

Study In Love

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1 Corinthians 13

Many people are acquainted with 1 Corinthians 13. It is so often even memorized. It is normally held up as an outstanding commentary on love. But, I wonder how many of us have ever thought that this comes right in the very middle of a big argument?

The section of 1 Corinthians that includes Chapters 12, 13 and 14 deals with the problem of distress and confusion among the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. Some thought they were better than others on account of what they did. Some people thought that if they were teachers or preachers they were more important than anyone else. Some people thought that if they gave money that they were more important than anyone else. Some thought that speaking in tongues made them superior to others. This tendency for people to get interested in themselves as compared to others and to feel themselves ahead of other people was causing distress.

Paul, in answering this situation, didn't condemn the wrong. He didn't criticize them. But he picked up the problem and discussed it to show that this problem did not need to be there. Paul discussed the fact that differences in people are real. Some people are gifted one way. Some people are gifted another way. And differences in service are real. Not all services are of equal value. Some of the gifts are more important. Some of the gifts are less important. And so, at the end of Chapter 12 he said, "Covet earnestly the best gifts." There are some that are better and some that are best, and some that are not so important. Yet, they are all gifts of God.

It is natural for people to want to excel. We can't help but want to be important and to compare well with others. They don't seem to think that this tempts them to pride and vanity. This is a very natural thing. Paul is warning that it can cause real trouble.

Now after Paul admitted in Chapter 12 that each gift is valid, and he has admonished the believers to covet earnestly the most valuable, now he points out what might be called the preferred outlook. Your personal importance is found not in any gift given to you, but in the fruit that you produce. He holds up for approval not gifts but fruit. Gifts, which are divine enablements for service, God enabling you to do something, are important and valuable and should be appreciated. But fruits, which are the result of Christ working in you, are eternal. They are forever.

1 Corinthians 13 was written to show the more excellent way of achieving importance and significance in Christ. Paul is not particularly writing about love as a topic of its own. He is writing to Christians. He wants to point out to us how we can become successful Christians.

1 Corinthians 13:1—3

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. 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, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing" 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels." The speaking with tongues that he mentions here, I think, is related to the speaking with tongues that he mentions in Chapter 12:10 and 12:30. That was speaking with tongues that was characteristic of the spiritual experience of people in the city of Corinth. He continues his comments about it in Chapter 14.

"And have not charity." This word charity has in it the idea of kindness. If we do not have love for other people, if we are not actually seeking the welfare of other people, "I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." In other words, all our speaking doesn't account for anything unless we really care to help other people. "And though I have the gift of prophecy." Here he means that we can really preach and be gifted to preach. "Understand all mysteries" means we can interpret Scripture. We can show others the hidden truths of Scripture. "And all knowledge." We can gather all the scriptural facts together and show the meaning of them. "And though I have all faith." Here we should think of the kind of faith that he talked about in Chapter 12:9 that was given to him. Or perhaps you can say the faith that you find in Chapter 12:28 when you have miracles mentioned. That is faith adequate to get things done in any situation. "So that I could remove mountains." This is accomplishing great things in the will of God. "And have not love I am nothing."

This is tremendously important. I don't know that I can add to it with emphasis. I am only stopping here for us to catch our breath. I may be a real preacher, I may explain to you the hidden things of the Bible, I may show you the meaning of things, I may get answers to prayer, but if I am not seeking the welfare of other people, if in the bottom of my heart I am not wanting to advance them, I am nothing.

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor." We give up everything we have and give it away. "And though I give my body to be burned." That is zeal to the point where we would be willing to die for the faith. And if we are not doing this for the sake of other people, if we have not charity it profiteth us nothing. Paul is saying that the interest you have in your heart, the desire to help other people, qualifies everything that you do.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

"Charity suffereth long, and is kind, charity envieth not, charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things" 1 Cor. 13:4-7.

The King James version speaks of charity. Many people today use the word love. That I think is possibly helpful. The only thing about it that gives me a little concern is that anybody might think that there has been some change. There really hasn't because the word charity as used in the New Testament means love in action. If you do not know the New Testament stories, narratives and descriptions, you could very easily misunderstand the word love. You might very easily pick up the word love in the way Americans would use it. Or you could pick up the word love as theatre-goers or people who watch television would see the word love used. This is not the way in which it is used in the New Testament. It is certainly not what Paul had in mind. When you read here that "Charity suffereth long, and is kind, charity envieth not," you're not to suppose that any kind of love suffereth long, or that any kind of what the common American person would call love is kind, or that it doesn't envy. No, you'd have to be careful about that.

For one thing you might keep in mind that Paul did not write this chapter as an essay on the concept of love. This may seem rather strange, but I need to point out something: there is no such *stuff as* love.

It's not a vapor. It is not a fragrance. It's not an electrical charge. Love isn't any *thing* as such. If you use the word love as a noun, you are referring to an action of a type. This is an action word. The word love as used in the New Testament is more of an adverb than it is a verb. The word love refers to the way in which you do whatever you do. Whatever you do will occur in a local situation. You can do anything for selfish reasons, or you can do it for the New Testament love reasons. The action of love as referred to in the New Testament is grounded in an attitude. This attitude qualifies every action with love. To love in the New Testament sense is to act with the intention of promoting the welfare and the happiness of somebody else.

"Charity suffereth long." Having this frame of mind in which you are thinking of help for other people, you act in patience. Long-suffering refers to patience. It keeps doing this on and on and on. You don't do what you do because other people will appreciate it. You don't do what you do because you can produce results. You are inwardly moved to do this by the grace of God and you have this attitude toward other people that you keep on seeking their welfare whether they respond or not. You're not looking at them. You're looking up to the Lord. And you're acting as out from God.

When you say "is kind", you mean that love actually looks to see how you can bring this help for others to pass. You don't hold others responsible for what they do. You actually seek to guide and bring to pass help even with people who are not minded that way.

"Charity envieth not." If you have the frame of mind of wanting to help other people, then you're not envious of other people. If someone else is doing as well or better than you, you're glad. It's as if you were trying to save children out of a burning house. If you brought out three you don't stand around feeling envious of the man who brought out five. You wonder if there are ten more in there, and you want to get them out. You'd be very glad to appreciate the man that brought out ten. Why? Because you're interested in the children. You want the children out. God actually means to help, not because we're good, not because we're responsive, but because He is God. He is grace. In His grace He wants to help us. He's not looking at other people and comparing Himself with other people.

"Charity vaunteth not itself." A person who has a frame of mind to help others isn't interested in piling up his own score. "Is not puffed up." He doesn't get to have personal egotistic feelings. This is something like water running out from a spring. You know when water runs out from a spring and spreads out into the sands of the desert, the water disappears from view. The water running from a spring doesn't run somewhere into a pool. It doesn't try to make a lake. It spreads out in the sand, into the soil and tries to make it fruitful.

Love "doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own." That's the same frame of mind of trying to help other people. "Is not easily provoked," because you want to help other people, you want to help them. "Thinketh no evil." Love doesn't mean anybody harm. It's not even thinking in terms of doing anyone any harm. "Rejoiceth not in iniquity" means it has no pleasure in other people doing wrong or in seeing other people doing wrong. "But rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things." This attitude keeps on believing every promise of God whether there are results or not. "Hopeth all things." You keep on expecting everything God has promised. "Endureth all things." You can't put love out. It keeps on going.

1 Corinthians 13:8-10

"Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in

part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away" 1 Cor. 13:8-10.

"Charity never faileth." For a long time in my life I thought this quote meant that charity never fails to succeed in its purpose, that charity always gets the job done. Only recently have I realized and understood that's not what Paul had in mind. Paul meant that so far as charity is concerned, this attitude of seeking the welfare of others never stops. This disposition to help other people is inexhaustible if it is genuine and real. Why? Because it comes from God. Just like an artesian well, you have an endless supply of good will toward others bubbling over with the desire to serve others for their welfare. This is not because they're worth it, not because they're good, not because they deserve it and not because they're going to appreciate it. You have no reason except their need and God.

God said to Abraham, "I will bless thee and make thee a blessing." He says to us, "I will bless you and make you a blessing." The blessing we receive from God is fellowship with Him. He fills us with something that overflows like a fountain and goes out to other people. One more time, let me remind you that a Christian is like an oasis in the desert. The water flows out from that spring in all directions, and where it flows the grass grows and the date palms flourish. The water never gets back to the spring. The water is never returned. It spreads out and makes fruitful the ground that it waters. Something like this is the very essence of the gospel. Because God did for us so we will do for others in the name of the Lord. And it will be done as unto Him.

"Whether there be prophecies, they shall fail." Prophecies could ordinarily mean preaching, but also here let us think of the word as indicating predictions. The reason that predictions will fail isn't that they are wrong. The meaning of failing is that they'll come to an end. The predictions will be fulfilled. Every bit of this preaching that you've done, this predicting that you've done, will have its day over. For instance, with reference to a garden, when someone wants to know how to have some beans, you tell them "Put the beans in the ground and cultivate them, and you will have beans." That's your prediction. You know what happens? He puts the beans in the ground. He cultivates all summer long and in the fall he gets beans. Close the book. It's over. The prediction you're going to have beans is done. That's the way it is with prophecies. Whether there be prophecies they will be finished, they will end.

"Whether there be tongues, they shall cease." This refers to the tongues that he has been talking about in the former chapter. This evidence of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the heart is called one of the gifts of the Spirit. This was actually given as a sign. I want you to look at this very closely. Do you notice that Paul says that they shall cease?

Now I want to suggest something to you. Paul is evidently not thinking of speaking in tongues as being helpful in nurturing faith. That's not what they're being used for. He is not thinking of speaking in tongues as being helpful for the development of the spiritual life. If so, they'd never stop as long as you needed help. But why were tongues given? You'll read both in Chapters twelve and fourteen that tongues were given for a sign. And they were given for a sign to those who do not believe. The main significance of speaking with tongues is the testimony. Perhaps it's a testimony to the person who is having that experience and it may be a testimony to the people outside. It's a testimony that God is having something to do with that heart. That's what that testimony is. But, one more time let me say to you gently, even though I am very earnest about this. Apparently this is not essential to, perhaps not even incidental to, it's not an element of your growing in spiritual things. If it were, Paul wouldn't say they would cease. There comes a time when you won't need them. When is that time? When the unbelievers are not around. When the unbelievers are not around there is no reason for tongues because they are given

for a sign.

"Whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." Oh my! Stop and think of that again. Knowledge is composed of human judgments that people commonly call facts. I want to tell you that every fact you know is a partial truth. It's only in part. Anybody that has ever established a fact in science knows that you defined it. And it all has to do with what in philosophy we call cognition. That which is in cognition is what you recognize, what you can define and describe. "For we know in part and we prophesy in part." Now prophecy is interpretation. You take what you understand and communicate it to others. So what we know, what we cognize, is in part, and what we prophesy, what we communicate to others of what we know, is in part.

We know in part and we prophesy in part. The day will come when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. That which is perfect will be that which incorporates all the aspects, the past, present and future, at one moment, the seen and the unseen, the personal and spiritual, when that which is complete comes, then that which can be seen, something that is involved in "my" project, all of that will pass away. Anything that has definition, anything that has limitations, anything that has boundaries, anything that has practical interests is only temporary. As soon as the interest is over it's over. It's only temporary. In this way Paul is pressing the point that this attitude of helping other people is the one thing in you that would never be reduced, never be modified. That's the eternal truth.

1 Corinthians 13:11-12

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" 1 Cor. 13:11-12.

There is a fatal limitation in all natural learning and science. Science can make a sharp knife. But science can never determine whether that sharp knife will be a surgeon's scalpel to be used in operating and saving a life or whether it will be an assassin's stiletto used for killing a man. Science cannot control the hand that controls the knife. The best informed people are not always the most successful. The people who have the most information are not always able to accomplish the most in actual service. Sophistication is no help toward blessing. It doesn't have to be a hindrance, but it can be a threat. It certainly is no help. There is an old saying I picked up some years ago, "The heart has reason the mind knows nothing of." All this was especially significant to the Greek Christians to whom Paul was writing. Today is a day of intellectual emphasis. It's all around about us with the confusion that there is in morals, in ethics, in judgments of various kinds, as well as in faith and religion. With all the confusion that there is, we see people trying to take refuge in being intellectual. They are trying to understand things with the mind. And that's very important, I know. But these folks today are often like the Greeks Paul knew who were forever hearing or discussing some new thing (Acts 17:21).

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (1 Corinthians 13:11-12).

I am sure that anyone reading this feels at once the good common sense in it. There are a few things to notice right away. There is a difference between being childish and being child-like. We definitely are

told, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 18:3). We need to be as a little child. Right? But now when we are childish, that is a way of prolonging the undesirable attitude of a child.

When Paul is contrasting the child and the man, do you think he is contrasting ignorance and knowledge? Do you think he is saying that when he was a child he didn't know anything, he thought as a child because he was ignorant? When he became a man he was smart, and now he knows things? Well, in the context, does that fit? He has just been telling us that knowledge is not so important for life.

How about this? A child is naturally self-centered. I don't care who your baby is and how sweet it may be as a baby. You know perfectly well that if that baby has an interest in anything it's a selfish interest. A baby wants to get whatever it wants regardless of you or what will happen. Of course, it doesn't know any better, and that's why it's a child. What I am talking about is attitude. The baby is self-centered. What about the adult? What about the person who is mature? By the word mature I mean like a grown man. Well, a grown man may possibly have a family. One truth about a grown married man is he is not alone. He has someone else to care for. If there are children he has them to care for. And if he is a man who acts the part of a man, he doesn't think of himself alone. He is thinking of others. When a person becomes mature he is interested in other people.

This is in keeping with the whole discussion of Corinthians. They were babes in Christ because they were thinking only of themselves, and he wanted them to grow up in Christ and to become mature. In other words, a child in its outlook is always partial. It only sees a part, its part, the part it is interested in. Man can be total. He can see more. Certainly he has his part. Others have their parts too.

"When I was a child, I spake as a child," self-centered. I was interested in myself. "I understood as a child." Everything was related to me. Did I like it? Didn't I like it? Was it good for me? Wasn't it good for me? "I thought as a child." I figured as a child. I schemed. What can I get? Where can I go? What can I do? What do I do next? I - I - I - I ... that's childish. "When I became a man, I put away childish things."

The next is a little bit tricky. "For now we see through a glass, darkly." Someone may wonder, "Maybe the glass wasn't clean?" That's not the meaning. This is seeing in a mirror. Take a hand mirror. Put it right on the table by you. And take pencil and paper. Now, putting the mirror so that you see in it your pencil and paper, look into the glass and try to write. See what you are writing when you look in the glass? You are seeing what you are writing, but you can't make head or tail out of it. That's the significance of seeing in a glass. This is seeing in a mirror. Or you could just walk up to the mirror and look. Your right eye is on the left side. Your left eye is on the right side. You only see part way.

As these people lived together in Corinth they saw each doing differently than the other, and they had a tendency to compare themselves with each other. In that comparison their feelings became aroused. Their contentions arose because of the comparison of the gifts that they had been given of God. The underlying idea in Chapter 13 is that it is not the capable operation or work on the part of people with special gifts in service that is the most important. It's the attitude with which these things are done, the intention and purpose on the part of those who serve.

1 Corinthians 13:13

"And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity " (I Cor. 13:13).

Paul has been emphasizing that the attitude toward others, which he speaks of as love, is basic to everything. There are three words used in this verse that we have here: faith, hope and charity. These

words are so common and yet oftentimes go unknown, because faith, hope and charity are not three things. They are not three substances. They actually refer to three modes of consciousness. They are something we do. We do this matter called faith. We do this matter called hope. And we do this matter called love.

The action of the will in responding to the revealed will of God, when the promises of God are known and we respond to them and receive them — that's faith. Now the word faith does have a secondary meaning. That involves the content of what we believe. We can speak of the faith of a Christian. You can refer to the actual content of what it is that Christians teach. But the word faith as Paul uses it has to do with the actual function involved. It's an action on the part of the will and the consciousness of a man in responding willingly to the revealed promises of God.

Hope is an attitude of the heart. It's an attitude of the heart in expecting that God will keep His promises. In faith the emphasis was upon self, that the self would commit himself to God. But in hope the emphasis is upon God, that God will keep His word. There is a secondary meaning here too. You can speak of the hope of a Christian and include there the content as to what it is that he expects will happen when God does what He says He will do. And so you could speak about that Blessed Hope, in which you're referring to, some thing that you're expecting that God will do. But primarily, as Paul is using the word hope in this particular chapter, it's an attitude of the heart in expecting that God will keep His promises.

Charity, or love, refers to the directing of activities toward seeking the welfare and the happiness of others. When we are doing something for the sake of other people we are doing it in love. When we are doing the same thing for our own sakes we are exercising ourselves in selfishness.

There can also be a secondary meaning of this word love. That will involve the actions in themselves. We can say that love is manifested in deeds, not words. Let your love be in deeds and in truth, not in words (1 John 3:18). But that doesn't specify what those deeds are going to be. As a secondary meaning, we may seek to identify specific acts or deeds as deeds of love. But the word love in the Bible primarily has to do with the direction of the action.

"But the greatest of these is charity." No explanation is given as to why this is the greatest. Frankly, I think love is inclusive of the other two. I think that so far as we are concerned with our activity being directed out toward other people, that becomes possible when we believe God. It's when we believe what God will do with us that we will do for others. "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). First of all God loves us. Then we love Him. And because we love Him, we love others. So you see, love is grounded in faith.

The same is true of hope. We can love and actually have the disposition to help other people because we confidently expect that God is going to do certain things for us. We read about the Lord Jesus Christ "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). He confidently hoped to be in the presence of His Father. Many people will say that the love of God was manifested in that Christ Jesus died for us. That's true. But He died for us in confident expectation of what God would do, which is hope.

So actually, faith, hope and love are not separate things. They are not absolutely distinctive things. And of the three of them, possibly love is more inclusive than the others. But we have them right here before us — three different activities on the part of believers, all of which are spiritual and blessed — but love is the greatest.