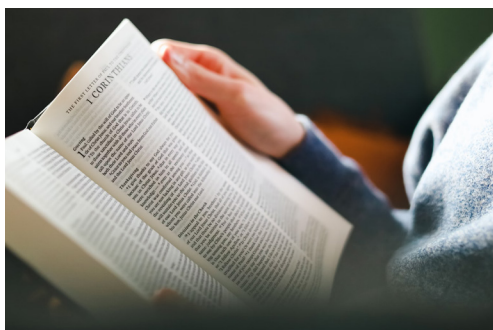


Pursue Love

By Daryl Wingerd



Two simple words forming one simple command lead the way in Paul's introduction to 1 Corinthians 14 — the chapter best known for Paul's instruction about spiritual gifts in the meetings of the local church.

“Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts . . .”

These two words — “Pursue love” — immediately follow Paul's beautiful chapter on love. After describing the supreme importance and significance of love (13:1-3), after telling the Corinthians what love looks like (13:4-7, describing the exact opposite of the way they were conducting themselves in their fellowship due to their misguided, selfish focus on a certain spiritual gift), Paul commanded them to “pursue” what he had just described.

In the New Testament, Paul commonly uses the word “pursue” to exhort or command others to strive diligently for things of the highest importance. For example:

- He exhorted the Romans to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding” (Rom. 14:19).
- He wanted Timothy to “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” (1 Tim. 6:11; also see 2 Tim. 2:22).

And Paul was no hypocrite, expecting of others what he would not do himself. In Philippians 3, he described his own zeal to “know [Christ] and the power of his resurrection ... that by any means necessary I may attain the resurrection from the dead” in this way: “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own [lit. “I pursue it”] because Christ Jesus has made me his own ... forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward [lit. “I pursue”] the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:10-14).

Clearly for Paul the word “pursue” did not describe any half-hearted or lackadaisical effort to obtain something. He was not merely wanting the Romans to “wish for” peace.

He was not exhorting Timothy to “drift toward” righteousness. He was exhorting them to manifest their eager desire for these things by the means of intentional and strenuous effort. He wanted them to demonstrate their zeal in their “pursuit” of these things!

It is also instructive to note that the same Greek word is used elsewhere in the New Testament to indicate persecution. Where the context makes it clear that this is the kind of “pursuit” in view — to pursue someone for their harm — this is how the same word is consistently translated. For example:

- This is the word Jesus used in Matthew 5:11-12 when he said, “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you [same word] and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted [same word] the prophets who were before you.”
- When Jesus spoke to Saul (Paul) on the road to Damascus where Paul was heading to arrest and imprison Christians in his attempt to snuff out the still-fledgling movement, he used the same word: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me [same word]? ... I am Jesus whom you are persecuting [same word]” (Acts 9:4-5).

It's not hard to imagine Paul's zeal in persecuting the church, or the zeal of the “others” Jesus had in mind in Matthew 5:11-12. (Think of a lion pursuing a zebra and you'll get a pretty good picture). But we are not left to imagine that this persecution — this pursuit to harm another — involves zeal. Paul said so himself in describing his own pre-Christian credentials as an unbelieving Jew. He used this same word as *proof* of his own zeal as a Pharisee who was seeking to destroy Christ by destroying his followers: “as for zeal, a persecutor [same word] of the church” (Phil. 3:6).

I am not suggesting that in 1 Corinthians 14:1 Paul might have meant to convey the idea of persecution, or that the word should be translated differently in any of these places. Many words have a range of meaning, with the best translation depending heavily on the context in which they are used. What I am suggesting, however, is that our “pursuit” of love should not involve any less zeal than Paul's “persecution” of the church, or later, his own “pursuit” of “the goal for the prize of the of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”