

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter Thirteen

Introduction

One of the Greek words for "love" in the New Testament is agapë. The word was not in common use previous to the writing of the New Testament. The love of God for mankind, seen in and through Jesus Christ, required a new word to describe it. Agapë is love that wills to initiate a relationship and show kindness and self-sacrifice regardless of whether the other person or people are worthy, deserving, or even likable. It is supernatural love that completely transcends all human ideas, ideals, experiences or expressions of love. It is a word that summarizes God's words and works throughout history to bring mankind salvation by grace through faith.

The attitudes and actions of Jesus on the earth in the first century revealed God's agapë. As He went about in His earthly body ministering the Good News of salvation in God's agapë, the world could recognize Him as God's Son and their Savior.

Today Jesus is in heaven, but He is not without an earthly "body." As we saw in First Corinthians 12:27, "Now you are the body of Christ..." on the earth today. The attitude and actions of Christians on the earth in this century reveal God's agapë. As we go about as the earthly body of Christ ministering the Good News of salvation in God's agapë, the world can once again recognize Jesus as God's Son and their Savior.

That is, they can recognize Jesus *when and if* we go about in God's agapë! Unlike Jesus, you and I can minister to others *with* or *without* God's agapë. The with or without of love in our ministering is the difference between people being helped to see Jesus or being hindered from seeing Jesus.

Paul has been discussing how we minister one to another through the exercise of the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit bestows upon us as individual members of Jesus Christ's one body. He has told us that

the exercise of your spiritual gifts are one way that Jesus is revealed on the earth today. But the exercise of your spiritual gifts by themselves is not enough. Your spiritual gifts can be exercised with or without love. When exercised without love, your spiritual gifts only draw attention to yourself and away from your Savior; when exercised with love, your spiritual gifts always draw attention to your Savior and away from yourself.

#1 When Exercised Without Love, Your Spiritual Gifts Only Draw Attention To Yourself And Away From Your Savior (v1-3)

In Corinth the believers were exercising their gifts in ways that called attention to themselves. To illustrate this, Paul compares individual believers to the instruments of a symphony orchestra being conducted by a great Master conductor. In verse one he says,

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

The "sounding brass" is really a brass vase that was used to amplify sound in the outdoor theaters. The cymbal has its proper and necessary place in the symphony orchestra. Think of it, though, when played out of place and amplified: It distracts from the conductor's presentation of the musical score, and inevitably calls attention to the one clanging it through the amplifying brass..

Your exercise of spiritual gifts is like the playing of a symphony orchestra being conducted by a great Master conductor. You each have your necessary and proper place in the symphony. But you can exercise your gift or gifts in such a way as to call attention to yourself and away from your conductor; you can be like a gong or a cymbal being played out of place. It happens when you lack love in your Christian walk.

1 Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

1 Corinthians 13:2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

It is only too possible to be spiritually gifted and still lack love. The tongues, prophecy, knowledge, faith, benevolence, and martyrdom mentioned are valid spiritual enablings. Paul describes them in their most spectacular and sensational manifestations to show that even the greatest spiritual enablings cannot overcome the lack of love in the fellowship of believers. When you draw attention to yourself and away from your Savior, you are "nothing" and "it profits [you] nothing." In other words, there is no real spiritual impact on others or spiritual inheritance for yourself.

It is helpful to see these verses in the context of the Corinthian Church. They had all the spiritual gifts, but they were not exercising them in love. Paul said of them, in 1:4-5,

1 Corinthians 1:4 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus,

1 Corinthians 1:5 that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge,

In verse seven of chapter one he adds, "...you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

There was no lacking in spiritual gifts in Corinth, but there was a lacking in love in Corinth:

1. There were divisions among them. Some of their members preferred Apollos, some Peter, some Paul.
2. They were tolerating gross immorality in the Church assembly. There was a man, a professed believer, openly living in sexual sin with his father's wife.
3. The members of the Church were suing one another in open court.
4. The members of the Church were divorcing one another without biblical grounds.
5. They were conducting themselves with gluttony at the love feast preceding communion and with drunkenness at the communion table.

Besides lacking love towards one another in general, they lacked love in the exercise of their spiritual gifts:

1. They would all speak in tongues at once, making it impossible for each other to be truly edified.

2. They often interrupted one another if someone felt he had received a prophecy while someone else was speaking.
3. They didn't interpret their speaking in tongues, even though unbelievers might be present who would be confused by the lack of understanding.

As they exercised their gifts they were only drawing attention to themselves. You can't draw attention to Jesus and to yourself at the same time; it has to be one or the other. If the attention is on self and not on the Savior, it accomplishes nothing, and it is detrimental to the goal of revealing the presence of Jesus on the earth.

You could easily identify the lack of love in Corinth. How could you identify the presence of love? Paul tells you in the remaining verses.

#2 When Exercised With Love, Your Spiritual Gifts Always Draw Attention To Your Savior And Away From Yourself (v4-13)

Let's agree right now that these next few verses cannot be improved upon by commentary. Talking about them is like dissecting a flower; you know something about the parts, but you've ruined the beauty of the flower.

The very best way to understand verses four through six is to perform two simple exercises:

1. First, everyplace you see the word "love" put in the name "Jesus." These verses describe Jesus. They are a summary of how Jesus ministered so that you would understand the love of God for you.
2. Next, everyplace you see the word "love" ***put in your name!*** These are the qualities that should describe your ministering to others, so that others can again understand the love of God for them.

Don't be discouraged. We all fall short. But God can produce these qualities in our lives. He promised us in Romans 5:5 that "...the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." It is by the Holy Spirit that you produce these qualities. Love is the fruit of the Spirit that is produced as we abide in

Jesus and yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit day by day in our Christian walk.

Love may be difficult to define, but it is not hard to discern. Paul pictures love in action. In the Greek language these words describing love are all verbs; they are all present tense, continuous action verbs. Love is a verb. Love is something you *do* or *don't do*. God's agapë involves attitudes and actions, *not* affections.

God's agapë affects your attitudes and actions in three areas: *Inward, outward, and upward*.

God's Agapë Affects Your Inward Attitudes And Actions:

1 Corinthians 13:4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;

1 Corinthians 13:5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own...

These words describe the inward affect of love.

"Love suffers long and is kind" - You are patient in enduring injury from others and active in conferring good toward them. You do not give place to bitterness or wrath; you harbor no resentment.

"Love does not envy" - You don't begrudge others their success, don't enter into rivalries.

"Love does not parade itself" - You are never anxious to be on display.

"[Love] is not puffed up" - You aren't smug in your superior knowledge or position.

"[Love] does not behave rudely" - You are genuinely sympathetic towards the feelings of others and, so, will not wound, distress or embarrass others.

"[Love] does not seek its own" - You don't feel the need to insist on your rights.

The Corinthians provide a good bad example:

1. They were impatient: They interrupted one another.
2. They were unkind: They hoarded their own food at the love feast.
3. They were envious of one another's gifts.
4. In their meetings they "paraded themselves": They put their gifts on display.
5. They were puffed-up spiritually: They divided into factions over who was the more knowledgeable teacher - Apollos, Peter, or Paul.
6. They behaved rudely: They got drunk at the communion table.
7. They sought their own: They were suing one another.

In God's agapē there is no place for these attitudes and actions. These are characteristics of our old, sin nature. The love of God shed abroad in your hearts affects these inward attitudes and their corresponding actions.

God's Agapē Affects Your Outward Attitudes And Actions:

1 Corinthians 13:5 [love] is not provoked, thinks no evil;

1 Corinthians 13:6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth;

These words have to do with how you react towards others. Paul mentions three ways in which we allow the weaknesses, sins, and failures of others to overcome God's love that is shed abroad in our hearts.

First, people can "provoke" us. They arouse us to anger; we get in the flesh because of what they say and do. We then blame them for our reaction! Instead, God's agapē guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by the things done and said against it.

Second, Paul refers to "thinking evil" of others. It's a bookkeeping term that means "to keep a record." We keep a record of the wrongs people commit against us. God's agapē is ready to forgive, and to practice forgiveness by keeping no such records.

Thirdly, when others sin, we have a tendency to "rejoice" that they have fallen; it makes us seem better somehow. This is what fuels the gossip columns and magazines. God's agapē "rejoices in the truth," rejecting gossip and slander.

God's Agapë Affects Your Upward Attitudes And Actions:

1 Corinthians 13:7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The phrase "all things" describes your walk with the Lord. As Paul says in Romans, "all things work together for good to those that love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." In the world you will have tribulation. There are burdens to shoulder - your own, and those of others. There is suffering and affliction along your path toward home. All this can affect your upward attitude towards God, which, in turn, affects your activities for God. Here Paul tells you that God's agapë strengthens you to bear, believe, hope, and endure. God's agapë enables you to exercise a strong assurance that "all things work together for good to those that love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Whatever happens, God's agapë assures you that "all thing" concerning you are in the plan and purpose of God.

Spiritual gifts had become the focus of the church at Corinth. When spiritual gifts become your focus there is a tendency to get your eyes onto yourself and off of Jesus. Gifts have their proper place; they are an important part of the Christian experience, but they should be governed by love.

To emphasize that spiritual gifts should be kept in their proper place, Paul discusses their temporary place in the eternal plan of God:

1 Corinthians 13:8 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away.

1 Corinthians 13:9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

1 Corinthians 13:10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Spiritual gifts will one day cease! They are **not** permanent. They have their place on earth today, but they will be unnecessary in heaven.

"That which is perfect" is being in heaven with Jesus. In heaven with Jesus it should be obvious that there will be no need for prophecies, for tongues, or for the word of knowledge. These gifts of the Spirit are needed today to help manifest the presence of Jesus on the

earth. **In heaven He will be present!** His presence will be manifest **everywhere.**

You will see Jesus in eternity. You should want *others* to see Jesus on earth. Don't let your lack of love obscure the view people have of Jesus as they see His body on earth.

Paul looks forward to heaven:

1 Corinthians 13:11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Paul was perhaps thinking of his bar mitzvah. One moment Paul was still considered a boy; the next he was considered a man. We will have a spiritual bar mitzvah when we go to be with the Lord! Whether through death and resurrection or the Rapture, we will be immediately matured. Then we will put spiritual gifts away, the way a child one day leaves childlike things behind for adulthood.

As we look forward to heaven we ought to put the priority on love, not gifts, since love will endure forever and gifts won't.

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

Corinth was noted for its bronze. The mirrors in those days were made of beaten and polished bronze. No matter how valued a Corinthian bronze mirror might be, they were really crude in giving a proper representation. That's how we see Jesus - only partially, by faith. In heaven we will see Him face to face. And we will know Him perfectly, even as He knows us perfectly today.

As we look forward to heaven we ought to put the priority on love, not gifts, since it is Jesus we want others to see and not ourselves.

1 Corinthians 13:13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Faith will become sight, and hope will be fulfilled. Love will go on forever.

Spiritual gifts are important; they have their place in manifesting Jesus in the world today. But they must operate in an atmosphere of love to be effective. Without love, they only draw attention to you; with love, they always draw attention to Jesus.

Conclusion

Everyplace you see the word "love" ***put in your name!*** You fall short; but in examining yourself you will open your heart for the Holy Spirit to pour God's agapē into it.