1 Corinthians 13 Bible study

1 Corinthians 13:1-13. 3 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

Paul teaches that impressive spiritual gifts and costly acts are empty without love. He describes love through patient, kind, truthful conduct, then contrasts its permanence with partial knowledge and gifts that will pass away. Chapters 12 and 14 place this teaching in the life of the church. The chapter can speak to marriage, but its first task is to shape how believers treat one another as members of Christ's body.

READ TOGETHER: 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a ringing gong or a
clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and
if I have absolute faith so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I
possess to the poor and exult in the surrender of my body, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is
patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-
seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no account of wrongs. 6 Love takes no pleasure in evil, but
rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8
Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will
be restrained; where there is knowledge, it will be dismissed. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy
in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial passes away. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a
child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I set aside childish ways.
12 Now we see but a dim reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part;
then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope, and
love; but the greatest of these is love.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Read what comes before and after

At the end of chapter 12, Paul names different roles and gifts in the body of Christ. His questions do not assign every gift to every member. He then introduces an excellent way. Chapter 13 explains why love is indispensable, whatever a person's role.

Chapter 14 opens by telling the church to pursue love and desire spiritual gifts. Paul has not interrupted an unrelated topic with a poem. Love governs the use of gifts for other people's good. Read both surrounding passages before discussing the meaning of any one gift.

> *Now you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a member of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, and those with gifts of healing, helping, administration, and various tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way. (1 Corinthians 12:27-31)*

> *Earnestly pursue love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy. For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God. Indeed, no one understands him; he utters mysteries in the Spirit. But he who prophesies speaks to men for their edification, encouragement, and comfort. The one who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. I wish that all of you could speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets so that the church may be edified. (1 Corinthians 14:1-5)*

Three tests for a group

Verses 1 to 3 test impressive speech, insight, faith, and costly giving by asking whether love is present. Verses 4 to 7 describe its conduct. Verses 8 to 13 move from present partial knowledge to future fullness. Those three movements provide the three meetings below.

The chapter is not a license to conceal harm. Verse 6 says love does not rejoice in evil but rejoices with the truth. Read the endurance language in verse 7 together with that statement. An application that requires secrecy about abuse has lost part of Paul's description.

LOVE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Ask what each section corrects before turning it into advice for one relationship.

Impressive speech without love (13:1)

A speaker may sound extraordinary and still fail the test of love. Paul uses the noise of instruments to expose speech that impresses without caring for others. Ask who benefits from what is said.

Costly action without love (13:2-3)

Knowledge, faith, giving, and bodily sacrifice do not substitute for love. Paul's first-person examples make self-examination possible without asking the group to speculate about another person's motives.

Patient, kind, and truthful (13:4-7)

Paul names both what love does and what it refuses: envy, boasting, pride, rudeness, self-seeking, and delight in evil. This gives the group observable questions to discuss. Feeling warmly toward someone is not the whole measure.

Partial now, fullness then (13:8-12)

Paul pairs present partial knowledge with a future encounter described as seeing face to face. The child/adult and mirror images emphasize a difference between present limits and future fullness. They call for humility, not contempt for learning now.

The greatest is love (13:13)

Faith, hope, and love remain, and Paul names love as greatest. Chapter 14 immediately tells the church to pursue love. Let that command shape the discussion itself: listen patiently and make room for someone who has not spoken.

SESSION 1 OF 3

What gifts cannot replace

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Understand the opening examples within the church-body setting.
Also read: 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Read 12:27-31. What different roles and gifts does Paul name?

2. List the abilities and actions in 13:1-3. What repeated condition changes their value?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why might a group be tempted to treat visible ability as proof of mature love?

4. How do Paul's first-person examples invite self-examination rather than motive-policing?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. Choose one role you carry in church or family life. Who should benefit from it?

6. What would you change about that role if care for those people came before recognition?

SESSION 2 OF 3

What love actually does

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Move from a familiar reading to specific, truthful conduct.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Make two lists: what love does and what it does not do.

2. Which line connects love with truth rather than with avoiding all conflict?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. How does verse 6 qualify a careless reading of believing or enduring all things?

4. What is the difference between refusing vindictive scorekeeping and refusing accountability for harm?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. Without naming someone else's failures, choose one description you need to practice. What action would express it?

6. How can your group make room for truthful disagreement while speaking patiently?

SESSION 3 OF 3

Love and limited knowledge

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. Read the future-facing images with humility about present knowledge. Also read: 1 Corinthians 14:1-5.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What passes away, and what never fails?

2. Compare the child/adult image and the mirror/face-to-face image. What changes in each?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. What does Paul say about the limits of knowing now?

4. Read 14:1-5. How does pursuing love affect the way a gift is used in the gathering?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

5. Where should you speak with more humility about what you do not know?

6. Name one way your next gathering could build up someone other than the most visible speakers.

ONE-SESSION PATH

The love chapter in one evening

Read all of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Read 12:27-31, chapter 13, and 14:1. What subject connects them?

2. List the contrasts in 13:1-3 and the actions in 13:4-7.

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why is a wedding-only reading too narrow for this chapter?

4. How do truth in verse 6 and endurance in verse 7 belong together?

5. How should partial knowledge change the way a group handles disagreement?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Choose one concrete change in the way you use an ability for other people.

7. Close with a prayer shaped by one description of love, rather than by a general request to be nicer.

FOR THE LEADER

- Session 1 should locate the chapter in church life, not disqualify its use at a wedding. Marriage is one appropriate application within a wider call to love others.
- Session 2 has a textual safeguard: verse 6 joins love to truth and rejects delight in evil. Do not counsel someone to tolerate abuse, conceal wrongdoing, or abandon protective boundaries. Arrange appropriate help if a disclosure needs more than discussion.
- For scorekeeping, distinguish nursing resentment from keeping necessary records for safety, justice, or responsible oversight. The passage does not give a policy for erasing such records.
- In session 3, keep Paul's stated images on the page. The description of face-to-face knowledge matters when discussing what the perfect means. Do not present a disputed interpretation as though the chapter explicitly names a date.
- Allow a participant to pass on a personal question. Use an ordinary ministry example, such as listening to a quieter member, if the group needs a less exposed starting point.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

What does the perfect in verse 10 mean?

The phrase is read in debates about the duration of gifts. This guide starts with the explanations Paul supplies: knowing fully and seeing face to face in verse 12, contrasted with present partial knowledge. Verse 10 does not explicitly name the completion of the New Testament or give a date. Avoid presenting an additional interpretation of that timing as though Paul stated it directly.

Does this chapter settle whether all gifts continue today?

The chapter says particular gifts are temporary and love is enduring. The disputed question is how their ending relates to the fullness Paul describes. Arguments about gifts also use other passages. This study focuses on the chapter's explicit requirement of love rather than treating one discussion as a complete settlement of that broader question.

SOURCES

1 Corinthians 13, Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Primary text for the three movements, truth, endurance, and partial knowledge.

1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Gifts and the body of Christ as the preceding setting.

1 Corinthians 14:1-5, Berean Standard Bible. Berean Bible. Public domain. Pursuing love and building up the church as the following setting.

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