

| 1 Corinthians |  
Week 21 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

## Biblical Context

First Corinthians 13 is one of the most revered passages of the Bible. It is referred to as the “love chapter” and is often used in modern contexts to represent some dynamic nuances of our English word, “love.” This is often attempted by taking the chapter out of its biblical context and using it to fit our modern contexts and usage. While there are truths to glean which are applicable in individual relationships, the passage is “primarily about living in Christian community in a way that glorifies God, and that is by learning to treat other members of Christ’s body the way God has treated us—with self-sacrificing, other-oriented love.”<sup>1</sup> The word, *love*, here is the Greek word ἀγάπη (*agape*, *a-GA-pay*) and is best understood as self-sacrificial and unconditional love.<sup>2</sup> It is important that this chapter is read with the weight of its original biblical and historical context with the situation in Corinth. In chapter 12, Paul addresses the Corinthians’ imbalanced pursuit of spiritual gifts. Many were favoring one gift over another, some were looking down on others while others were looking down on themselves. He is writing to a church that is divided, imbalanced, and missing this crucial aspect of love.<sup>3</sup> In the context of spiritual gifts (chs. 12 & 14), Paul sets the stage for the *necessity* of love (13:1-3), then the *character* of love (13:4-7), and finally the *permanence* of love (13:8-13).<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 13 begins with the juxtaposition of spiritual gifts and the “more excellent way” of *agape* (1 Cor 12:31b), using himself as an example. Having just advocated for the exhibition of diverse giftedness in the body of Christ, Paul now shows their futility when missing the crucial element. For the Corinthians, to be *spiritual people* meant to operate in the gifts, primarily speaking in tongues; for Paul, it meant to walk in love and build up the church. Even if Paul would speak in the lofty language of humans or the transcendent language of heaven, if he lacked unconditional love, both intelligible and unintelligible words would be as harsh, clanging cymbals (13:1).<sup>5</sup> This does not negate the gift, rather emphasizes the necessity of *agape*. Even if Paul were to speak prophetic words (which build up, encourage, and console; cf. 14:3), and understand all mysteries, all knowledge, and have all wonder working faith (12:8-10), or any of the gifts—if he lacked *agape*, he would be nothing (13:2).<sup>6</sup> “Possession of *charismata* [gifts] is not the sign of the Spirit; loving others as Christ loved us is.”<sup>7</sup> Even if Paul gave away his possessions (cf. Matt 19:16-22), or gave himself up as a martyr (cf. 16:24-25; Dan 3), if he lacked unconditional love, he would ultimately gain nothing.<sup>8</sup> Paul is not speaking against gifts, generosity, or sacrifices, but is rather “presenting the absolute supremacy and necessity of love if one is to be a follower of Christ at all.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 619.

<sup>2</sup> While we use the word “love” somewhat loosely in English, Greek has different words to communicate. The word *στοργή* (*storgē*) is a fondness. The word *φιλία* (*philia*) is love between friends. The word *ἔρως* (*erōs*) is a more passionate type of love. The word *ἀγάπη* (*agape*) conveys a love that is enduring, sacrificial, committed. It is the God type of love that should be exhibited by Christians. In the Septuagint (LXX), it is used to represent the Hebrew word *אהבה* (*ahava*) and its verbal form (*אגאפא*, *agapaō*) is used to represent *אהב* (*ahav*). This is the love with which we are to love God and love our neighbor (Lev 19:18; Deut 6:4). In Paul’s writings, this is the love God has for us, and love we should have for one another. Love (*agape*) is to actively seek the benefit of someone else. In the Old Testament, this concept is to desire “shalom” (peace, wholeness, safety, etc.) for someone else.

<sup>3</sup> While the Corinthians consider themselves “spiritual,” they also tolerated sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, and divisions. They claimed to be wise, but walked in folly. They claimed to have knowledge but revealed their ignorance. Though many of them were active in God-given gifts, they were missing the key component.

<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 696.

<sup>5</sup> The Corinthians, believing themselves to be *spiritual*, and having an “over realized eschatology” (believing the kingdom of God had already come), believed that speaking in tongues was speaking the tongues of angels, or the language of heaven. Paul does not argue this point, but refers to them as “tongues of angels” (1 Cor 13:1), and “mysteries in the Spirit” (14:2). Cymbals (*κῦμβαλον*, *kumbalon*) was an instrument associated with pagan cults. The Corinthians were operating as “spirit people” with little to no concern for building the Christian community. To speak in tongues without a love and desire for the church to be built up “is not merely to speak unintelligible words; it makes one sound like the empty, hollow noises of pagan worship.” Fee, 701.

<sup>6</sup> Paul never speaks down about the gifts of God, but rather advocates for gifted diversity in the body so long as the motive is out of love and building up the church. Paul advocated for speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:5, 13, 18, 39b), but saw the higher value of prophecy (14:1, 4b, 5b, 19, 39a) and was a steward of the mysteries of God (4:1; cf 14:2b). Even so, operating fully in the gifts to build up the church but lacking love means nothing.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, 702

<sup>8</sup> Giving away possessions and giving to the poor was one of the requirements Jesus had set out for obtaining eternal life (in addition to obeying the law perfectly). Jesus also called us to lose our life for his sake. Thus, even the most noble deeds, if performed without the motivation of unconditional love, it meaningless.

<sup>9</sup> Fee, 704.

Paul goes beyond the gifts and the necessity of love. The *character* of love (1 Cor 13:4-7) contains both what love *is* (13:4a, 7) and what love is *not* (13:4b-6). In 13:4a, Paul lists both passive and active responses of love toward another—love is patient and kind.<sup>10</sup> These elements are seen in mercy (not receiving what one deserves) and grace (receiving what one does not deserve). Paul follows this by listing what love is *not*, which is precisely how the Corinthians were behaving. The Corinthians had envy/jealousy (ζηλώω, *zeloō*) and were boastful (περπερεύομαι, *perperpeuomai*).<sup>11</sup> The Corinthians had become arrogant (φυσιώω, *phusioō*; cf. 4:18, 19; 5:2; 8:1), behaved shamefully (5:1-2; 6:5; 11:22). They were seeking their own good, ignoring their neighbor (10:24, 33; cf. Phil 2:4). Furthermore, the one who loves is not easily irritated or resentful (οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν, *ou logidzetai to kakon*, lit. “does not tally the evil”; 1 Cor 13:5; cf. 2 Cor 5:19). It does not rejoice at unrighteousness (ἀδικία, *adikia*) but rejoices with the truth (ἀλήθεια, *aletheia*; 13:6; cf. 5:8). In 13:7, Paul forms a chiasm<sup>12</sup> with always bearing (στέγω, *stegō*) and enduring (ὑπομένω, *hupomenō*) relating to present circumstances, while always believing (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*) and hoping (ἐλπίζω, *elpidzō*) are looking to God and the future.<sup>13</sup> The Corinthians were hyper-focused on the spiritual but lacking in love. Believing they have arrived both spiritually and eschatologically, Paul frames love in light of the spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts (*charismata*) are to build up the church and glorify God in the present.

*Agape*, however, never ends—it should characterize Christians in the present and also forever. The heart of Paul’s argument in 13:8b-12 is the discussion of spiritual gifts and for their temporal nature.<sup>14</sup> Against the backdrop of his highlight of the necessity, character, and permanence of *agape*, Paul presents three spiritual gifts—prophecy (Paul’s preferred gift; cf. 1 Cor 14), tongues, and knowledge (the Corinthians’ preferred gifts; 13:8). Contrasted with the enduring nature of *agape*, Paul indicates that spiritual gifts will eventually pass away (καταργέω, *katargeō*), because they belong merely to the present age for the building up of the church. He indicates that what we supernaturally know and prophesy “in part” (ἐκ μέρος, *ek meros*), in this current age (13:9). However, when the perfect (τέλειος, *teleios*, “mature,” “full grown,” “complete”) comes, that which is done in part (the spiritual gifts) will pass away (*katargeō*; 13:10). The gifts pertain to the building up of the church as it “awaits the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:7). Thus, the *perfect* that will make gifts pass away upon its arrival is Jesus, when the church will be built up completely.<sup>15</sup> Paul relates the temporal present to being an immature child (13:11). The childish ways is an analogy for investing all efforts into the temporal present. Maturity and perfection (when the kingdom is fully come) negates the need for the gifts. Paul’s next analogy speaks of the temporal present (now) as a dim mirror, a mere reflection of reality (13:12).<sup>16</sup> But in the kingdom come (then) we will see as face to face. The gifts are a reflection of the kingdom but is nothing compared to the kingdom, itself. The true reflection of the kingdom is operating, in all things, in unconditional love, *agape*. In contrast to the “for the present” spiritual gifts, Paul ends this section by presenting the three words that embrace the whole of Christian existence, which is future oriented—faith (πίστις, *pistis*), hope (ἐλπίς, *elpis*), and love (*agape*). Faith trusts in God and the sufficiency of the cross for salvation. Hope looks toward the future which has been secured by Christ. Faith and hope will be fully realized at the revealing of Jesus and thus have an end in view. *Agape* never ends, never fails. In this present age, faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest is love.

## Connection and Application

Believing they were spiritual people experiencing the kingdom come, the Corinthians were wrongly focused on the temporal present. Paul reveals that spiritual maturity is marked not by pursuing self-glorifying giftedness but by pursuing self-sacrificial love—*agape*. This is only possible through Christ’s *agape* for us first. Thus, we should hasten to recognize how Christ has loved us. As a result, we walk in expression of that same love.

<sup>10</sup> The word for *patient* (μακροθυμέω, *makrothumeō*) carries the weight of bearing up under, or putting up with, without complaint, not merely waiting. The word for *kind* (χρηστεύομαι, *chresteuomai*) is not mere tolerance, but an active kindness toward another person.

<sup>11</sup> The Corinthians showed envy or jealousy for what they did not have that someone else did. This shows up in 1 Cor 3:3. In 12:15-16, Paul addresses the parts of the body who said, “Because I am not \_\_\_\_\_, I do not belong to the body.” They also showed boasting or pride in some of the gifts they had. In 12:21, Paul addresses the “showy gifts,” or parts of the body who essentially said, “Because you are not \_\_\_\_\_, you do not belong to the body.”

<sup>12</sup> *Chiasm* is a rhetorical or literary device where words or concepts are repeated in reverse order, e.g. ABBA.

<sup>13</sup> Fee, 709.

<sup>14</sup> This is against the background of the Corinthians’ over realized eschatology, and that speaking in tongues identified them as people of the Spirit.

<sup>15</sup> The goal is that Christians are sanctified “completely (όλοτελής, *holoteles*, “wholly perfect”)...at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes 5:23).

<sup>16</sup> Paul utilizes aspects of Corinthian culture. Corinth was famous as the producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity. Fee, 718.