



The Supremacy of Love (1 Cor. 13:1-13)

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps the best known chapter in all of the New Testament. It is read at most weddings, and when we read it, we are struck by its beautiful poetic ring. This chapter has been called the love chapter because in it love is described in vivid and beautiful terms.

1 Cor. 13 stands in the midst of a section about spiritual gifts and the misuse of these gifts in Corinth. In this chapter, the Apostle Paul teaches that any spiritual activity that is devoid of love is useless. Any righteous act that a person may do must be done within the context of love or it is without value. Then Paul describes what love is and what love does.

The Corinthian church was a church that lacked love. The Church in Corinth was divided. The people look each other to court and sued one another. Their marriages were unstable. They were prideful. They even showed a lack of love for each other in the way they shared in the Lord's Supper.

The Corinthian Church was a divided, un-loving church where the some members acted with superiority thinking that their spiritual gifts were better than others and that their value was greater than others within the church.

I. Spiritual Activity Without Love is Useless

Verses 1-3 provide an impressive list of spiritual activities which the Apostle Paul declares useless without the presence of love. In verse 1 he writes, ***“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”***

Some of the Corinthian Christians had the gift of tongues which allowed them to speak in a language that they had not studied. No place in the New Testament do we read of anyone speaking in the tongues of angels. Paul does not say that anyone **can** speak in the tongues of angels, but that **even if** one could it would be nothing without love. Paul uses superlative language to press the point as far as it can go. Even if you could speak in every language, even the language of angels, without love, it would be distracting and irritating like a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.



The point of the apostle Paul is that those gifts which the Corinthians eagerly desired were worse than useless. They desired these gifts of tongues so that they might boast, yet their tongues speaking was nothing but an irritating racket. Corinth was a pagan city which worshipped many Gods. In these pagan temples often gongs or cymbals were found near the entrance. When a worshiper would come to worship, he would bang the gong to attract the attention of the god. Spiritual acts without love are no more useful than the sounding of a pagan gong.

1. Define the word “nothing” as Paul uses it in verses 2 and 3.

Next, the scripture goes on to the gift of prophecy and faith in **verse 2**, ***“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”*** In chapter 14 Paul will speak of prophecy as the greatest of the spiritual gifts, yet without love the one who can prophecy (speak on behalf of God including revelations about the future) is nothing. Furthermore the one who can fathom all mysteries and the one who has all knowledge is nothing without love. Together, mysteries (which is truth revealed supernaturally by God) and knowledge (which is all a man might learn from observation and study of Scripture) comprise all that a man could possibly know. Even a man who literally knows everything would be useless without love. The one with the greatest of faith is nothing without love. Paul is trying to stress that if one had the totality of all possible spiritual gifts and did not have love, it was all useless.



Finally, in **verse 3** Paul says, ***“If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”*** Now we have some of the greatest acts of sacrifice imaginable. In the first case a man gives away all his worldly wealth and in the second case he is martyred for his faith. Still, giving up everything one possesses and even his life is nothing without love.

- 2. Why are all these great spiritual acts and acts of sacrifice and service useless without love?**

II. Love Described

Verses 4-7 provide us with a description of love rather than a definition. Some have suggested that these verses describe love much like someone would peel the petals back from a beautiful flower. Each one is unique and beautiful and together they form the entire beautiful flower. Love is described as an action, not a feeling. It requires commitment.

- 3. Verses 4-7 are a description of love, not a definition. Please define *agape* love in one sentence.**
- 4. List all the three descriptive words and phrases concerning love from verses 4-6 that say what love is or does.**
- 5. List all the eight descriptive words and phrases concerning love from verses 4-7 that say what love is not or does not do.**
- 6. List the four verbs in verse 7 that describe love.**

III. Love Endures Forever

Love is contrasted with the miraculous gifts of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge because they are temporary while love will endure forever. Prophecies will pass away. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will pass away. Love never ends.

Paul says in **verses 9-10**, *“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”* Our task is to determine two things. First, what is “in part” and second, what is “perfect.” Then we can determine when the gifts listed in verse 8 will pass away.

The word translated as “perfect” in verse 10 is the Greek word *teleion* and means complete or mature. The word *teleion* in verse 10 is in the neuter gender. This shows us that Paul is writing about a “thing” not a person. This is important because some have contented that “perfect” refers to Christ and his second coming. If this were the case “perfect” would have been in the masculine gender.¹

7. As Paul writes in verse 10, had “the perfect” arrived yet? How do you come to this conclusion?

The perfect had to arrive before the second coming because Paul says that “faith, hope, and love abide.” When Jesus comes again, there will no longer be any need for faith or hope because we will see Jesus face to face. That which Paul calls perfect must come between the time Paul writes in 1 Corinthians and the second coming.

That which is complete or mature is contrasted with the partial knowledge and prophecy the Corinthians currently possessed. This leads us to conclude that which is perfect or complete refers to the full revelation of God to man or the New Testament Scriptures. Once the Bible is complete there is no need for the gifts of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge.

The knowledge of the Corinthian Christians was incomplete since most of the New Testament had not yet been written. Even if a Christian had been gifted with prophecy or knowledge their part was incomplete and all Christians together still had an incomplete knowledge. The “in part” then refers to an incomplete knowledge or revelation. During this time then prophecies, tongues, and knowledge are active.

We know that the miraculous gifts in the New Testament were given by the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 6:6-8; 8:6, 17). Those who received any of these gifts could not have lived far into the second century. “Early New Testament literature outside the New Testament indicates that the miraculous manifestation ceased in the early second century. This was the time when the early Christians were assembling the books written by the apostles.”² It is interesting to note that the later New Testament books do not include miraculous gifts. 1 Corinthians was an early book written about 55 A.D. Charles Dailey has put together a chart showing all miracles recorded in the New Testament happened prior to 60 A.D.³

8. Why would the early church prior to the complete New Testament need miraculous gifts?

¹Cottrell, Jack. *The Faith Once for All: Bible Doctrine for Today*. Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002. p. 302-303.

²Smith, James E. *Teacher’s Commentary: The Encounter Epistles 1 & 2 Corinthians*. Lulu, 2010. p. 220.

³<http://charlesdailey.net/32-mirac.pdf>

Verses 9-12 serve as an explanation of why prophecies, tongues, and knowledge cease while faith, hope, and love remain. The explanation is made through the use of three illustrations.

The first illustration is that of childhood. We think and reason differently as adults and outgrow the need for childish ways. In the earliest days of the church prophecies, tongues, and knowledge were needed, but these have been put away not that maturity has come.



The next illustration is that of a mirror. Prior to the completion of the New Testament the Christians did not have a clear view of God's complete revelation, but now the mirror is clear.

The final illustration is that of knowing in part and then knowing fully. Again, the idea is that prior to the completion of the Scripture it was impossible to know God's complete revelation to man.

9. What three virtues remain after perfect comes? (vs. 13)

10. Why is love the greatest virtue?