

Lifeword.org

“Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (I Corinthians 13:13).

The Vital Principle

Central Truth: Unconditional love sustains the believer’s ministry.

L244. Date: January 1991. **Text:** I Corinthians 13:1-13.

Topic: God: Love Of; Love: Of Others; Love: Of God.

“Giving all diligence, add . . . charity” (II Peter 1:5, 7).

When Jerome was translating the New Testament from Greek to Latin, he had two words by which he could translate *agape*, the Greek word for divine love. He could use *amor* or *caritas*. The first places emphasis on physical passion and sexual love. The second accents goodwill, devotion, and selfless giving for the sake of the beloved. So Jerome chose *caritas*, and that has come over into our English language as *“charity.”*

When you read *“charity”* in the King James Version of the Bible, please do not think of the United Way or your gift to help some family whose house has burned. The word has a far greater impact than that. It is a commitment to another person by which one commits self and all resources to the welfare of that person. It says, “I am available at anytime, in any place, for anything, at any cost.”

Peter lists charity (divine love) as the eighth of the virtues which Christians are to be diligent to cultivate in their personal lives. We call that “The Vital Principle.” It is the belt that holds in place all other parts of the spiritual garments which the Christian wears (Colossians 3:14). The love which the Christian has is spiritual, not physical. It is divine, not human. It is indestructible, not temporary. It is discernible only in God, displayed only by God, and derived only from God. It is the love which is *“shed abroad in our hearts”* by the Holy Spirit who indwells us (Romans 5:5). Therefore, it is as natural for us Christians to love as it is for us to breathe.

I. THE SUPREMACY OF DIVINE LOVE (I Corinthians 13:1-3)

A. Love is sovereign in the heart and controls the emotions (verse 1). The exercise of spiritual gifts is a delightful experience. Those who had the gift of languages (speaking fluently in a language they had not known before) must have been thrilled. But divine love is greater than that experience. If, one could speak in every language spoken anywhere in the world and even speak the language of angels beyond that, but did it without divine love guiding what was said, his speech would be mere noise. Love controls and gives validity to the exercise of the most exciting of the spiritual gifts.

B. Love is sovereign in the mind and governs the intellect (verse 2). The spiritual gifts of prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, and faith are validated by divine love. Paul describes a person who never lived. He has the powers of prophecy plus an understanding of “*all mysteries,*” possessing “*all knowledge,*” and exercising “*all faith.*” What a gifted person! All of his acquaintances would hold him in high esteem. But if his ministry was without love, he would be nothing at all. Wisdom and gifts of wisdom are no substitute for love.

C. Love is sovereign in the will and governs all acts. Even sacrificial gifts require the motive of love in order to be most effective. Paul pictures a man who doles out all his wealth. He gives to meet the needs of person after person, giving out by his own hand. Finally, when his resources are exhausted, he gives his life. But if his motive is for praise or promotion, not divine love, it will mean absolutely nothing to him. People might praise him for his liberality, but he will not be profited before Him who rewards our works.

The mind, the emotion, and the will are the essence of human personality. God's love in the Christian must govern them all. That is why God commands us to love one another and urges us to increase in the expression of our love. A real spirit of love to God and man is essential; without it, everything else is valueless.

III. THE DESCRIPTION OF DIVINE LOVE (I Corinthians 13:4-8)

Love can hardly be defined; it must be described. We can no more define love than we can define a beautiful sunset or a precious child. So the text gives some descriptive qualities of love. Some are positive, and some are negative. Some are active, and some are passive. But each contributes to our understanding of the love which God has put in our hearts and which we

can show to Him and others.

A. Love is not hasty, but patient. “*Charity suffereth long*” (verse 4). It persists, endures, and waits in the face of injury and wrong. It is slow to anger and offend. It was reflected by the amazing restraint that Jesus showed when people misunderstood, denied, and even rejected the truth He taught. Love is “*swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath*” (James 1:19, 20).

B., Love is not inconsiderate, but benevolent. “*Charity . . . is kind*” (verse 4). Endurance may be mere obstinacy, but love is endurance plus kindness. One person suggests that the text means, “Love plays the gentle part.” It is “*kind . . . , tenderhearted, forgiving*” (Ephesians 4:32). Love can no more exist without kindness than spring can come without flowers.

C. Love is not envious, but content. “*Charity . . . envieth not*” (verse 4). It does not begrudge another's privileges. If another suffers, it suffers. If another is honored, it rejoices (1 Corinthians 12:26). Many sins arise from the wicked spirit of envy. Cain killed Abel because of it. But in love Jonathan surrendered his right to the throne so that David might sit there. John the Baptist was willing to decrease that Jesus might increase. Love is devoted to the welfare of the one who is loved. It manifests itself through following Jesus' teaching about delighting to give and not to get (Acts 20:35).

D. Love is not boastful, but humble. “*Charity . . . vaunteth not itself*” (verse 4). Love makes no parade! It does not have to talk about itself, for it is known by its acts. All boasting is empty talk. The love that must boast because it is anxious to impress is not divine love at all.

E. Love is not conceited, but lowly. “*Charity . . . is not puffed up*” (verse 4). Love has no pride or inflated vanity. It seeks no presumptuous self-satisfaction. It is content to say, “You first; I follow.”

One of Aesop's fables tells of a frog who thought himself to be the largest creature in the world. (He was larger than the minnows in his little pond.) But when a cow came to drink, the frog was dismayed. So he puffed and puffed, seeking to be larger than the cow, until he exploded. Real love is not arrogant, does not put on airs, and has no inflated sense of its own importance.

F. Love is not rude, but courteous. “*Charity . . . doth not behave itself unseemly*” (verses 4, 5). It is never rude or unmannerly. Awkward piety and blundering goodness indicate the absence of divine love. God's love does nothing to raise a blush. It is always well-mannered and respectful.

G. Love is not selfish, but self-forgetful. “*Charity . . . seeketh not her own*” (verses 4, 5). There is a tremendous self-emptying capacity in love. It finds joy and wealth in self-forgetfulness for the sake of others. It looks not

to its own advantage but to the benefit of others (Philippians 2:4). Like a loving mother, it forgets self in its ministry to another.

H. Love is not irritable, but good-tempered. “*Charity . . . is not easily provoked*” (verses 4, 5). Self-centered people are touchy and easily exasperated. They are embittered by injuries, whether real or imagined. They are contrary to the spirit of Jesus. He was not irritable or quick-tempered. Love takes no offense and is quick to forgive.

I. Love is not vindictive, but generous. “*Charity . . . thinketh no evil*” (verses 4, 5). That is, love does not keep a record or store up injuries. It never reckons up the wrongs done to it. King David should not be complimented for remembering the wrongs of Joab and the curses of Shimei. Love keeps a diary of good but forgets the wrong.

J. Love is not malevolent, but high principled. “*Charity . . . rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth*” (verses 4, 6). Love is never glad when others go wrong; love is always gladdened by goodness. It never gloats when another person (even one who calls himself an enemy) sins and is punished for it. It delights in truth and is always glad when right prevails.

K. Love is not rebellious, but brave. “*Charity . . . beareth all things*” (verses 4, 7). It suffers wrong without retaliation just as Jesus did (1 Peter 2:23). It gets under the load another carries and helps to bear its weight (Galatians 6:2). It stands up and faces life, rather than rebelling against it and running from duty. It is an umbrella which shelters the beloved. It bears up under anything, overlooking faults, and has no limit to its endurance.

L. Love is not suspicious, but confident. “*Charity . . . believeth all things*” (verses 4, 7). That does not mean that love is blind or credulous. It rather means that the one who loves is the opposite of the cynic, the pessimist, or the slanderer. It takes a kindly view. If a person falls, love thinks of the battle he must have had before falling. It is always eager to believe the best about everyone.

M. Love is not conquerable, but indomitable. “*Charity . . . endureth all things*” (verses 4, 7). It remains strong through all circumstances. It cannot be conquered by praise or neglect. It endures when it receives what is not due it. It is ever patient.

III. THE PERMANENCE OF DIVINE LOVE (I Corinthians 13:8-13)

A. Divine love is more permanent than the temporary gifts (verses 8-10). The gift of extrabiblical revelatory prophecy ceased. The gift of miraculous ability to speak the gospel distinctly in otherwise unlearned languages of men ceased. The gift of supernatural knowledge of otherwise

unrevealed truth ceased. But love continued unchanged.

B. Love continues into the completed state (verses 11, 12). The piece-by-piece and part-by-part revelation of the earliest Christian era ended in the completed revelation recorded in the Bible. The partial understanding of Christian truth then was swallowed up by the complete understanding of Christian truth now. The mirror image of then is replaced by the full-faced view of now. But love continues unchanged.

C. Love outlasts the abiding virtues (verse 13). Faith will end in sight. Hope will end when that which is hoped for is received. But love continues unchanged.

Passion will blaze as the straw and die away, but love shines as the sun. It is deathless in the face of disappointment, disillusionment, and defeat. It is eternally young. It never withers. It outlasts everything. It abides!

Love is possessed as a gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) by the new convert and borne as fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22) as the believer matures. People can “fall in love” and afterward “fall out of love.” But God continues to love.

Here is a good text to memorize: *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another”* (I John 4:11).

Questions for discussion

1. What is the Bible meaning of “*charity*”?
2. How does it differ from our use of charity today?
3. In what way is love greater than spiritual gifts?
4. Why must love be described rather than defined?
5. How is love related to patience?
6. How is love related to humility?
7. How is love related to forgiveness?
8. Why will love outlast the spiritual gifts?
9. Why is love greater than faith and hope?
10. How can you show the love of God through your life this week?