

## Lesson 19

### 1 Corinthians 13

Paul's "more excellent way" (12:31) is the way of love. In this chapter he proceeds to expound that way in a passage that has been called "the greatest, strongest, deepest thing Paul ever wrote." Most important, Paul describes a gift that is within the reach of the most humble and ordinary of God's people.

Some have suggested that this chapter is a digression from Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. To the contrary, it is essential to his subject. He is not through with his discussion of gifts; he has much to be said about them in chapter 14. But is essential to his argument that the central thing is not the exercise of any of the gifts. It is love.

Some translations render "love" (*agape*) as "charity." This translation was taken from Wycliffe who obtained it from the Vulgate (*caritas*). Jerome most likely used *caritas* because what the Latins meant by *amor* was not what the New Testament meant by *agape*. This Greek word was not in common use before the New Testament. It occurs 20 times in the Septuagint, but the Christians took it up and made it their characteristic word for "love." It occurs 116 times in the New Testament, 75 of them in the writings of Paul. Before the New Testament, the concept of love was love for those who are the best that we know. For Christians, love is the quality that we see on the cross. It is lavished upon the unworthy (Rom. 5:8). It is bestowed without ever giving a thought to the worthiness of the recipient. It proceeds from the nature of the lover, not from the worthiness of the one loved. The Christian no longer sees a person based upon merit; he sees a person as one for whom Christ died. He comes to practice that love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the one loved. It is this love that Paul unfolds in this chapter.

vv. 1-3 – The greatness and necessity of love.

1. Paul begins with some hypothetical possibilities. The Greek particle *ean* that begins each of the five statements indicates an uncertain or hypothetical possibility. *The tongues of men and of angels* most likely refers to the gift of tongues, but the term used is broad enough to mean any language. Paul's point is that not even the greatest eloquence or even the highest language in heaven or on earth avails anything in the absence of love. It is easy to be hypnotized by the magic of words while passing over that which matters most of all. One who is impressed more by saying than by doing has become nothing but sound, the sound of a brass or a clanging cymbal. "Brass" may refer either to the metal or to that which is made from it. A gong may be correct since it clearly points to something noisy. Both produce great noise but no music. Neither requires skill beyond striking at the right time and with the right force. Both produce sound, but no melody. These sounds would have been familiar at Corinth from their use by devotees of Dionysius or Cybele.

*Tongues of angels* has been urged by some here to refer to a heavenly ecstatic language which corresponds to the alleged gift of tongues today. That the possibilities Paul discusses here are hypothetical is established beyond doubt by verse three – Paul

had not given his body to be burned. Paul may be using hyperbole to stress the highest possible gift. Whatever he is doing, it must be remembered that in every recorded instance where an angel spoke to man, the angel spoke a human language.

2. Paul moves from tongues to gifts related to knowledge. If the gifts in 12:28 are ranked in importance, prophecy is second only to the apostolate. Loveless prophecy, along with the loveless prophet, is nothing. *All mysteries* and *all knowledge* point to the sum of all wisdom, human and divine. *Faith* in this context is miraculous faith. Matthew 17:17-20. It is *all faith*, or faith to the highest degree. Paul stresses that even if the Corinthians had the greatest of gifts to the highest degree, but lacked love, not only were they not very important; they were actually *nothing*.

3. From knowledge and deeds of power, Paul turns to deeds of mercy and charity. The picture is of one who in one sweeping gesture sells all that he has and gives it away. The language suggests that he personally doles it out bit by bit to many people. It is sobering to realize that a person may be generous to the point of beggary, and yet completely lacking in love. *The poor* is supplied by the translators – the Greek has no equivalent. The emphasis is on the giver, not the recipient. There is a textual problem with *though I give my body to be burned*. Some texts, and thus some translations, read, *though I give up my body that I may boast*. The difference, however, is minimal, since the boasting would be based upon the hypothetical martyrdom. Paul's point is that it is possible to give away great sums even to the point of sacrificing oneself, and yet not have love. In that case, Paul says, there is no profit to the giver.

vv. 4-7 – The qualities of love.

Paul's discourse on the qualities of love must be read in light of his purpose. Some conclude that it is much easier to define love negatively, what it is not, than to define it positively, what it is. Certainly, the majority of qualities that Paul attributes to love are negative, but the greatest definitions of love are positive; God is love; For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. . . . Why then is Paul primarily negative? Because it suits his purpose. He deals with love in light of the Corinthians conduct relative to the gifts that God had given them. He lists those qualities of love that the opposed the qualities the Corinthians demonstrated in the use of their gifts. They were impatient, discontented, envious, inflated, selfish, unmindful of the interests and feelings of others, suspicious, resentful, and censorious.

v. 4 *Love is patient*. The word Paul uses means the opposite of short-tempered. It denotes patience with people rather than with circumstances. It is often used of God and thus implies a God-like quality. It speaks eloquently of love's restraint.

*Love is kind*. This is the only occurrence of this verb in the N.T. The corresponding adjective may be translated *good* (15:33) or *kind* (Eph. 4:32). Some think Paul may have coined the word. Some suggest that both meanings are inherent in the word: love reacts with goodness to those who ill-treat it; it gives itself in kindness in the service of others.

*Love does not envy.* This word is occasionally used in a good sense (12:31), but more often refers to a strong spirit of jealousy or the like. Love is not displeased at the success of others.

*Love does not boast.* Paul uses a word that describes a person as a braggart or a wind-bag. He parades his rhetoric and himself to gain attention. He is subservient toward superiors and condescending toward subordinates. He is arrogant toward all.

*Love is not proud.* Some, perhaps many, of the Corinthians were arrogant. Paul had told them not to go beyond that which was written that no one of you become arrogant. (4:6.) Many of them prided themselves on possessing knowledge. Paul admonished them that “knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” (8:1.) With love, knowledge is a valuable asset; without love knowledge becomes obnoxious arrogance.

v. 5 *Love does not behave itself unseemly.* The Greek word indicates behavior that is not in keeping with the established norm of decency. For the Christian, that is God’s word. A person who loves always strives to conduct himself with proper decorum toward others, whether they are low or high in society, whether they are friend or foe. The Royal Law, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (James 2:8), demands no less.

Decent behavior does not stop with words or attitudes. It also pertains to one’s apparel and appearance. Proper dress and a groomed appearance commend a person who desires to please others. Love extends to all aspects of one’s demeanor.

*Love seeks not its own.* Paul himself had demonstrated this quality when he labored among them for a year and a half supporting himself so that he would not be a burden to the Corinthians. He repeatedly instructed them to seek the welfare of others and not their own. (10:24, 33.) Self-centeredness is the very opposite of love. Selfishness cannot see beyond its own desires. It believes that all roads lead to Rome and that it is Rome.

*Love is not provoked.* No one is completely immune from irritation no matter how full of grace and love. God has anger. Moses had anger. Jesus had anger. Righteous anger is permissible and in some instances necessary. Paul does warn that anger should not leak over into the next day (Eph. 4:26). Most of our irritation is unjustified; most of our anger is not righteous. Love has no room for such conduct.

*Love takes no account of evil.* Paul describes a CPA of a different sort – one who is always Counting Punitive Acts. He is loathe to forget them and quick to remember them. He can recite them for years past; he lays them to the charge of the malfasant even when they have been repented of and forgiveness has been asked. Love knows no such conduct.

This is not to say that such deeds must be forgotten. Often they cannot be. It is erroneous to say that “when God forgives he forgets” in the sense that they are blotted out of memory. God “forgets” in the sense that he does not impute forgiven acts to the one whom He has forgiven.

v. 6 *Love does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices in the truth.* Paul continues to describe the qualities of love with two balanced clauses using the same verb but differing in their objects; evil and truth. Love cannot help but take notice of evil. How else could it act to correct it and overcome it? But love does not rejoice or take pleasure in evil. It grieves over the evils that man commits against man.

On the other hand, love constantly seeks out good and praiseworthy words, deeds, and thoughts in a person. It rejoices when truth triumphs over evil.

v. 7 *Love bears all things.* This clause has many translations – covers all things, patiently accepts all things, always supports, bears all things, and never gives up. The Greek word can mean “endure” (9:12; 1 Thess. 3:1, 5). Peter writes that “love covers a multitude of sin” (1 Peter 4:8). Love is the virtue that throws a cloak of silence over what is displeasing in another person. Hence, the idea of covering things with a cloak of love is fitting. It also avoids repetition with “endures all things.”

*Love believes all things.* This does not mean that the person who loves becomes a gullible dupe for every con man. To the contrary, love is always wise and discerning. What the Christian does have is a constant faith in God who is in control and working for the Christian even when everything seems to point in a different direction..

*Love hopes all things.* Paul here introduces the second of the triad – faith, hope, and love. Hope is sometimes the neglected member, overshadowed by faith and love. But when a tripod loses one of its legs its failure is inevitable. So it is with a Christian who nurtures faith and love, but neglects hope. Hope waits patiently for its fulfillment. This is not an unreasoning optimism that fails to take account of reality. It is confident assurance that looks to ultimate triumph by the grace of God.

*Love endures all things.* This is not a resigned acquiescence; it is an active, positive fortitude. It is the endurance of the soldier who, in the heat of battle, is not dismayed, but continues his service vigorously. Love is not overwhelmed, but plays its part whatever the difficulties. It is to endure in times of pain, suffering, deprivation, hatred, loss, and loneliness. Paul tells us that if we endure with Christ, we will also reign with him (2 Tim. 2:12). The suffering that the apostles and early Christians suffered for the sake of Christ and the gospel is eloquent testimony of love for God.

vv. 8-13. The permanence and perfection of love.

v. 8 *Love never fails.* This supports and grows out of the preceding verse and is a summary of vv. 4-7. At the same time it looks forward and introduces vv. 9-13. Love begins this section and appears twice in its final verse. In between Paul emphasizes the temporary nature of spiritual gifts, and provides three illustrations of their immaturity and imperfection – a child, a reflection, and knowledge.

Love, however, is eternal and never loses its validity. It emanates from God to all of his people through all of time and eternity. While everything else in God’s creation comes to an end, love has constant and continuing vitality and lasting influence.

*. . . but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away.* Paul explains the reason in verse 9 – such gifts are partial. Because of their partial nature, they shall cease. The Greek word *katargein* that Paul uses four times in verses 8, 10, and 11, is translated “to set aside, to pass away, or to cease.” It is related to the adjective *argos*, meaning “idle, inactive, unproductive (see, e.g., Matt. 12:36). The verb means that something has been put aside or has become ineffective.

Some commentators suggest that Paul has in mind the fulfillment of prophecies and that they pass away in that sense. What Paul has in mind here, however, seems to be

not the prophecy itself, but the gift of prophecy. It is the gift that shall pass away, be set aside, or cease. The same end awaited the gift of tongues and the gift of knowledge. By listing only these three gifts in this context, Paul is not suggesting that these are the only three gifts that were to end; the list is illustrative and not exclusive.

vv. 9-10 <sup>9</sup> *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part;* <sup>10</sup> *but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.* In these two verses Paul gives the reason that spiritual gifts shall cease and when they shall cease. The language of these verses is simple. It is their meaning that is difficult. What does it mean to know and prophesy “in part”? What is that which is “perfect”? Some suggest that “in part” means that the will of God was revealed in bits and pieces and that at the time Paul wrote the revelation of God’s will was not complete. They point to James 1:25 (But he that looketh into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and so continueth, being not a hearer that forgetteth but a doer that worketh, this man shall be blessed in his doing.) and from it conclude that the “perfect law,” or complete law, is that which was to come at which time the spiritual gifts would cease. While that is not without reason, it is in my view a stretch to put these two verses together when they were written for different purposes and making different points. Certainly it is true that not all of the books of the New Testament had been written, but did that mean that the early Christians did not have access to the complete will of God. I think not. In fact, that would seem to have been at least one of the reasons, if not the major reason, for spiritual gifts. In the absence of a written record the presence of spiritually gifted prophets and teachers was surely able to reveal the will of God and to do so fully. Certainly it is true that once the writing of the New Testament was complete the spiritual gifts would no longer be needed. All people would have access to the complete will of God as it had been revealed through spiritually gifted writers. No further revelation was needed.

Still others suggest that that which is perfect is the consummation. Certainly heaven will be perfect, but this cannot be that to which Paul refers. Since the purpose of the spiritual gifts was to confirm the word of God (Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:1-4). If that which is perfect refers to heaven, then spiritual gifts do not pass away until then. The necessary conclusion is that the word of God will never be fully confirmed in this life. But, we are told, “now” is the time of the imperfect and of spiritual gifts (v. 12), and since “now” abideth faith, hope, and love (v.13), spiritual gifts must abide at the same time and for the same period as faith, hope, and love. This misses Paul’s point in verse 13. He has returned to his contrast between the eternity of love versus the temporality of spiritual gifts. Further, if spiritual gifts and faith, hope and love are coterminous, then, if that which is perfect is not the consummation, faith, hope, and love do not last forever.

What, then, is “that which is perfect”? The Greek word *teleion* usually equates with *maturity*. Of the eight occurrences of the word in Paul’s writings, six are translated “mature.” The seventh, in Romans 12:2, is the adjective form describing the “perfect” will of God. That leaves only its use here. Some, looking at Paul’s illustration of a child’s becoming a man, see it as a reference to the maturity of the believer. This seems unlikely, however. If it points to the maturity of a single believer, who is that believer? If it points to the maturity of all believers, maturity will never be reached since, at least in theory if not in fact, there will always be babes in Christ.

vv. 11-12 Paul's illustrations may give us insight. They are three in number – the child, the mirror, and knowledge. Of these three, the first is the one that speaks directly to the concept of maturity – when I became a man I put away childish things. There are some things that the church has in its infancy (spiritual gifts) that will not be necessary in its maturity. If that maturity is the consummation, then the church will always be in its infancy. Paul tells us that this is not the fate of the church. In a similar discussion in his letter to the Ephesians, he writes: “And he gave some *to be* apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; <sup>12</sup> for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: <sup>13</sup> till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: <sup>14</sup> that we may be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error; <sup>15</sup> but speaking truth in love, we may grow up in all things into him, who is the head, *even* Christ; <sup>16</sup> from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in *due* measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love.” (Ephesians 4:11-16.)

In these verses Paul is discussing spiritual gifts and he speaks of their duration. He identifies when the “then” of 1 Corinthians 13 is with his “till” in Ephesians 4:13 – it is until the maturity (fullgrown man) of the church. The things that are “in part” are the spiritual gifts themselves. They are in fact that which has been done away. We “all” have attained unto the unity of the faith, *i.e.*, there is “one faith” (Eph. 4:4). We now have “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Each person sees the completed word. He needs no further inspired revelation; revelation has ended. The silliness of much claimed continuing revelation substantiates this truth, *e.g.*, Joseph Smith's *Book of Mormon* and Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. The truth is that if a latter day revelation contains more than the Bible, we don't need it because it contains too much. If it contains less than the Bible, we don't need it because it contains too little. If it contains the same thing as the Bible, we don't need it because we already have the Bible.

It is fitting that the last word in this chapter is “Love.” It occupies the supreme place. God cannot be said to exercise faith and hope, but he certainly loves, and in fact is love (1 John 4:8, 16.) Some say that love is the greatest because it alone is eternal; faith will be lost in sight and hope will be realized. That is true (though some commentators discuss ways that they think faith and hope are also eternal), but that is not Paul's point and we should not spend too much time trying to figure out why love is the greatest of the triad. In the face of the Corinthians' love for the spectacular, he is saying that the really important things are not tongues or any other spiritual gift, but faith and hope and love.

Finally, the words of one commentator surely express the feeling of all who have approached this marvelous chapter: “The commentator cannot finish writing on this chapter without a sense that soiled and clumsy hands have touched a thing of exquisite beauty and holiness. Here what is true of all Scripture is true in especial measure, that no comment can be adequate to so great a theme. Yet no commentator can excuse himself from the duty of trying to make plain what these matchless words have come to signify for him. And no Christian can excuse himself from the duty of trying to show in his life what these words have come to mean for him.”