



A Study of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians

Lesson 19: A More Excellent Way... 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

Now what we saw in our study last week was that the real issue in Corinth was the Corinthian's infatuation with the gift of speaking in tongues. That is...they viewed the gift of speaking in tongues as something to be desired above all other things. They viewed speaking in tongues as the highest evidence of being spiritual and the result was that they sought that gift above all others and judged true spirituality on its basis alone.

But Paul had a much different idea than that. Paul believed that the gifts that mattered had value to the body as a whole and he goes out of his way to make that plain enough the rest of the way out. That is why, of course, Paul hammered the idea of the body in chapter twelve.

You will remember that he brought up the monstrous illustration of one part of the body refusing to play its role because it wanted to be something else. He did that in 1 Corinthians 12:20.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:20**...As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to flesh out the fact that even the most humble part of the body has importance. Look at what he says in verse 22.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:22**...On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

I mean think about it...think about the last time you burned your finger or smashed your thumb with a hammer. In that moment, the preeminence of your brain didn't matter very much to you. Your brain suffered...or not really suffered in and of itself but entered into the suffering of the finger. It didn't think about itself at all...it only thought about the fact it was sharing in the pain of that member.

Now that is precisely what the Corinthians were not doing. Their self-absorption had somehow anesthetized them to the pain of the other parts of the body. They didn't feel the pain...they didn't feel pain because they didn't feel any connection to the rest of the body at all. Of course that meant that they operated as a freakish thing, limping along without even realizing that they were limping at all. They were each so focused on the preeminence that they desired...the gifts that they desired ...and for them that mean speaking in tongues...that they could not

rightly discern the body of Christ for what it was...so they stopped trying to all together.

That is why Paul reminds them again of the imagery of the body in verse 27.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:27**...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues.

Now it is not his intention here to outline all of the different possible types of gifts or offices. You can tell that from the fact that he starts off talking about different kinds of people and switches halfway through the verse to different kinds of gifts¹. His point, as I said earlier, was not to single out a particular gift but rather to show that that they whole body has been rightly fitted with different kinds of people and different kinds of ministries to meet it needs.

Now in verse 29, Paul switches gears and begins to ask the Corinthians a number of rhetorical questions. He does that because he is about to switch gears and offer the Corinthians a wonderful alternative. Now the questions that he asks all require a negative answer.

We can do the same thing in English...like when someone tells us a tall tale and we know there is no way on earth they really expect us to believe it and we say something in return like, **“Now you don’t expect me to believe that do you?”** In Greek, framing questions to expect a negative answer was a common way of writing and something that every elementary school student knew how to do. It is what Paul does here in verse 29.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:29**...Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

Now the proper way to read that is like this.

Are all apostles? No, of course not.

Are all prophets? No, of course not.

Are all teachers? No, of course not.

Do all work miracles? No, of course not.

Do all possess gifts of healing? No, of course not.

Do all speak with tongues? No, of course not.

Do all interpret? No, of course not.

You see the Corinthians had determined that they knew which gifts were important and which gifts were not and what they wanted was to have the more enviable gifts. For them, that meant speaking in tongues. But Paul refuses to let them think that way. Instead he says, **“Look here the gifts are sovereignly distributed by God as he sees fit. That is why there is a diversity of gifts. That is why you don’t all have the same gift and what you guys want to do is to turn yourselves into one giant freakish tongue...that can’t even hear its own brilliant speech. Where’s the edification in that?”**

Still Paul doesn’t fault them completely for desiring gifts. What he tells them to do is to desire the best gifts and to do so with a certain mindset and conviction.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:31**...But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Now I have to tell you that what takes place here in chapter 13 is a bit of a digression. By that I mean that it is a bit of a rabbit trail from his original argument. You can see that I think if you skip over chapter 13 and look all the way down to chapter 14, verse 1. You see 12:31 tells the Corinthians to pursue the higher gifts...

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 12:31...** But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

And then 14:1 says...

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 14:1...**Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.

What you see at the end of chapter twelve and the beginning of chapter 14 is the repetition of the same phrase...earnestly desire gifts. You see Paul starts his thought in chapter 12 and takes it back up in chapter 14 and in between he places this little chapter that is just about the loveliest thing ever written by anyone anywhere.

Now the fact that it is a digression does not mean that it is out of place or that it ought to be moved to some other spot. We are not people who think that the Bible is misshaped or some sort of faulty patchwork. What I mean by digression is that Paul sidesteps what he is discussing to pursue a particular point or emphasis...to return to the original thought a bit later. In this particular case, the digression concerns the nature and value of love.

Now almost all of us here can quote a part or all of chapter 13. We have all heard it used time and time again at weddings, or funerals, or commencement services and those uses are not without merit. 1 Corinthians 13 does speak wonderfully well to the primacy of love and to the practice of love and even to the permanence of love. Yet, in the overall argument and structure of 1 Corinthians, it speaks most wonderfully...most clearly as to the place of love within the church and especially within the realm of a person's exercise of their spiritual gift.

Gordon Fee writes this:

This is one of the greatly loved passages of the New Testament, and for good reason. It is one of Paul's finest moments; indeed, let the interpreter beware lest too much analysis detract from its sheer beauty and power. Unfortunately, however, the love affair with this love chapter has also allowed it to be read regularly apart from its context, which does not make it less true but causes one to miss too much. Even worse is that reading of it in context which sees it as set over against "spiritual gifts." Paul would wince.²

Now, 1 Corinthians 13 is divided into three specific parts and I have to tell you that its literary structure is fairly specialized. It is what is called an aretalogy.

Charles Talbert writes this:

1 Corinthians 13:1–13 is an aretalogy³ of love that falls into an *aba'* pattern: (a) the superiority of love (vv. 1–3); (b) the characterization of love (vv. 4–7); and (a') the superiority of love (vv. 8–13).⁴

There is a similar aretalogy in 1 Esdras 4. Now that is not a book that I will expect you to be familiar with. It is a part of what the church calls the Apocrypha. That means it is a non-canonical book...that is, it is not part of our inspired Bible. Still it

does contain this particular literary form and is useful in showing you, I think, how the form was used. In this particular case, the thing being praised is **“truth”**.

^{NRS} **1 Esdras 4:35**...But truth is great, and stronger than all things. ³⁶ The whole earth calls upon truth, and heaven blesses her. All God's works quake and tremble, and with him there is nothing unrighteous. ³⁷ Wine is unrighteous, the king is unrighteous, women are unrighteous, all human beings are unrighteous, all their works are unrighteous, and all such things. There is no truth in them and in their unrighteousness they will perish. ³⁸ But truth endures and is strong forever, and lives and prevails forever and ever.

Now in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul uses this same form...this rhetorical form to extol the virtue of love. Now I want you to get this. You see, by extolling “love” Paul is showing the Corinthians a better way. He is not trying to get them to stop speaking in tongues altogether. We may want to put that twist on it today in light of some of the bizarre behavior out there associated with tongues. But that was not what Paul was trying to do. He is not trying to get them to stop exercising any of their spiritual gifts. He is not trying to get them to lay aside the spiritual pursuits they desire. Rather, he wants them to look at each other through Christological glasses...and by that I mean he wants them see each other through eyes of love...so that they will draw in their own independent desires and lusts...so that they will stop thinking about their own lusts primarily and will apply a bit of true spiritual affection for each other as proper boundaries for the spiritual desires they want to pursue. To say it plainer, he wants to show the Corinthians that unless love constrains and restrains their behavior, their beloved spiritual gifts really count for nothing...are simply so much wind.

Listen to Calvin.

However it may be as to this, after having commanded that regard should be had chiefly to edification, he now declares that he will show them something of greater importance — that everything be regulated according to the rule of love. This, then, is the most excellent way, when love is the regulating principle of all our actions. And, in the outset, he proceeds upon this — that all excellencies are of no value without love; for nothing is so excellent or estimable as not to be vitiated in the sight of God, if love is wanting.⁵

I have shortened what Calvin says here to this...**without love the very best we can do is useless.** That is the line of reason that Paul follows in these first three verses. Look at verse one.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:1**...If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Now you ought to notice that Paul starts off with the issue of tongues. Now I have to say that Paul doesn't tell the Corinthians anywhere in 1 Corinthians that tongues are stupid or forbidden or to be avoided. I may think that and that may well be the case but that is not his word to them. Rather, what he says is this, "Tongues, in and of themselves, count for nothing. They have to be regulated by love." Now the imagery he uses here is wonderful. What he says is this, "If I speak with beautiful words like Demosthenes or even an angel from heaven and yet and yet do not possess love...presumably in a manner that oversees my words usage and design...I am really not much more than a noisy gong or cymbal."

In verses two and three he proceeds to do the same thing with prophetic powers, with spiritual knowledge, with faith and even with martyrdom. Look at what he says.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:2**...And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,

but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

I love what Calvin says about this last little phrase...delivering up my body to be burned.

He speaks, undoubtedly, of martyrdom, which is an act that is the most lovely and excellent of all; for what is more admirable than that invincible fortitude of mind, which makes a man not hesitate to pour out his life for the testimony of the gospel? Yet even this, too, God regards as nothing, if the mind is destitute of love. The kind of punishment that he makes mention of was not then so common among Christians; for we read that tyrants, at that time, set themselves to destroy the Church, rather by swords than by flames, except that Nero, in his rage, had recourse, also, to burning. The Spirit appears, however, to have predicted here, by Paul's mouth, the persecutions that were coming. But this is a digression. The main truth in the passage is this — that as love is the only rule of our actions, and the only means of regulating the right use of the gifts of God, nothing, in the absence of it, is approved of by God, however magnificent it may be in the estimation of men.⁶

Now having pointed out the importance of love pervading every single area of ministry, Paul goes on to point out the fact that **love has certain characteristics**.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:4**...Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Now what I would like you to see is that Paul arranges seven couplets or words in a wonderful way to describe what love is like. The first and last are positive. The middle couplets are all negative. And the remarkable thing about his arrangement is that it parallels almost exactly what he has had to say to the Corinthians right along.

Love is patient and kind;
love does not envy or boast;
it is not arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrongdoing,
but rejoices with the truth.

Now this opening idea...that love is patient and kind seems to describe God...seems to show the active and passive nature of God's love for us. On the one hand, He is patient in not pouring out His wrath on us. On the other hand He is kind in the many acts of mercy he shows.

These middle phrases...does no envy or boast...does not insist on its own way etc. all seem to point to the very things that Paul has had to chastise the Corinthians for along the way. It seems that Paul is saying, **"If you want to know what genuine love is like...it is the exact opposite of what you have been doing in your own selfish pursuits...in your uncrucified lusts to have your own way."**

In verse 7, Paul concludes with a quatrain of ideas and imagery.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:7**...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Now this last item in the list...this item "endures" serves as a transition to his conclusion. What Paul says is this, **"Love is the one thing that really endures."**

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:8**...Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Now what Paul is saying is something like, "Love doesn't end...it never ends...and the truth of the matter is you are consumed, O Corinthians, with the transitory issues when you ought to be consumed with the one thing that endures. After all, "prophecies...as exciting and important as they are will pass away. Tongues as exciting and vital and important as they are...will pass stop. Words of knowledge...and the unending quest for knowledge will pass away. When will it do that you ask. It will do that when the perfect has come because when the perfect has come...the partially perfect will pass away and be done."

Now that leads us to want to know, of course, when that "perfect" will come. It is an important question because there are a number of commentators that think that the "perfect" that is being addressed here is the close of the canon of Scripture. That is, that Paul is saying that when the New Testament is completed there will no longer be any need for tongues, or prophecies, or words of knowledge or the like. And the reason or part of the reason that they hold to that view is because they want to be able to speak authoritatively against the continued use of or emphasis on the charismatic gifts that still infatuate so many today.

Let me tell, I don't think that is right. I do think such charismatic gifts have ceased and I think they have ceased for the exact same reasons that my brothers do who argue the way they do. I just don't think that is what Paul has in mind here. In fact, I think what Paul has in mind here is the revelation or parousia of Jesus Christ. You see all of the gifts that Paul is describing here are transitory gifts...they have their purpose but their purpose is finite...set for the edification of the church. When the church finally sees the Savior...the need for such gifts will be done away. Listen to what Calvin says.

But when will that perfection come? It begins, indeed, at death, for then we put off, along with the body, many infirmities; but it will not be completely manifested until the day of judgment, as we shall hear presently.⁷

What Paul wishes to impress upon the Corinthians is, that the gifts in which they so much prided themselves, were small matters compared to what is in reserve for the people of God.⁸

You see what Paul is arguing is that the Corinthians are possessed by the transitory. They are possessed with stuff that is already becoming obsolete. What he wants them do is to continue to desire those things but to desire them and to use them in love...especially since love is the one thing that will not cease to be.

David Garland writes this:

Here, the battery of future tenses, the disappearance of the partial replaced by the complete, and the reference to knowing as God knows us, all point to the end time. He contrasts the present age with the age to come. The “perfect” is shorthand for the consummation of all things, the intended goal of creation; and its arrival will naturally displace the partial that we experience in the present age. Human gifts shine gloriously in this world but will fade to nothing in the presence of what is perfect. But they also will have served their purpose of helping to build up the church during the wait and to take it to the threshold of the end. When the anticipated end arrives, they will no longer be necessary.⁹

I think that is so good and I think it helps explain the illustration Paul uses at the end of chapter 13. You see what he is going to do is to explain that “tongues” is not childish...no that is not his point...but rather that “tongues” are transitory and at some point will go the way of all flesh. What he is going to say is that such gifts while important right now won’t be later on. What he is going to say is that such gifts are like looking at the reflected image of God in a mirror...they are not crystal

clear...they are helpful but not the full revelation of God which we will see and know when we see Him face to face.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:11**...When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Isn't that wonderful? Isn't that what we need, especially when we become consumed with our own self-exaltation, our own self-absorption? I want to close our time this morning with something I wrote ten years and eight months ago when a good friend of mine died. Now, I'm not reading this because my writing has any particular merit. I am reading it instead because the man I wrote about was a perfect illustration of how we ought to implement the gifts that God has given us in selfless love for one another.

On Sunday April 12, 1998, Christians around the world celebrated the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ with joy and thanksgiving. That same morning, in the privacy of his own home surrounded by friends and family a good man I know named Randy Harwell quietly died after being ravaged by cancer.

The two events Easter and Randy's death were, in my mind, closely related.

Randy was the songleader at Bethel Baptist Church in Arlington. I use the term "songleader" because Randy was from Alabama and in Alabama they know what a "songleader" is but worry a lot if you use high falutin language like "music minister" (That was Randy's joke not mine). But Randy was much more than a "songleader". He was one of the most genuine, compassionate, godly men I have ever had the privilege to know. Randy took seriously Christ's charge to shepherd His sheep and he was willing to share their joys and their sufferings.

In one sense, Randy had the heart of a woman. He could sit in an I.C.U. waiting room with a hurting family longer than anyone I ever met. He had an uncanny

ability to say the right thing or to say nothing at all as the situation required. Randy was responsible for visiting the sick and infirm for Bethel Baptist, not just because it was a big church and the various pastors had so many responsibilities, but because the people of the church wanted Randy. If things were going well, any minister would do, but if things were going bad or were really desperate, it was time for Randy. He would read Scripture, or pray, or sing hymns, or just sit and he would do all those things with the grace and style of the southern gentleman he was.

In another sense, Randy had the heart of a child. He and his lovely wife Barb never had any children and the result was that they "adopted" children wherever they could find them. Every year at Christmas they made it a point to pick out a family and shower them with the gifts that they would have given to their own children. They always gave their gifts without fanfare. It was a private matter which they never talked or bragged about. But, it was an experience that Randy loved. I know, I experienced it firsthand.

One Christmas, when I was in seminary, and my wife and I were struggling to buy food and clothes for our children. Randy and Barb just showed up with presents for our kids. Among the toys they brought was a Nintendo type game which Randy proceeded to hook up and demonstrate to my then small children. He sat in the floor with my two wildly ecstatic kids until all three of them, my two kids and Randy, were so exhausted they all had to be put to bed. It is rare thing to observe greatness of heart and it is ever rarer to observe it playing Nintendo.

Another time, my wife and I were having an anniversary and since we had no money to celebrate we were at home feeling sorry for ourselves and Randy and Barb drove up. They got out of their car both dressed like Italian waiters and came storming into our modest house talking in the worst combination of Alabama drawl and Italian accent you can imagine. They carried a large picnic basket and inside they had a whole array of things for our anniversary meal. They had a large checkered tablecloth and candles and wonderful food. They set our dining room table, opened a bottle of sparkling apple juice, it looked just like wine, wished us a happy anniversary and left as suddenly as they had come. It's the kind of picture you remember all your life.

Lastly, I would say that Randy had the heart of a lion. In the last few months of his life, Randy was visited by hundreds of people trying to demonstrate their genuine love and appreciation for his life and ministry. The amazing thing is that people always felt better after visiting Randy not because of what they could offer

him but rather because of what he managed to give in spite of his illness. He maintained his sense of humor and joy and he always made even the most self-conscious visitor feel at ease. A visit would always begin with tears of sorrow but always ended with tears of joy and gratitude for the life Christ had given. In an era where the average minister's tenure is less than two years, Randy Harwell demonstrated the results of a minister committing himself both to the gospel and a specific congregation. He believed in the gospel. He claimed he was no theologian, but his life and actions demonstrated that he was, in fact, a theologian of the first order. He believed that Christ's atoning work had cleansed him from all sin and that belief gave him the courage to just let his life hang out there where everybody could see it. We all liked what we saw.

Randy had, I think, the heart of Christ.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 13:13**... So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

¹ C.K. Barrett, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 292. Barrett writes, "The argument is rounded off with the comprehensive statement **Now you are Christ's body, and, individually** (this seems to be the meaning of ἐκ μέρους) **members**. Paul's main intention is still strictly practical. The members of a human body are various, and inter-related; they are diverse, but form a unity. This (as we have seen) had been said about other societies; it was certainly true about the Christian society, whose members differed in the gifts given to them and were, because the differences arose out of the action of a divine person, the more various and the more interdependent. But the very fact that they were, individually and collectively, constituted by spiritual gifts shows that they were not simply the body of Christians (which would have been a natural expression to use) but the *body of Christ*, since it was only in Christ that the spiritual gifts existed, and since the spiritual gifts were bestowed in order to make it possible for the human community to do the work of Christ. The genitive is not of identity but of possession and authority; not, the body which is Christ, of which Christ consists, but, the body that belongs to Christ, and over which he rules, separate from the body even though continuous with it."

² Gordon D. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians NICNT*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1987), pp. 623-4.

³ W.R.F. Browning, "aretalogy" in *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997) at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1O94-aretalogy.html>.

⁴ Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, (Crossroad Publishers: New York, 1987), pg. 88.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 13:1.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 13:3.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 13:10.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 13:12.

⁹ David E. Garland, *1st Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 622-3.