

## Love in Godless Times

### Why is God missing in the Great Love Chapter?

godless times study #8: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

#### essential facts

God is never directly mentioned in First Corinthians chapter 13, and Paul seemed to be careful to not do so. For instance, faith in 13:2 obviously involves God, but God is not mentioned. Likewise, that which is perfect in 13:9 will, of course, come from God, but again God is not directly mentioned. Moreover, the all-knowing Lord is not mentioned in 13:10, despite the verse being about God knowing us. So why is God missing in the great love chapter?

#### possible explanations

Which of the following points do you think are valid or important?

- God is not mentioned because the chapter is only 13 verses.
- God is not mentioned because the chapter is largely negative.
- God is not mentioned because the chapter is about social interaction.
- God is not mentioned in order to better stress personal responsibility.
- God is not mentioned directly because spiritual gifts are obviously from God.
- God is indirectly revealed through the detailed description of love in the chapter.

## 8. The Corinthian church members were gifted, but...

godless, selfish living  
was still a big problem.

First Corinthians chapter 13 is well known in a way, but there are many important things about the chapter that are easily overlooked. It is not about love in general, but was aimed at changing the sinful situation in the Corinthian church at the time. Similar problems still exist in churches today.

### First Corinthians Chapter 13 is a special chapter, but...

Mark the lines (as completed) below as either correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

<b>A</b>	( ) First Corinthians chapter 13 is the most FAMOUS chapter in the Bible on love.
<b>A-1</b>	( ) It is one of the best known chapters in the Bible.
<b>A-2</b>	( ) It is about love, spiritual gifts, and things that last.
<b>A-3</b>	( ) It is about God's everlasting love for us (13:13).
<b>A-4</b>	( ) It is much like First John chapter four.
<b>B</b>	( ) First Corinthians chapter 13 is an UNUSUAL chapter in various ways.
<b>B-1</b>	( ) God is not directly mentioned (13:10, 12).
<b>B-2</b>	( ) The Corinthians are not directly mentioned.
<b>B-3</b>	( ) It does not contain any commands (14:1).
<b>B-4</b>	( ) It covers various time periods.
<b>C</b>	( ) First Corinthians chapter 13 is far more NEGATIVE than many realize.
<b>C-1</b>	( ) It shows what love is not (13:4-5).
<b>C-2</b>	( ) It is about the misuse of spiritual gifts (13:1-3).
<b>C-3</b>	( ) It is against being childish and selfish (13:5, 11-12).
<b>C-4</b>	( ) It shows that spiritual gifts were not permanent (13:8).
<b>C-5</b>	( ) It shows that faith and hope are not eternal (13:13).
<b>C-6</b>	( ) It is mostly about sinful behavior (13:1-6, 11).
<b>D</b>	( ) First Corinthians chapter 13 is a very IMPORTANT chapter.
<b>D-1</b>	( ) It is important because the way we use gifts is important.
<b>D-2</b>	( ) It is about 'a more excellent way' (12:31) to live.
<b>D-3</b>	( ) It is great to use in relational counseling.
<b>D-4</b>	( ) It was written to change lives.
<b>D-5</b>	( ) It is a call for humility.
<b>D-6</b>	( ) It really includes 14:1.

Most of the lines above are correct, but a few are not. Some of the most interesting discussion on the next page is on why God and the Corinthians are never directly mentioned in chapter 13 (B-1, B-2).

The discussion on this page and the next was overheard at [a Bible study on spiritual gifts](#). Participants discussed the worksheet about **First Corinthians chapter 13**, on the previous page.

**study leader** (opening thought and question)

In today's chapter, Paul showed the Corinthian church members 'a more excellent way' (12:31) to use their spiritual gifts to help others (D-2). Rather than using their gifts in a competitive way, they were to use them in love. What do you think of the points on today's worksheet?

**pessimist** (on the dark side of chapter 13)

This worksheet is one the best I have ever seen! It correctly points out that First Corinthians chapter 13 is far more negative than most people realize (C) and correctly shows that the chapter was written because of the Corinthians' selfish misuse of spiritual gifts (C-2). Though the Corinthians are never mentioned directly (B-2), I believe their pride was what Paul was aiming at (13:4, D-5). Basically, I think the chapter is mostly about the ugly things that love is not (13:4-5, C-1).

**optimist** (on the bright side of chapter 13)

Why be so negative? Paul also wrote several positive things about love. Love suffers long, thinks no evil, and is full of hope (13:4-7). Moreover, though the special spiritual gifts used in the early church ceased (13:8, C-4), love will be with us forever (13:13). This chapter is **not** just about sin (C-6)!

**study leader** (on the dark and the bright together)

You are both partly right. Corinthian sinful behavior motivated much of what Paul wrote in this chapter. Yet, Paul wanted them to show love to one another which is more than just ceasing to be selfish. It involves actually doing good. Therefore I marked line C-6 as partly correct. — By the way, why do you think God is never directly mentioned in the chapter (B-1)?

**Proverbs enthusiast** (on human responsibility for sin)

Solomon described wisdom in Proverbs chapter nine without mentioning God much, and Paul did the same with love in First Corinthians chapter 13. I think this was done in both cases to stress human responsibility. If Solomon's young readers lacked wisdom, it was not God's fault. Likewise, if the childish Corinthians (C-3) were unloving, it was because **they** focused on the wrong things (13:8).

**Galatians fan** (on love as the fruit of the Spirit)

I don't think that's the point. Love is a fruit of the Spirit, **not** a work of the flesh, and Paul stressed this by **not** commanding the Corinthians to do a single thing in chapter 13 (B-3).

**study leader** (on chapter divisions, Paul's commands, and human responsibility)

What about the first verse of chapter 14? The chapter divisions were added to the Bible by men. So they are not inspired. Moreover, although love is impossible without the work of the Holy Spirit, the love that Paul describes here is mostly interpersonal, between people, rather than the love of God for us (A-3, A-4). If chapter 13 was all about God's love, the chapter would not have so many negatives in it (C). Paul stressed human responsibility by showing what love is not (C-1), and by summing up his teaching with the commands in 14:1 (D-6).

**counselor** (on Paul's relational counseling)

There is an interesting paradox here. Paul stressed personal responsibility, but he was indirect (B-2) in order to be more persuasive, by speaking of himself negatively in 13:1-3 and 13:11 and by humbly using *we* instead of *you* regarding ignorance in 13:9 and 13:12. This is great relational counseling (D-3) in both content and style, calling for personal responsibility but remaining humble and persuasive.

**study leader** (rephrasing the opening question)

Going back to my opening question and changing it a little, what do you think is most important point or line on today's worksheet?

**retired pastor** (on some gifts being temporary)

In my many years of ministry, the false belief that speaking in tongues is a gift for today probably caused more trouble than anything else. So from a pastoral perspective, line C-4 about some spiritual gifts not being permanent (13:8) is very important. Sadly, many ordinary church members don't seem to care about protecting the church. In Acts 20:28-31, church leaders are commanded to do so.

**church board member** (on the need to speak for God)

Not only that, I believe the commands in 14:1 should be considered part of chapter 13. God wants us to speak up for him. Love does not usually mean remaining silent. So line D-6 is my favorite.

**pessimist** (on the need to be humble and quiet)

I have some doubts about that, because I like line D-5 and believe that the great love chapter is a call for humility. Like many people today, the Corinthians should have humbly endured more (13:7) and said less. Isn't that what we all need to do as well?

**study leader** (on the importance of 14:1)

My study Bible has a great note on 14:1 that wonderfully answers that question. It says that love does not rule out being zealous for spiritual gifts including in speaking. It also says that the commands in 14:1 were needed because some might have wrongly concluded that they should stop doing much because of all the negatives in chapter 13. The various positive commands in 14:1 must be understood as a unit and used together in applying chapter 13. There is much that we should do and say! — We could close with that thought, but some others may want to say something about their favorite worksheet line. This is a rich chapter, even though God is never directly mentioned (B-1).

**Proverbs enthusiast** (on seeing God in the chapter)

I'd like to speak up for line B-1, which I took as a personal challenge to try to discover God in First Corinthians chapter 13, much like we do using the S.E.E.D. method in Proverbs. Although God is not directly mentioned, I believe He is indirectly present in various ways.

For instance, the ability to move mountains by faith in verse two totally depends on God to do the moving and it being God's will for the moving to be done. Simply put, it is impossible to think rightly about faith without thinking about God. The Corinthians mostly thought about themselves.

**a mother of five** (on childish selfishness)

Like selfish children it is easy to focus on our gifts rather than on the One who gave them (C-3). When we do so, we misuse the gifts (C-2, C-6, D-1). God wants us to grow up (13:11). So my favorite lines are C-3 and D-4. Growing up is changing for the better, and changing for the better is growing up. The Father above is watching, even if we do not see him because of our selfishness (13:5).

**my application**

---

---

---

---

---