

## Take-Aways for Small Group Leaders to Consider

This text is well known for being read at wedding rehearsals and anniversary celebrations and is thought of as a beautiful reminder of God's love. **However, the real context is that Paul is in the process of rebuking the dysfunctional Corinthian church for their abuse or waste of God's spiritual gifts.** He did not write it to ponder marriage, but rather to stress the futility of all religious practices without love in the community of the church. Spiritual gifts are initially mentioned in Chapter 12 and Paul touches on these same gifts when stressing the importance of love.

Richard Hays writes,

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*Love is the ground of meaning....even the most apparently spiritual and meritorious activities become, without love, literally meaningless. First Corinthians 13 ought to encourage us to step back from even our most cherished projects and ask, "Why am I doing this?" If we cannot honestly say, "I am doing this for love and in love," then the legitimacy of the whole enterprise must come under serious doubt. (Hays: 232).*

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Because of our familiarity with this text we are prone to miss this true meaning to do all things based on love. This pertains not only to religious activities, but also to our daily lives with our family, friends, business, academics, etc. Otherwise, what starts out as having good intentions to "do good" can evolve into an exercise of loveless tasks that either glorify ourselves or even cause friction with or between other believers. This is what was happening in Corinth at the time of Paul's message where they were very focused on spirituality, but had become "guilty of dividing the community and despising their brothers and sisters" (Hays: 232).

Speaking of losing our way over time Hays writes,

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*We are so susceptible to self-deception in such matters that we need others around us who can keep us honest and remind us, as Paul does, that love is what really counts ultimately. (Hays 232).*

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### Analyze the Text Helps

3. The "perfect" is Jesus. The "partial" refers to the fact that our current understanding of God is limited. But when Jesus comes the "partial" (our limited understanding) will be no more and we will understand when the "perfect" (Jesus) comes.

4. The two analogies are childhood and the mirror. Paul basically says that we try and understand indirectly like a child does. We can't look at God/Jesus directly so it's like looking at Him in a mirror or as a picture. We won't know fully until Jesus (the "perfect") comes again.

**SUMMARY AND REVIEW**

Take 5 minutes to discuss last week's sermon.

**INTRO TO THE TEXT:**

This chapter includes Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians for their behavior and waste of their spiritual gifts. It is not meant to be the wedding love message that we have all used or heard ourselves. He argues that love is an action and not an emotion and that all spiritual gifts are wasted if we don't have love. The type of love he refers to can be seen, experienced and demonstrated which is contrary to our culture that prioritizes "personal feelings"; i.e., we do what we want when we want because we "feel" like it.

**READ** 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

**ANALYZE THE TEXT**

1. What six spiritual gifts does Paul mention?
2. In 13:2-3, Paul refers to three spiritual gifts. Where do they come from? (12:4-7) We automatically consider these gifts as noble so how can we reconcile them as worthless without love?
3. In 13:9-10, Paul argues that a time of perfection is coming. What or who is Paul referring to by the use of "when the perfect comes"? And what is "the partial" that will be done away? (after wrestling with this, see take-aways for help)
4. In 13:10-12, what two analogies does Paul use to make his point? What will transpire to help him to "know fully"? (v.10)
5. How do you think the Corinthians received this criticism? How would you respond if you listened to this "sermon" today?

**A FEW THINGS TO CONSIDER:**

We recognize God's demonstration of love for us through the sacrifice of Jesus. However, there is no explicit reference to Jesus in this text. Paul stresses love demonstration as a character attribute that is shown through action, attitude and behavior and, therefore, it can be seen as ethical. He is stressing character formation for the Corinthians to help them reverse their current behavior.

In verses 1-3 Paul stresses that spiritual actions without love are meaningless. He describes various spiritual practices, all of which are wasted without love. Paul adds that the greatest spirituality is love.

Verses 4-7 refer to love as the antithesis of the Corinthians' behavior, and he wants us to know love when we see it as it can be demonstrated. He drives home this point with the use of 15 verbs, with love as the subject, to show that love isn't some theoretical term, but rather an actionable gift. We need to move away from the theoretical view of love and see it through action.

Then in verses 8-13, he discusses the permanence of love in contrast to the "transitory character of the spiritual gifts" (Hays, 228). Love is an eternal gift while the aforementioned spiritual gifts are temporary. The spiritual gifts will be done away with eventually (they will no longer be necessary when the Lord returns and the fullness of his kingdom is present) while "love abides" forever. These 15 gifts of revelation are here for a time between times in which the church must walk by faith and prophecy and only see a glimpse of God's future truth. Paul stresses that we are limited in our understanding, but this will change with the coming of Jesus.

**APPLY**

1. Reflect on your own spiritual gifts that you feel you have exercised recently. Do you do what you do out of genuine love for people? Or do you do it out of a sense of obligation?
2. God has called us to love people. Jesus said that all people will know we are His disciples by the love that we have for one another (John 13: 34-35). Look at those closest to you: a spouse, children, friends, neighbors, etc. Do you love them the way you should? What specific actions could you take today to demonstrate true love?
3. What are some ways that you could hold yourself accountable to regularly test your love "quotient"?

**Suggestions for further reading:** Richard Hays, *Interpretation: First Corinthians*; William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*; N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians*.