



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 12:31-13:13

Topic

Paul encourages the church at Corinth to determine whether or not their selfish exercise of certain gifts of the Spirit is in keeping with the love that should characterize us as believers

Title

“Love Means Never Having to Say You’re Selfish”

Introduction

Capital One has made the slogan, “What’s in your wallet?” iconic. The ads I’m thinking of feature a group of somewhat friendly Vikings (or Visigoths) as they interact with modern society. They always end up smashing or breaking something on account of their horrible manners.

If the apostle Paul had been tech-savvy he might have produced a series of short parody videos showing the horrible manners of the believers at Corinth. Sure, they were exercising spectacular gifts of the Holy Spirit. But they were simultaneously tolerating all manner of sexual sin, they were promoting divisions, they were suing one another, they were divorcing one another, and they were given over to idolatry.

Paul might have adopted the slogan, “What’s in your worship?”

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What **wasn't** in their worship was love. Before he tells them *what* they ought to do to bring order to their worship services, he establishes the *way* they ought to do it and everything else.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 When Exercised Without Love Your Spiritual Gifts Only Draw Attention To Yourself And Away From Jesus, and #2 When Exercised With Love Your Spiritual Gifts Always Draw Attention To Jesus And Away From Yourself.

#1 When Exercised Without Love Your Spiritual Gifts
Only Draw Attention To Yourself And Away From Jesus
(12:31-13:3)

The worship services in first century Corinth were disorderly. Everyone was speaking with tongues simultaneously and those with the gift of prophecy were interrupting the teaching and preempting one another. *It was so bad that visitors left thinking the believers were crazy!*

Paul will put their worship services in order in chapter fourteen. But before he does he elevates their thinking. Instead of focusing on what they were doing they ought to be focusing on why they were doing it.

1 Corinthians 12:31 But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

If you've been following our studies you know that Paul just finished an argument in which he established that every gift is of equal value. Why, then, does he say, "Earnestly desire the best gifts?" His statement about desiring the "best gifts" seems to contradict what he just said.

There are three possible answers:

1. This might have been a quote from a letter the Corinthians wrote to Paul. If that's the case then Paul was saying, "You say that you earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way." Their defense for their disorderly public worship was that the gifts

- they emphasized were the best gifts when, in fact, all gifts are equal and the real focus ought to be on exercising them in love to build-up others.
2. Greek scholars say this verb can be in a tense called 'indicative.' If that is the case, then the sentence reads, "You are seeking the so-called greater gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way." In other words, if your behavior lacks love then you are only fooling yourself that what you are doing is spiritual.
 3. Perhaps the best answer is to look at the entire context of chapters twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. In chapter twelve Paul had argued that all the gifts are for the mutual building-up of all believers. In chapter fourteen he will establish that the only way everyone can be built-up is when the gifts are exercised in an orderly manner that everyone can understand. If this is the case, then Paul was saying something like this in verse thirty-one: "When you walk in love you will desire all the gifts of the Spirit and you will exercise them in an orderly manner making sure that you are understood by everyone."

No matter which answer is correct you are left with the understanding that love is the way in which you must conduct yourself among other believers. Any exercise of a spiritual gift or gifts *in public* must therefore be for others, *not* for your own edification.

In Corinth the believers were exercising their gifts selfishly in ways that called attention to themselves. Paul illustrated this by comparing individual believers to the instruments of a symphony orchestra being conducted by a great master conductor. In verse one of chapter thirteen he said,

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.

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The exercise of spiritual gifts in public 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.

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.

Paul described various gifts in their most spectacular operation. But he quickly added that when you draw attention to yourself and away from Jesus you are "nothing" and "it profits [you] nothing."

- There is no real spiritual impact on others.
- There is no spiritual inheritance for yourself.

“What’s in your worship?” In Corinth it was self and selfishness.

The “more excellent way,” the way of love, is active and practical in drawing attention away from self and onto Jesus. It is described next.

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

In the Greek language these words describing love are all present tense, continuous action verbs. Love is something you do or don't do. We're talking about a kind of love that involves attitudes and actions, *not* primarily affections.

These next few verses cannot be improved upon by commentary. G. Campbell Morgan said that talking about them is like dissecting a flower. You know something about the parts, *but you've ruined the beauty of the flower.*

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Perhaps the best way to have these verses impact our lives is to simply define what the words mean **then substitute your name for the word “love”** as a means of self-examination!

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

"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. You don't enter into rivalries.

"Love does not parade itself" - You are never anxious to be on display. You are not upset when you do not receive recognition.

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

1 Corinthians 13:5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil;

"[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.

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!* Love guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by the things done and said against us.

"Think[ing] evil" is a bookkeeping term that means *to keep a record*. Love is ready to forgive so we can keep no such records.

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

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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. Love "rejoices in the truth," rejecting gossip and slander.

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

The phrase "all things" is reminiscent of Romans 8:28 where Paul says, "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. Love strengthens you to bear, believe, hope, and endure. Love 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, love assures you that "all thing" concerning you are in the plan and purpose of God.

After examining yourself for love then, and only then, can the gifts of the Spirit be put in their proper place.

Paul elevates their thinking again. He looks forward, beyond earth to eternity, and puts gifts in their proper, temporary perspective.

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.

There is nothing wrong with these gifts or with the truth they convey. In fact, they are necessary. *It's just that one day they will be unnecessary!* When will that be?

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.

There is almost no argument anymore among serious scholars about what Paul meant when he said, "when that which is perfect has come." He was

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talking about eternity. He was describing the day you are translated or transformed into your glorified body, taken to Heaven, and see Jesus face-to-face.

- You won't need the gift of prophecy because the Lord will be speaking to you directly.
- There will be no unknown languages that need interpreting.
- The word of knowledge, by which the Lord supernaturally reveals to you something you could not have known, will vanish away because you will know everything!

Two illustrations help you get a grasp of the change from earth to eternity.

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 compared our change from earth to eternity to the change from childhood to adulthood. I don't think, however, he was describing the gradual changes as we grow. The way he worded this sounds more immediate.

Paul was perhaps thinking of his bar mitzvah. One moment Paul was still considered a boy; the next he was considered a man.

It will be a spiritual bar mitzvah, in a sense, when we go to be with the Lord! Whether through death and resurrection or the rapture, we will be immediately matured. Then the gifts, as precious and important as they are on earth, will seem childish by way of comparison.

The second illustration is the mirror:

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.

The mirrors in those days were made of beaten and polished bronze. No matter how well crafted a polished bronze mirror might be, it was really crude in giving a proper representation.

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That's how we see currently see spiritual things - only partially. Yes, we have everything we need for life and godliness in God's Word. But it is still not the same as being with Jesus. In Heaven we will see Him face to face. And we will know Him perfectly, even as He knows us perfectly today.

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

The Bible says that we walk by faith, not by sight. Thus "faith" is only necessary for our time on earth. In eternity faith will become sight when we see Jesus.

Our blessed hope is the coming of the Lord! Thus "hope" is only necessary for our time on earth. In eternity hope will become reality when we are with Jesus.

"Love" does not have the same temporary quality. It will go on for eternity as the context in which we exist.

The Holy Spirit produces this love. Since He indwells us **these characteristics are not only possible, they are normal. Love is the normal Christian behavior.**

If I am falling short in love in one or more of these ways it isn't a matter of my trying harder but of realizing I am refusing to yield to the indwelling Holy Spirit. These are the qualities that ought to characterize my life simply because the Holy Spirit indwells me. I don't learn how to do them; He produces them when I get out of the way of His work.

The love we've been examining was so amazing, so different, that an entirely new word had to be coined to capture its essence. It is the Greek word *agape*.

According to Alan Redpath we get our English word 'agony' from *agape*. "It means the actual absorption of our being in one great passion."

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Here is a simple way of challenging yourself. What are you **really** passionate about?

When Jesus is your one great passion there will be *agape* overflowing from you all over the place!