

What is Love?

Text:

I Corinthians 13:1-12

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. 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. 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.

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.

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

Introduction:

Like the twenty third Psalm and the Lord's Prayer, I Corinthians 13 is one of those passages that seem so nearly perfect in themselves that they need no comment nor explanation; they speak eloquently by themselves, and the best we can do is stand out of their way and let them speak for themselves. It is, perhaps, for this reason that while we often hear this chapter read, we seldom hear it preached from. While it is often alluded to, it is seldom expounded. We can easily imagine that that it is so well-known and well-loved that it needs no explanation; simply referring to it is enough to put it into action as with all things that are a part of the collective consciousness. I am going to take exception with these assumptions for three reasons. First, statistical studies indicate that we cannot assume that current Christians are familiar with even the most basic biblical concepts and passages. Secondly, when this chapter is known it is often

misunderstood, and finally the truth expressed in this chapter goes to the heart of the Christian faith and life. Not understanding what it is saying to us would seriously cripple any effort we made to live the Christian life.

In this, the first of a series of studies, I want to focus on the second reason – that the chapter is often misunderstood. I want us to think first of all about the purpose of the chapter, and then consider the meaning of its key word, “charity” or “love”.

I. The Purpose of the Chapter

The most characteristic description of this chapter is “the love chapter”. This is accurate. It is, not the only chapter in the Bible that could be called “the love chapter”. Since “God is love”, and since he has demonstrated his love to us in Jesus Christ, and since Christ calls us “to love one another as I have loved you”, it’s hard to find a chapter or a page of the Bible without love. The reason this chapter catches our attention, I think, is first, that it is short, succinct, and easily remembered; secondly, that more than any other biblical passage it seeks to define love, and finally that it establishes the preeminence of love among the Christian graces. It has sometimes been call a love poem, but that is a misnomer. With the exception of the first three verses, it is written in very precise prose. It aims not at painting a poetic picture of love, but at defining love in terms of a precise kind of behavior.

A second error that is often made in relation to this chapter is to consider it a sort of independent unit inserted between I Corinthians 12 and 14 that is unnecessary to the overall argument of the section and the letter as a whole. Some have suggested that Paul didn’t even write it, but borrowed it from someone else and inserted it here, or that he had, himself, previously written it and inserts it here. Even a cursory examination will indicate that this is not the case. But before we look at the details of the chapter itself, we need to see its purpose. Why does Paul put these words here where he does?

Remember that the Corinthian Church was a church full of problems. For the most part it consisted of newly-converted pagans who were having a hard time shedding their pagan beliefs and practices. Among other things, they were bickering with one another, dividing up into competing groups, justifying immorality, suing one another, exhibiting unruly behavior during their services, and making a mockery of the Lord’s Supper. Within this letter you will find every one of the works of the flesh that Paul lists in Galatians 5. On the other hand, there is a profound absence of the fruit of the Spirit. This is the reason Paul describes them in chapter four as carnal rather than spiritual. He does not deny that they are believers. He refers to

them as brothers and sisters in Christ, but their behavior is not that produced by the Holy Spirit, but rather that which is characteristic to normal human life outside of God.

Furthermore, it is clear from all of Paul's writings that the one thing that is central to the life of God in the believer created by the Holy Spirit is what he calls in the chapter under consideration, "charity" or "love". It is not an exaggeration to say that all of the failings of the Corinthian Christians are failings of love. The one great antidote to all of their dysfunctions is love as Paul is going to define it in this text.

More specifically, this chapter falls within a three chapter section where Paul writes to them about their misconceptions of spiritual gifts. Already in the first chapter we learn that this church placed a high value on demonstrations of powerful spiritual gifts. The one they seemed to value most was speaking in tongues. In this section of the book, chapters 12-14, Paul is trying to convince them that they have misunderstood the basic purpose of gifts. What he says, of what he calls spiritual gifts, is true of all that God gives us. It can be summed up in one sentence. What God gives to us as individuals, he gives to us for the good of all. He never gives us anything simply for our own personal satisfaction and enjoyment, but that we might use it for the good and the edification of others. This is especially true of spiritual gifts. God, he says in chapter twelve, gives different gifts to individuals so that they in turn may use the gift or gifts that he has given them to the edification or building up of the entire church. It appears that many of the Corinthian believers, in failing to grasp this concept, were exercising their God-given gifts out of pride for their own self-aggrandizement. It is to put a stop to such foolishness, and to lead them into true Christian service that Paul writes these three chapters.

You will notice that in chapter twelve, after establishing the principle that all have received gifts to be used for the good of the entire body, that Paul closes the chapter with the words: "And yet I show unto you a more excellent (or the most excellent) way." Then comes his exposition of love in chapter 13 followed by the exhortation in 14:1 to "follow after love". If we leave out the chapter divisions, and read the three chapters straight through, the argument is seamless. The purpose of chapter 13 is first, to establish that nothing done outside of love has any value in the Kingdom of God; secondly, to clearly define what he means by love, and finally to establish love as the one ultimately permanent thing.

II. What Paul Means by Love

Before looking at the details of the chapter, one task remains. We must establish the meaning of the chapter's key word. We have read it as "charity" from the King James Version. Most other translations translate it "love". There is a problem with either translation, because both words have been devalued, and either may be seriously misunderstood. The question before

us is not: “How do I understand love?” but, “What does Paul mean by love?” We are facing the same dilemma that the Apostles faced when they began to proclaim the Gospel, and to write the books of the New Testament. Christ who was the manifestation of God, who is love, and who had demonstrated God’s love in the world, and who had called us to “love one another” in the same manner that he had loved us, had so revolutionized the meaning of love that no available Greek word was really sufficient to express it. Now the Greeks had several words available, but the Apostles chose a little-used word allowing the reality of Christ to define the word, rather than letting the word define Christ. This is what we must do. When we come to love as it is expressed in the Bible, we do not start with any word as it is commonly understood, but we start with the reality of God’s love expressed in Jesus Christ and let the reality define the word.

William Tyndale, who first translated the New Testament from Greek into English, used “love”, not “charity”. The Bible of the English speaking peoples up to this point had been the Latin Vulgate which has *caritas* (charity). It had originally been used to distinguish divine love from human love, but in medieval Christianity had come to be understood as meritorious works. Tyndale, wanting to avoid any idea of salvation by works, and to put the emphasis where it should be on love as a divinely implanted gift, translated it by “love”. “Charity” was restored by the King James translators because one of James I requirements in sponsoring the KJV was that the more Latin based ecclesiastical words were to be restored.

Modern translators have used “love”, and this is no doubt the best word available word, but we must carefully distinguish between love as it is commonly understood and Christian love. As we work our way through the chapter the biblical meaning of love will become clear. For the present let us establish two things:

- (1) Love is a divine gift. There are human loves and they come from God, but the love of which I Corinthians speaks is the gift of God’s own love. In Romans 5:5 Paul says: “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” In Galatians 5:22 he tells us that it is a fruit of the Spirit. The love of which this chapter speaks is not a natural or inherent human love. It is not something we can create from within ourselves; we receive it as a gift from God. As such it follows faith. When we believe in Christ we receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God working within us, and the fruit of that work is always love. God is love and where God is a work, divine love is present.
- (2) Love is a behavior. The most common mistake in thinking about love is to equate it with a feeling. We will see in the central section of this chapter, where Paul defines love. It is not always evident in the translation, but he defines it by a series of fifteen verbs. He defines by what it does, and doesn’t do. When we consider how love does

and doesn't act in these verses, we are led to the conclusion that to love is to act as Christ. God demonstrated his love by sending Christ into the world. In the end Christ is the definition of love. To love is to act as Christ acted as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit.