

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

PREFACE

What stands before us is a passage of Scripture so beautiful, so eloquent, that it has been misused and misunderstood down through the centuries.

- Its eloquence does not make it poetry; it is not a “hymn to love.”
- It does not represent a peaceful interlude for Paul as he leans back in his chair and takes a break from his persistent exhortation and counsel.
- It was not written as a sentimental paean to romantic love.

David Garland: [Chapter Thirteen] is not a digression—a charming, self-contained hymn on love that Paul drew from his files to serve as a pleasant diversion or to give people something to read at weddings. It comprises an essential link in the flow of argumentation from Chapter Twelve to Chapter Fourteen.

I would like to begin by reading Chapter Thirteen. As I do, please note the rather obvious organization of the text.

- Verses 1-3: The Necessity of Love
- Verses 4-8(a): The Character of Love
- Verses 8-13: The Persistence of Love

Read 1 Corinthians 13.

Let us begin by defining the word that is the focus of these thirteen verses: love. Not surprisingly to anyone familiar with God’s word and the Christian faith, that word is translated from the Greek *agape*—more specifically in this instance, *agapen*. The apostle will indeed present his own definition in vv4-7, but let’s look first at the Greek word itself, and the manner in which Paul uses it.

The reason we commonly think of *agape* as the highest form of love is that it is the word of choice to describe God’s relationship with man. Thus, just as God’s grace, compassion, forgiveness represent the highest form of those concepts—so high they cannot remotely be compared to man’s expression of them—*agape* represents the highest form of love, because it comes from, and is exemplified by, God. And we have the supreme expression of that love being demonstrated at the cross.

Most of us are familiar with another Greek word for love: *phileo*, which is “the most general word for love, or regard with affection. *Phileo* mainly denotes the attraction of people to one another who are close together both inside and outside the family” (W. Gunther in *DNTT*). This is why the city of Philadelphia is known as “the city of brotherly love.”

More often than not in the NT *agape* is used to express God's love for man, and man's love for God. It is *that* kind of love Paul employs nine times in this chapter—but the twist is that the chapter is not about man's love for God, but man's love for others in the body of Christ. That is, this love has the *qualities* of *agape* (vertical), but the direction and deployment of *phileo* (horizontal).

Gunther: A believer is a sinner who is loved by God. When he realizes this, he enters the sphere of God's love. He himself becomes loving. Hence, also in Paul, love for God and love for one's neighbour derive from God's own love... [In Chapter Thirteen] *agape* is always both God's love and man's love.

Before we move into the text, let me reiterate how we are to understand love in the context of this discussion about Spirit-gifts. Love is not a gift from the Spirit, as in, for example, prophecy, helps, or tongues, but love is a *fruit* of the Spirit. That is, love is not the "best" gift; it is *the best way to employ the gifts*. Note, for example the context where Paul places love in v13.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:13.

"Faith, hope, love"—those are all *fruits* of the Spirit, not Spirit-gifts. Here is how Gordon Fee expresses it:

Love is primary for [Paul] because it has already been given concrete expression in the coming of the Lord Jesus to die for the sins of the world. Love is not an idea for Paul, not even a "motivating factor" for behavior. It *is* behavior. To love is to act; anything short of action is not love at all. Love is not set over against the gifts, precisely because it belongs in a different category altogether. For Paul it is not "gifts to be sure, but better yet love"; rather, love is to be the primary motivation lying behind everything they are and do—including Spirit manifestations (gifts) in the gathered assembly... It is not a matter of these things *or* love, or even these things motivated *by* love, but these things by a person whose whole life is also given to love, which begins, as someone well noted, when another person's need is more important than one's own. Otherwise, the speaker's ethical life adds up to zero.

Finally, note Paul's use of "having" love throughout. He doesn't say "show" love or "be loving," but "*have* love." This points up that he is talking about authentic, true love.

Garland: One can put on a show of love without having love, but one who truly has love cannot help but show it. Consequently, Paul emphasizes having love.

v1

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In the first paragraph (vv1-3), Paul sets forth five conditional statements regarding the necessity of love. He begins with tongues because that is the issue in Corinth. I'm going to move through these three verses rather quickly, because I think Paul's point is obvious. I just want to reveal some details lying beneath the surface of our translations.

Verse 1 is one of the texts that help substantiate the position that authentic speaking in "tongues" may be speaking in a celestial language—what I have termed "the language of heaven." Paul draws a distinction between the tongues of men, and the tongues of angels (see also, 2 Corinthians 12:1-4).

I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

NKJV: sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

The first noun is never used for a musical instrument; a metaphor for an empty, hollow sound; The second is indeed an instrument commonly employed (still) in pagan worship. So one can interpret Paul as saying, speaking in a language of earth, or even the language of heaven without love is nothing better than the sound of one banging on an empty pot or making the music of the pagan temple.

v2

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Paul continues to emphasize some of the gifts so prized by some in the Corinth church. After tongues in v1, he moves on in v2 to prophecy, mysteries, knowledge, and faith—the last three modified by "all." This is a mixed bag. The first, prophecy, we know from Chapter Fourteen that Paul considers to be the most valued of the *charismata* in the church. So he certainly is not denigrating it here—in fact he is not denigrating any of these Spirit-gifts but simply making the case that any or all of them are worthless without the surrounding Spirit-fruit of love. "Knowledge" was a Corinthian favorite.

Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

"Faith" that can "remove mountains" was a proverbial expression meaning the gift of a special faith for mighty works, or doing the impossible in a miraculous way—used even by Jesus.

Read Mark 11:22-23.

The combination of “all mysteries and all knowledge,” both controlled by the verb *eido*, to know, to understand or fathom, harkens back to the deep mysteries of Judaism regarding “the unfolding of God’s final eschatological drama” (Fee). So if we package all this up, we could summarize and paraphrase this verse, *If I were so gifted as to know everything about everything, to not just know, but understand even what God is doing now and will be doing until the end of time itself; if I had so much faith that I could will the geography of the planet to change before my very eyes—even with all that, if I have not love, I am nothing.*

v3

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Finally, Paul moves beyond *charismata* to give examples of great personal sacrifice. The first part means, literally, “If I parcel out all my property for food to feed,” with “the poor” being implied. The word translated “give” or “bestow” is *psomiso*, which means to “give away bit by bit, feed with sops or tidbits.”

Sidebar: At first, considering this literally, I was disappointed that Paul would use a term that seems to imply that the generous one is doling out food in a niggardly fashion, just a small bit at a time. But then I thought about my typical response to the stories on the news of individuals and restaurants laying out free spreads for the poor on Thanksgiving or Christmas. My thought when I see this is invariably, *But these people are hungry year-round. Wouldn't it be better to feed them a small amount on a regular basis, than a feast on just one day?* And, of course, some individuals and institutions do just that.

The second part of this verse represents a problematic “textual variant.” By changing the operative Greek word by just one letter, the meaning is changed considerably. If the manuscript has *kauthesomai*, it means to burn; if the manuscript has *kauchesomai*, it means to boast. Commentators are divided, with the majority going with “to burn.” The NIV2011 typically covers itself both ways, but offers perhaps a reasonable compromise with “and give over my body to hardship that I may boast.”

Frankly, I consider the arguments for *either* side to be strained, so have no strong opinion either way. But just two points: First, no matter how our common versions translate this, most include a footnote offering the variant; and second, we shouldn't miss the overall point that Paul climaxes this paragraph with an example that, whichever text is correct, is an example of giving oneself bodily for the good of others.

Paul is always thinking about Christ. For him, He is the supreme example of giving oneself for others out of love. It was Jesus who said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

In v2 the result of having gifts without love was, “I am nothing.” In v3 this changes to performing acts of kindness and sacrifice without love. The result? “It profits me nothing.”

There will indeed come a day for each one of us when we stand before our Lord and give an account for what we have done in His name. And though it may not be clear what it will be, there will be some manner of reward for those things done for the right reason: love—love for Christ, and love for our brothers and sisters in the body.

Let us close with Paul’s account in Philippians where Christ Jesus received *His* reward for a job well-done—a reward for *His* personal sacrifice, if not by being burned, to death on a cross, and all out of His love for sinners.

Read this familiar account in the context of our passage, especially v3.

Read Philippians 2:1-11.