

Study 17: 1st Corinthians Chapter 13

Introduction

Chapter 13 is one of the most widely quoted chapters in the entire bible. It is the great chapter of love. The context is about spiritual gifts and their application in the church – and of course the wider connection of relationships between brethren in the church. Chapter 13 he tells us that the spiritual gifts will be replaced with something else.

Body of the Study

The introduction to the issue

What about those without the gifts?

The true character of love

Contrast to the spiritual gifts

The gifts are partial

Something is going to be better

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *What are the practical implications for the Corinthian church, and also for us, of Chapter 13?*
- *How does Paul show that the bible concept of love is neither abstract nor sentimental? How does this concept of love differ from what is reflected in everyday life, or popular songs?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapters 14 in preparation for next week.

Notes for study 17: Chapter 13

Introduction

Chapter 13 is one of the most quoted chapters in the entire bible. It is the great chapter of love, and is often read at weddings. Whilst it is widely quoted, it is almost always quoted out of context. That is not to say that the things that it says about love (even in the context in which it is quoted) are not true.

But as we will see, the context is about spiritual gifts and their application in the church – and of course the wider connection of relationships between brethren in the church. Chapter 13 he tells us that the spiritual gifts will be replaced with something else.

Body of the Study

The introduction to the issue

The context of chapter 13 is set by the last verse of chapter 12 “...earnestly desire the best gifts, but yet I will show you a more excellent way...” (1:12:31). In chapter 12, Paul has just described the dysfunctional relationships between brethren that have been (apparently) caused by arguments about the miraculous gifts.

The problem was that those who had the gifts (and those with the best ones) were not considerate of those who had none, or had lesser gifts. It was exactly the same with the Lord’s Supper. In all of our relationships we need to have love as the binding force. It is true that we need to have love for God, as well as love for one another. If our love to God is true, then our love to our brethren will follow (1 Jn 2:9-10, 3:17, 4:11, 4:20-21).

Paul describes the current relationships in the context of the Corinthian problem. He talks about *speaking in tongues* (1:13:1), *the gift of prophecy* (1:13:2), *the word of knowledge* (1:13:2), and *the gift of faith* (1:13:2). But having the gifts don’t accomplish anything if we don’t have love for one another. Speaking in tongues without love is just making a noise – “...a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal...” - we make a noise but it doesn’t accomplish anything. Paul will deal with this further in the next chapter.

If the gift of knowledge was complete – so that we could “...understand all mysteries...” – without love it is worthless. And complete faith that would allow us to “...remove mountains...” without love is empty and accomplishes nothing (except for the poor farmer who wakes up one morning with a mountain in his back paddock where the pasture used to be!)

What about those without the gifts?

After discussing the misappropriation of the gifts by those who had them, Paul next discusses the problem in the context of those who don’t have them. He talks about the use of our *natural gifts*.

Even if we give all of our goods to feed the poor, it really doesn’t matter if we don’t display love to our brethren. Paul goes to extremes here to point out the issue. There are very few people who would give away everything that they had (and become poor themselves) in order to feed the poor. There are some examples of this in the world – but the point is that to do it without love is empty.

Likewise, in emptying ourselves – “...give our bodies to be burned...” also accomplishes nothing if we don’t have love. He doesn’t mean literally throwing ourselves on a fire as a means of sacrifice, but rather the idea of making such sacrifices in our lives, that our self-sacrifice is complete.

The true character of love

The true character of love is perfectly exemplified in the life of the Lord.

Is Patient	This is linked to the last quality (endurance)
Is kind	The first two qualities relate to God's patience and kindness towards us.
Not envious	Is not jealous of the gifts that someone else has
Is not boastful	Contrasted to the behaviour of the Corinthians
Is not proud	As some of the Corinthians (apparently) were about their gifts, to the detriment of others
Does not behave rudely	Ditto
Not self seeking	Some of the Corinthians were totally self centred to the detriment of their brethren
Not easily angered	Self control is a key to our behaviour
Does not think of evil (keeps no record of wrongs)	To keep a record of the wrongs done to us, and to think evil is the opposite of love. God (who is the essence of love) obliterates the wrongs that we have done.
Rejoices in the truth	Truth and love are bound together, just as God, love and truth are bound.
Bears all things	Endures wrongs without complaint, and often without divulging its needy condition.
Believes all things	Takes the highest view of circumstances and actions, not the darkest view.
Hopes all things (always hopeful)	It never loses its hope, (like the quality above, it looks to the future)
Endures all things	A stronger (military) term than "bears", which means to go to extreme endurance.
Love never fails	Love is complete, and is superlatively excellent in every circumstance.

A synonym (a different word that has the same or a similar meaning) can be substituted for a word in a sentence. This is one of the ways that we can learn to understand what a sentence means. Since we learn that God is love (1 Jn 4:8), then we can say that "...God is patient, kind, not envious, etc..." And since Jesus and God are one (Jn 17:11) we can say that "...Jesus is patient, kind, not envious, etc..."

Now, since christians are Jesus' disciples (learners) who try to emulate His character, then we should also be able to say that "...A christian is patient, kind, not envious, etc..." It is easy to say, but we all fall short of the true character to which we are called. That which was lacking was very evident in the behaviour of the Corinthians.

Contrast to the spiritual gifts

The overwhelming superior position of love is contrasted to the (then present) situation in Corinth. The spiritual gifts are of no comparison to a proper relationship between brethren. Paul picks three of the spiritual gifts as an example – prophecy – tongues – and knowledge.

These three might seem like some of the best gifts. But Paul says specifically that the prophecies are going to fail, that the tongues will cease, and that the knowledge will vanish away. Love is permanent in direct contrast to the temporary nature of the gifts. We might ask what it means for the tongues to cease, for the prophecies to fail, and for knowledge to vanish away. One possibility would be from the standpoint of the person who possessed the gifts – when he (or she) died, then his gift would also die. But that is not the context of Paul’s discussion.

The gifts are partial

He now discusses two of the gifts – prophecy and knowledge – and says that what they deliver is only partial. This is both to the possessor of the gifts, whose knowledge is not complete, and to those whom he teaches, who only receive that partial knowledge.

In the first century church, they had to rely on the spiritual gifts to learn, by *confirming the word* (Mk 16:20) by those who had them. But that did not give them complete and perfect knowledge. It was only partial.

Paul uses several illustrations of the point here. The first is the partial knowledge, as discussed above. The second is that of a child growing up. To teach a child, we need to communicate at their level. Children do not think as adults do, and cannot comprehend more complex situations. Children have (and enjoy having) lots of toys. But it is a different story when we reach adulthood. The toys and childhood games no longer excite us (well, some of us!) like they used to. When we grow up, the childish things are put away. And it is just the same with the spiritual gifts. They were there for the childhood (infancy) of the church. When the church grew to maturity, the purpose for (and the need of) the spiritual gifts had passed.

The third example Paul uses is that of a mirror. In these modern times, we have bright clear glass and bright silver mirrors. But in Paul’s time, things were not as clear (pun intended). If they had glass at all it would have been thick and cloudy. More than likely, what they had for a mirror was a piece of polished brass or bronze. You could see your face in it, but it would not have been that clear. This is like the spiritual gifts. We can see the picture, but it is not totally clear.

Something is going to be better

In all of the contrasts, something is going to be better, which Paul describes as “...*that which is perfect...*” (1:13:10). When that comes (whatever it is), then the partial will be done away with (ie it will end). This is clearly the idea that Paul has when he discusses the failure of prophecies, the cessation of tongues, and knowledge vanishing away.

Likewise, the partial will be replaced with completeness (“perfection”), the childish things will stop, and will be replaced by adult (mature) things, and what can only be seen dimly will be seen as though we were looking at it straight in the face.

So, the question is, what is “the perfect”? There are several possibilities, with the two most obvious answers being:

- The coming of the New Testament
- The second coming of Christ

The word translated “the perfect) (*teleion* Gk5455) has a neuter gender. (Unlike the English language, the Greek language has three forms of words – a masculine form, a feminine form, and a neutral form - used to an object. A not very satisfactory comparison in English is the name Robert – masculine, and Roberta – Feminine). Were *teleion* used to describe Jesus, then the masculine form would have been used. (There is one example where Jesus is described in a neuter gender, but that was before His birth).

The argument from the construction of the language is not totally conclusive – or at best, difficult to totally understand. However, when we consider how the gifts were passed on, and that they did not give the infant church complete knowledge, then we can see very strong consistency with what Paul says here.

Note that Paul says “...*now abides faith, hope and love...*” (1:13:13) When Jesus comes, our faith will be made sight! We will not believe by faith, but believe by having *seen* Jesus. We will no longer *hope* for His return, and for our eternal salvation, but we will *receive* it.

So, what Paul is talking about here is that “*the perfect*” is the coming of the complete and perfect revelation of God in the New Testament. It is no coincidence that at the very time that the ability to pass on the spiritual gifts died out (when the apostles died), that the need for them also ended (because the New Testament is our complete and perfect revelation).

“...All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work...” (2 Tim 3:16-17)