

St Valentine, the patron saint of love... February 14th...

A young woman was taking an afternoon nap. After she woke up, she told her husband, "I just dreamt that you gave me a pearl necklace for Valentine's Day. What do you think it means?"

"You'll know on St Valentine's Day", he said.

The day came, the man presented his girlfriend with a small package. Delighted, she opened it. She found a book entitled "The Meaning of Dreams".

It was CS Lewis, in his book 'The 4 Loves' that describes the words in the Bible for love – affection, friendship, romantic love... and the word that Paul uses at least once in each of his letters, and the words translated as love when Jesus speaks. It's the word *agape* – because none of the other 3 was adequate. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4hI638mskQ>

In this amazing chapter about love, therefore, put away those other lovely ideas, and let's focus on something new – something that is found in the Lord Jesus and his love for us.

Even those who do not like Paul, for whatever reason, still love this chapter because love is good. But we need to put this chapter in the Corinthian context. In 1 Corinthians 12:31 Paul says: "But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way." Readers feel perplexed a bit about this verse because earlier in 12:1-26 he told the Corinthians that all gifts are different yet important. However, now he insinuates that there are superior gifts, asking them to "strive for the greater gifts."

This verse must be understood not in terms of kinds of spiritual gifts, as in 12:6-10, but in terms of a different focus of work in the church: "Works of love," which is "a more excellent way." In this sense, "greater gifts" (*charisma* means a gift or grace) refer to all love-related works, which is the topic of 1 Corinthians 13.

Let's look at the passage (follow in Bible – give out – replace/repair!)

1) Love is foremost – 13:1-3

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul speaks in the first-person-singular and explains why love is foremost. Speaking in tongues may be regarded as one of the superior gifts by the Corinthian community. But if there is no love, it is nothing, as he says: "I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" that would hinder community work. Likewise, he goes on to say in 13:2-3: "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. 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."

2) Love is concrete (13:4-7)

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, Paul describes what results from love rather than what love is. He does not romanticize it with abstract language. Rather, love is a concrete action that comes with all action verbs, as in 13:4-7: *makrothymeo* ("to be patient"), *chresteuomai* ("to act kindly"), *zeloo* ("to be jealous"), *perpereuomai* ("to brag"), *physiomai* ("to be proud"), *aschemoneo* ("to behave indecently"), *zeteo* ("to desire"), *paroxynomai* ("to be upset"), *logizomai* ("to reckon"),

chairo ("to rejoice"), *synkairo* ("to rejoice with"), *stego* ("to bear"), *pisteuo* ("to believe"), *elpizo* ("to hope"), *hypomeno* ("to endure").

As we see above, seven out of the fifteen action-verbs have to do with what love must do: "To be patient," "to be kind," "to rejoice in the truth," "to bear all things," "to believe all things," "to hope all things," and "to endure all things." Then, the rest (eight of them) has to do with what love should not do: "Not to envy," "not to boast," "not to be arrogant," "not to be rude," "not to seek its own way," "not to be irritable," "not to be resentful," and "not to rejoice in wrongdoing."

If the Corinthians are led by the Spirit and informed by the Lord, they can follow examples of love as shown by Christ and participate in his work, rejoicing in the truth. All this is the work of the Holy Spirit loving in them, who helps them to bear all things, to believe all things, to hope in all things, and to endure all things.

At the same time, love results in the absence of negative things - not envy, not boast, not be arrogant or rude, not seek their own way, not be irritable, not be resentful, and not rejoice in wrongdoing.

3) Love will never end (13:8-13)

In 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, Paul draws to a close. On the one hand, he emphasizes the primacy of love, and on the other, he talks about the apocalyptic time when the complete comes. First, he says "love never ends," while prophecies, speaking in tongues, and knowledge will come to an end. Love is the reason for the Corinthian church, love is the reason for any church, love founded in the person and work of Jesus Christ. From beginning to end, love is a constant mover to the Corinthians. Love comes from God who chose the weak and the foolish (1 Corinthians 1:26-29); Jesus loved the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-25), and therefore, the Corinthians follow the example of Christly love.

Notice how in 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, Paul talks about the apocalyptic time and vision when eventually the complete comes. He says in the first person plural: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end." This partial knowledge and prophecy must be a good reminder to the strong people in the Corinthian community who think that they are wise in Christ and that they were saved already. Until the end, no one can see fully.

Therefore no one can claim to have full knowledge or prophecy. They must be humble before God and others. That's why being tolerant of each other is so vital in a church – we don't know everything there is to know, even though some people behave as if they do! Their job is to love more as much as they can, and as long as they are led by the Spirit.

In 1 Corinthians 13:11, Paul continues to talk about this issue of time, but now in the first person singular: (Nb now at weddings, need to watch our language! – NIV.)
“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” Sometimes grown-ups act like children – it’s not fair! There’s even a new verb ‘adulthood’ the time we have to act like an adult when we don’t feel like it! We do not know details about Paul’s metaphor of a child. But one thing seems clear: there was a time that he was thinking and acting like a child.

We get the impression that Paul underwent a process of transformation toward maturity. It is important to read his candid confession that he was a child (“speaking like a child, thinking like a child, and reasoning like a child”). Perhaps he refers to his former time as a Pharisee before receiving a call from God, or, he may refer to the former times during his early career of Christian ministry. Whichever is the case, his point is that he grew mature if not fully, and that he put an end to childish ways. Then in 1 Corinthians 13:12, he switches from the first-person-plural and back to the first-person-singular: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” In an ancient mirror, things are not seen clearly since it is not made from glass. Thus “now we see in a mirror, dimly,” which means all have partial knowledge or prophecy. But when the complete comes, all will see all things clearly.

Interestingly, Paul says that in such a time of completion: “Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” The implication is one cannot know fully himself/herself until the Parousia. Each person needs to continue to grow with a humble attitude toward God and others.

Lastly, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul uses the triadic formula of faith, hope, and love. He does not say that love is the only important thing; rather, he says that “now faith, hope, and love abide.” This means that the Corinthians must have all these three. But they should remember that love is the basis for and the goal of their works and life. That is why he says: “And the greatest of these is love.”

But let’s end where we started, and remember the words for love – the greatest is not affection, nor friendship, nor romantic love, but agape – unselfish, giving actions when we follow Jesus and his love for us – this remains, just as one day we will see Jesus.

Love is not just for Valentine’s day – it’s for life, as it is eternal life.