

Chuck Smith:

Let's turn to the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians.

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians actually begins with chapter 12. Paul was talking in chapter 12 about the various gifts of the Holy Spirit. How the Holy Spirit manifests Himself through the life of the believer and those various gifts that a person can possess. Not everyone has all of the gifts, not everyone has all of the ministries, obvious by the rhetorical questions. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But the Holy Spirit divides to each man severally as He wills of the gifts of the Spirit. So the Holy Spirit is sovereign as far as the dispensing of these gifts, yet we are to covet earnestly the best gifts.

Just because the Holy Spirit dispenses them does not stop me necessarily from desiring particular gifts. So Paul said, "Covet earnestly the best gifts." Again, the best gifts are determined by what is the need in your life. What is the ministry that God has called you to fulfill? Whatever your place is in the body will determine what will be the best gifts to enable you to adequately minister. And yet, Paul said, "I will show you a more excellent way." There is a better way than even having the gifts of healing or being able to work miracles, or speak in tongues, or whatever. There is something even better, superior to these. So as we enter into the thirteenth chapter, we enter into what Paul refers to as the more excellent way than the gifts, than the best gifts.

In the first few verses of chapter 13, the first three verses, he shows to us the superiority of love over the gifts of the Spirit.

For though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal (1Cr 13:1).

This word translated in Kings James charity is the Greek word agape. It is a word that was coined for the New Testament. It is a word that is not found in classical Greek. The classical Greek has other words for love. Love on the physical level, the eros, love on the emotional level, the phileo. But the classic Greeks knew nothing of the agape, this divine love of God.

I was listening this morning to an interesting news commentary on how that we are having to constantly add words to our dictionary. This particular commentator was suggesting that whenever we add a new word to our vocabulary, especially those who are reporting news, that they, for the first few times, they use the word sort of definite. Then people can take it from there. But so many new terms being added. And it is necessary to give a definition. So beginning with verse 4, Paul defines what agape actually is. Let's see what he is talking about when he talks about agape. We receive this translation charity, because the King James translators followed the pattern that was set by Wycliffe, who first translated the scriptures into English. When he made his translation, he was translating from the Latin Vulgate. And in Latin, the word charitos is the word for love, and thus, in translating the charitos, he transliterated it and made it charity.

The idea, originally, with the word meaning "a giving kind of love". But through the years the word charity has changed in its meaning, and it is a giving sometimes out of pressure. How much are you going to give to the United Fund this year? And it sort of takes pity on the poor, and so it is not necessarily anymore a giving that is prompted by love. And so the word charity, though it at one time may transliteration of Latin charitos did perhaps adequately express this Greek word, no longer does it express it because of the use of the word charity in our language today. So we really are sort of stuck and must go back to that well-worn word love. And as we have to go back to the word love, we immediately recognize the limitation of the English language.

Because it is a word that I use to express one of my deepest feelings and emotions, as I say, "I love my wife Kay." And expressing my deepest feelings and emotions. It is a word that I use to describe my feelings toward her. However, when I want to describe what I think about hot fudge sundaes, I have to use the same word. "Oh, I love hot fudge sundaes." But what I feel towards the hot fudge sundae is far different than what I feel towards my wife. The English language is limited. And so we take the Greek word eros and we translate it love. We take the Greek word phileo and we translate it love; stergio, we translate it love; then agape, we translate it love. And yet, it is all love on different levels, different degrees. Now it would be more proper to say, "I have a great eros for hot fudge sundaes." Because eros is an area of flesh and that is surely the area of the hot fudge sundae lies in. I have a great phileo for my wife. But this agape is indeed a love that gives, as we read its definition. And it is that word that is used to describe God's attitude towards us. God so loved the world. It is the word that is used to describe what our attitude should be towards each other. Love one another. The giving kind of a selfless

love.

Now this love is superior to the gifts of the Spirit. If I have the gift of speaking in tongues, whether it be in the languages of men, or of angels, a heavenly kind of a language that is not understood by any man, if I have this kind of ability and gift, if I don't have love, my speaking becomes totally meaningless; it is just a noise. As a noise that is made when you clang cymbals together. It is a meaningless sound. It loses its meaning if there isn't love behind it.

Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge (1Cr 13:2);

So I may have the gift of the word of knowledge, I may have the gift of prophecy, I might have deep spiritual insights that I understand those interesting little nuances within the scriptures, the various cryptic messages that God is trying to give to us, and if I have not love, it really makes me nothing.

though I have all faith (1Cr 13:2),

Now, I often wished that I had more faith. But if I have all faith, but I have people tell me they have all faith, but I haven't really met anyone yet, I don't think, that has all faith.

but if I had all faith, so that I could remove mountains (1Cr 13:2),

Now Jesus said, "If you had faith as a grain of a mustard seed you could remove a mountain." Now if I had all faith and I could move mountains,

and if I had not love, I am nothing (1Cr 13:2).

Love is superior to sacrifice. So many times we are called upon to make sacrifices for God. But if I made personal sacrifices,

and I bestow all of my goods to feed the poor, and I gave my body to be burned [for the cause of Jesus Christ], if I had not love, it profits me nothing (1Cr 13:3).

Love is superior to any and all of the gifts. Love is superior to any sacrifice that I might make for God.

Now Paul does us a favor and he now defines for us this Greek word agape as he declares,

Love suffers long, and is kind (1Cr 13:4);

There is another definition given to us of this word by Paul in Galatians 5:22, where Paul said, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love." And then to define it he says, "Joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, temperance, meekness." But long-suffering is one of the characteristics, one of the marks of this love.

Peter, feeling that he was developing in his walk with the Lord, one day said to Jesus, "How often should I forgive a man the same offense? Seven times?" I think Peter was trying to show off in front of the other disciples, sort of indicating, "Lord, I think I have capacity to do it seven times for the same offense." Thinking the Lord would say, "Wow, Peter, you are really growing, that is great." But the Lord said to Peter, "Peter, seventy times seven." What was Jesus saying? Long-suffering or forgiveness is not a matter of mathematics, it is a matter of Spirit. It is an attitude, so that I don't keep track. I don't keep an account. I don't say 478, 479, until I get to my seventy times seven, and then let go. I am sure that Jesus figured that Peter would lose count by the time he got that far and would just realize that long-suffering or forgiveness is a matter of Spirit.

The characteristic of love, the agape, is that is long-suffering, but also that it is kind. That is, at the end of that period of long-suffering, its response at that time is one of kindness. Now I have heard people, myself say, "I have taken enough of that and now I am going to do something about it." It is usually in a powerful, vengeful way, not so kind. I have taken and taken and taken and I have had it. That isn't agape. The agape is that I have taken, and taken, and taken, poor soul. God help him. It is kind after it is long-suffering.

love envies not (1Cr 13:4);

I don't desire those good things that you have. Because I love you, I rejoice that good things have happened to you. I rejoice that your number was picked instead of mine, because I love you. I rejoice that you receive the

promotion. You see, the love is so great that you rejoice in the blessings of the other. It isn't envious of what you have received. It isn't jealous of that which you have gained. But love envies not,

neither does it vaunt itself (1Cr 13:4),

It isn't seeking to promote itself.

We are living in a world of hype. They are promoting everything in this world today. It seems that everything is a big promotion for this, a big promotion for that, and unfortunately, this worldly hype of promotion has crept into the church. Thus, we see too much hype within the church as man is trying to promote a program, or worse yet, trying to promote himself. True love doesn't vaunt itself,

nor is it puffed up (1Cr 13:4),

That is, it doesn't have a superiority attitude. It doesn't look at itself as better than others. It doesn't look down on others. It doesn't create class distinctions. It isn't puffed up.

It does not behave itself unseemly (1Cr 13:5),

In other words, it isn't weird.

Years ago when I was back in the ancient days, when I was at school, we had a gal in our class who flipped out when she was studying for opera. She had learned to really develop her voice and project her voice. You could hear her for five city blocks. But she had become weird, to put it graciously. I used to work downtown Los Angeles, and she would dress weird, feeling that it was godly. Her hair was always pulled straight back and in a bun, because that was godly, never any makeup, because that was ungodly. And she had all of these little ideas of what constituted righteousness and holiness and godliness. I used to have to ride the streetcar back out to the dorm. And sometimes as I was sitting there in the streetcar, she evidently worked down town too, and sometimes she would get on the same car that I was on. With that loud operatic voice, when she would spot me, she would say, "Praise the Lord, brother." And this through the whole streetcar. Hear this weird looking gal through the whole streetcar. You know, if she were beautiful or something it might have been different. It was embarrassing. You didn't want to be identified with something weird like that. Everyone's head in the car would turn to see who she was talking to, mine also. But whenever I would see her waiting for the streetcar that I was on... I got to where I knew the corner that she got on... and if she was waiting to get on, I would get off the back door if she came on the front door. I would take the next car home. It was worth the extra dime.

Love really doesn't behave itself unseemly. It doesn't make a spectacle of itself. It doesn't try to draw attention to itself.

it seeketh not her own (1Cr 13:5),

The word way should be inserted there. It doesn't seek its own way. It defers to others. It doesn't insist on its own way.

is not easily provoked (1Cr 13:5),

The word easily does not appear in any of the Greek manuscripts, unfortunately. Because I used to say, "Well, I am not easily provoked. You work at it and you can get me upset, but not easily." Then when I started looking through the Greek manuscripts, I find it doesn't appear in any of the Greek manuscripts. The translators when they were translating this thought, "Oh, that is too heavy, not provoked. Who isn't provoked at some time or another?" They, for your benefit, inserted the word easily, but unfortunately, to be true to the Word, I have to take it out. Is not provoked.

it thinks no evil (1Cr 13:5);

It is sort of guileless, without suspicion.

It rejoices not in iniquity (1Cr 13:6),

"Oh, he has got what is coming to him. Oh, I am so glad to see that. Oh, he needed that." No, that isn't love. When my enemy is put down, wiped out, doesn't rejoice in iniquity,

but it rejoices in the truth; and then it bears all things, it believes all things, and it hopes all things. [Finally] it never fails (1Cr 13:6-8):

Now, there are things that shall fail. You are dealing with the gifts of the Spirit, and again, we come back now to the superiority of this love over the gifts of the Spirit. Another area of its superiority is that it is enduring; the gifts of the Spirit are not. There is coming a time when the gift of prophecy will no longer be necessary. In heaven I will have to seek another occupation. What will there be to exhort, to edify, or to comfort when we are there with Jesus? Everything we'll need will be right there. I won't have to exhort you to seek the Lord anymore, to just commit it to the Lord; we will be there with Him. I won't have to comfort you; all of our trials are over. We are there in the glory of His presence. And so this gift of prophecy has a limited time value. It is good now; it is needed now while we are still here, but there is coming a time when this gift of prophecy will fail. It will not be necessary any longer when the Lord comes.

whether there be tongues, they shall cease (1Cr 13:8);

And, of course, this would be a reference to the gift of speaking in an unknown tongue, the glossialia, which, as we will point out in a few moments, is given by God to assist you in your communicating the deep things of your spirit unto God. Given to you to help you in your worship. Given to help you in your praise. We will be there in His presence, no longer will it be necessary. And thus, this gift of tongues will cease.

whether there will be knowledge, it shall vanish away (1Cr 13:8).

And again, this would be a reference to the gift of the word of knowledge, where God gives to us knowledge or insight into a particular situation, to help us in dealing with that situation. The word of knowledge is always partial knowledge. We never receive total and complete knowledge of a situation. In the New Testament when this gift was exercised, they received not a total knowledge, partial knowledge of what the future held, but not all the details.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part (1Cr 13:9).

These are things that are partial. These are things that one day will pass off the scene.

Love, on the other hand, never fails. Prophecies will fail. Tongues will cease. Knowledge will vanish away. For these things are all just partial things. We know in part, we prophesy in part,

But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away (1Cr 13:10).

Now what is it referring to "that which is perfect"? It is interesting to me that every Bible commentator prior to the twentieth century always understood it to mean the coming again of Jesus Christ. This is the historic traditional view of the church of every Bible commentator up until this twentieth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 1906, there began a modern charismatic movement called, in those days, a Pentecostal movement, with a renewing of interest in the gifts of the Spirit. And with this modern Pentecostal movement beginning in 1906, those fundamentalist preachers who wanted to discount this movement of the Holy Spirit in these last days, they turned to I Corinthians 13, and they brought out a new interpretation. And suddenly, "that which is perfect is come" was no longer the coming again of Jesus Christ. But now, according to their interpretation, it was the full revelation of the Word of God. When we receive the whole canon of scriptures, then they did not need the supernatural gifts of prophecy, tongues, and word of knowledge to teach the people any longer. We now have the Word of God, that which is perfect has come, and therefore, all of the gifts of the Spirit ceased with the apostles, and the end of the apostolic age. That brought an end to the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit. And in order to, of course, prove from a scriptural basis their premise, they had to change the meaning of "that which is perfect" and twist it around to mean the Word of God, rather than the coming again of Jesus Christ.

In the more later commentaries you will find "that which is perfect" often being referred to as the Word of God, but that is not so prior to this century, before all of the Bible teachers understood it to mean the coming again of Jesus Christ. I agree with G. Campbell Morgan, who I believe to be a very honest commentator. I agree with him when he declared that it is obvious from the context that he has to be referring to the coming again of Jesus Christ. For he goes on to say that we are going to see Him face to face, "Now we see Him through the glass darkly, but then face to face." "Now we know in part, we prophesy in part, but then we are going to know even as we are known." When? When we see Him or meet Him face to face. Rather than this thirteenth chapter

here being a proof against the exercise the gifts of prophecy or tongues or word of knowledge today, in reality, it is a support, because these are given to us until the coming again of Jesus Christ, until that which is perfect is come.

If you will turn mentally with me to the second chapter of Acts, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the church and they were all speaking in other tongues, and the devout men from all over the world who had gathered for the feast of Passover heard the noise, gathered to the room where the disciples were meeting. They were filled with wonderment and amazement, and they said, "Are not all of these that are here Galileans? How is it that they are speaking in our own languages from the nations from whence we have come? For we hear them speaking in the language of the Medes and the Parthians, and those from Mesopotamia, and they are glorifying and praising God. What does this mean?"

When Peter stood up to explain unto them what it meant, he first of all gave to them a scriptural basis, "You men of Israel, hearken unto me. First of all, your premise is wrong. These are not drunken as you suppose. It is only 9:00 in the morning. But you are asking, 'What meaneth this?' This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel, when he said, 'In the last days saith the Lord, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams, and upon my servants and handmaidens will I pour out of my Spirit in that day, saith the Lord.'" This prophecy goes right into the Tribulation period, "and there shall be blood, fire and vapor of smoke and the moon shall be turned into blood, and the sun into darkness, before the great and notable day of the Lord come." So the prophecy of Joel was a prophecy of the last days, carrying you right into the Tribulation and right into the coming of the Lord. "For it shall come to pass in those days, saith the Lord, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." From a scriptural basis, it is forcing the interpretation to say that, "that which is perfect" refers to the scriptures rather than to the coming again of Jesus Christ.

I think that those who have taken that position have only taken that position because of the previous position that they have taken that the gifts of the Spirit are not for today. And because they have taken that position, then they are forced to interpret this. But it is a forced interpretation of the text. I do believe that the correct interpretation is to interpret "that which is perfect" is the coming again of Jesus Christ. It is balanced through the scriptures, other scriptures.

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 (1Cr 13:11).

There is a natural development, a maturing process. There will be a fullness when I stand in the presence of my Lord; I will be complete. Many of the things that I do today as I look back on them from that vantage will appear very childish. I won't come into that completeness and fullness until I am with the Lord. So those things, prophecy, tongues, word of knowledge, will no longer be necessary, set aside. I have entered into the fullness there with Jesus.

For now we see through a glass, darkly (1Cr 13:12);

Or in a mirror, but in those days they had not perfected the process of making mirrors as we have today. It wasn't until about the thirteenth century that they really began to create mirrors, using glass with a silver backing painted on. Prior to that time, the mirrors were all polished metal, highly polished metal. But you never got a true reflection in those mirrors. Quite often the reflection was distorted, so we look in the mirror, but we see sort of distortions. We can't see clearly,

but then we are going to see face to face (1Cr 13:12):

We will understand completely, and we will know at that point even as we are known.

As we move next week into the fifteenth chapter, and Paul talks about the resurrection and the new bodies that we have, and the fact that they are going to be very different, the question naturally arises, will we know each other then? How will you know me, if I don't have a bald head? How are you going to recognize me with all of my curly, dark hair?

we will know even as we are known (1Cr 13:12).

We will have all knowledge at that point, and we will need no introductions. We will know each other as well as we know ourselves.

There are things that are going to pass: prophecies, tongues, word of knowledge, but there are things that will always remain.

And now abides faith, hope, love (1Cr 13:13),

These are enduring characteristics. Faith is believing it, simply because God said it. My faith is based upon God's Word; God said it, I believe it. It is believing what God said, that will always be. Even when I am in heaven, I will continue to believe what God has said. So it is abiding, it remains. It will always be there. I believe what God has said, though I don't understand what He has said.

There are many issues where there are two sides to the issue: predestination and human responsibility. Someone says, "Do you believe in predestination?" I say, "Yes." They say, "Well, do you believe in human responsibility?" I say, "Yes." "Well how can you believe in both?" Because God said them both. I don't understand it. If you ask, "Do you understand predestination?" I would say, "No." "Do you understand human responsibility?" "No." But I believe them because God has said them. So I believe in what seemed to be conflicting, exclusive concepts. But because God's Word teaches them both, I believe them both, though in mind I cannot reconcile them together.

Now one of my problems in my early years of seminary was my endeavor to reconcile them together. I have spent hours in discussions. I have spent hours in private study, praying over, studying the doctrines of predestination, divine sovereignty, human responsibility. Trying to put it together, trying to tie all the ends. Years ago I walked out of my study, I threw my books of doctrine on the floor. I was leaving the room in disgust, and I cried out, "God, I can't understand it. I have been trying for years to do so." God spoke to my heart and said, "I never did ask you to understand it, I only asked you to believe it." I said, "Well, all right, I will believe it." I believe that God is sovereign, and that He has called me by His grace, to be His child. But I also believe that it was necessary for me to call upon the name of the Lord in order to be saved. Yet, if you want to get into a logical kind of a debate and discussion, I cannot reconcile it.

Now, the problem many people make is they get on either one side of the coin or the other, and they get on one side to the exclusion of the other. That is dangerous, because you are only dealing then with one half of a truth. But there are some people, because they can't reconcile it, get on either one or the other and they get all of these theological debates going. And that is why so many divisions in the church. People can't believe the whole truth, they will only believe what they can understand or rationalize or reason in their minds. I only will believe what I can see. That isn't faith. Faith is just believing because God said it. I believe it.

Hope is a combination of desire and expectation. Both have to be there. People, many times, desire things for which they have no expectation at all. Many times my desires are so out that I really never expect them, I just desire them, but that isn't hope. Hope also has that expectation; I not only desire, I expect it. It is coming. Now you can expect things that you don't desire. Now you may get a ticket and you are going to have to appear on the twenty-first in Superior Court to answer to the judge. So you are expecting this appearance before the judge, but you sure don't desire it, because you are guilty. Hope has both aspects: desire and expectation. Paul said, "We are prisoners of hope." We hope in the glory of the Lord. I desire the glory of the Lord, and I also expect the glory of the Lord. Waiting for the blessed hope of the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. I am desiring for Jesus to appear, I am expecting Jesus to appear, and so I hope for the appearance of Jesus. It is the hope that keeps you going when everything else is failing around you. It is the hope, hang in there, the Lord is going to work. I expect Him to work. I desire Him to work. Hope keeps us and sustains us.

"Why are thou cast down, O my soul? Why are thou disquieted within me?" The psalmist is talking to himself about his feelings of being upset, about the discouragement and the depression that he was in. "Why are you so depressed? Why are you so discouraged?" He said, "Hope thou in God." That is the answer to the depression, to discouragement, to being so upset over a situation. Hey, God is going to work. I am expecting Him to. I am desiring Him to. Thus, my soul, then, is at rest. Because my hope and expectation is in the Lord. So these three things abide: faith, hope and love,

but the greatest is love (1Cr 13:13).

Why? Because it encompasses the other two. As we were reading the definition, love believes all things. So that is encompassed in love. Love hopes all things, so faith and hope are both encompassed by love. Thus, the greatest of all is love. Greater than the gifts, greater than the other graces and characteristics of the Christian

Commentary on 1 Corinthians 13

life. The greatest thing you can possess is love. Paul said, "For he who loves has fulfilled the law." As he said in Galatians 5:22, "Against such there is no law." If you love, you don't need any law or anything else, you have got it made.