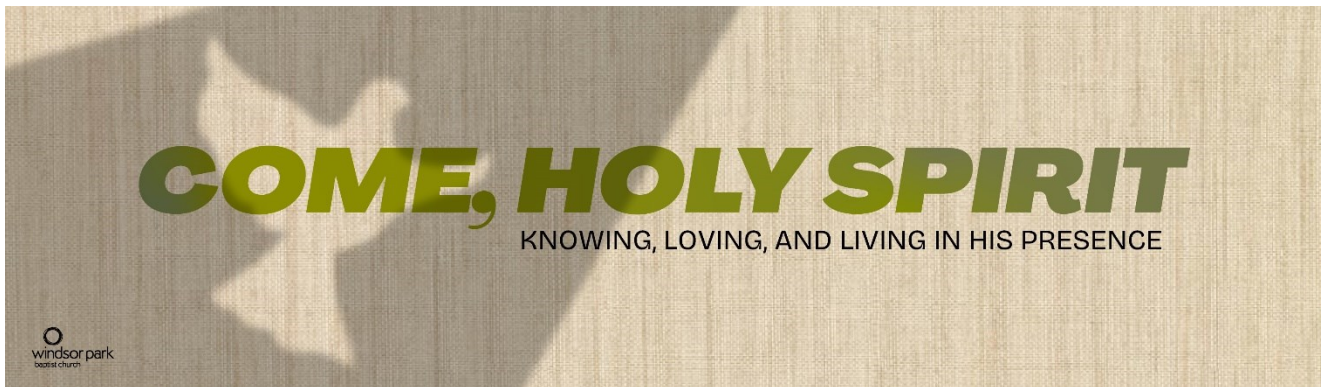


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Week 4: The Spirit of Love (1 Corinthians 13:1–13)

Key Idea:

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul teaches that the greatest evidence of the Holy Spirit is not spiritual gifts, knowledge, or powerful experiences, but Christlike love expressed through patience, kindness, forgiveness, and selfless service. As we pursue the Holy Spirit, His primary work is not simply to make us gifted, but to transform us into people who love like Jesus, reflecting God's heart to the world.

Introduction

Today we continue our series called **Come, Holy Spirit: Knowing, Loving, and Living in His Presence**, and we arrive at what is a very familiar passage – 1 Corinthians Chapter 13. I'm pretty sure it was read on 2nd November 1991 at Palmerston North Central Baptist Church when Jo & I were married, and I'm pretty sure it's been read at perhaps half of the 77 weddings that I've officiated since becoming a pastor.

While 1 Corinthians Chapter 13 is beautiful at weddings, the Apostle Paul wasn't even thinking of weddings when he wrote this letter to the church in Corinth; he was writing to a church, the kind of church that everyone would want to visit. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 12 we can see that the church loved spiritual gifts. They had miracles, prophecy, tongues, wisdom, power ... the full Holy Spirit combo meal. It was a Holy Ghost-filled, supernaturally empowered church.

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But they were using those gifts to show off, to one-up each other, to divide into factions, and make some people feel like second-class Christians. **They weren't doing the one thing that Jesus said trumps all others – love God and love your neighbour** (which in Scripture are one action, not two).

So right in the middle of Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians Chapters 12 & 14, he suddenly stops and says in Chapter 13: ***“If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”***

In other words, he says to the church in Corinth, and by association us today:

You can have spiritual gifts.

You can have spiritual experiences.

You can have spiritual knowledge.

But if love is missing, you've missed the point.

And that's incredibly important for us because throughout this series we've been talking about how the Spirit empowers, guides, sends, and gives good gifts. But today we discover something foundational: **The primary evidence of the Holy Spirit is not how gifted we are, it's how loving we are, because wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, He always moves us towards greater love.**

The Context: A Church Obsessed with Gifts

On paper, the church in Corinth does sound amazing. In 1 Corinthians Chapter 1 Verses 4-7 Paul says about them, ***“I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way - with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge - God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore***

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you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.”

The problem wasn't a lack of gifts, and to some of us this church sounds a little dreamy. But Paul isn't happy with what he's seeing on the inside because all this goodness was creating competition. People were comparing themselves, ranking themselves against others. Some thought they were more spiritual than others. Some believed their gift was superior to what others had. And the result of that ... division and a church that didn't reflect the message of Jesus.

Paul's answer to this division is fascinating. He doesn't tell them to stop using their gifts, he tells them to use them differently. **He tells them to use them in love**; he suggests that spiritual maturity isn't measured by giftedness, it's measured by Christlike love.

You see, there's a huge difference between being gifted and being mature. A person can be incredibly gifted and still be deeply immature. A church can have outstanding ministries and still fail to reflect Jesus. The Holy Spirit never gives gifts as an end in themselves; the gifts are tools for building people up. **Love is the purpose.**

Paul uses an example we can all relate to - a clanging cymbal. It makes noise. It gets your attention. It might even be impressive for a moment. But there's no melody. There's no harmony. There's no music. It's just sound. Likewise, you can have a church full of gifted people making noise ... impressive, spiritual-sounding noise, but if love isn't there, you haven't got a church - you've got a performance.

Love Is Greater Than Spiritual Ability

We've seen that Paul begins Chapter 13 with three dramatic examples:

1. If I speak in the tongues of men or angels ...

2. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ...

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3. *If I have faith that can move mountains...*

Those are impressive things. Imagine having extraordinary spiritual experiences; imagine understanding profound truths; imagine possessing mountain-moving faith. Yet Paul says that if we do not have love, ***"We're nothing."*** Not ***"We're less effective."*** Not ***"We're missing something."*** ***"We're ... nothing."***

That's a shocking statement, because the world usually measures success by our performance, or by our influence, or by how many followers we have (well done Tim Payne of the All Whites!), or by what we've achieved or by how much money we have. But Paul has a different measurement for those who follow Jesus. He asks, ***"How much do you love?"*** because love is what most resembles God. Love is what most reflects Jesus. Love is the fruit the Holy Spirit desires to produce.

If we think about Jesus, we know that people were amazed by His miracles. But what transformed lives wasn't simply His power, it was His love. The leper felt loved. The outcast felt loved. The adulterous woman felt loved. Zacchaeus felt loved. The sinner felt loved. The broken felt loved. Power got people's attention, but love changed their lives.

What Does Spirit-Led Love Look Like?

In Verses 4-7 Paul goes on to give us one of the most famous descriptions of what love looks like, this is the part that's most read at weddings. But notice that every one of the 14 examples is relational.

- 1. *Love is patient.***
- 2. *Love is kind.***
- 3. *Love does not envy.***
- 4. *Love does not boast.***
- 5. *Love is not proud.***
- 6. *Love does not dishonour others.***

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7. Love is not self-seeking.

8. Love is not easily angered.

9. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

10. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

11. Love always protects.

12. Love always trusts.

13. Love always hopes.

14. Love always perseveres.

Paul isn't describing feelings, he's describing behaviours; the kind of behaviours that the Holy Spirit produces in everyday relationships when we allow Him to shape our hearts.

Let's be honest, that's a depressing list. I mean what if we were to do something that will make us slightly uncomfortable – it makes me uncomfortable. Let's read those lines and replace the word "**love**" with our name. **Grant** is patient, **Grant** is kind, **Grant** does not envy ... etc. How are you doing on the Holy Spirit inspired love test? I got as far as "*Grant is patient*" before I realised we should move on quickly.

Let's look at a few of these Spirit-led behaviours specifically:

Firstly, love is patient: The Greek word here, *makrothumia*, means having a long fuse especially with difficult people. It's the capacity to be under pressure, to be wronged, to be frustrated, and yet to not have short fuse, or explode, or retaliate, or shut down. Who in your life requires the most patience from you? I'll give you a moment to picture their face. Maybe it's a family member, or a colleague. Maybe, and I say this with gentleness, it's someone in the church. The Holy Spirit grows patience in us toward that exact person. Not patience in general, but patience toward the specific, difficult, complicated person in front of you.

I've seen this play out in my own family. As I watched my mum care for my dad as dementia took hold in his life, I saw her patiently answer the same question again and again and again. Not

because she felt like doing that every day, but because love stayed. I think that anyone who cares for someone with dementia is displaying the fruit of the Spirit in a remarkable way.

What about love is kind: Kindness sounds simple until you have the opportunity to practice. Kindness is love in action. It's encouragement. It's generosity. It's noticing people. It's choosing gentleness when harshness would be easier. The world is not suffering from an excess of kindness, but the church should be known for it.

And then, love is not self-seeking: This may be one of the hardest because our culture constantly teaches us to prioritise ourselves. My rights. My preferences. My comfort. My needs. But Paul says love looks outward. Love asks, *"How can I serve?" "How can I help?" "How can I bless?"* In kindness, the Holy Spirit continually turns us away from self-centredness and toward Christ-centredness.

Then there's love keeps no record of wrongs: This doesn't mean pretending hurt never happened. It means refusing to weaponise the past. Love doesn't keep a running spreadsheet of offences but chooses forgiveness, not because the offence wasn't real, but because Jesus has forgiven us. In fact, one of the clearest signs of the Holy Spirit's work in us is growing in forgiveness. The word Paul uses here is a bookkeeping term. It means entering something into the ledger. To write it down and keep a running total. And Paul says love doesn't do that. Love doesn't keep a score sheet. But we do, don't we? We're remarkably good accountants when it comes to how we've been wronged. We've got spreadsheets. We've got the receipts. We remember the exact words they said in 2019. We remember the tone. We remember where we were standing, but **love tears up the ledger**. Not because the hurt wasn't real. But because the Holy Spirit gives us the capacity to forgive, actually forgive, the way God has forgiven us.

We could repeat that analysis with all fourteen behaviours, but you get the idea. They're challenging.

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Why Love Matters So Much

Paul reaches the pinnacle of the point he's making in Verses 8–13, ***"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 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 put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a 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. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."***

Here Paul is talking about the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge as being temporary. They belong to the "in part" age that we're living in now, where we see dimly, where we know partially, where we experience the Spirit in part. But when Jesus returns, when we see Him face to face, the gifts will have served their purpose. They'll cease. They'll be stilled. But love? Love never fails. Love is eternal. Love is what remains.

Think about what that means for how we see ourselves. The platform doesn't last. The title doesn't last. The impressive spiritual gifts, as extraordinary as they are, don't last. Even the memories of our greatest moments will fade. But every act of genuine love? Every patient conversation, every forgiven wrong, every moment of staying when you wanted to leave, every sacrifice made in love? **Those things echo into eternity.**

Because love is the nature of God. And love is what the Kingdom of God is built on.

The Holy Spirit and Love

Let's look at Romans 5:5 as a central passage that shows where the Holy Spirit fits into all of this, ***"God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."***

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The love Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 is not a self-improvement project. You can't grit-teeth your way to this kind of love. You can't discipline yourself into keeping no record of wrongs. You can't willpower your way into persevering when everything in you wants to quit. **The love that Paul describes is a gift.** And that gift is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And that changes everything about how we pursue it.

We can't pursue this kind of love by trying harder, we can only pursue this kind of love by pursuing the Spirit, by staying close to Jesus, by letting the Spirit have access to the parts of us that prevent us from loving like God does — giving the Spirit access to our bitterness, our resentment, our insecurity, our pride, our fears.

When Paul writes to another church in Galatia, he makes it very clear what the fruit of this kind of Spirit-filled living is. In another similar list, we see that Galatians Chapter 5 Verse 22 says, ***“But the fruit of the Spirit [who has been poured out into our hearts] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”*** But love is first. Love is the headline. Everything else is in service of love.

If our serving is making us proud, if our prophesying is making us competitive, if our giving is making us resentful — then we need to go back to the source. We need more of the Spirit. Not more of our gifts.

A Challenge for Windsor Park

As we think about Windsor Park, this passage asks us an important question. What do people experience when they encounter us? Do they experience gifted people, or loving people? Do they experience impressive programmes, or genuine care? Do they encounter efficiency, or compassion? Do they see people winning arguments, or serving one another?

The measure of our church is not ultimately attendance, or buildings, or budgets or programmes. **The measure of our church is whether people experience the love of Christ among us.**

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Imagine if every person who walked through our doors felt deeply loved. Imagine if every newcomer felt welcomed. Imagine if every child felt valued. Imagine if every teenager felt seen. Imagine if every older person felt honoured. Imagine if every struggling person felt supported. Imagine if every conversation reflected grace. That is the work of the Holy Spirit. Because wherever the Holy Spirit is present, love grows.

I've come to understand that the greatest miracle I strive to see, is love between my brothers and sisters in Christ in the church. The kind of love that Paul urges us to develop, which is clearly and obviously not possible in our own strength, otherwise we'd see it more – this kind of love is miraculous because it is a work of the Spirit in me, and in us.

Someone came to see me recently to tell me they'd left Windsor because of the decisions we made during the pandemic years. They're not the only ones. That season cost us dearly as a church, and personally it was by far the hardest period of my career. I still carry some of that pain, but the Spirit keeps bringing me back to 1 Corinthians 13, challenging me to not let that pain and bitterness take hold. In these last few years, the Spirit has been helping me say,

- *Grant is not easily angered.*
- *Grant keeps no record of wrongs.*
- *Grant always hopes.*
- *Grant always perseveres.*

It is truly miraculous that I think my heart is soft enough to be able to say that.

The Greatest Evidence of the Spirit

Sometimes people ask: “*How do I know the Holy Spirit is working in my life?*” That's a good question. We often look for dramatic signs. Powerful experiences. Extraordinary moments. Yet the New Testament repeatedly points us toward something beautifully simple ... are we becoming more loving, more patient, more kind, more forgiving, more selfless, more like Jesus?

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Because the ultimate goal of the Holy Spirit is not simply to make us gifted. it's to make us Christlike. I believe that the Spirit's greatest miracle may not be speaking in tongues, or prophecy, or miraculous gifts. **I believe that the Spirit's greatest miracle is transforming ordinary people into people who love like Jesus.**

Conclusion

Paul finishes with these famous words: ***"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."***

Faith is essential.

Hope is essential.

But love is the greatest.

Why? Because love is the clearest expression of God's heart. And love is the truest evidence of the Spirit's presence. As we continue exploring the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the coming weeks, Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians to stop pursuing spiritual gifts. In fact, in the very next chapter he tells them to eagerly desire them. His point isn't gifts or love. His point is gifts and love. Gifts exercised through love.

Imagine a visitor walking into Windsor Park. They may never see a miracle. They may never hear a prophecy. They may never understand all our theology. But they should encounter something unmistakable. A people who genuinely love one another. And when they ask where that love comes from, we can point them to Jesus and say, *"That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Not simply giving gifts to God's people but forming the character of Jesus in God's people."*

Amen.

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Reflecting on Sunday 7th June 2026:

Last Sunday Pastor Aidan Wivell took us through the wonderful day known as the Day of Pentecost. After reflecting upon that message, where did you intentionally pause, receive from the Holy Spirit, and step into God's mission over the last week?

The following questions help you think more about this message. We hope they might be a conduit for conversation and reflection, encouraging us to wrestle with how this message might practically work itself out in our lives.

- When knowing that 1 Corinthians 13 doesn't contextually apply to weddings and marriage, how does that change the lens of how you read that chapter?
- What is the difference between being spiritually gifted and spiritually mature?
- Which of the 14 descriptions of love do you find most challenging right now, and why?
- Who is God calling you to show greater patience, kindness, or forgiveness toward this week?
- If a visitor spent one week with you, would they notice your gifts or your love first? How would that apply to Windsor?

If you'd like to chat with someone about your spiritual journey or anything else going on in your life, please contact us at care@windsorpark.org.nz; **we're better together** and **no perfect people are allowed**.

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Below are some further resources that may take the message further and deeper and enable you to explore other viewpoints on the same theme. We also encourage you to engage with the preacher if there are further questions you have or if you'd like clarification on anything. Email info@windsorpark.org.nz and we'll direct your query to the appropriate person.

1. Click the link below to access RightNow Media and a study called **1 Corinthians 13: Love Defined**. In this six-week study, Laurie Short explores the definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, against the backdrop of the ancient city of Corinth, where Paul sent the letter. Laurie dives into the history of this renowned chapter of Scripture while standing in the place where the message was sent - and teaches verse by verse how Paul challenged the Corinthians to love. In our divided culture, Paul's words are a clarifying call to the church today, and Laurie's insights from this chapter show how we can live out God's love.
<https://app.rightnowmedia.org/en/content/details/874065>
2. In **The Bible Project** study on **1 Corinthians, Session 11** is called, **Spiritual Gifts and the Body of Christ**. Lucy Peppiatt takes us through Chapters 12 & 13. Here's the link:
<https://bibleproject.com/classroom/1-corinthians-lucy-peppiatt/sessions/11>
3. Jon Bloom has written an article called, **Why we Must Earnestly Desire Spiritual Gifts**, that seeks to balance Paul's words to seek spiritual gifts but to use them in the context of love. Here's a link to that article:
<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-we-must-earnestly-desire-spiritual-gifts>