

“GROW UP: LIFE LESSONS FROM FIRST CORINTHIANS
(#4 – THE GREATEST OF THESE...)”

(1 Corinthians 13:1-13)

© 2011 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[PROP NEEDED: SermonSpice.com Video “Love Never Fails”]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 10-2-11]

--I--

1. [Traditional Service ONLY] Read Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Pray.
[Contemp. Service ONLY – **WATCH SCRIPTURE VIDEO “Love Never Fails”**
(from SermonSpice.com, showing all words of 1 Cor. 13:1-13), Time: 3:21]
2. [Sing these titles at Contemp. Service???...] “*All You Need is Love*” (The Beatles), “*What The World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love*” (Jackie DeShannon), “*I Want To Know What Love Is*” (Foreigner), “*Love Is A Battlefield*” (Pat Benatar), “*The Power of Love*” (Huey Lewis and the News)... and I could go on and on.

A--But you know, there’s probably no more popular subject among poets and songwriters than that of “Love” -- it’s “theme topic” (if you will) of our entire civilization.

B--And yet, what *IS* love -- real, mature, “grown up” love? What are its characteristics? And how should we practice it in our daily lives?

3. Well, we today are not the first to ask that question. In fact, it was foremost in the minds of people 2000 years ago when the New Testament of our Bible was being written.

A--As an example, as we continue our series on the book of First Corinthians, today we turn our attention to Chapters 12-14, where the apostle Paul is writing advice to Christians in the Greek city of Corinth about their need to “*Grow Up*” in their understanding and practice of LOVE.¹

B--And from *his* words here, I think we’ll find good counsel for our *own* lives, as well.
(*Sermon notes in bulletin, past sermons, study outline & Bible Study notes in Narthex & on my blog, & each week I’ve been giving you Homework Chapters -- this week read Chapters 15-16*)

--II--

4. Let’s begin by recognizing that while many of us may have heard Paul’s eloquent words about love in his famous “*Love Chapter*” (Chapter 13), what is *not* as well known is his reason/context for writing them. So, let me help with that:

A--First, we have to understand that throughout the Mediterranean, Christians of Paul’s day were challenged by two opposing dangers dealing with what’s known as the “*Gifts of the Holy Spirit / Spiritual Gifts*” (we still face both of these today):

(#1) “*Charis-phobia*”²: the *fear* of spiritual gifts, thinking that they’re the realm of fanatic Christians who aren’t very educated or cultured, and so these “gifts” are written off as manipulative *gimmicks* (or at least as *irrelevant* to faith).

(#2) “*Charis-mania*”³: the *misuse/abuse* of the spiritual gifts in showy, flashy ways to the point where people are judged as “spiritual” or not by how many (and which) spiritual gifts they possess.

B--Now, the problem in the Corinthian church was the latter (“*Charis-mania*”), & Paul’s words in Chapters 12-14 are meant not only to correct their misunderstanding *about* the spiritual gifts, but also to correct their *use* of them.

5. Chapter 12 essentially does the first of these: In it, Paul describes the nature and meaning of spiritual gifts as an example of *unity in diversity* through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴

A--It’s here’s that we find the famous metaphor of God’s Church as the “*Body of Christ*” -- with many parts, but one body working together (and it’s that ONE body, by the way, that we celebrate here today on what we call “*World Communion Sunday*”).⁵

B--In this chapter, he also describes several types of spiritual gifts to illustrate how they’re all just manifestations of the one Spirit of God: “*Ordinary/Equipping gifts*,” like teaching, helping, and leadership; and also what has come to be called the “*Extraordinary/Ecstatic gifts*,” like healing, miracles, and tongues.⁶

6. And then, skipping a chapter, we have *Chapter 14*, which corrects how the spiritual gifts were being *misused/abused* by the Corinthians.

A--In this case, there were *two* gifts that were causing the problems (“*Tongues*” and “*Prophecy*”⁷), and most likely there was a small group of women in this church (and in many others of that day) who were the main abusers of those two gifts.

B--So, in this chapter Paul not only describes how “*Tongues*” and “*Prophecy*” are to be properly *used* within corporate worship, but also places limits on the women at Corinth who are *misusing* them and causing conflict and disorder.⁸

[Please Notice: His words about women in 14:33-36 are not meant to be applied *literally* to *all* women in *all* places or times (as some Christians teach today), but only to *these* women who are causing the conflict⁹ -- Paul is *not* the male chauvinist that some people make him out to be!]

C--No. His point is that even though Christian worship *should be* guided by God’s Holy Spirit, there still has to be “orderliness” *so that* visitors and guests can see God at work and be drawn to Him.¹⁰

7. So, now let’s backtrack to Chapter 13, which offers beautiful, poetic words that talk about (in Vss. 1-3) the importance of “mature/”grown up,” unselfish love (Greek: *agape*), words which describe some of the characteristics of *agape* (Verses 4-8a, often heard at weddings), and words which remind us of the permanence of *agape* (Verses 8b-13).¹¹

A--Now, at first glance, this whole chapter appears to be out of place: E.G., Chapter 12 explains the *nature/meaning* of spiritual gifts; Ch. 14 talks about the proper *use of* two of those gifts; and in between, Ch.13 shares flowery words about “*agape/love.*”¹²

B--It must be mistake, right? ... or is it?

1--Could it be that by its very placement between these two chapters, Paul is trying to teach the Corinthian Christians something about *how* the spiritual gifts are to be properly understood and used?¹³

2--Could he be saying that the kind of love described in Ch. 13 is the “meat” of the sandwich (so to speak) for which the gifts of the Holy Spirit are merely the “bread”?

3-- Could this be Paul’s way of saying (to them *and* to us today) that **all we say and do as Christians** (including our practice of spiritual gifts) **should be guided by AGAPE LOVE**¹⁴ -- that it should be the “heart” of our faith practice?

--III--

8. I think that’s *precisely* what he was saying, and I don’t know about you, but the challenge he therefore sets forth for us as Christians to follow is pretty intimidating.

A--To show what I mean, I want to invite you to take a “**Love Test**” with me...

1--In your bulletin & on the media screen, you’ll find the words of Ch. 13:4-8a.

2--I want us to read it *in unison* out loud. But everywhere there’s a *blank*, I want you to call out your *first name* in that space.

3--And then, as we read these verses together, ask yourself honestly, “*How well do I fit the description of myself that I’m reading*”? ...Ready?...

B-- “_____ is patient; _____ is kind; _____ is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. _____ does not insist on his or her own way; _____ is not irritable or resentful; _____ does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. _____ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The love of _____ never ends.”¹⁵

C--So, how do you feel? If you’re like me, you feel pretty hypocritical about now, because I know that I *don’t* live up to all those characteristics all the time.

1--But what we need to understand is that Paul isn’t calling for absolute perfection. Instead, he’s giving us a *standard / a goal* to shoot for.

2--And he’s asking the Corinthians (& us) to make a conscious effort to be *more intentional* about practicing this kind of *agape* love in our dealings not only with one another, but also with people who’re *not yet* followers of Jesus.

3--One suggestion I’ve found helpful is to take just ONE of the qualities in Verses 4-8 and focus on it over a period of time (like the next month, or during a spiritual season like Advent or Lent), and then move on to another, & so on.¹⁶

D--But however we do it, Paul's intention is to help us understand that at the *heart* of who we are and what we do as Christians should be a person at least *generally* marked by the characteristics of *agape* love described here.

--IV--

9. You see, today's chapters tell us that it doesn't matter how "spiritual" we claim to be, how many spiritual gifts we possess or use, how theologically knowledgeable or "correct" we are, how many Bible verses we can quote, or even how regularly we darken the doors of a church building.

A--No. "*If we don't follow the way of love,*" then we're nothing, nobody, bankrupt!

B--And when describing mature, "Grown Up" Christians, Jesus himself said, "*You shall know them by their fruits.*" (Matthew 7:16 & 7:20)

C--Well, according to Paul in today's scripture, the "*Greatest of These [Fruits]... is LOVE*" (1 Cor. 13:13).

D--So, it begs the question that I want to leave us with: How loving -- how *really* loving -- are you and I? And how will we allow God to help us improve?

14. [PRAYER: "*O God, forgive us for sometimes being so concerned about being 'right' and being 'spiritual' that we come across to others as unloving. Help us remember that the heart of who we are and what we're called to do and be is people of agape love – to know that you're not calling us always to be perfect in action, but to always strive to have a perfect intention of love towards others, even when the execution of that intention is less than perfect. Jesus, in your own life here on earth, you gave us the greatest example of the kind of love we've talked about today. So help us to look at how you loved, and then to do our best to imitate you in that love for others. We know that none of this is possible in our own strength, so we ask for your Holy Spirit to empower us towards its accomplishment. And we'll give you all the praise and glory, in the holy name of Jesus we pray, Amen.*"]
15. ["World Communion Sunday" HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

¹ It should be noted that today's chapters (1 Corinthians 12-14) have come to be among the most famous (and infamous) of all chapters in the entire Bible. *Without* them, for example, we would not have the popular "Love Chapter" that we often hear at weddings, and God's Church might not be sometimes called the "*Body of Christ*" (that metaphor comes from these chapters). *Without* them, we also may never have heard of certain "controversial" spiritual practices like "tongues" and "prophecy."

² "*Charis*" (Greek "*Gift*"). "*Phobia*" (from Latin "*exaggerated, illogical fear of*")

³ "*Charis*" (Greek "*Gift*"). "*Mania*" (Middle English from Latin "*excessive, unreasonable enthusiasm for*")

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:1-11.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:28-30.

⁷ Although the gift of “Tongues” is sometimes defined as an unlearned human language (as in Acts 2:4), here the context seems to indicate that in this case, Paul does not use “Tongues” to refer to any known human language, but as unintelligible human speech that has spiritual/heavenly meaning. Likewise, the gift of “Prophecy” as used here by Paul does *not* refer to mere preaching or teaching (as some people have argued), but to the sharing of God’s truth with others -- as I’ve heard it said before, biblical prophecy is *not* “fore-telling the future” but “forth-telling God’s truth/Word.”

⁸ Chapter 14:1-25 generally talks about the proper use of “Tongues” and “Prophecy” in corporate worship, and Chapter 14:26-40 describe the importance of “orderliness” in worship. Evidently, in the Corinthian church, some women were using these two spiritual gifts (“Tongues” and “Prophecy”) to highlight how spiritual and connected they were to God, and how unspiritual others were who did not possess and/or use those gifts. In doing so, they were causing disruption, conflict, and disorder not only in worship, but also in the Corinthian church, in general. So, Paul’s point here in Chapter 14 is that such arrogance does not reflect maturity, and that the Corinthian women who are misusing these gifts need to “grow up”/mature in their faith by learning to better practice the way of love.

⁹ His words about “*silence*” (Vs. 34) are also meant to be applied to women “*in all the churches of the saints*” (Vs. 33) who are causing conflict and disorder in the same kind of way as are the disorderly women in Corinth. The very *context* of Verse 33 disqualifies any meaning that would imply that Paul’s words here are meant to refer to *all* Christian women *anywhere, anytime* (though this very literal meaning is precisely what some believers have argued -- I believe that to be an incorrect and misunderstood interpretation of scripture).

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:26-40.

¹¹ It should be noted that whereas in English our *one* word “love” can have many different meanings (determined by the context), the ancient Greek language (which was the “international” language of the first-century), contains *four* different words for “love”:

(#1) **Storge** (sometimes transliterated as “*philostorgos*”) -- the cherishing of one’s kindred/relatives, especially referring to the love between parents and children (by implication, fraternal spirit towards fellow Christians as “kindred” in Christ). This term itself doesn’t appear anywhere in the New Testament or in other early Christian writings. However, its meaning is nevertheless implied in numerous places, as when we are encouraged to consider the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and in our thinking of God as “Father.”

(#2) **Philia** (*phile*), sometimes translated as “brotherly love” (Gk. *philadelphia*), “to have a friendship, affection, or fondness for; to *like*” -- as in, “I like ice cream, my dog, my friend, etc.” *Philia* and a derivative of it appear only six times in the New Testament (Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 1 Pet. 3:8; 2 Pet. 1:7). In the Old Testament, the concept of this kind of “love” is found most prominently in the covenant friendship between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:1-3).

(#3) **Eros**, sometimes thought of as sexual desire (hence the English word “erotic”), but more accurately merely refers to the desire for something that one does not possess (i.e., it is selfish desire = desire for one’s own well-being. Like “*storge*”, “*eros*” does not appear anywhere in the New Testament, although its effects are once again implied in its various ethical teachings.

(#4) **Agape**, unselfish, loyal, and benevolent concern for the well-being of another = self-giving love; selfless desire = desire for the good of another. This is the term for “love” that is most used in the New Testament (and its equivalent in Old Testament Hebrew term *ahab*). Other places in the New Testament where we find this concept described in detail are: 1 John 4:9-10 and Romans 5:8. It should be noted that in the King James Version of the Bible, *agape* is translated as the English word “charity,” which comes from the Latin *caritas* (literally “dearness, affection,” “high regard,” or “benevolence”).

As a whole, New Testament writers seem to indicate that each of these types/kinds of “love” all have their proper place in human life. For example, in a marriage relationship, there should be a balanced *combination* of both *eros* and *agape* (therefore, one should not view them strictly as opposites of each other). For Paul, however, the highest and noblest description of “love” is *agape*.

¹² This apparent break in subject matter between Chapters 12 and 14 (coupled with the fact that the practical and detailed advice found in Chapters 12 and 14 are missing from Chapter 13), have caused some scholars to question whether or not Paul even *wrote* Chapter 13. Some feel that either he *didn't* write it, or that perhaps he wrote it at a later time. I, however, believe it is authentically from Paul, and that it is placed precisely where he intended, as my sermon goes on to point out.

¹³ Note also that Chapter 12 ends in verse 31 with Paul's references to the "greater / higher gifts" and a "more/most excellent way" – these phrases are obviously meant to bridge the subject-matter in Chapter 12 *to* the subject-matter found in Chapter 13. This further supports the notion that Chapter 13 is authentically Pauline and its placement between Chapters 12 and 14 is intentional. It should be noted here that although Paul refers to love within the context of spiritual "gifts," neither he nor any other New Testament writer considers "love" to be a "spiritual gift," *per se*. Instead, Paul and others view love more correctly to be a spiritual "fruit" (Read Galatians 5:22).

¹⁴ The context of Chapter 13 seems to imply that Paul felt that the "gifts of the Holy Spirit/spiritual gifts" can be possessed and practiced *without* the manifestation of love: up to this point in the entire letter, he implies that the Corinthians were so distracted with contentions, divided by parties, and envious of each other's spiritual gifts, that their essential unity in Christ was nearly destroyed. So, in these verses, Paul attempts to correct that misunderstanding by stating that *agape* / "love" should be the standard by which all "gifts of the Holy Spirit/spiritual gifts" are to be measured.

¹⁵ It should be noted that although Jesus is never mentioned in Chapter 13, the characteristics of love listed in its verses accurately describe the *agape* love of Christ in detail.

¹⁶ Another suggestion is, in any particular challenging situation, ask yourself WWLD? ("*What Would Love Do?*")