



151st Church of Christ
Small Group Study Guide – 1 CORINTHIANS
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AN IMPERFECT LOCAL CHURCH
A Study in 1 Corinthians
TEACHER – Lesson 19

GENERAL OUTLINE

1 Corinthians 12:1-14:40, Unity and spiritual gifts

OUTLINE: Lesson 19

1 Corinthians 13:1-13, The greatest gift

13:1-3, The imperative of love

13:4-7, The description of love

13:8-13, The endurance of love

Whenever the subject of miraculous gifts is the issue, we invariably run into passages that are difficult to understand and which produce much debate. To some extent, that is the case at the beginning and the end of 1 Corinthians 13. However, the heart of this chapter is the description of love in the middle section where understanding the meaning is not the problem. It probably is not accidental that the most important passage of the letter is the clearest, and the clearest is the hardest to live by.

Paul's purpose in this chapter is not to explain the exact nature of any or all the spiritual gifts that are mentioned, nor to give a precise prophecy of when such gifts will cease on the earth. His intent is to impress on the reader the absolute need to infuse all aspects of a person's life with the peculiar kind of love that was demonstrated by Christ and imitated by his followers. Every problem discussed in the letter required *agape* love (from the Greek word for love preferred by New Testament writers) to find improved church life. Whatever our discussions on secondary details of the chapter, we must not lose sight of Paul's primary message.

DISCUSSION

1 Corinthians 13:1-3, The imperative of love

1. Paul presents a series of gifts or actions in the first three verses.

a. What are they?

Speaking in tongues, prophecy (explained as understanding mysteries and knowledge), all faith, extreme generosity, voluntary martyrdom.

b. Which ones are miraculous?

All except generosity and martyrdom.

c. Which, if any, of these qualities does not describe Paul (as far as we know from Scripture)?

Paul didn't seek wealth and was concerned for the poor (especially Christians in Jerusalem), but we don't have record of his intentionally selling all he owned to feed the poor.

He died a martyr (we believe), but not by burning.

2. How would the Corinthians have viewed or valued a person who possessed these gifts and qualities? Note that the use of the word "and" rather than "or" to link the items suggests that Paul is describing someone who had all the qualities mentioned.

The Corinthians would have considered the person a "super-Christian" and would have most likely elevated that person in some way. We know that some Corinthian Christians had miraculous gifts, but it is unlikely that anyone there or elsewhere had all the qualities mentioned in this description. Paul creates an exaggerated "super-Christian" to prove a point.

3. What connection do you see between this idea (question # 2) and problems addressed in 1:12; 3:5-7; 11:21-22, 29?

In 1 Corinthians 1 and 3, Paul rebukes their tendency to divide over their preferred spiritual leaders possibly by comparing their respective gifts that they interpreted as producing a superior spirituality.

The Lord's Supper problems were caused by wanting to be with certain Christians but not with others. This discrimination may not have been related to spiritual gifts (more likely wealth) but it was still a form of congregational segregation that Paul repudiated.

4. How or why would someone have given generously and sacrificially to the poor other than because of a big, loving heart?

Various answers are possible, but ego and a desire to be thought "important" and superior to someone else would be among them (cf. Matthew 6:1-4).

5. Would the use of these gifts, or the practice of these praise-worthy actions, have brought benefit to the church or to individual members of the church if the gifted person lacked love? What does this tell us about Paul’s main concern?

The gifts were beneficial in and of themselves. The gift of prophecy blessed the congregation by the content of the message presented. A hungry person had his hunger relieved regardless of the motivation of the giver. But for Paul, there was something more important to consider.

The problem in chapter 13 is not so much about the gifts, but the perceived importance of the person who had the best or most gifts. Not to mention the arrogance of the gifted individuals themselves.

Paul was not criticizing or discouraging the use of the gifts. There is no question that the Corinthian church was blessed with many gifted people and with miraculous gifts. On this basis, it seems that they erroneously concluded that they were a supremely spiritual congregation. Paul wants them to understand that even with all their gifts, if they lacked love, their spiritual stature was nil.

6. Do we have any clear cases in the Bible where angels spoke in their own special languages? Are there cases where a human is said to have spoken in the “tongues of angels?”

I don’t know of any. Some commentators suggest that this is what Paul heard in 2 Corinthians 12:4. We should note however, that he also says that to speak the things he heard was “unlawful.”

If 1 Corinthians 13:1 means that some Christians had the gift of speaking angel languages, it is the only passage that does so. It is more likely that this is hypothetical, just as it is hypothetical that one person possessed all the traits listed in verses 1-3.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7, The description of love

7. Paul describes love in both positive and negative terms. Identify each.

a. Positive

Suffers long (is patient), is kind, bears/believes/hopes/endures all things.

b. Negative

Does not envy, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil, does not rejoice in iniquity

8. Which qualities of love do we know the Corinthians violated?

Puffed up: 4:18; 5:2; 8:1

Envy: 1:11-13 (cf. Philippians 1:15-16)

Seeking one's own interests: 6:7-8; 10:24, 33

Others: _____

9. Assuming that Paul doesn't contradict himself, how does the thought of 5:11 help understand what "thinks no evil" means (NIV: "keeps no record of wrongs"; ESV: "is not resentful")?

It doesn't mean that when someone sins, we shouldn't take note of it and deal with it appropriately. It means that we shouldn't be eager to find fault, and shouldn't keep a tally of things people do that offend us. Christians should give each other the "benefit of the doubt."

10. How does Paul's teaching about love relate to the problems of 8:9-13 and 11:17-34?

In 8:9-13, Paul counsels against going to banquets in pagan temples out of love and concern for a brother in Christ whose faith would be weakened by that example.

In 11:17-34, various members excluded others from their meals and Lord's Supper observance because of socio-economic differences. Love would override such issues, and cause them not only to eat together, but to want to eat together.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13, The endurance of love

11. The idea in verses 8-10 goes beyond the question of which items will last the longest. What point that is fundamental to the entire chapter is Paul driving home when he states that love will never fail, but these other things will cease, vanish or be put away?

The main idea is not merely that love is more lasting, but it is inherently superior and more spiritual.

Note: The Greek word for fail in "love never fails" is *ekpipto* and is used only for love. In prophecies will "fail," knowledge will "vanish away," what is in part will "be done away," and "I put away" childish things (NKJV), the key word is *katargeo*, and "cease" in "tongues will cease" is the word *pauo*.

**12. There is great debate over the meaning of “that which is perfect” in verse 10. What different options and timing for “perfection” are suggested in the New Testament? (The Greek word translated “perfect” is *teleion*). *Teleion* is used in the following verses:
By Jesus: Matthew 5:48; 19:21
By Paul: Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:6; 13:10; 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15; Colossians 1:28; 4:12
Others: Hebrew 5:14; 9:11; James 1:4, 17, 25; 3:2; 1 John 4:18**

Teleion can mean “perfect” as in without fault, but usually means complete or mature.

Jesus seems to use the word to imply a high level of godliness. His call for perfection seems to indicate that it is attainable, which would tend to rule out the total absence of imperfection. This would also fit Romans 12:2 and James 3:2.

Several of the passages would fit the meaning of mature in faith and commitment to God (e.g., 1 Corinthians 14:20; Colossians 4:12; James 1:4).

Several passages make some connection with wisdom or knowledge (e.g., 1 Corinthians 2:6; 13:9-10; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:15).

The “law of God” is mentioned in James 1:25. This, along with the idea of knowledge, has led many to conclude that the perfect of 1 Corinthians 13 is the completed New Testament.

Others see a very God-guided love as the meaning (1 Cor 13; 1 John 4:18).

Ephesians 4:13 can also be taken as a reference to the maturity of the church, which was brought about by the work of the apostles and other inspired Christians of the 1st century. This would coincide with the completion of the New Testament, the adulthood of the church without the legal protection as a sect of Judaism, the fall of Jerusalem approximately 40 years after the church was started in Acts 2, and the gradual passing of the apostles and those on whom the apostles had laid hands to confer miraculous powers. The “perfect” could then refer to the situation when all of these elements were in place.

13. How long do faith, hope and love abide in relation to the miraculous gifts of prophecies, tongues and (miraculous) knowledge in verse 8?

Love will continue into eternity. Faith and hope will no longer be needed in heaven since we will have that for which we have believed and hoped (2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:1).

Paul implies that all three (faith, hope and love) outlast miraculous gifts. If so, this would suggest that miraculous gifts ceased (or will cease) prior to Christ’s return.

14. Discuss and share ideas about how important and useful miraculous gifts, including multiple languages (for teaching the lost), prophecy (i.e., inspired teaching), and inspired knowledge and understanding, would have been in the early church before the New Testament was written and circulated, and when the church was populated entirely by recent converts.

Even today, when studying written Scripture and discussing spiritual subjects, we run into many difficulties of understanding. Even with members who have been raised “in the church” many congregations still have difficulty finding qualified men to serve as elders.

The early church depended on oral transmission for teaching about Christ and about life in the church. Verifying and validating such teaching would have been difficult without written documents. Developing mature spiritual leaders would take time in a culture completely void of prior Christian influence. The boost provided by miraculous gifts in the early years would have been extremely useful for the edification of local congregations, which is exactly the purpose that Paul will identify in chapter 14 for such gifts. (We will take a closer look in the next lesson at the nature of “tongues.”)

15. The opening verses (1-3) and closing verses (8-13) of the chapter have the same main message. This chapter is something of a sandwich with the meat in the middle (vv. 4-7), and the bread on either side. What is that main message?

Whatever it is that we want to elevate and choose as the proof of our spirituality, it cannot compete with love. Love is greater, more important and longer lasting.

Miraculous gifts, including how long they were to last in the history of the church, are not the main message. We must not forget this as we study the chapter.