

Overview of I Corinthians 13: The Apostle continues addressing the misuse of the interim spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth. As noted in the last chapter, there was covetousness over what was perceived to be the best gift. The more excellent way about to be portrayed was to have a spirit of agape-love. Paul then concludes the chapter by pointing out that when the completed New Testament arrived, the temporary interim gifts would fade away.

13:1 Before showing the more excellent way, Paul laid an introductory background. He proposed, **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.** Some have sought to make a point about speaking with the tongues (languages) of angels, alleging this is the ‘gift of tongues.’ However, there is absolutely no other scriptural support for this view. Moreover, the context does not support it either. To the contrary, the context clearly presents the contrast he is noting. He is essentially saying, ‘Even if I could speak like an angel and have not love, etc.’ The point of the chapter is to focus on love rather than tongues. The gift of tongues likely is in view, but the mention of angels is merely for added emphasis to make a greater contrast of the point he is seeking to make.

Throughout the chapter, the Apostle will use the word translated as **charity**. It is translated from the word (αγαπη) *agape* and is otherwise most frequently translated as ‘love.’ It is the highest level of spiritual love in which one gives of himself for another.

He uses the metaphor of “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” The scenario alluded to very well may have been the ubiquitous, oriental bazaars with which Paul was so familiar. Merchants would hire musicians to play tinny brass instruments and their small cymbals as ‘background music’ in the market. It provided a more festive atmosphere in attracting shoppers. But

it also was the sound of crass commercialism and hucksters at work. The greater point Paul is making is that without love, what we say has no more credibility than a huckster in a bazaar with his tinny oriental music jangling in the background. The lack of such love in the Corinthian church is apparent.

13:2 In that same vein, he writes, **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.***

The Apostle then shifts to the gift of prophecy though the word *gift* does not appear in the text. Even if through the interim gift of prophecy he could understand all spiritual mysteries, and through the gift of knowledge fully understand the things of God; if they were not exercised in love, he and his ministry would be as nothing. The reference to *faith* likely refers to the interim gift of faith mentioned in 12:9. Thus, even if he had faith to such a degree he could move mountains, without it being exercised in love, he and his ministry were as nothing. The allusion to Matthew 17:20, where Jesus spoke of even little faith being able to move mountains, is obvious. Spiritual gifts exercised in a vacuum, devoid of love, were less than worthless. They in fact caused spiritual damage.

13:3 He continues, **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.*** Moreover, even if he went through the motions of ‘charity’ in giving all he had to feed the needy; without a heart and motive of true love, such actions amounted to zero. And even if he surrendered to be burned at the stake as a religious work, without godly love, the advantage was zero. The greater point Paul is making is that serving God or man without a heart of love is empty, hollow, and vain. This was another problem in the Corinthian church.

13:4 -7 Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, 5 Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; 6 Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; 7 Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Though the following is often quoted in the context of marriage or other personal relationships, the context clearly is of love in the church. The former is not wrong. In fact, *agape*-love whether in marriage, the church, or otherwise is better described here than perhaps any other one place. But the direct context is of *agape*-love and its lack in the Corinthian church. Sixteen virtues directly related to *agape*-love are noted below. In each case that the word *charity* appears, it is translated from (αγαπη) *agape*. We will thus render it as ‘*agape*-love.’

(1) **Charity suffereth long.** The word translated as **suffereth long** (μακροθυμew *makothumbew*) essentially refers to being patient. (2) *Agape*-love is **kind**. The word so translated (χρηστευομαι *chresteuomai*) has the additional sense to ‘have gentleness of spirit.’ (3) *Agape*-love **envieth not**. The word thus translated (ζηλοω *zeloo*) has the sense to ‘burn with envy, ha-tred, or anger.’ *Agape*-love does not. (4) *Agape*-love **vaunteth not itself**. The word so translated (περπερευομαι *perpereu-omai*) has the idea of being rash or of boasting. Again, true love does the opposite.

(5) *Agape*-love is not **puffed up**. The latter is translated from (φυσισιω) *phusioo* and has the idea of being inflated by pride—a big head. (6) *Agape*-love does not **behave itself unseemly**. The word thus translated (ασχηνονew *aschemoneo*) has the idea of behaving inappropriately or improperly. True love does the opposite. (7) *Agape*-love **seeketh not her own**. The thought is simple. *Agape*-love is not selfish. (8) *Agape*-love is not **easily provoked**. Such love will preclude the loss of temper or the sudden eruption of anger. *Agape*-love overrules negative emotions. (9) *Agape*-love **thinketh no evil**. The idea

likely is, *agape*-love does not think evil thoughts regarding others. (10) *Agape*-love **rejoiceth not in iniquity**. It is sad-denied by unrighteousness.

(11) In contrast, *agape*-love **rejoiceth in the truth**. It abhors dishonesty. (12) *Agape*-love **beareth all things**. The word so translated (στεγῶ *stego*) has not only the thought of putting up with the faults of another, but even of covering them. Peter wrote, “for charity shall cover the multitude of sins” I Peter 4:8. (13) *Agape*-love **believeth all things**. Such love is trusting and is the antithesis of suspicion. (14) In a similar vein, *agape*-love **hopeth all things**. *Agape*-love thinks the best and hopes thereto. It never gives up hope. (15) *Agape*-love **endureth all things**. The word so translated (ὑπομένω *hupomeno*) has the sense of persevering. *Agape*-love does not give up. Finally, (16) *agape*-love **never faileth**. The word so translated (ἐκπίπτω *ekpipto*) literally means to ‘fall off.’ The greater idea is that *agape*-love does not quit. It does not give up. It does not wither away.

It is helpful to recall that these sixteen virtues are recorded within the context of the Corinthian church. More specifically, they relate to the friction and pride over who had the best gift. *Agape*-love is the more excellent way. The Corinthian church needed to love each other rather than vie for what they considered were the best gifts.

13:8 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.

Though *agape*-love is enduring, not withering away, “whether *there be* prophecies, they shall fail.” Here, the word translated as **fail** (καταργεῶ *katargeo*) has the sense of being ‘abolished’ or of ‘ceasing.’ What the Apostle is speaking of is the interim gift of prophecy. Love endures, but the various interim gifts of the Holy Spirit, in this case prophecy, shall fail. It would be abolished! It would cease!

“Whether *there be* tongues, they shall cease.” Once again, the word translated as **tongues** (γλωσσα *glossa*) is the common Greek word for languages. The Apostle is not suggesting human languages as such were about to cease. Rather, he is speaking of the *interim gift* of tongues. The word translated as **shall cease** (παυω *pauo*) has the additional sense to ‘leave off.’ Paul in effect wrote, the day is coming when the gift of tongues will leave off or fade away.

“Whether *there be* knowledge, it shall vanish away.” Again, he is not indicating that knowledge in general is going to vanish away. Common experience makes that clear. Rather, he is again speaking of the *interim gift* of knowledge as described in 12:8. The day was soon coming when that gift along with others would simply **vanish away**. The word so translated (καταργεω *katargeo*) is the same as rendered *fail* earlier in the verse. It again has the sense of being ‘abolished’ or of ‘ceasing.’

The greater point the Apostle is making is that the day was not far off when the various interim gifts of the Holy Spirit would cease. The reason why will be made clear in verse 10. Thus, rather than fighting and feuding over who had the best gift, Paul said they all were going to fade away soon. They were fighting over something which was only temporary.

13:9 Referring back to the gifts of knowledge and prophecy, he wrote, **For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.** The thought is how they only had partial knowledge of the things of God. Moreover, even with the gift of prophecy, they only had incomplete knowledge of the truth. The interim gifts, though helpful, were not comprehensive. No one individual or church saw the whole picture. They only knew of a part.

13:10 Paul now reveals why these various spiritual gifts were partial and temporary. **But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.** There

certainly has been misunderstanding of this passage. However, a close look will make clear the intent thereof. The key word is that which is translated as **perfect** (τελειος *teleios*). It has the sense of ‘complete’ or ‘finished.’

Some have mistakenly thought the reference is to Christ in His return. However, the gender thereof is neuter. Rules of grammar therefore dictate that the word must refer to a *thing* or *object* and not a person. The solution to the riddle is found in the completed New Testament. Upon the completion thereof, “that which is in part” began to fade away. As the perfect law of liberty (James 2:25) was completed, the various, interim spiritual gifts to the early church were **done away**. As in verse 8, the word so translated is again (καταργεω) *katargeo* and has the sense of ‘being abolished.’ One variant to that purpose will be noted in 14:21-22. The simple truth is, as the New Testament was completed, *all* of the interim gifts of the Spirit to the early church faded away. Something far better had arrived.

13:11 The Apostle further illustrates the matter. **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.** His point is simple. The immaturity of childhood is displaced by the maturity of adulthood. There is further ‘play’ on words. The phrase “put away” is translated from (καταργεω) *katargeo* which he used in verses 8 and 10, referring to the abolition of the gifts. The illustration is singular. As the church matured and with the completion of the New Testament, the adolescent interim gifts of the Spirit likewise were put away (abolished).

13:12 In that same vein Paul notes, **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.** The word translated as **glass** (εσοπτρον *esoptron*) literally refers to

a mirror. The ancients did not have the technology to make useful mirrors from glass. Rather, they were made from polished metal. Of course, the imagery thereon was not clear, but somewhat fuzzy. The word translated as **darkly** (αἰνιγμα *ainigma*) is whence the English word *enigma* derives. Here it has the sense of ‘not clearly,’ or as the Authorized Version renders it, *darkly*. The idea was of the obtuse imagery of ancient mirrors. The application was to the limited degree of spiritual understanding and knowledge present in the early church ab-sent the New Testament.

However, the day was coming when they would see “face to face.” His point is simple. Though in spite of God’s gracious gifts to the early church, their understanding and grasp of New-Testament truth was like looking into a polished piece of metal as a mirror. The image was there, but not clear. However, the day was not distant when their understanding would be like seeing face to face. He continued, in that day I “shall know even as also I am known.” When the New Testament was completed, their knowledge of things spiritual would be as sharp as seeing each other face to face.

13:13 He finished the thought with the conclusion: **And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.** Though faith, hope, and charity (*agape*-love) would remain after the cessation of the various spiritual gifts, Paul’s contention was that the greatest of the three was *agape*-love. It was that which the Corinthian church sorely lacked.

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Overview of I Corinthians 14: The Apostle Paul concludes this section regarding the abuse of spiritual gifts in the Corinth-