

# First Corinthians 13

## **Introduction:**

1. This chapter is found right in the middle of Paul's three chapters of instructions for the right use of spiritual gifts (12-14).
2. Its location is not an accident, and it should greatly affect its interpretation, for the context will give us the overall lesson.
3. The church at Corinth had major problems with division (1:10; 11:18; 12:25), strife (1:11; 3:3), and glorying in their spiritual gifts (1:4-7; 8:1; 12:12-30; 14:12,26). Paul included this instruction about love to correct these deficiencies.
4. He used chapter 12 to teach the importance of unity, and he used chapter 14 to teach the specific regulations for the gifts.
5. It is the teaching of love as the more excellent way of serving Christ Paul used here to correct selfish, envious conduct.
6. At the conclusion of chapter 12, Paul gloriously appealed to the Corinthians to fervently desire better spiritual gifts and to pursue a way of serving Christ that was better than any spiritual gift, including the gift of being an apostle (12:31)!
7. For a detailed explanation and practical application of the definition of love, see the sermon outline link at the bottom.
8. We will learn that love is superior to spiritual gifts by nature (1-3), by definition (4-7), and by duration (8-13).

## **Outline of Chapter 13:**

1. Spiritual gifts without love are worthless (1-3)
2. Defined love is the greatest relational grace (4-7)
3. Love is the enduring grace for all to seek (8-13)

### 13:1 **Speaking in tongues without loving one another is nothing but a very irritating noise.**

- A. The tongues of men are the various languages of mankind (Gen 10:20; John 5:2; Acts 2:5-8).
- B. The tongues of angels is hyperbole, exaggerating the gift of tongues to exalt love more.
  1. Remember, tongues are a specific language, not merely babbling or gibberish of any sort.
  2. Hyperbole is an obvious exaggeration that the reader understands to make a strong point.
  3. There is no Bible basis for a specific language of angels that could be spoken by men.
  4. The tongues of angels would not be a spiritual gift, for it would not edify or confirm men.
  5. This hyperbole cannot justify barbarian babbling and gibberish of today's false tongues.
  6. Charismatics appeal to this verse to justify their abuse of the lowest gift with gibberish.
- C. Paul began with tongues, because the church at Corinth was overly infatuated with this gift.
  1. Paul will deal with tongues in detail in the next chapter, though ranking it last (12:28).
  2. Let God be true: Paul ranked the gift of tongues last, even after the gifts of "helps."
  3. The emphasis is fitting, since American Charismatics in 2004 are still infatuated with it.
- D. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another, as carefully defined (13:4-7).
  1. The truest measure of the grace of God is to love the brethren (John 13:35; I John 4:7).
  2. The love here is not the love of God, but rather the love of saints, which is your calling.
- E. Any gift of tongues, no matter how incredibly glorious, was an irritating noise without love.
  1. By this comparison, Paul elevated brother love over the gift of choice of the Corinthians.
  2. Neither God nor men care what spiritual gift you have, if you cannot love other saints.
  3. Spiritual gifts were given to benefit others, but what benefit are they from selfish people?
- F. Sounding brass might be a military bugle, and a tinkling cymbal is merely another vain noise.

### 13:2 **Prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, and faith without loving one another leaves a man nothing.**

- A. The gift of prophecy was the ability to reveal the will of God by direct inspiration (14:29-32).
- B. The gift of wisdom was the ability to understand all mysteries by direct inspiration (12:8).
- C. The gift of knowledge was the ability to know things of God by direct inspiration (12:8).
- D. The gift of faith was the special ability to believe God for great future miracles (12:9).
- E. These gifts are exaggerated beyond their reality to make a greater appeal for charity.
  1. The gift of prophecy did not include total knowledge on any subject (13:9; 14:29-32).
  2. Faith to move mountains is another hyperbole, and it is figurative (Matt 17:20; 21:21).
- F. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another, as carefully defined (13:4-7).
- G. Any of the revelatory gifts, no matter how extensive, were worthless for a man without love.

1. Though the church was built on the prophets, lacking love reduced them to nothing.
  2. The revelatory gifts were very important and useful in communicating God's will.
- H. A church that prides itself on doctrine without love is nothing (Acts 2:42-47; I Cor 8:1-3).

13:3 **Even charitable giving and martyrdom without loving one another is totally profitless.**

- A. The incredible contrast between outward charity and the true love of others is shown here.
  1. Men can easily have false motives for outward actions (Ps 144:7-8; Pr 21:4; 26:24-26).
  2. Pulling money out of your wallet for another person is much easier than loving them.
  3. Putting up with irritating idiosyncrasies and offensive words and conduct is much harder.
- B. Again, extreme descriptions are made of giving and suffering to make a great appeal for love.
  1. We might think giving your goods to feed the poor is a glorious act of Christian charity.
  2. We might think giving your body to fire, as a martyr, is a great act of Christian devotion.
- C. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another, as carefully defined (13:4-7).
- D. Any of these great acts of external giving and suffering are worthless without practical love.
- E. God is not pleased by a man giving much money and dying as a martyr, if he cannot love.

13:4 **God's inspired definition of love is the most perfect cure for all relational problems.**

- A. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another in godly human relationships.
- B. Love will suffer, enduring the pain of irritations and offences by its object, for a long time.
- C. Love is benevolent, courteous, and good in all its thoughts and actions toward its object.
- D. Love does not envy another person for superior advantages of abilities or circumstances.
- E. Love does not put itself forward in the presence of others due to any presumed superiority.
- F. Love does not have a puffed mental arrogance or haughtiness about presumed superiority.
- G. For a detailed explanation and practical application of these phrases, see the outline below

13:5 **God's inspired definition of love is the most perfect cure for all relational problems.**

- A. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another in godly human relationships.
- B. Love always acts in a courteous, conventional, decorous, and appropriate way at all times.
- C. Love is not selfish in pursuing its own ambitions and preferences over those of others.
- D. Love does not get offended or angry with others easily, no matter what the offences by them.
- E. Love thinks the best of others' actions and does not evilly surmise that they intended wrong.
- F. For a detailed explanation and practical application of these phrases, see the outline below.

13:6 **God's inspired definition of love is the most perfect cure for all relational problems.**

- A. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another in godly human relationships.
- B. Love is grieved when it sees its object in error and does all it can to help get them right again.
- C. Love is happy when it sees its object doing everything right and growing in righteousness.
- D. The depravity of the soul is seen at internal gloating at the sins and punishment of others.
- E. For a detailed explanation and practical application of these phrases, see the outline below.

13:7 **God's inspired definition of love is the most perfect cure for all relational problems.**

- A. Charity in this chapter is practical love one toward another in godly human relationships.
- B. Love bears all the burdens and offences of others without getting angry or bitter at them.
- C. Love believes the best about others, even when there is suspicion of insincerity or evil.
- D. Love hopes the best about others, even when there is not enough evidence to believe them.
- E. Love endures repeated irritations and offences of others and does not wear out and give up.
- F. For a detailed explanation and practical application of these phrases, see the outline below.
- G. You have just read the finest sentence in any language about the greatest subject of all.

13:8 **Love will endure forever, though the spiritual gifts at Corinth were soon to disappear.**

- A. The emphasis on love here is not that it always works, but rather that it will always be in use.
  - 1. The “never faileth” of charity is contrasted to prophecies failing, tongues ceasing, and knowledge vanishing away. We know Paul is arguing about the duration of charity!
  - 2. Faith, hope, and charity abide; they will not fail, as the spiritual gifts will all fail (13:13).
- B. Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge were to come to an end, which was in contrast to love.
  - 1. Prophecies would not fail in the sense of predictions not coming to pass as foretold, for the prophecies of every prophet of God always came to pass without exception.
  - 2. Prophecies would fail in the sense of the temporary gift of prophecy ending (14:29-32).
  - 3. Speaking in tongues, or foreign languages, as a supernatural sign gift would also end.
  - 4. Knowledge vanishing away was not in the sense of all men becoming senile or ignorant, but rather the temporary gift of supernatural knowledge would come to an end (12:8).
  - 5. The gifts Corinth loved were only temporary; the charity that God loved was permanent.
- C. The apostolic sign gifts and revelatory gifts were temporary gifts to help build the church.
  - 1. God promised by covenant to do marvelous things in Israel for 40 years (Micah 7:14-20).
  - 2. God gave the gifts to the apostles and their hearers, which was fulfilled (Mark 16:17-20).
  - 3. The three gifts mentioned are simply examples of all the miraculous gifts going away.
  - 4. Paul lost his power to heal by the time he wrote his epistles to Timothy (I Tim 5:23); he left a minister sick (II Tim 4:20), though he had once used handkerchiefs (Acts 19:12).
  - 5. Paul taught Timothy to study, which was not necessary, if wisdom and knowledge stayed.
  - 6. In the three Pastoral Epistles there is not a word about any miraculous gifts of any kind.
  - 7. There have not been any consistent spiritual gifts since 70AD provable by any church.
  - 8. The gifts claimed by Charismatics are hilarious caricatures of the power of the apostles.
  - 9. [See the sermon outline defining, denying, and defying Charismatic religion.](#)

13:9 **The temporary gifts of knowledge and prophecy were only imperfect and partial gifts.**

- A. The gift of knowledge did not reveal everything – they only had a word of knowledge (12:8).
- B. They only had part of the knowledge necessary for edifying and instructing the church.
- C. Those with the gift of prophecy could only reveal to the church part of God’s will for them.
- D. These gifts were quite limited to any individual, so cooperation was necessary (14:29-32).
- E. Paul said his gifts were imperfect by appealing to hypothetically perfect knowledge (13:2).
- F. Paul is reminding the saints at Corinth that the gifts they exalted were inferior, partial gifts.
- G. Why did Paul write epistles to churches, even Corinth? The gifts were not nearly enough.

13:10 **Perfect knowledge and prophecy would end the partial gifts of knowledge and prophecy.**

- A. The perfect thing that was coming was contrasted to the things that were in part – knowledge and prophecy (13:9-10). Compare the parallelism of the two occurrences of “that.”
- B. The complete and inspired Scriptures of the New Testament are “that which is perfect.”
  - 1. David called the inspired Old Testament of God perfect, but we need the New (Ps 19:7).
  - 2. Paul said Scripture was sufficient to perfect Timothy as a N.T. minister (II Tim 3:16-17).
  - 3. James called it the perfect law of liberty, which had to be the New Testament (Jas 1:25).
  - 4. Peter called the Scriptures “more sure” than God’s voice from heaven (II Peter 1:16-21).
  - 5. The completion of the New Testament meant the end of the apostles and their signs, for the witnesses of the risen Lord Jesus Christ had documented their witness in writing!
  - 6. Paul is dealing particularly with revelatory gifts – knowledge and prophecy – which would no longer be needed due to the finished revelation of Scripture.
  - 7. Any man coming short of perfection has failed the Bible; the Bible has not failed him.
- C. The canon of the New Testament Scripture was rapidly coming together easily before 70AD.

1. It is a Catholic lie the canon was not finalized until the Council of Carthage (397AD), just as they lie about everything else to take authority from the apostles (I Tim 4:1-3).
2. Peter assumed his readers knew which of Paul's epistles were Scripture (II Pet 3:15-16).
3. Paul wrote Timothy and quoted Luke as Scripture (I Timothy 5:18 cp Luke 10:7).
4. Paul wrote Timothy, assuming he had Scripture to perfect his ministry (II Tim 3:15-17).
5. Paul told Timothy to preach the word (II Tim 4:2), which had to be the N.T. (II Cor 3:6).
6. Jude called for earnest defense of the faith, which had already been delivered (Jude 1:3)?

13:11 **The time of reformation would end and lead the New Testament churches to maturity.**

- A. To understand this verse, it must be fully grasped on a purely human and personal basis first.
- B. Paul's analogy simply describes the maturation process of a human male from child to man.
- C. The church was in its early development stage of spiritual gifts; they would grow past them!
- D. The time of reformation depending on imperfect gifts was a childish state of the church.
- E. The arrival of the canon of Scripture and the ending of temporary gifts would be maturity.
- F. The Corinthians were an immature church based on Paul calling them children (3:1; 14:20).
- G. True spiritual maturity would recognize charity as being inherently more valuable than gifts.

13:12 **The arrival of a complete New Testament would provide much better comprehension.**

- A. Here is another analogy that should first be understood naturally – dark glass or face to face.
- B. The issue in this verse is not what they would see, but rather how they would see. Grasp this!
- C. Seeing through a glass darkly was the temporary inferiority of the imparted gifts of the Spirit.
- D. Neither the context nor this verse has anything to do with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.
- E. It does not say we will see Him face to face, but rather we will be able to see face to face.
- F. If the partial gifts remain until the Second Coming, then they would be here, but they are not.
- G. Of course, any man's knowledge will only be true to the extent of his application to study it.
- H. The partial gifts of prophecy and knowledge, which Paul refers to again, have not remained for 2000 years. They went away before 70AD, when the sign-seeking Jews were destroyed.
- I. There is a definite timeframe in the mind of Paul, for he again used "now" and "then."

13:13 **Faith, hope, and love are all abiding graces superior to spiritual gifts, but love is greatest.**

- A. In contrast to the temporary nature of spiritual gifts, the graces of faith, hope, and love abide.
- B. Faith and hope last all this life, but they will not work in heaven (Hebrews 11:1; Rom 8:24).
- C. Though faith and hope abide much longer than spiritual gifts, they are very inferior to love.
- D. Love will mark the conduct of saints in heaven as much as it ought to mark them now.

**Conclusion:**

1. There is no spiritual gift in the early church or in the church today that is equal to loving the brethren rightly.
2. The definition of love given in this chapter will optimize every marriage, every family, and every church.
3. The Charismatic movement is wrong from numerous aspects, but for sure their spiritual gifts ended long ago.
4. The Word of God you have is a very precious thing – the perfect revelation of God: make sure you read it.

**Additional study:**

1. [The Definition of Love: An exposition of I Corinthians 13:4-7.](#)
2. Sermon outline, Love Is the Greatest.
3. Sermon outline, Miscellaneous Thoughts on Love.
4. Sermon outline, Getting Along with Others.
5. [Sermon outline, Charismatic Religion.](#)
6. [Corroborating outline from the Church of Christ.](#)