

“The Greatest Thing”

- 1 Corinthians 13 -

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1 Corinthians 13 - *1 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.

Chapter 13

For twelve chapters, Paul has been leading up to this one. The chapter breaks are for our benefit. Therefore in actuality, this letter is seamless in its presentation. Indeed there lies a constant concept throughout the letter, which is the maturity and the restoration of the unity of these believers.

Chapters 12 -14 speak of the use of our service gifts...for the blessing and of course again, the *unity* of the local body of Christ in which we are a part of. For three chapters here in the middle of this letter Paul focus's on these gifts. Chapter 12 speaks of God's giving of these gifts, and chapter 14 *which is to come*, speaks of God's instructions as to how to exercise the gifts properly...the "box instructions" *so to speak*. But here in the middle of those two chapters is chapter 13. Not a 'stand alone' subject matter as it is so often presented, but the heart of the greater issue really. In this chapter lies the power that if exercised provides the energy to see our gifts manifested for God's glory. With it, a person and a church can change the world. Without it, we are just as certain to fail. It is the "smoking gun" as to the presence of both salvation and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Through years now of ministry endeavors and relationships, I have known countless people who served and participated in the church...attempting to use their gifts. But the vast majority have ultimately and finally failed in their attempts because they effectively ran out of gas. They had great promise, obvious gifts and natural talents, but they did not have love. They did not love God enough to repent when confronted with sin, or uncomfortable scenarios, and they did not love the brotherhood here enough to endure imperfections and human shortcomings that will always be present. So they walked away proving they knew only worldly love that flowed in one direction...towards them, and did not know the 1 Corinthians 13 agape love of God.

All that Paul had spoken thus far is contingent upon what he has to say in this chapter. The commentator JW McGharvey speaks of this chapter saying, "It has been admired by all ages, but, unfortunately, practiced by none!" Paul tells us clearly that if we do not have this love, we have nothing. And if we have love, even if we

lack so much, we have what matters most. That's why it is so often the inexplicable individual that moves the world!

There is no way to dance out of the need for this mandatory possession. For this is agape love...not some other form of love that we may want to claim is our possession and practice and believe therefore we are in good standing. Agape love encompasses every part of our being into one great passion. It has little to do with emotional response or feelings. *"It indicates love which deliberately, by an act of will, chooses it's object, and through thick or thin, regardless of the attractiveness of the object concerned, goes on loving continually, eternally. It is a word that speaks of complete self-denial. To love in this way means never thinking of ourselves at all; the self-life does not enter into the picture."* (Redpath)

The world today, at least in some abstract way, sees love as the ultimate answer to the problems of mankind. It is the cure for our social ills: crime, war, injustice, poverty, hunger, all of man's inhumanity toward his fellow man. Yet after thousands of years, we struggle still, and mankind remains lost when it comes to understanding just what real love is.

Clearly this is because we want love to be something it is not. We tend to force aspects and characteristics of love that do not exist. We are constantly reinventing and redefining it's meaning. Therefore until we have a definitive baseline from which to work, we will continue to remake this thing called love again and again to fit our own changing culture, ideals, and personal tastes. We can so often see love as something fluid, only a verb, instead of a noun with consistent attributes.

We want to believe that God *expresses* love, but scripture goes further than that, telling us that God *is* love. His love is not separate from His being and His presence. No God, no love. Thus without that real practice and presence of supernatural agape love in our lives, we do not know or have God. For 1 John 4:16 says *"And 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."*

13:1 *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

The members of the Corinthian church had been struggling for position within the body of believers. It seems each believed his or her personal gifting was the most important, and he/she individually was the top member.

Paul has already spoken in length concerning spiritual gifts and their importance. He stated clearly that all the gifts were crucial to the whole and no one was more important than another. Now he goes a step further into this discourse by emphasizing the uselessness of all such gifts if they are not backed up by love. Again we must understand that such does not mean *man's* version of love, but *God's* version.

Paul begins with an exhortation to those who exercised the gift of other tongues. Those in the early church believed that such a manifestation of unknown tongues was the language of angels. This sounds quite grand. Paul declares that such a gift matters little if it doesn't come wrapped in love. It may sound exotic or even lofty, but unless it is melded with love, it is just noise. Sadly, much of the exercise of tongues in the greater church has become just that, *noise*. A man's oratory and command of the vernacular may generate admiration, but only love can move the heart of men.

13:2 *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.*

Love must be also sovereign in our intellect, not merely a feeling or emotional response. Paul emphasizes this aspect of agape love in verse 2. The things he listed here are to be possessed in our head and being, and distinct from our sentimentalities. The prophecies...the power to declare the things of God, interpret life, and bring the word of God to bear upon earth. Mysteries...the discernment of spiritual things. Knowledge...the intelligence of truth and understanding. And faith...the firmness of belief that expresses itself through endurance.

All of these gifts were listed in Paul's teaching concerning gifts in chapter twelve. Paul however was precise in his choice of wording here. Once again, let us note that the word he chose for the love we are to seek is agape. This is perfect love. This is not man's idea of love, but rather that which emanates from our Creator and Father. This is a critical aspect to this passage as well as the truth that Paul is attempting to pass on to us.

Many "good" people will attempt to love, but with man's version of love, not God's. It may *seem* to be the same thing. However if we fail to understand the fullness of *God* love, we will be apt to replace God's perfect love with a poor stand-in version. Unfortunately, this is often the case. We attempt Christian love with a human version of it, and end up with less than exemplary results, to say the least.

Our version is often far from God's, even though we may have the best intentions. The reality, though, is that we like our version better. Our version of love has no pain, discipline, or responsibility. Our version is designed to always feel good, and requires nothing in response. It is a child's version of love. A version that provides total freedom, is mostly based on *receiving*, and is emotionally-based. It is vastly different from adult love, parental love, which is the nearest comparison we have to *agape*. If we insert the word "agape" in place of the English word "love" in the text, we get clarity.

The reality is, all of these gifts can be exercised in selfishness. No matter how prolific a man is in any of them, without love, the scripture says they are nothing. Like the church of Ephesus in Revelation...they had the big Mo going, but they lacked love. So all of those great things they were doing didn't matter.

13:3 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.

We can practice the *action* of love on a human level, feeding the poor, living in self-sacrifice, doing all sorts of "good and righteous acts." But unless our love is agape, our earthly acts, while perhaps kind, are not necessarily God's design. Often, they are not. In fact, Paul says such profits me nothing. Often people will practice a plethora of charitable acts that are essentially motivated by such aspects as fear, guilt, or an attempt at spiritual atonement.

13:4-7 Love suffers long [and] is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul presents here in these verses a short list of agape love manifested. *How* this "God love" is to be practiced and evidences that it *is* indeed God love. The church in Corinth...*and so often we ourselves that wear the mantle of Christianity*, actually live out the direct opposite of this description. We are impatient, discontent, unkind, envious of others, proud, ill-mannered, selfish, self-centered, short-tempered, resentful, joyful at others failures, and judgmental.

The word 'charity' in the King James is an unfortunate interpretation. The word is agape, God's perfect love.

Agape suffers long, is patient, and is kind. It does not envy. Agape does not parade itself; it's not arrogant (puffed up). It does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, and thinks no evil. It does not rejoice in evil, but rejoices in truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and eminently endures.

“Endureth all things.” this is a military term that means to sustain the assaults of an enemy. God love, *agape* love, stands the test of time and survives the attacks of Satan. Man's love makes no such promise. A most can claim no such attribute in their lives.

13:8-10 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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Agape “never fails.” That's how you can tell just what kind of love you are dealing with. That brief statement... “Love never fails,” is not only the heart of this chapter, but the whole of the letter to the Corinthian church. If you eventually stopped loving, then your love ceased and you have failed. You have failed because you were not practicing the Love that is God. There is one factor above all others that demonstrates unmistakably who is a Christian and who is not, and it is “unceasing love.”

Man's love, *sadly*, is imperfect and flawed. It is emotionally-based and therefore often amiss. It is self-centered and self-serving. It indeed fulfills the old adage, “Love is blind.” So often even when we think we are doing good, we can blindly be causing a world of hurt. Therefore trying to love with the wrong love, we can actually be going *against* the will and plan of God!

So must ask ourselves: Is our love succeeding? Take a look around. Does your version of love bear fruit for the kingdom? Fruit that remains? (John 15:16) Do lives change?

Many folks will attempt to make this passage speak of an early demise of the gifts of prophecy and tongues. Please note though, that it says such things will pass upon the “coming of that which is perfect.” The perfect is no doubt in reference to the second coming of Christ. I know of no other “perfect” on this planet. Unless knowledge also went away along with tongues and prophecy, then time is still on our side.

The Greek word for perfect is telos. Considering the way the New Testament uses telos in other passages, this certainly seems to be speaking about the coming of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:8; 15:24; James 5:11; Revelation 20:5, 7; 21:6; 22:13). (Guzik) Our love, our reality, will indeed pass away. It is God's love, agape love, that will and does fulfill. Until our Perfect returns, **our** perfect manifestation is agape love.

13:11 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.

Again we see the idea of childlike attitudes being manifested. The earthly love we try to pass off as Christian love is often one of the childish things we hold onto with white knuckles.

Paul is calling the Corinthian believers to a new level of maturity. It's only in maturity...*adult Christianity*, that we can practice the things Paul speaks about in this chapter. He's calling them to a spiritual adulthood they had apparently consciously avoided, as many of us do today.

Paul was giving them a reality check. All of the gifts they regarded so highly were going to pass away.

Those gifts were not an end or a fulfillment, rather a *means to an end*. *Christ* was the center, not *them*, not the *gifts* they were focused upon.

13:12-13 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. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these [is] love.

The manifestation we experience of these gifts is, as in Corinth, merely the dim reflection of the perfect to come. A passage like the one that precedes this verse cannot mean the completion on the canon of scripture or any other such thing as many see this text. Can we say today that we no longer “see dimly” the reality of all of God’s truth? Is it all crystal clear, this revelation of Christ and His power on this earth? It isn’t to me.

No, we all still “see dimly.” When Christ returns, I will know all just as clearly as He knows me. The gifts, all the gifts are still here, still active, still making us a body of Christ. He didn’t carry on about all of this for the past two chapters to tell us now that they are gone.

The greatest of these gifts is agape love. Remember, God *is* love. (agape) Agape love is God’s present power on this earth and the proof that we are redeemed and that He lives within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is *God’s* love, not our version. In the church and Christian operations, we need to put away fruitless counterfeits and embrace the real thing; God and His *agape love*.

A carnal church, a divided church, a worldly church, an indulgent church, a compromising church, can never effectively proclaim the gospel. Such will never fulfill it’s mission. We may have all the right theology and convictions, but unless they affect our behavior, then it is all empty and meaningless. This spirit today threatens to engulf the whole generation...the whole Christian church, until we have no testimony left. Agape love is empty and worthless without sacrifice. Unless we are so willing, then we will never know or experience this kind of love.