

Loving the Body of Christ: Understanding How Faith Works

1 Corinthians 12:31--13:13

The Bible makes much of love, both ours and God's, for our loves are the objects of desire. What we love we desire, and what we desire, we work to obtain, and that "work" is an indication of the strength of the desire. This is why loving the Lord is the greatest commandment, and love for other humans its twin. Paul explains that all our works, whatever our gifts, must be love-inspired, or else they would be better left un-done. In context, Paul is laying the second tier argument against vaunting one's gift of tongues: when we love others, we seek to edify them, which (as chapter 14 concludes), uninterpreted tongues do not and cannot.

- ❖ "Church, seek the BEST of the gifts, but first, a better way (to apply them) . . ." 12:31

The church should be pursuing the best gifts. Still, something is greater than gifts.

- ❖ "Because apart from love our gifts and deeds are worthless." 13:1-3
Love is the quality without which the spiritual life is nonexistent.

- ❖ "And because love alone defines our true character and actions." 13:4-7
Love is the fountain from which all (other) spiritual qualities and works spring.

- ❖ "And because, unlike the gifts, love and its blessings will last forever." 13:8-12
After faith and hope become sight and fulfillment, love will remain.

- ❖ "In fact, love is the greatest and highest of spiritual activities." 13:13
Any and all spiritual life must be assessed by its relationship to love.

Growth Principle #16: The spiritually mature Christian is characterized by an intentional, rational, self-sacrificial care for the well-being of others.

1. Faith works.

At our new birth, we believe in Jesus, and a new life begins within us, which is the very life of God (John 3:1-16). So saving faith begins a life which, however imperfectly, mirrors God and works, as does God. Faith begins at a moment in time, but sustains its effects throughout our lives. Ephesians 2:1-10 says that faith's works are inevitable.

2. Faith works by love.

Galatians 5:6 reminds us that faith works through love. In other words, faith is not the new legalism which imposes duty, but rather, a principle that brings delight, since its work is on behalf of the loved one. In fact, love fulfills the law (Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 22:36-40). This does not come primarily out of "feelings" we have for another person, but the commitment to doing good for him or her, even a complete stranger. If we love God, we will love those born of Him, and we will desire what He desires for them. 1 John 3:16; 4:7-12, 19-21.

3. Love, the fruit of the Spirit, is greater than any gift of the Spirit.

While gifts come with the danger of misuse, love never does. In fact, the fruit of the Spirit is directly opposed to the works of the flesh and displaces them as we submit to God and walk in the Spirit. Galatians 5:16-26. Paul wants the Corinthians (and us!) to imitate Jesus in loving others, and as we do this, we are evidencing His grace. This is how Jesus is the Vine and we are branches, and why all of the glory for our love based works goes to him. John 15:1-11 This is why "love never fails," and "the greatest of these is love." The gifts are the MEANS, but love is the END for which they were given. We are never told to search out which gift we have, but we are often commanded to love.

Going Deeper--For Growth Groups:

1. What impresses us most in others, their gifts or their Christlikeness? How do you measure whether or not a person is "loving"? Which builds the church better, great gifts or great love?
2. Which is easier for us, to serve out of love or duty? Can someone "love too much"?
3. How does love "fulfill the Law" without making us slaves of the Law? How does the New Covenant deal with the problem in ways that the Old Covenant could not? (Jeremiah 31 may have some clues.)
4. What does Paul mean when he says that love "believes all things, hopes all things"?