

# What the World Needs Now

*September 10, 2023*

## Lesson Summary

### **Main Passages**

1 Corinthians 13

### **Session Outline**

1. Why Love? (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)
2. Love Is . . . (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)
3. Love Endures (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

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### **Theological Theme**

The love of Christ is the main thing the world needs to see and experience from the church today.





## Leader Guide

# What the World Needs Now

### Introduction

“What the World Needs Now” is a well-known song from the 1960s written by Hal David and Burt Bacharach and recorded by many different artists over the years. Having been included in over 220 films and television shows, many go back to these lyrics when the world is troubled. After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, this song was played on radio stations around the country, showing the wide recognition of the need for love.<sup>1</sup>

Most of us have heard this song or one with similar lyrics pointing to the same idea. Songs like this have been used as comfort in troubling times or as simple encouragement to seek a better way. Either way, the importance of love is celebrated. It is not insignificant that a song about the necessity of love is one of the most widely recognized and enduring songs across generations.

-  Do you know the song “What the World Needs Now”? What context have you heard this song in? Why do you think the theme of this song has resonated through the years?
-  What does this point to regarding all people’s recognition of the need to receive and give love?

### Session Summary

The Christians at Corinth had become distracted from the main thing. They placed improper emphasis on spiritual gifts. In this chapter, Paul wrote to encourage them to stop making spiritual gifts the focus and goal of their lives and to recognize that without love, those gifts meant nothing. No matter what they did for the kingdom, if they did it without love, they truly achieved nothing. If we are not careful, we too will get distracted by secondary things, forgetting love as the motivation for spreading the gospel.

The Corinthians needed to understand the necessity of love in all they did. Paul described the outworking of love in daily life. Through these characteristics, we can identify love or the lack of love and do something about it. The world needs to know true love and how they can experience it for themselves. The church bears the responsibility to demonstrate love so that those without Christ will come to know Him and His unfailing love.

## 1. Why Love? (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians is one of the most widely known and recognized passages of Scripture. It is often read in wedding ceremonies even though it was not written for this context originally. Paul sent this letter to the church at Corinth to encourage and teach the believers there.

 What are some contexts in which you have seen or heard the words of 1 Corinthians 13?

The Christians at Corinth were distracted from the gospel in many ways. One of their distractions was being enamored with the spiritual gifts. They valued certain ones more than others, which led to valuing certain people over others. Any time we begin to value the gifts of God in the place of God, it causes issues. Paul addressed the church's favoritism over gifts beginning chapter 12. He wanted them to understand that even the gifts they valued most were meaningless if not accompanied by love.

 Why are even good things of no value if not done with love? Why do our intentions matter in living out the Christian life?

Paul's reference to the tongues of angels and men was purposeful because the gift of tongues was highly valued in the church. Paul also named other gifts to make the point that when done with the wrong motive, the spiritual gifts will not fulfill their intended purpose. When we leave out love, our motives and goals become our aim, putting us rather than the Lord at the center. Paul was not pitting love against gifts but showing that the purpose of the gifts was to display Christ's love.

In referencing love in this passage, Paul used the Greek word *agape*. This word denotes the self-giving love God displays to His people. It is unchanging love, given to those who are unlovable. *Agape* love does not expect anything in return. Included in this type of love is the idea of self-denial. Think about how that relates to use of the spiritual gifts. With this kind of love as the goal, the gifts would be used rightly to glorify Jesus and build up His body.

Paul pointed out that performing self-sacrificing acts or denying ourselves is not enough if love doesn't motivate our sacrifice. In all things, love is vital for those who follow Jesus.

- Application: Where might you have been seeking to do godly things without the motivation of Christ's love? What needs to change?

## 2. Love Is . . . (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

If we are to be more focused on love, we need to better understand what it looks like in practice. Paul began a list of characteristics to describe the presence or absence of love.

The word love is used in so many ways in our culture, so it is important to have a standard by which to measure biblical love. Paul gave these descriptors of what love in action looks like instead of only referring to love as a feeling or idea. It is easy to get caught up in the expected worldly emotions of love, but these traits Paul listed help us grasp true love according to God's standard.

- How does the list of characteristics describing love in these verses help you to better assess your daily motivations?

Paul described love positively and negatively. He wrote that love is patient and kind, but also made clear what love does not do. The presence of envy, boasting, arrogance, and the rest of this list can indicate a failure to love as Christ has loved us. These things are easy to justify and will creep in unless we intentionally pursue the sacrificial love of Christ. Love is not envious, proud, arrogant, rude, selfish, irritable, or resentful, and it doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing. We may be able to easily agree with this list, but do we live in agreement with it?

- Which of the negative descriptors do you wrestle with the most? How has Christ loved you completely in that regard?

It does not take much to find evidence of the opposite characteristics of love in our lives. All of us experience envy or jealousy sometimes. We all deal with selfish natures that push us to make choices based on our desires instead of what God wants and the Spirit prompts. Paul spoke plainly and directly so that there was no confusion. We choose godly love, or we choose these other things.

For further clarification and emphasis, Paul gave four more virtues of love. These virtues may seem extreme to us, but all of us have been loved by Jesus in these ways. Paul repeated “all things” (v. 6) in reference to what love bears, believes, hopes, and endures. This kind of love is only possible when you live surrendered to the Holy Spirit and dependent on the Lord every day.

- ❓ Application: Where are you struggling to love in “all things”? How can you relinquish control and ask the Holy Spirit to love others through you in these areas? Why must this be a daily prayer and not just a one-time thing?

### 3. Love Endures (1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Wrapping up his point about the importance of love, Paul stressed the permanence and endurance of love over anything else. The Christians in Corinth had overemphasized the spiritual gifts, and it was time for the Corinthians to put everything in the proper perspective. Paul told them love would never fail while other gifts would have an end.

It is not exactly clear what Paul meant when he wrote about when the spiritual gifts will cease but scholars agree that the phrase, “when the perfect comes” (v. 10) refers to when we will be perfected with the Lord for eternity. Though other gifts will fall away, the love of God will endure forever.

- ❓ How have you seen the truth that love never fails in your life? Consider challenging moments when you have shown or been shown godly love compared to when this love has been absent.

Paul offered common illustrations to help his readers understand the temporary nature of the gifts and the permanence of love. First, he used the concept of growing from childhood to adulthood. The things that are completely appropriate for a kid are not necessarily appropriate for those who have grown and matured. The same is true spiritually. The gifts of the spirit may be useful at a certain time but will not be appropriate forever. Spiritually mature believers will keep a proper perspective about the gifts and their intended purpose of building up the body of Christ.

- ❓ What did you value or enjoy as a child that has fallen away as you’ve matured into an adult? What are some spiritual things that become unnecessary as we move from spiritual children into maturity?

#### The Supremacy of Love

Spiritual gifts have their place for a time, but love endures forever. Above all else love is the one thing needful. Faith, hope, and love form a heavenly triad of spiritual graces that endure forever, but “the greatest of these is love”.

Paul also used the image of looking at a reflection in a mirror. Paul described the image of a blurry, dim, and unclear reflection. We see Jesus in this dim way right now but one day we will see Him with perfect clarity. We will know Him as we should when we are united with Him.

Paul concluded this section of his letter by pointing to the enduring traits of the Christian life: faith, hope, and love. We should appreciate and use spiritual gifts, but they were never meant to be the focus of the Christian life. Rather, we are to pursue faith, hope, and love. When we finally come face to face with Jesus, we will no longer need faith and hope because our faith will be sight and our hope will be realized, but our love for Him and one another will endure forever.



Application: What needs to change so that your daily focus is on faith, hope, and love? How would your life be different if this really was your sole aim?

## Conclusion

The church at Corinth had put their focus on the wrong things. They got distracted by their value of the spiritual gifts and overlooked the love of Christ that should be present in all followers of Christ. Paul wrote to encourage and challenge them in a better way.

He reminded them that godly love was the most important factor in everything they did. This is a vital truth for us today. If we lose focus of this, we easily get caught up in doing things for the Lord while leaving out the most important ingredient—love. Paul went so far as to say anything done for the Lord, even very good things, without love doesn't matter. The love of Christ is to be the focus and goal of our lives.

Paul gave a list describing what love is and what it isn't. It is sometimes easier to recognize a virtue by identifying the opposite characteristics because those may be the ones we display the most. In recognizing what love is not in our lives, we can repent and adjust by God's power. As we seek to reach the world with the gospel, it is crucial that we realize the role love must play in all we do. The world needs to see and know what real love that never fails and makes all the difference.

- ❓ Where might you be distracted from the aim of living with Christ's love?
- ❓ How might we as a group encourage one another toward godly love each day?
- ❓ How does living with the love we have studied about today lead us toward gospel conversations with others?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank God for His love. Ask for love to abound in your life so that He will be glorified and others will be drawn to Him.*

## Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians* by Daniel Akin and James Merritt
- *Be Wise* by Warren Wiersbe
- *1 & 2 Corinthians* by Richard Pratt Jr.

### Prayer Prompts:

1. How can you use your gifts, motivated by love, to bless someone in your group/your church?
2. What characteristic of love from 1 Corinthians 13 can you practice this week in how you love others?

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples



### Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

\*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC



## For Next Week

### Session Title

- The Reward for Good Work

### Main Passages

- Matthew 25:14-30

### Session Outline

1. The Assignment (Matthew 25:14-15)
2. The Strategy (Matthew 25:16-18)
3. The Master Returns (Matthew 25:19-30)

### Memorize

*If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. - 1 Corinthians 13:1-3*

# Historical Context of 1 Corinthians

## Purpose

Paul's purpose in writing 1 Corinthians was to motivate the Corinthian church to acknowledge the Lord's ownership of them and the implications this had in their lives. Key topics Paul addressed in this overarching theme of the ownership and authority of the Lord include Christian unity, morality, the role of women, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection.

## Author

First Corinthians ascribes Paul as its author (1:1; 16:21). Biblical scholars are almost unanimous that Paul wrote the letter. He wrote it during the last year of his three-year ministry at Ephesus, probably a few weeks before Pentecost in the spring of AD 56 (15:32; 16:8; Ac 20:31).

## Setting

First Corinthians is the second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. He had written them an earlier letter, of which no extant copy exists, that included an admonition not to mix with the sexually immoral (5:9). The writing of this second letter (1 Corinthians) was prompted by oral reports from Chloe's household about factional strife within the church (1:11). Paul had also received reports about an incestuous relationship among the membership (5:1), factions that arose during observance of the Lord's Supper (11:18), and confusion over the resurrection of the dead (15:12). As a result, Paul addressed these issues in 1 Corinthians. Apparently as he was writing the letter, he received a letter from the Corinthians asking his opinion on various issues (7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). Therefore, he included his replies within this letter to the Corinthian believers.

## Special Features

First Corinthians is the most literary of Paul's letters. With a variety of stylistic devices—irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, alliteration, antithesis, personification, framing devices, hyperbole, repetition, picturesque words (with local color), double meanings, and other wordplays—Paul attempted to persuade his readers. He wanted to communicate to the Corinthians the necessity of accepting the Lord's authority over their lives.

# Extended Commentary

## 1 Corinthians 13

13:1 If not accompanied by love, the ability to speak human or angelic tongues would be unbearable to others, like misused musical instruments.

13:2 Paul did have the gift of prophecy, he had great faith to the point of doing miracles, and as an apostle he was “manager” of God’s mysteries (4:1). His point here is that he could have these gifts to perfection and it would be pointless without love.

13:3 Sacrifice of one’s life (give over my body) can be the ultimate act of love (Jn 15:13; Rm 5:6–8), but it is also possible to make such sacrifice in order to boast rather than out of love. In this case, nothing is gained.

13:4–5 Paul personifies love in order to show its daily character and choices. Love is not self-centered but other-focused.

13:5–6a The Corinthians would have recognized these faults as taking place among them.

13:6b Contrary to common perception, love is not marked by tolerance for error.

13:7 Love endures in this age with a sure expectation of better things to come in the next.

13:8–13 Many aspects of church life will end at the end of this current age, but love never ends. This permanence signals love’s priority within the church.

13:10 The perfect refers to the next age, the eternal age when Messiah reigns.

13:11 Paul uses the analogy of infancy versus adulthood to explain the contrast between our present understanding and the understanding we will have in the next age.

13:12 Believers are granted to know truth in this age but only a reflection as in a mirror. Our imprecise perception of Christ will be made complete in eternity, where we will know him face to face.

13:13 Of faith, hope, and love, love is the greatest because it continues into the next age. Both faith and hope will be fulfilled in eternity, and so will not remain. This statement concludes a semantic bracket that began in v. 8—“Love never ends.”<sup>2</sup>

## Author Bio

1. Kimberly Elkins, “Story of a Song: What the World Needs Now Is Love,” Guideposts, accessed July 20, 2023, <https://guideposts.org/positive-living/entertainment/music/story-of-a-song-what-the-world-needs-now-is-love/>.
2. F. Alan Tomlinson, “1 Corinthians,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1830.

## Author Bio

### Daniel Akin (Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians)

Daniel L. Akin is the president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. He holds a Ph.D. in Humanities from the University of Texas at Arlington and has authored or edited many books and Bible commentaries including *Ten Who Changed the World* and *A Theology for the Church*.

### James Merritt (Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians)

James Merritt is the pastor of Cross Pointe Church in Duluth, Georgia. He is the host of a nationwide and worldwide broadcast ministry, *Touching Lives*. He earned a Master of Divinity degree and a PhD in Evangelism from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He served as President of the Southern Baptist Convention – the largest protestant denomination in the country. He and his wife, Teresa, have three sons and five grandchildren.

### Warren Wiersbe (Be Wise)

Warren W. Wiersbe, former pastor of the Moody Church and general director of *Back to the Bible*, has traveled widely as a Bible teacher and conference speaker. Because of his encouragement to those in ministry, Dr. Wiersbe is often referred to as “the pastor’s pastor.” He has ministered in churches and conferences throughout the United States as well as in Canada, Central and South America, and Europe. Dr. Wiersbe has written over 150 books, including the popular BE series of commentaries on every book of the Bible, which has sold more than four million copies. At the 2002 Christian Booksellers Convention, he was awarded the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association. Dr. Wiersbe and his wife, Betty, live in Lincoln, Nebraska.

### Richard Pratt Jr. (1 & 2 Corinthians)

Richard L. Pratt Jr. (M.Div., Union Theological Seminary; Th.D., Harvard University) is president of Third Millennium Ministries. He was a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary for over twenty years and is the author of *Pray with Your Eyes Open*, *He Gave Us Stories*, and *Every Thought Captive*.