

Agape 1 Corinthians 13

Although chapter 13 seems to divide Paul's main thought on the use of the spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14, it actually fits in perfectly where it is. Chapters 12–14 should be read as a unit for a fuller understanding of the failures of the Corinthians church, and how members of the Body of Christ need to work together for the common good. Their lack of love for each other led to many failures within their church, and was an indicator of their spiritual condition.

Charity, agape, phileo

Throughout chapter 13, the Greek word *agape* is translated by the English word *charity* in many versions of the Bible. Most people have been taught that *agape* is the highest form of love that is displayed from God toward man, and that *phileo* is a lesser form of love between people. *Agape* love is often said to be godly love and *phileo* is brotherly love. As with many other traditional teachings, it is not that cut-and-dry. These traditions of the Christian faith usually begin with a well-respected pastor or teacher telling us what the Bible says (or even what Bible we need to read), and these non-biblical ideas often take precedent over sound biblically based teaching. As soon as anyone leaves the Bible, which is our only trusted basis of truth, error will creep in and will ultimately lead to division between believers. If the Bible does not specifically teach a particular doctrine, then we cannot be absolutely dogmatic about believing that so-called doctrine, even if it is espoused by the most respected mid-Acts teacher on the planet. Believers need to approach any bible teacher with a good amount of skepticism and verify all teaching with Scripture, rightly divided.

This idea of agape vs. phileo is usually explained using John 21 which shows Jesus asking Peter if he agape loves Him, and Peter responding that Jesus knows that he phileo loves Him. This sounds good on the surface, but the rest of the Bible must be used to determine if this is the correct interpretation.

The Bible uses *phileo* love to describe the manner in which the Pharisees prayed (they loved to pray Matthew 6:5), to show God's love for man (John 16:27), to show God's love for the Son (John 5:20), and to characterize Jesus' love of Lazarus (John 11:36). *Agape* love is used to describe the depth of affection between believers (John 13:35), between God and the Son and the Son toward believers (John 15:9), of Paul for the saints (1 Corinthians 16:24), and between saints (1 Thessalonians 3:12), to name a few. There are about four times more references using agape than phileo.

Notice that when referring to God's love for man and for the Son, that the Bible uses both agape and phileo (compare Romans 8:39 and Ephesians 3:19 with John 16:27 and Revelation 3:19). Also, both agape and phileo are used to describe love between believers (compare 1 Corinthians 16:14 and Colossians 1:4 with Titus 3:15). There actually appears to be very little difference between the two Greek words, and either one could be used when talking about love. John 21:15–17 seems to actually prove the interchangeability of these two words when Jesus confronts Peter about his love for Him. Jesus uses agape the first two times He asks Peter if he loves Him and Peter says, "You know I *phileo* you." The last time Jesus asks Peter if he loves (phileo) Him, Peter was grieved because Jesus asked him THREE times if he loved Him (verse 17). If these words had two different meaning, then why did Peter respond that Jesus asked him three times if he loved Him? Instead of trying to make this interaction between Jesus and Peter into two levels of love, it makes more sense to see how Peter would be a bit offended that Jesus had to ask his three times if he loved Him. This conversation loses nothing by understanding that Jesus was getting Peter ready to step in as head of the Little Flock of believers when Jesus is gone from this world. It was affirmation that Jesus had picked Peter for a special purpose.

Definition of love

1 Corinthians 13 gives both a positive and negative definition of love. It is patient (long suffering, not quick to give up), and kind (willing to step in and help). On the negative side, love does not envy (literally to desire with much zeal, to covet), it does not brag (boasting to make yourself look good), nor is it arrogant (to inflate yourself. The Greek word for bragging is used seven times by Paul, six of those times it was directed toward the Corinthians, showing that this was a major problem among those within the assembly). Love also will not act in an indecent way (an action done against another person), will not cause one to seek ways to benefit only themselves over another person (literally: To crave self), does not rejoice in wrongs (in context, does not take glee in seeing someone who irritates you getting unjustly hurt or accused), but instead rejoices in the truth.

Paul then sums up the traits of a person who truly loves others. The person who truly loves others will bear all things and endure all things (1 Corinthians 12:7). How you react to other people is a good indicator of your spiritual maturity. Those who truly love others, desiring the best for them, will let go of all the little hurts that come their way. They will bear up under the negative things that people do and will continue to do the right and godly things. They will endure living around those who are inflating themselves at the expense of other people. Notice that the four words are arranged in a very purposeful manner. We are to bear all things and endure all things by means of the two words inserted between the bearing and enduring. We are able to bear and endure by believing and hoping. If we stand strong in our doctrine, we will have assurance of our hope and of our eternal future. Instead of looking at all the little problems of life, we will be able to move past them knowing that we are secure in Christ. The problems of this life will end up being just short-lived impositions (2 Corinthians 4:17).

A proper understanding of 1 Corinthians 13 requires an understanding of the word *love*, and the context in which this chapter resides. The word *charity* has changed its meaning over the years and no longer carries the intensity that was intended. When the Bible speaks of love, it can usually be understood in terms of doing what is best for the other person. When Scripture says that God loves us, it means He will do what is best for us. When we are told to love our neighbor we are to do what is best for them. Love is not a feeling, it is a “doing.” If we love, we will do, and we will do what is best for the other person. This is what edification is all about. What good would God’s love toward man be if He didn’t put action to that love and send His Son to earth to die for our sins (Romans 5:8; John 15:13). Love without action is merely sympathy.

When Paul tells the Corinthians that the greatest of these things is love, he means that gifts used without the proper motivation and focus is worthless. All of the gifts were to be used to build up everyone else, not for personal gain. Paul stressed that the Corinthians needed to employ these gifts out of love for each other. Instead, they were completely focused on their own needs and desires with little or no regard for others. The opposite of true love is not hate, it is focusing on edifying yourself, on self-esteem, on loving yourself. Contrary to what the world teaches, a true biblical love is not about self love and being fulfilled, but about helping others grow spiritually. Paul was teaching them that spiritual gifts are worthless unless used properly with love for others.

The best gifts

Paul spends all of chapter 12 explaining the proper use of the spiritual gifts. All the gifts given to the church are to be used for the benefit of all the other members. The nine spiritual gifts listed in verses 8–10 are only a portion of the gifts given to the church for its proper functioning. There are additional gifts of people given to the church listed in verses 28; apostles, prophets, and teachers. Apostles were given broad authority over churches. Prophets were chosen by God to be the bearer of the revelation of His word to congregations. Teachers were able to lead people to understand what His word meant. These

gifts of people are followed by some of the gifts of the Spirit. These same people gifts (plus the gift of evangelist) are listed in Ephesians 4:11, but this time the spiritual gifts are not listed because they had passed away, as promised by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

The spiritual gifts are listed in the order of importance from wisdom through tongues. The Corinthian church was putting the emphasis on tongues as being most important, but Paul tells them that they need to have zeal for the greater gifts, implying that the more important gifts were being ignored. When they are told to covet earnestly for the best gifts, that does not mean that they were to wish they had a different and better spiritual gift, but that they were to understand that some gifts played a more important role in the church, and that they were to emphasize these more important gifts. The more important gifts were ones which elevated the preservation and dissemination of Pauline doctrine. It should be obvious that apostles, prophets and teachers would be very important to a church before Scripture was completed, and that the spiritual gifts of wisdom and knowledge would eclipse the gifts of tongues and interpretation of tongues.

Some verses which exemplify biblical love

Galatians 5:13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only *use* not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

Ephesians 4:2–3 ²With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love ³endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Philippians 2:2–4 ²Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. ³Let nothing *be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. ⁴Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Colossians 3:12–17

Use of agape and phileo in the Bible

- Love between Christians (man to man)
agape: John 13:35; 1 Corinthians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 16:14; Colossians 1:4
phileo: Titus 3:15
- Paul's love for the saints (man to man)
agape: 1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Corinthians 2:4; 2 Timothy 3:10
phileo:
- Love of God for man (God toward men)
agape: Romans 8:39; Ephesians 3:19; 1 John 3:17
phileo: John 16:27; Revelation 3:19
- The love of man toward God
agape:
phileo: 1 Corinthians 16:22
- The Love of the Father for the Son (God toward God)
agape:
phileo: John 5:20

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