

1 Corinthians 13

The Corinthian church was obsessed with spiritual gifts. They loved to see God in action, working supernaturally in their lives. Spiritual gifts are good, but the Corinthians were imbalanced. They focused on the outward signs of God's Spirit but neglected His inward work in their hearts. In 1 Corinthians 12 – 14, Paul gives an extended teaching on the topic of spiritual gifts. Here in the middle of that, in Chapter 13, he tells them what they should make their highest priority. **Read 12:31.**

If we want to be more like Jesus, then growing in *agapē* love should be our highest priority.

Introduction:

- I. Love validates our spiritual gifts and personal sacrifice. 13:1-3
- II. As we grow in love we will grow in a variety of virtues. 13:4-7
- III. Spiritual gifts are only temporary; love is eternal. 13:8-13

Love “This Greek word was rarely used in Greek literature prior to the NT. In the NT, the word *agapē* took on a special meaning; it was used by the NT writers to designate a volitional love (as opposed to a purely emotional love), a self-sacrificial love, a love naturally expressed by divinity but not so easily by humanity.” (*New Commentary on the Whole Bible*)

- I. Love validates our spiritual gifts and personal sacrifice. 13:1-3
 - A. Spiritual gifts can be exercised in a loveless way. Amazing things can be done for personal attention or with an ultimately selfish motive.
 - B. Charles Hodge (1797-1878), who was the principal of Princeton Theological Seminary 1851-1878 put it like this:

“Neither intellectual gifts nor attainments, nor power, without love, are of any real value. They do not elevate the character or render it worthy of respect or confidence. Satan may have, and doubtless has, more of intelligence and power than any man ever possessed, and yet he is Satan still. Those, therefore, who seek to exalt men by the mere cultivation of the intellect, are striving to make satans of them.”

- C. 13:3 **body to be burned** Think of Daniel's friends in the fiery furnace.
 - i. Millions of people are deceived on this point. They think they can substitute something outward for something inward. It cannot be done. God desires the heart. The most generous giving and most extreme self-denial can still be carried out with a wrong heart. If that is so, it becomes useless in God's eyes.

Application: We need to check our motives – to examine our hearts. Should we be giving generously? Certainly. Living self-sacrificially? Most definitely. Do our lives need to benefit others? Of course, but let's make genuine love for God and others the motive for our behavior.

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II. As we grow in love we will grow in a variety of virtues. 13:4-7

- A. Paul doesn't exactly define love here, but describes it.
- B. Notice the similarity between this chapter and the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:22-26 NKJV ²²*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. ²⁴And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

This has led some to conclude that love actually encompasses all the fruit of the Spirit.

- C. 13:6 **rejoices in the truth** The old Apostle John told a man named Gaius:

3Jn 1:3-4 NKJV *... I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*

- D. 13:7 **bears all things** "Bears" literally means "to cover" or "to hold fast" like a watertight ship, without leaking. It means "to hold out against," "to endure patiently," "to contain one's self". The believer who possesses this characteristic of love restrains himself from giving vent to what selfishness would prompt under personal hardship. (*New Commentary on the Whole Bible*)
- E. **Endures all things.** The word "endures" is a military word, and means to sustain the assault of an enemy. It is used in the New Testament to express the idea of sustaining the assaults of suffering or persecution, in the sense of bearing up under them, and enduring them patiently. (See Hodge)

Application: When it comes to the gifts of the Spirit, some people have one gift and some people have another. Some people are very gifted while others are less so. As to the fruit of the Spirit, or the various virtues that comprise *agapē*, God expects us to cultivate the whole cluster. It's not as if one person specializes in patience while another is kind; one person does not envy and another is not puffed up. The idea is that we should all be growing in all of these qualities at all times. The end result will be a church would be characterized by *agapē*, because it was made up of people characterized by *agapē*. Each individual would be a loving individual.

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III. Spiritual gifts are only temporary; love is eternal. 13:8-13

- A. 13:8 **Love never fails** Literally, “Falls off” (ἐκ) like the flower in 1 Peter 1:24. “Love survives everything.” (Robertson)
- B. 13:8-10 Again, the Corinthians prided themselves in and placed their attention upon their gifts. Paul wishes to impress upon them the fact that these gifts, which were so all important to them, were not really such a big deal in light of eternity.
- C. 13:11-12 Paul now gives us two illustrations:
 - i. 13:11 A child’s understanding may be accurate, but that knowledge is limited: This is mommy, daddy, my house. These are my brothers or sisters or friends and so on. As we grow and mature our knowledge increases; our understanding expands. Paul’s point is that none of us have yet arrived at perfection. We are still incomplete. That comes later.
 - ii. 13:12 Mirrors in Paul’s time were usually made of polished brass; they gave a hazy reflection, expressed by the word *dimly* (lit. “in an enigma”).

1Jn 3:1-2 NKJV ¹*Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him.* ²*Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*

- D. 13:13 *Agapē* love is that greatest of all the Christian virtues.
 - i. It validates whatever spiritual gifts we may have or sacrifice we may make.
 - ii. It encompasses many other virtues. It contains many other important qualities within itself.
 - iii. Finally, it lasts. In a world in which everything seems so temporary, if we focus on growing in *agapē* love, we’ll be focusing on something that we can take with us into eternity.

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The Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, in his *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, suggests we substitute the name of Jesus for “love” throughout this chapter. It’s a great exercise – and no doubt a perfectly valid way to describe our Lord. We might also substitute our own names to see how we measure up.

Concluding Scriptures:

1Jn 4:7-16 NKJV ⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

¹²No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. ¹³By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.

¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

1Jn 3:16 NKJV By this **we know love**, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

Finally,

Rom 5:8 NKJV But God demonstrates **His own love** toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Make no mistake. *Agapē* love is supernatural. It can only be produced by the Holy Spirit working within us to make us more like Christ.

Gospel

Communion