

## The Great Love Chapter

### 1 Corinthians 13

1 Corinthians 13: *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 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. 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. 4 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 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. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. 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. 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. 13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”*

### Background Notes

At first glance, this great New Testament chapter on love seems like a digression from Paul’s discussion on the proper use of spiritual gifts. Well, it is an extremely necessary digression, because **love is essential for the proper use of spiritual gifts**. This is the “more excellent way” mentioned by Paul in the last verse of chapter 12.

Remember, 1 Corinthians 12 is about the Church as the body of Christ, with many members, and all members with different gifts and functions. Each member is to recognize and exercise his or her own gifts and functions in the body, or the body will be dysfunctional.

And dysfunction is exactly what was going on in the church at Corinth, in reference to the use of spiritual gifts. There was jealousy of gifts and pride of gifts, and self-display of gifts, and improper emphasis on certain “sign” gifts, and despising of believers with the less dramatic gifts. The solution to this was **love!** **Love** should be shown to all members of the body, regardless of their gift and function. This is the “more excellent way,” and it is defined and elaborated in 1 Corinthians 13.

In reference to verses 8-13 of this chapter, evangelical Christians hold two different interpretations. The key to the two different views is the meaning of verse 10: *“But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.”* What does the term “perfect” mean, and when will this “perfect” come?

The more traditional view is that “perfect” refers to the future eternal state. At that time there will be no more need for spiritual gifts, and thus they will cease. Love, of course, will continue, because love is eternal.

Verse 12 seems to support this more traditional view: *“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.”* In Paul’s day, mirrors were made of polished bronze, and thus the image was not as clear as today’s mirrors. So in this view, our knowledge and insight and appreciation is partial and dim now compared to what it will be in the eternal state.

The other interpretation is that the term “perfect” refers to the completed canon of Scripture. Remember, New Testament revelation was still being given and written when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. At that point the Bible was not yet complete. Support for this view is the fact that the Greek word *telelos* (translated *perfect* here) can also mean *fully grown, or mature, or complete*. So “perfect” could be translated “complete”.

Proponents of the second view believe Paul meant that the special gifts mentioned in verse 8 – prophecies, tongues, and knowledge – that the need for these special gifts would cease when the New Testament was completed. These gifts would not be needed then because the full revelation of God in Scripture would be complete.

Which view is correct? I tend to go along with the more traditional view - that Paul was looking on to the eternal state, and thus the word “perfect” in verse 10 refers to the return of Christ.

Yet at the same time, Paul saw that there would be stages of growth in the Church, in the imperfect time before the return of the Lord. He used the illustration of a child growing into the maturity of manhood (v11). The “childhood” or immature stage of the Church was the time when the more dramatic and spectacular gifts were needed to authenticate and confirm the word of the apostles. But as the church matured (and certainly the completion of the New Testament contributed to its growth and maturity), the need for the early “sign” gifts would cease. But the full maturity of the church, of course, will not be reached until the “perfect” comes - the return of Christ and the end of the Church Age.

Until that time, our emphasis should be on **hope, faith, and love** (v13), which are *more important than spiritual gifts*. Verse 7 says that faith and hope are manifestations of love, and thus love is the greatest of these three.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. Love is more important than having spiritual gifts.

This is certainly the point the Bible makes in verses 1-2: *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging 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, but have not love, I am nothing."*

The phrase "tongues of men and angels" is meant to include all languages, and every form of exalted speech. Suppose you could speak all languages, both earthly and heavenly? What an awesome gift and ability! But if you don't have love, you're nothing more than a nerve-racking noise, and no real benefit at all to the body of Christ.

The same is true of all the other spiritual gifts. If you have the gift of prophecy, or the gift of knowing all hidden truth, or the gift of great faith (even to the moving of mountains!) - but you don't have love, you're one big zero. Even though these are great gifts and God gave them to you, **love is more important than having spiritual gifts!**

## **2. Love is more important than doing Christian service.**

*Verse 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."*

Suppose you gave all your money away to a good cause (like Growing Christians Ministries [laughter]), but if your gesture is primarily for drawing attention to yourself, and it's not done out of love for the Lord - it profits you nothing. Your gift would profit Growing Christians Ministries (and we'll take your gift with or without the love and put it to good use!!), but there will be little eternal reward for you.

Suppose you gave your body to be burned. Paul does not mean dumping gasoline on your body and lighting yourself on fire. No, the idea here is willingly becoming a martyr. You could be so committed to Christian service that you would be willing to give your life as a martyr - but if you're just doing this for self-glory, and there is no real love for the Lord and His work and His people, then forget it! There is no eternal value in it.

What does the word "love" mean here? 1 Corinthians 13 is not talking about "romantic love." This chapter is speaking about the *agape* kind of love. That's the Greek word that's used here for love, and it means **a determined denial of self in the interest of others**. The *agape* kind of love is an act of the will, rather than a feeling of the emotions - although many times *agape* love will involve the emotions as well.

*Agape* love is the kind of love that God has shown us. 1 John 4:10: *"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* *Agape* love is the kind of love we are to show others, and without this kind of love our Christian service is just mechanical activity – with little reward.

In verses 4-7, *agape* love is defined by what it does - and what it doesn't do. I challenge you to read these verses slowly and examine your heart in reference to your relationship with your spouse, your family, and your fellow believers.

Love suffers long and is kind – kind and patient even when you're provoked and agitated by others.

Love does not envy – it's happy when others are honored and in the spotlight, and you're not.

Love does not parade itself. It is not puffed up - because it realizes that everything we are and have has come from God by His sovereign will.

Love does not behave rudely – it is courteous and is considerate of others.

Love does not seek its own – it's unselfish. It is not provoked to anger by the hurtful things that people do and say to us.

Love thinks no evil - it does not judge the motives of others. Love does not rejoice in iniquity but rejoices in the truth - maybe the type of movies you enjoy is an indication of whether you pass this test.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things - love tries to always make the best of the situation for everyone involved, knowing that God can work all things together for good.

Let me ask you, did you pass the "love test"? Did you pass with an "A" - or with a "D"? Love is more important than doing Christian service!

## **Practical Application**

### **Let's put away our childish things!**

Verse 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."* In the context of 1 Corinthians, this verse illustrates the stages of growth in the Church - from early immaturity (childhood) to ultimate maturity (adult).

But this verse certainly has an individual application. Where are **you** in your growth as a Christian? Do you need dramatic signs and wonders or bigger and better material blessings to keep you happy in your immature Christian life? Or are you a mature believer, humbly serving the Lord and His people with selfless *agape* type love?

Let's put away our childish things!