

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

Jessica: Every time I read or hear this verse, I think about this soap-box preacher who came to campus when I was in school. He was so passionate and loud, I heard him from pretty far away, and when I got close enough to make out his actual words, I was immediately enraged. He was shouting nonsense; letting us know exactly who was on the very long list of people Jesus hated. It was not good news, or loving in the least - it really was just noise.

13:2 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.

Bob: Jonah the prophet knew exactly how the people of Nineveh had ignored their covenant with God. He was good at his job. The Pharisees spent a lifetime carefully interpreting and mastering the intricacies of Torah. They were good at their jobs, too. The disciples stood ready to follow Jesus down the Mount of Olives. Sure, there are clinical aspects of our faith - we do need discipline to be disciples! But if we are not first guided by love - the kind that rankles reason and reinterprets our experiences – we risk losing our humanity. Not to mention our connection to the divine.

13:3 If I give away all my possessions and if I hand over my body so that I may boast^[a] but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Jessica: Christians in the 1st century faced frequent persecution because Christianity was seen as a threat to the Roman empire; Christians rejected Roman gods and refused to worship the Roman emperor. Because of that, many early Christians were martyred. And

eventually, martyrdom got sort-of *trendy*... if you died a martyr you were upheld as an extra faithful Christian, someone who was seen as super holy. And here, Paul is saying to the Corinthians that if your radical actions and choices are done for any reason besides love, then those actions are a waste. Completely pointless.

13:4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

Bob: Kristoff told Anna, “My love is not fragile.” Imagine a love that waits, that offers space, that refuses to demand a person be in the exact place of the other person’s liking every moment. Imagine a compassion that needn’t be compensated with flattery; that needn’t puff out its chest; that needn’t run roughshod over others. Imagine a love that’s contented by its own enough-ness. Now imagine a community of believers, applying this ethic of love toward God and neighbor.

13:5 It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs;

Jessica: This is a verse that was written for me. I am irritable more often than I’m not, insistent that *of course* my way is best, and forgiveness - sure... but a wrong is so hard to forget. I assume most people are the same way - and even God. But no. Love? Love keeps no record of wrongs. And who invented love? Who dreamt it up, who embodied it? God did - God is love. We are loved by a God who is not inflexible, who is not easily angered... a God with no list of our missteps. And that is a huge deal.

13:6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth.

Bob: This is a letter addressed to churchgoers at Corinth thousands of years ago, but it could also be addressed to us as well. We have ideas, strong ones, about what's right, and what makes us righteous. And it seems too often we're working harder to expose the unrighteousness of our neighbors - their ways, methods, and expressions of faith - than we are to live righteously for God. Love has no desire to be proven right. Love only desires to make known an inescapable truth: God loves all of us. Forever and always.

13:7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Jessica: This is where it gets hard for us - because even the most loving person in the world can't bear, believe, hope, or endure all things. They probably shouldn't be asked to - that feels harmful and unhealthy. God does not ask us to live under the enormous weight of abuse or toxicity and certainly not to bear it alone in the name of being faithful to love. But what about Divine love? Is there a limit to what God can bear, believe, hope, and endure? I can't imagine so. If there is a love that can bear and endure whatever we show up with, no matter how ugly or hurtful, surely it must be God's perfect love. Surely God's love is born of hope so unshakable that it can only be called certainty. Surely God's love can see past who we are on the outside, right to our most vulnerable truths and believe in what is buried there.

13:8 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.

Bob: The love we have for our partners, for our children, for our family in Christ, and God's love for all creation - this love is boundless, timeless, not at all spatial. Love is our source. Love is our spirit. Love is our enduring purpose. Our vehicles of faithful expression - our words, our wisdom, our witness - these are all vital, but they are limited, just like our own physical lives. Love's endurance binds the expressions of past, present, and future. Love's endurance connects Corinth to Raleigh and beyond.

13:9-10 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Jessica: We can only do the best we can do with what we have in front of us. We can only do our best to interpret, to understand, and we can only do our best to speak what we understand to be true. We hope that will be enough - maybe it will be. But maybe not. Our human understanding can only get us so far. There's a day coming, though...

13:11 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.

Bob: Life is growth and change. Adulthood is not an indictment of childhood. The future is not an indictment of the past nor present. The grapes in the vineyard grow sweeter over time. But what farmer would

criticize the budding grape for still being sour. And so it is with our spiritual journey. Our understanding increases and matures with experience. We need new comforts and new challenges. To put away childish things is to leap off the building blocks of youth, buoyed and empowered to be fulfilled in adulthood.

13:12 For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, 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.

Jessica: There's a day coming... when we will see the big picture, when things will be revealed, when this will all make sense. And we will see what our part in it was - the part that we, fully known and created for such a time as this, played in bringing God's kingdom into being.

13:13 And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

Bob: Then! Then! Then! When it's all said and done, when the story's been told, when God's kin-dom has burst into this world, it won't be a story of transient gifts: monuments, or gold and silver, or eloquent tongues, or volumes of insightful commentary, or charismatic expressions. It's gonna be a story of what is permanent, of what remains: faith, our centeredness in God, hope, our expectation for a purpose-filled world, and love, the powerful source that binds us. And make no mistake, it is love, love, love, that binds us together, and love, love, love that is the greatest of intransient gifts. And love that will be the final word. Until then!

Amen.