

Spiritual Gifts, Part 3 (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:3)

Pursuing the Gifts Through Love

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Introduction

1. A brief refresher
 - a. The purpose of the gifts is to build the body of Christ, the church, and to enable Christ's servants to fulfill the purpose of their individual callings.
 - b. The distribution of the higher or miraculous gifts is varied according to the will of the Holy Spirit, not the will of believers desiring them. No believer has all higher gifts, and some have none.
 - c. Paul lays out five foundational principles by which he addresses the use and misuse of higher or miraculous gifts.
 - 1) The Corinthian church was troubled by a series of errors in doctrine and practice, one of which was the tendency to Christianize pagan practices (12:1–3).
 - 2) The variety of gifts distributed throughout the body are to achieve a common benefit within the body (12:3–11).
 - 3) The body is composed of many members who function as one unit according to God's design (12:12–27).
 - 4) God has appointed two kinds of gifts: offices for establishing and building the church and empowering gifts for strengthening, maintaining, and enabling the church's witness in the world (12:28–31).
 - 5) Paul argues that all gifts and personal sacrifices are worthless outside the framework of supernatural love, our discussion for today (13:1–13).
2. The major problem with the Corinthian church was its focus on certain miraculous gifts—sensational gifts that created personal excitement, causing abuse of the gifts and creating disunity in the body. Satan introduces false gifts and lying wonders to deceive many in order to divide the church.
 - a. Paul seeks to correct this error in four steps: (1) establishing the corporate nature of the church for properly using spiritual gifts; (2) pointing to a superior way to “pursue higher gifts” through a regulating principle; (3) arguing for the superiority of prophecy over tongues; (4) maintaining proper order of worship to curb the misuse of gifts.
 - b. Paul transitions from stage one by declaring: *“Be zealous for the higher or greater [megas] gifts [charisma], but I will show you a beyond all measure surpassingly excellent way”* (1 Corinthians 12:31). Chapter 13 is a jewel of Scripture. As one writer expressed:

Through the centuries the passage has been acclaimed as incomparable. Beautiful in its brevity, dignity, simplicity; beautiful in its orderly progressiveness, nobility of thought, exquisite phraseology; it is all of this and far more. Who can begin to pay worthy eulogy.

- c. Verse 31 forms the thesis statement: *agape* regulates the surpassingly excellent way to seek the higher gifts. Paul gives three reasons to demonstrate his thesis: (1) without *agape* any pursuit or sacrifice is worthless; (2) the qualities of *agape* make it indispensable; (3) *agape* alone is permanent.

I. Love Identified

1. The nature of *agape*

- a. *Agape* love is not *doing*; it is a personal attribute. One is either loving or selfish. No one can alter this essential aspect of his being.

There may be an *altruism* natural in unregenerate humans, although damaged by sin, because humans were originally created in God's image. Nevertheless, it will be greatly affected by selfishness, particularly when it comes to being recognized and appreciated.

- 1) *Agape* is an attribute—Scripture declares that *God is love* (1 John 4:7, 8, 16).

It does not say, God loves—that He is a loving person or that He shows love—but that He *is* love. He would not be God if He were not love.

- 2) However, *agape* love must manifest by serving. *Agape*, by virtue of its very nature, must be expressed in service to God.

Agape is like shining is to the sun, burning is to fire, or wet is to water. Because God is love, Jesus was given to manifest love in all that He did (John 13:1). Because believers bear the image of Christ (Romans 8:29), Scripture requires that the obedience of believers be done *in love* (Ephesians 3:17; 4:2, 15, 16; 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 5:13).

- b. Service without *agape* is *unacceptable*.

True service must be rendered to God, not men. Love motivates believers to obey the will of God, and nothing less is of any value. *Agape* is not love if it is not expressed in selfless service to God. Since we cannot serve God directly, we serve Him by serving His creatures.

2. *Agape* illustrated (1 John 3:1, 2)

- a. There are three facets of love: *benevolence*, *beneficence*, and *complacence* (John Flavel [1628–1691]).

Benevolence is God's desire to do good to the object of His choice. *Beneficence* is benevolence in effect as worked out in God's purpose. *Complacence* is the satisfaction and delight that God experiences as He observes love's fruit (benefit).

- b. *Benevolence* is seen in the phrase, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us." Love's purpose is thus expressed, and the fruit is seen in "that we should be called the children of God."

- c. *Complacence* is seen in the term, "beloved" (v. 2), which also shows that love does discriminate because the Father loved "us" (believers) and not the world (v.1).

The Father did not withhold love for the world because the world would not respond to His love. *Agape* would not be *agape* if it functioned only where it was welcomed.

II. The Necessity of Love (vv. 1–3)

1. As compared to speaking in tongues (v. 1)

- a. Paul begins his discussion of the “*more excellent way*” by negatively showing the value of service without *agape* as its motivating and driving force. He starts with what was closest to the heart of the Corinthians, speaking with tongues. In effect, this is the bottom rung of the ladder. It is that which is most desired to elevate the individual but has the least value to the church.
 - b. The first verse has caused some discussion. Are there different kinds of tongues (languages), one kind for humans and another for angels? Even if one could speak with an angelic language, such speaking without love would make it worthless service.
 - c. The conclusion is clear: without love, speaking in tongues has no more value than the noisy clanging of gong and cymbal.
2. As compared to powerful service to the body (v. 2)
- a. Paul continues by elevating the discussion to those areas of service that would truly benefit the body: *prophecy*, *understanding of mysteries*, *all knowledge*, and the kind of *faith* that removes mountains.
 - b. However, Paul is exaggerating for effect. The gifts he mentions, with the exception of prophecy, were extraordinary, extreme, and seldom evidenced in any body of Christ. *Prophecy* relates to the clear and powerful Spirit-produced supernatural declaration of the Word of God. *Understanding mysteries* is also a work of the Spirit, opening truth to believers that is not easily discerned from the Word. *Mysteries* are previously unexplained but Spirit-revealed truth. *All knowledge* is the complete understanding of revealed truth.
 - c. What value are these gifts to the servant without love? Nothing!
3. As compared to extreme sacrifices
- a. The final step upward in the service of the body is self-sacrifice. Again, few believers ever find themselves in the situations that Paul describes, but when such sacrifices are made, we tend to hold those who make them in very high regard.
 - b. Paul echoes the Lord’s command to the rich young man (Matthew 19:21; Luke 14:33), applying it to all believers. Early Christians were sacrificial in meeting the needs of others (Acts 2:45; Galatians 2:10).
 - c. Again, Paul exaggerates the degree of self-sacrifice to drive his point home. It is not likely that one would voluntarily give his body to be burned. I disagree with commentators who argue that Paul is referring to a martyr’s death. Paul is speaking of one who offers his body to be burned. Without love, this extreme sacrifice produces nothing of value.

What Can We Take Away?

1. Do you desire higher gifts? What drives that desire? Is that desire driven by the need for personal fulfillment or recognition? Or is it love motivating a Spirit-driven desire to glorify God by obedience to His will?
2. Are you aware of Satan’s counterfeit miraculous signs and wonders? Are you able to distinguish the difference between true and false manifestations?
3. While the attribute of love is refreshed and the ability to serve in love is freed in the new birth, it is not immediately evident in its full operation. Our growth in spiritual life is the

gradual work of sanctification by the Holy Spirit. We recognize our need and go to our knees to plead for mercy and grace to change and become more like Jesus. We also watch out for each other and pray that we might all experience His powerful work in grace together. That builds unity.