in other people. This kind of love attracts people to one another. And this kind of love also attracts people who don’t know Christ. Jesus Himself said in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The unity of the human body is an amazing, wonderful thing. How all the parts and pieces work together to make a man or woman is incredible. When we love others in the family of God like Paul has described, the church displays that same wonder to the world. The first thing that we need to recognize is that true, Biblical love is not to be practiced for its own sake. It is the “more excellent way” to achieve Christian unity.

Next we need to remember that great spiritual gifts or great spiritual wisdom are never a replacement for love. It was God’s love in Christ on the cross that saved us, not the fact that He gave us wisdom or the ability to speak in tongues. No spiritual gift or great intellect or sacrifice can make up for a lack of love.

Finally, we need to examine our own lives. Do we measure up to the description of love that Paul presents? This list of characteristics can be overwhelming if taken all at once. Thankfully, God is patient and kind. But let us not take advantage of His patience and kindness. Let each of us seek Him in prayer, asking Him to reveal to us how we can love better.

Ask a friend if he notices areas of your life where you don’t love in the way Paul describes. Then trust in God and take a step of faith toward living out this kind of love in your life. Ask God to give you opportunities to show the characteristic of love that you struggle to show. Rest in His grace and persevere. Rest in the truth that God always loves you. And through the power of the Spirit who lives in you, seek to be the kind of person who loves others like God loves you.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we trust that You will give us opportunities to demonstrate love to others. We know that we cannot do this on our own, but we constantly need Your grace and mercy to be truly loving to those around us. Help us not only to rest in the truth of Your love for us but also to be obedient to Your Word that commands us to love one another. In Jesus’ loving name. Amen.

SERMON EXAMPLES

Ash, Christopher. “Gifts without Love (1 Corinthians 13).” All Saints Little Shelford.
www.allsaintslittleshelford.org.

What role does love play in a church? Ash responds that love is vital (13:1–3), love is active (13:4–6), and love lasts (13:13). This encouraging sermon from an accomplished Biblical preacher demonstrates that love is the glue that holds the church together.

Keller, Tim. “Better than Miracles (1 Corinthians 13:1–3).” Redeemer Presbyterian Church.
www.gospelinlife.com.

The former senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City identifies “Paul’s bombshell” in 1 Corinthians 13, discussing how love differs from giftedness.

Lucas, Dick. “Model Exposition 2006 (1 Corinthians 13).” The Gospel Coalition.
www.thegospelcoalition.org.

During a preaching workshop, this Anglican evangelical pastor presses home three points: love is indispensable, love is practical, and love is eternal. He concludes with an urgent call to “grow up!”

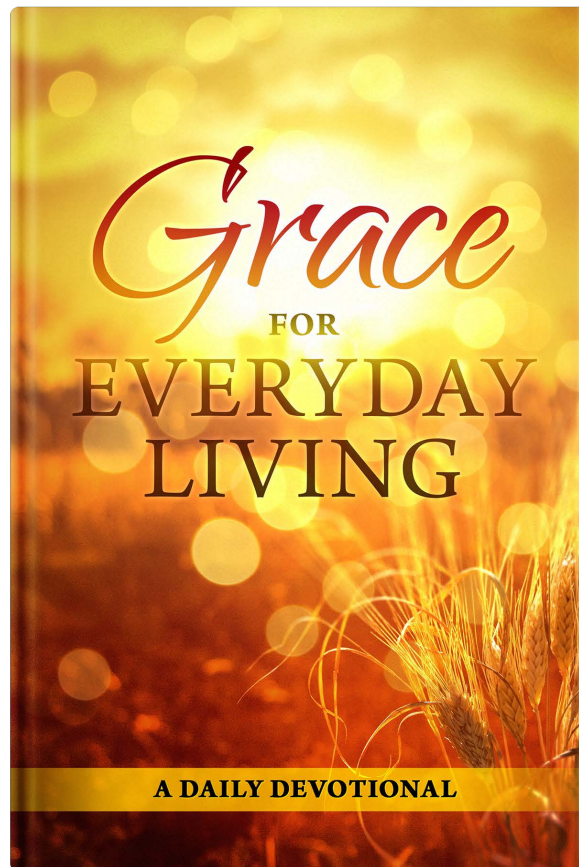
Sande, Ken. “Charitable Judgements—an Antidote to Judging Others (1 Corinthians 13:7).” First Baptist Grand Caymen. www.fbc.org.ky.

The founder of Peacemaker Ministries, Sande provides an excellent and practical application of the truth in 1 Corinthians 13, focusing specifically on how we judge other people.

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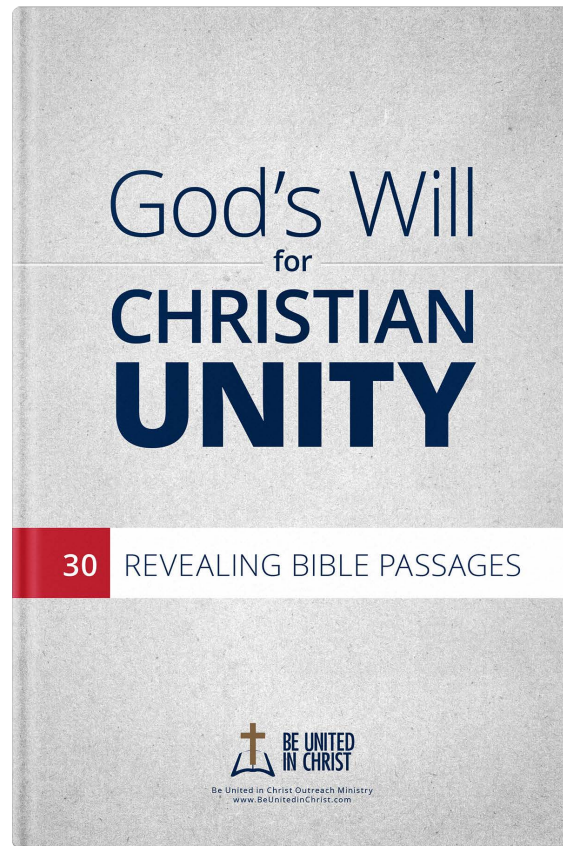
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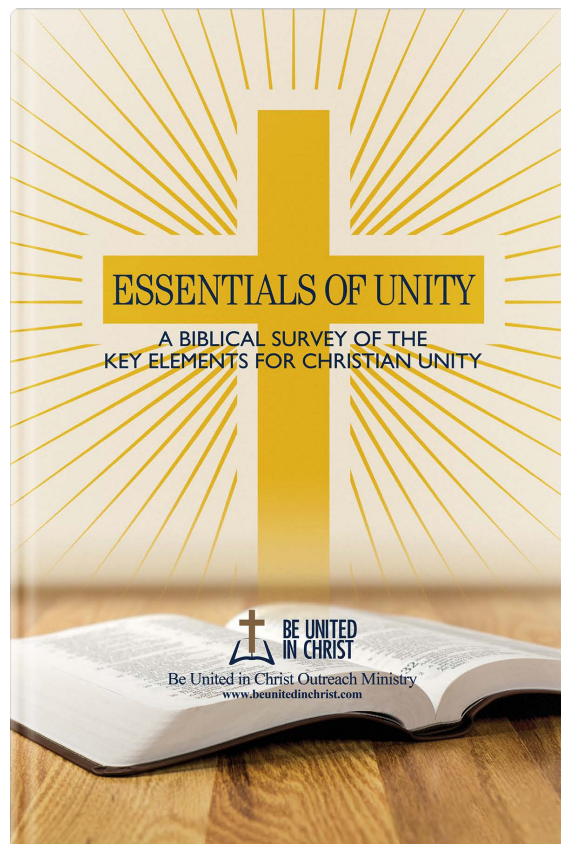
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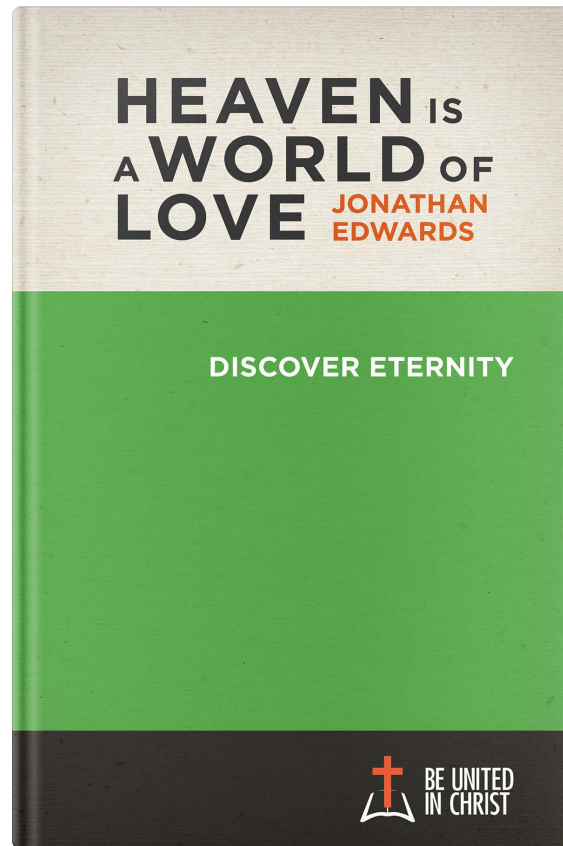
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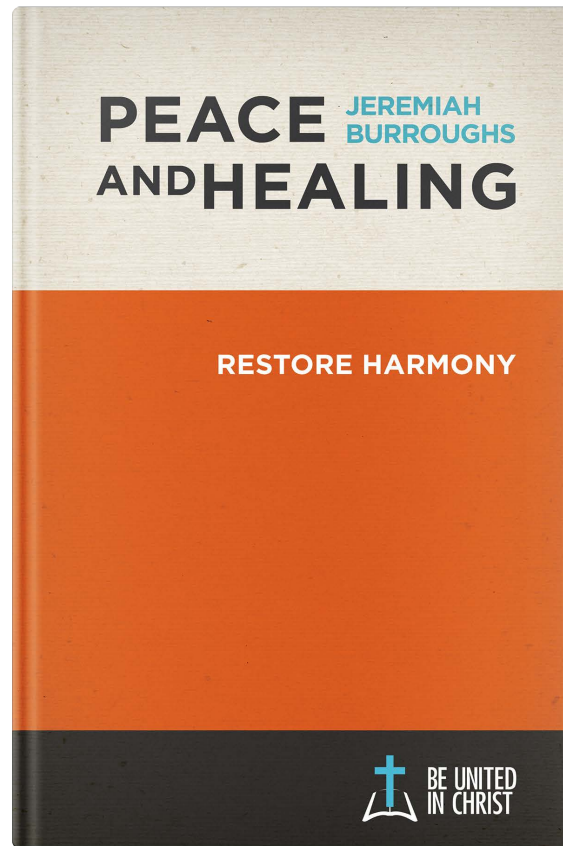


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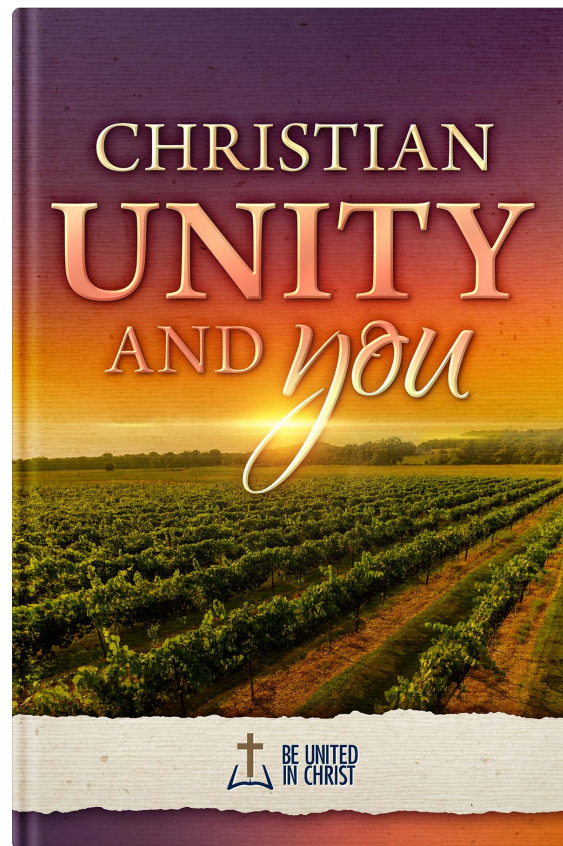


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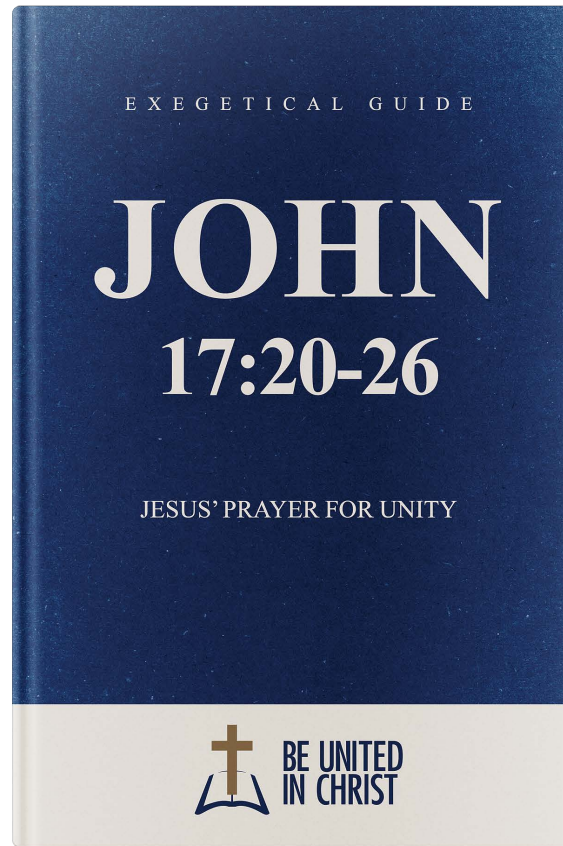


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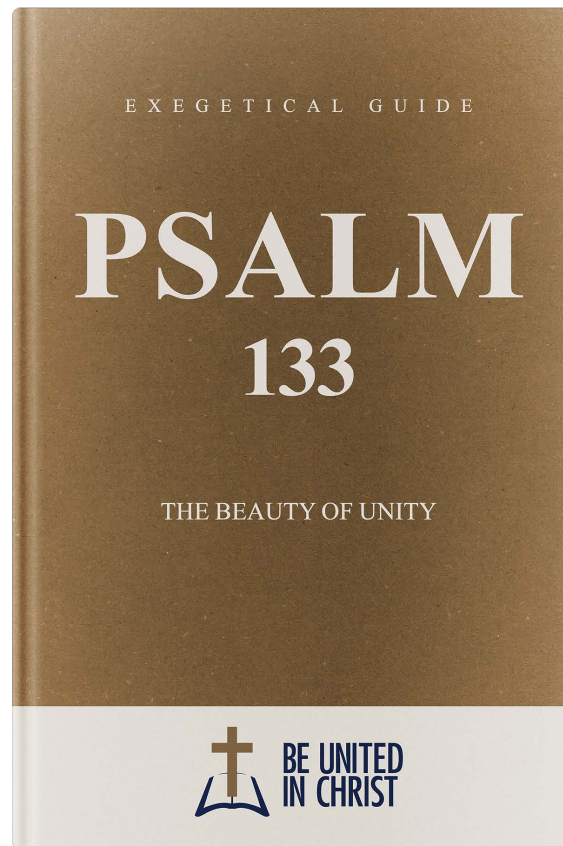


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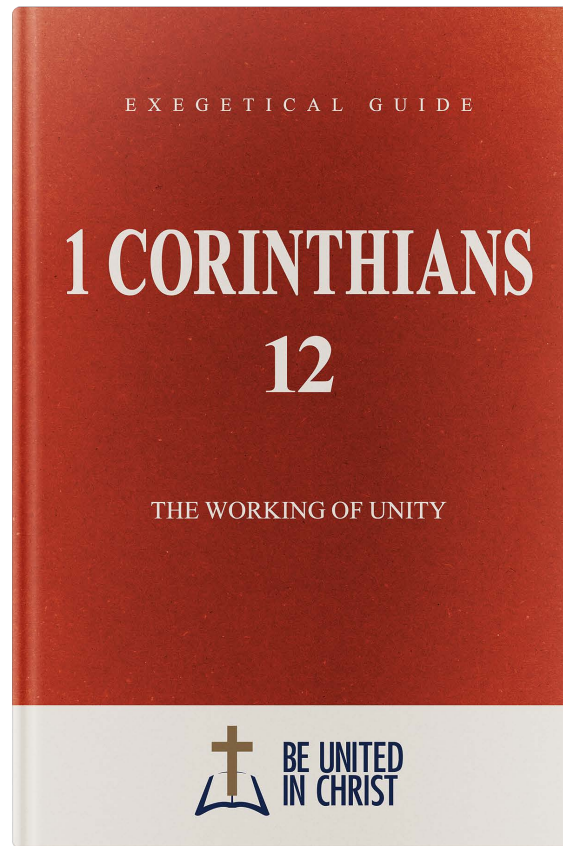


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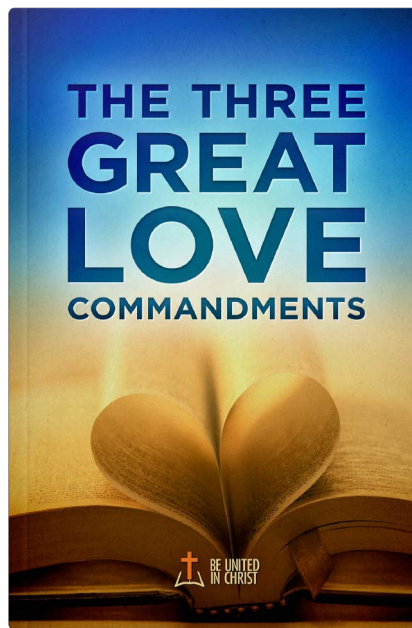


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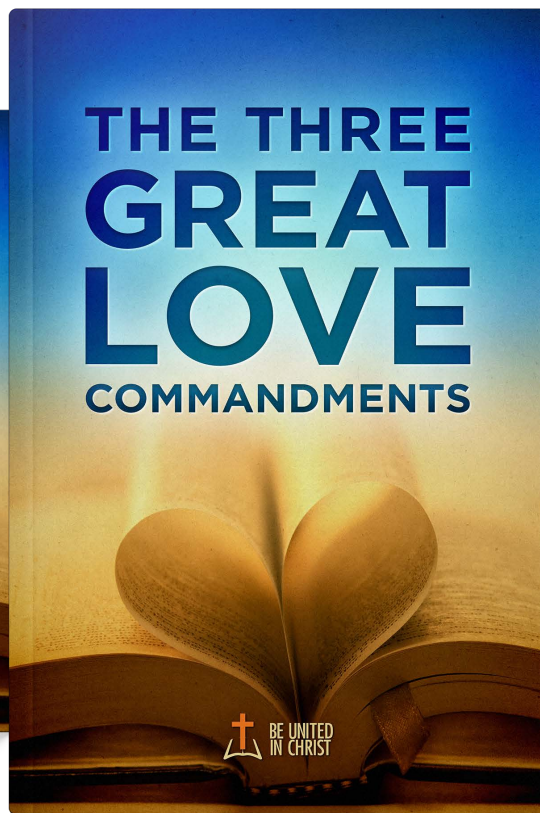
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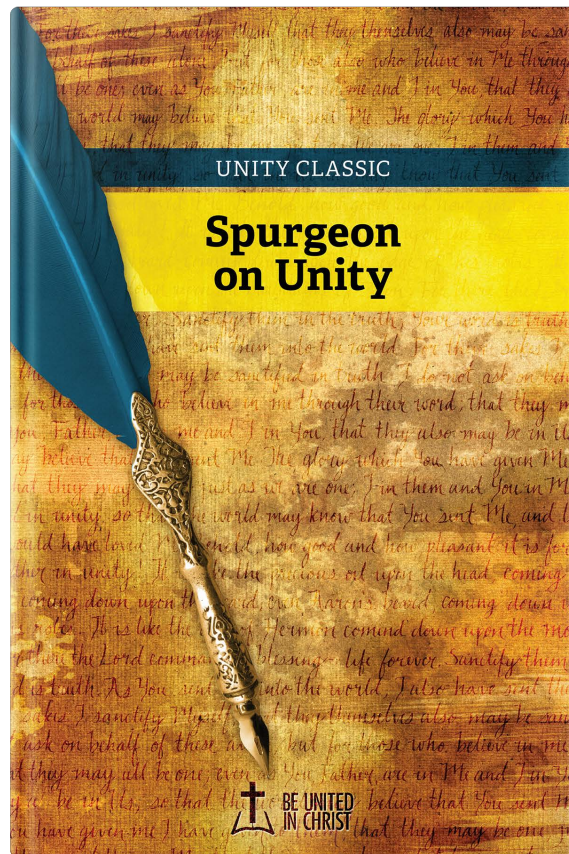
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