

Further texts and discussion

Having told the Corinthians that spiritual gifts are intended for the benefit of all—not for the benefit of the individual (12:7), Paul then promises to show the Corinthians ‘a more excellent way’ (v. 31). He does this by pronouncing the futility of spiritual gifts when practised without love (1–3), before praising the supreme qualities of love (4–7), and then comparing the durability of love to the finitude of other activities. You may be familiar with 1 Corinthians 13 read at weddings. In its original context though, Paul was not referring to romantic love between two people but to love for others within the community.

13:1 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** 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. **3** 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.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** 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. **12** 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. **13** And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Questions

- ▶ Paul refers to speaking in tongues, prophecy, wonder-working, almsgiving and some kinds of acts of self-sacrifice in vv. 1–3. Which of these spiritual activities might your character have participated in, if any?
- ▶ Is Paul being rhetorical or could these gifts have been practised without love? What might one have thought to gain through them? How could they lead to the negative qualities in vv. 4–6?
- ▶ How might Paul’s praise of love impact your character’s thinking about members of the body caring for each other (1 Cor 12:24–25)?

- ▶ Love 'endures all things'. What might your character be called to endure through practising love?
- ▶ How might your character respond to the implication that some of the church's behaviour has been childish?
- ▶ Paul describes other spiritual gifts as finite whereas love is eternal. Would this sound attractive to your character and why?
- ▶ What would your group as a whole do in response to Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 13? How could a person of low social standing practise love towards a person of higher standing and vice versa?

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