

**International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
May 31, 2015**

**Lesson Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
Lesson Title: The Greatest Gift is Love**

Introduction

In First Corinthians 12 the Apostle Paul discussed how the church, which is the body of Christ, is made up of many different parts of spiritual gifts. God sets the members of the body as it hath pleased him. It is the believer's responsibility to know his spiritual gift to minister to the entire body of Christ. Spiritual gifts are not for self-edification.

In First Corinthians 14 the Apostle Paul deals specifically with the misuse of the spiritual gift of languages. The Corinthians had changed the original gift of languages into a showy selfish gibberish that resulted in confusion in public worship. Ignorance of spiritual gifts and pride seemed to be at the heart of all this confusion (1 Corinthians 14:38). Paul sarcastically confronts the Corinthians about their misuse of spiritual gifts and places clear restrictions on their use.

First Corinthians 13 is located between chapters 12 and 14. In this famous chapter known as the "love chapter," Paul introduces something completely new to the discussion: Christian love, without which all spiritual gifts are meaningless. First Corinthians 13 is not an independent chapter on love that stands alone. It is a vital part of this section that communicates the Apostle Paul's message to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts. Without 1 Corinthians 13 and a proper understanding of love, this section on spiritual gifts would be incomplete.

A more excellent way to minister spiritual gifts is the way of love (1 Corinthians 12:31). The church at Corinth had spiritual gifts, but without love they were selfish and operating in the power of the flesh. If love is missing then whatever spiritual gifts are operating in the church will be showy, fleshly, and carnal.

Love is Indispensable (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

Verse 1

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal."

"Though" is the Greek word *ean* {eh-an} and is often translated "if." The word "tongues" is the Greek word *glossa* {gloce-sah} and means "languages."

“Charity” is obviously the focus of chapter 13. The word “charity” appears nine times in this chapter. “Charity” is the Greek word *agape* {ag-ah-pay} which is God’s love or the self-sacrificing kind of love. Although “charity” or “love” in this chapter is often used in reference to romantic or emotional kinds of love, that is not what the word means in this context and chapter.

The “charity” or “love” Paul is talking about in this chapter is the act of self-sacrifice and humility. There is no pride, self-glory, or parading of the flesh in this kind of love. Right out of the gate Paul wants the Corinthians to know that whatever spiritual gifts they possess and reason they are using them, there is only one legitimate reason, love.

Paul says if he is able to speak the different languages of men with eloquence or if he speak to the degree of angelic eloquence but does not possess a self-sacrificing love, it is “as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” In other words, without love it is just a noise without a message. Apart from love, even one who is eloquent in communication is nothing more than noise.

Verse 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, and have not charity, I am nothing.”

Paul mentions three spiritual gifts in this verse: prophecy, understanding mysteries and knowledge, and faith. Remember, “And though” is best read as “if.” “Prophecy” relates to the proclamation of God’s truth so others can understand it. Prophecy was a great spiritual gift in the apostolic age. Paul himself was a prophet (Acts 13:1). As great as the gift of prophecy was and as great as prophets were, they were nothing without self-sacrificing love. “Understand all mysteries, and all knowledge” is used here by Paul to represent great human understanding and divine spiritual understanding. If Paul could perfectly understand all unrevealed divine mysteries, along with everything that has already been revealed, he would still be nothing without love.

If Paul had “faith” to trust God to do anything on his behalf such as “remove mountains” and had no self-sacrificing love, he was “nothing.” Paul’s choice of the word “nothing” is very impressive. He uses it twice in verses 2-3. “Nothing” means “none, not even one.” Someone once said, “Nothing is a zero (0) with the rings knocked off.” That does not leave much! Paul is knocking the props out from under the Corinthians and us. Without love we are “nothing.”

Verse 3

“And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”

Paul further illustrates his point by suggesting that if he gave all his possessions to feed the poor and did not have “love,” it would be “nothing.” The word “feed” is the Greek word *psomizo* {pso-mid-zo} and means “to supply with bits.” It has the idea of giving away food one piece at a time. Rationally he is not just writing one huge check or giving a large donation of food but rather constantly meeting the needs of the hungry. Even that type of gracious and compassionate giving is nothing without self-sacrificing love.

“Give my body to be burned” is difficult to interpret. It most likely speaks of martyrdom. The word “burned” is associated with great pain. It is one of the worse possible things that can happen to a human body. Paul could have been thinking about the three Hebrew boys in Daniel 3 or he could have been thinking about a slave being branded with a hot burning iron to be identified with his master. Either way, suffering pain to be identified with Christ or to give one’s life for Christ was worth nothing without love. Nothing, not even martyrdom can make up for its absence.

Life minus loves equals zero. Love is truly indispensable.

Love is Incomparable (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Verse 4-7

“Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.”

Paul now describes “charity” or self-sacrificing love in terms of behavior.

Self-sacrificing love “suffereth long.” That means true love is patient. A patient love is the ability to be taken advantage of or inconvenienced without retaliation. The world makes heroes of those who fight back. But God’s love is different. Jesus spoke to Peter about forgiving not seven times, but seven times seventy. He also spoke about going the second mile. That is love that suffers long.

Self-sacrificing love “is kind.” To be “kind” is to be “useful, serving, and gracious.” Much of Jesus’ ministry was spent in helping others. When the disciples wanted to turn the multitudes away, He fed the five thousand.

Self-sacrificing love “envieth not.” “Envy” is ill-will toward those who serve in the same field as us. Do you ever want to be someone else? Jesus’ disciples once had a strife over who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus

answered their question by taking a basin of water and a towel the washed their feet (John 13).

Self-sacrificing love “vaunteth not itself”. Love does not show off and parade its superiority. Jesus never bragged or paraded Himself. He said, *“I can of mine own self do nothing; I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me...”* (John 5:30).

Self-sacrificing love “is not puffed up.” “Puffed” means “to inflate.” A Christian who truly loves is not a windbag! Love does not shoot off its mouth about its own accomplishments. The Corinthians were puffed up (1 Corinthians 4:6). At this stage in their spiritual growth they were a bunch of spiritual showoffs. Today that still seems to be the case among those who claim spiritual superiority through the misuse of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Self-sacrificing love “doth not behave itself unseemly.” Love is polite and courteous, not brutal, smart mouth, or ugly in manners. Love is not rude. According to 1 Corinthians 11 the Corinthians were rude and outright ugly while participating in the Lord’s Supper. Many people do not care how their attitude and actions affects others. Undisciplined behavior seems to be the norm today both inside and outside the church. True love is disciplined behavior.

Self-sacrificing love “seeketh not her own.” Love keeps self where self should be. This is the heart of everything Paul is teaching. The Corinthians were so selfish. They demonstrated their selfishness primarily in their tongue speaking. Paul told them, *“He that speaketh in an unknown tongue edifieth himself...”* (1 Corinthians 14:4). Jesus said, *“For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45). True love never dwells on self.

Self-sacrificing love “is not easily provoked.” The word “provoked” means “irritated, upset, or angry.” Love is not touchy or easily irritated. Love does not get irritated when another person offends it. Paul is not saying that Christians do not get angry or irritated at sin. He is talking about our personal relationships with each other. There is no place for anger to be the first reaction when we are offended.

Illus. A woman told her pastor that she got angry and could lose her temper in a flash, but she said, “It’s over in a few seconds.” The pastor replied, “So does the atomic bomb!”

Self-sacrificing love “thinketh no evil.” The word “think” is an accountant’s word meaning “to add up.” Love does not keep a ledger on other people’s sin. On the way to the cross, Jesus did not add up the insults and assaults. Rather,

He cried, *“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do...”* (Luke 23:34). Do not keep scores of others mistakes.

Self-sacrificing love “rejoiceth not in iniquity.” “Iniquity” means “unrighteousness.” It is a word that speaks about sin. Love never “rejoices” about sin. How can someone “rejoice” about sin? Some people “rejoice” in sin because they think they are getting away with it. Others “rejoice” in sin by talking openly and publicly without any sense of shame. The worse way to “rejoice” in “iniquity” is when someone is glad to see sin ruin and wreck someone else’s life. In John 8, the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. Our Lord found no joy in that embarrassing scene, but dealt with the woman in grace, truth, and love.

Self-sacrificing love “rejoiceth in the truth.” Love can only rejoice “in the truth.” Love cannot rejoice in error or false doctrine. The Corinthians had distorted and redefined spiritual gifts. There should be no rejoicing or gladness in that type of environment. The Apostle John said, *“I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father”* (2 John 4). The reason the Corinthians were not demonstrating self-sacrificing love was because they were ignoring God’s Word concerning the use of spiritual gifts. A Christian or church that disregards God’s Word concerning spiritual gifts will never minister in love.

Self-sacrificing love “beareth all things.” The word “beareth” means “to roof over, to cover with silence.” The thought here is that true self-sacrificing love will do everything possible to cover the ugliness of sin in someone else’s life. The sinful nature of man wants to expose sin in other people’s life. True love would rather throw a blanket over someone’s sin as to have it exposed. The Corinthians were all about making each other’s sins publicly known. They would sue and drag each other to court for everyone in Corinth to witness (1 Corinthians 6). That is not true love.

Self-sacrificing love “believeth all things.” Love does not live with suspicion all the time. Love believes the best and forgets the rest. In the home of Simon the leper, a woman poured a box of ointment on the head of Jesus. The disciples were suspicious but Jesus was thankful (Mark 14:1-11).

Self-sacrificing love “hopeth all things.” Love is optimistic in spite of how things may appear. Love refuses to take failure as final. At the tomb of Lazarus the talk was, “Lord, you are too late.” In spite of that feeling, Jesus brought hope. The Jews said, *“Behold how he loved him!”* (John 11:36).

Self-sacrificing love “endureth all things.” “Endure” means “remain, to stay under, persevere.” Love is what keeps us strong through all the changes and challenges of life. Love just hangs in there while we are bearing, believing, and hoping.

Love is Imperishable (1 Corinthians 13:8-12)

Verse 8

“Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

The words “charity never faileth” are the foundation for the remainder of chapter 13. In verses 8-12, Paul contrasts the temporality of certain spiritual gifts with the permanence of love.

“Prophecies” will “fail” and “knowledge” will “vanish away.” “Fail” and “vanish away” are the same word meaning “rendered useless” or “made inoperative.” The gift of “prophecy” refers to “what God says to men through the prophet.” The gift of “knowledge” refers to “the ability to observe facts and draw spiritual truths out of the Bible.” Paul says that these two gifts will at some point be “rendered inoperative.”

The gift of “tongues” or languages will “cease.” The word “cease” is a different Greek word from “fail” and “vanish away.” “Cease” means “to stop or come to an end.” The gift of “tongues” or languages was the ability to speak a foreign language as a sign to unbelievers. It was never an ecstatic prayer or praise gibberish. “Tongues” was always a known language.

Prophecies and knowledge will become inoperative at some point. Tongues will come to an end. The million dollar question is, When? Verses 9-12 answers that question.

Verse 9-12

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.”

“For we know in part, and we prophesy in part” is why the gifts of prophecy and knowledge were so important in the early church age. The word “part” means “a portion of the whole.” Believers today are so blessed to have the complete revelation in the inerrant word of God. The Corinthians only had a part. Although we have the completed word of God there is so little that we understand in light of all that is in God’s Word. Evidently there were some

know-it-all people at Corinth. Paul said, *“And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know”* (1 Corinthians 8:2).

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” “Now” means “up to the present time.” The “glass darkly” refers to mirror that give an inaccurate picture of something. Paul’s point is that believers in this life will never get the complete and perfect picture until God’s Word is complete. Commenting on these words, Doctor Oliver B. Greene writes, “Paul is saying, ‘At the present, I am in the process of knowing, but I only know in part. Then, when that which is perfect is come, I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.’” Thank God the word of God, “that which is perfect” has come (James 1:25).

On the basis of verses 9, 10, and 12, there is evidence that the gift of prophecy and knowledge will be “rendered inoperative” when “that which is perfect is come.” Some interpret “that which is perfect” to reference the completion of the written word of God. Others interpret it to refer to the Second Coming of Christ. It seems that the gift of prophecy became inoperative at the completion of Scripture and the gift of knowledge will be inoperative when Christ returns and all believers shall be like Christ.

When that occurs, “that which is in part shall be done away.” “Done away” is the same Greek word meaning “rendered useless” or “rendered inoperative.”

At the time of Paul’s writing to the Corinthians, prophecy and knowledge would continue until “that which is perfect” would come and stop them. But “tongues” would stop by themselves. They “ceased” in the Apostolic Age. How do we know that? First Corinthians is the only epistle where the gift of tongues appears. The Apostle Paul wrote at least 11 other epistles and 12 if you believe he wrote Hebrews. Paul never mentions the gift of tongues in any other churches. The Apostle Peter, James, John and Jude never mentioned the gift of tongues. Why? It “ceased.”

“When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” Paul was indicating that tongues belonged to the undeveloped and immature stage of the spiritual life, and when spiritual maturity comes it should cease. Paul’s point is that he wants the Corinthians to grow up. These temporary spiritual gifts served their purpose as does the normal growth stages of the physical body. Paul “understood” or exercised his mind like a child when he was a child. He “thought” or reasoned like a child when he was a child. Now that he was “a man” that level of reasoning and understanding was useless.

Love is Immense (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Verse 13

“And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

“Faith, hope, and charity” are without question three of life’s greatest spiritual virtues. “Faith” means as believers, we are to consistently trust God. “Hope” reminds us that we have a sure expectation that everything God has promised He will bring to pass. “Faith” and “hope” abides now along with “charity.” “Charity” is the “greatest” of these three virtues.

Someday there will be no need for “faith” or “hope.” We know that. But even “now,” today, “love” is the greatest. Showing love, practicing love, and living this self-sacrificing love, is more important than any spiritual gift. Why? Because God is love (1 John 4:8).

Conclusion

The church at Corinth had a diversity of spiritual gifts, great teachers ranging from the apostle Paul to Apollos and many others. They had reached the lost in their pagan city. It seemed they had many things going for them. However, when Paul added everything up it came to zero because he says, “Love is missing.” And anything minus love equals zero.

Whatever your spiritual gift is today, it is only temporary. Even your faith and hope are temporary. Love is eternal.

Amen.