



“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not charity. Am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (I Corinthians 13:1).

The Motive in Using Spiritual Gifts

Central Truth: Each believer should exercise his gifts in a spirit of selfless love.

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What is *love*? It could be defined as a feeling of tender affection, a desire to share life with another, a sense of loss when the beloved is not present, or a commitment to be a helper to another. One teen said it is “that strange little itch you can't quite scratch!”

Whatever love is, it determines the validity of the exercise of one's spiritual gift. With love as the motivation, any spiritual gift is effective. Without love, it is severely handicapped. That is the message of I Corinthians 13:1-7.

First Corinthians 13 is more than a beautiful hymn on love (called “charity” in the King James Version of the Bible). It is located between two chapters which discuss spiritual gifts and is a part of that discussion. Chapter 12 discusses the nature and diversity of spiritual gifts (verses 1-11) and the unity of spiritual gifts (verses 12-30). Chapter 13 discusses the motive in the exercise of spiritual gifts. Chapter 14 discusses the relative value of two of the spiritual gifts, prophecy and languages, showing that prophecy is much superior. The virtues and ministries of love are set against the background of how Christians use their respective spiritual gifts.

The central truth of this week's study bears out that statement: “Each believer should exercise his spiritual gifts in a spirit of selfless love.”

I. THE NATURE OF LOVE

The Bible uses two words which express the nature of love. They are the Greek words *philia* and *agape*. The first is used of human affection, the love of one person for another in its highest and most honorable form. The second is used only of the love of God — His love for sinners, His love manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus, and His love spread abroad in the hearts of those who trust Jesus.

What is the difference between *philia* and *agape*? It is the difference between human affection and divine love. Human love is a sense of dearness, preciousness, tender affection. Divine love is a commitment to help. Human love is a desire to enjoy a relationship with another. Divine love is a desire to benefit another by lifting and satisfying him. Human love always has some element of self interest. Divine love always centers in the beloved one rather than in the loving one.

True love is an earnest desire and an active involvement in the well being of the beloved one. It is more than a feeling; it is feelings in action. It gives itself for the sake of the loved one, whatever it may cost personally. It is inexhaustible!

Human love is seen in a young man holding the hand of his precious bride or a mother cuddling her infant child in her arms. Divine love is seen in God coming in human flesh and dying on a cruel cross to save guilty and condemned sinners.

Love is set forth in Holy Scripture as being the first fruit of the Holy Spirit. "*The fruit of the Spirit is love*" (Galatians 5:22). Some interpreters hold that love is the only fruit of the Holy Spirit. They say that joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self-control are the consequence of that love which the Holy Spirit produces in believers. That view is not the best understanding of the passage, but it illustrates the importance of love in the Christian life. If the Holy Spirit does what He desires to do, He will produce divine love in every Christian. "*The fruit of the Spirit is love.*"

Love is also the gift of the Holy Spirit. "*The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us*" (Romans 5:5).

"*Shed abroad*" means to broadcast, to spread everywhere, to scatter liberally. Saying that the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with the love of God conveys the idea of its abundance through His ministry. Christians do not love in their natural emotions. They love with the love of God. So they love what He loves, how He loves, as long as He loves, and whom He loves. They let God love through them. His love in the believer is not earned or obtained by degrees; it is a free gift by the Holy Spirit who indwells each

Christian. God's love is the belt which holds in place all the garments of the Christian's spiritual dress (Colossians 3:14). It is the sphere in which the Christian walks and the virtue which fills him (Ephesians 3:19; 5:2). It governs all his relationships with Christians and non-Christians alike, whether in the sacred relationships of the church or the secular relationships of the world (Ephesians 4:25—5:2). To know by experience the love of Christ is to know what it means to be filled with all the fullness of God.

II. THE SUPERIORITY OF LOVE

First Corinthians 13:1-3 lists five blessed gifts of the Holy Spirit: languages, prophecy, knowledge, faith, and giving. Each of these is related to love as the motivation for exercising the gift. Those five gifts relate to the three areas of human existence: mind, emotion, and will.

A. Love is sovereign in the emotional realm (verse 1). “*Tongues*” (languages) was one of the most emotional expressions among the spiritual gifts. It was the God-given ability to speak fluently in a foreign language which the speaker had not known or understood. It must have been a thrilling experience to speak the message of Jesus in such a way and see people saved because they heard the gospel in their own native language.

Paul wrote of speaking “*with the tongues of men and of angels*” (verse 1). That was more than the Corinthians had done in all their boasting of the gift of tongues. But to so speak without God's love as the motivation (without the purpose of helping people) was to be “*as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal*” (verse 1). The most enthusiastic and amazing of the spiritual gifts is reduced to “sound and fury signifying nothing” when love is absent. Think about that! No emotional exercise in the work of God is valid if done apart from the motive of divine love.

That principle applies to all the speaking gifts: teaching, prophecy, exhorting, and all the rest. Let the teacher, the preacher, and the counselor be aware today of that divine requirement.

B. Love is sovereign in the intellectual realm (verse 2). Turn attention to the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith. Those are divinely conferred capacities which relate to the intellect. (Faith is based on knowledge of fact.)

Imagine a person so gifted that he understands all mysteries, has all knowledge, and can exercise all faith. (“All, . . . all, . . . all” indicates a superabundance of divine enabling by the spiritual gifts.) Although such a person never lived, suppose that he did. Imagine his exercising his gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith. What a blessing he would be to those who

received his ministry! What progress of the kingdom of God he would bring about! But if he did it without love, its power would be blemished and he who had the great gifts would be absolutely nothing at all. Love governs the intellect and makes its powers effective.

C. Love is sovereign in the volitional realm (verse 3). Turn to the acts of the will, specifically the exercise of the gift of giving. Imagine a person who gives so liberally that he personally doles out the totality of his material resources to feed persons who are ill. His giving is so complete that he sacrifices his own body to death. Who has known a person with so great a commitment to give and benefit others? But let him do it all without being motivated by the love of God and he learns a startling twofold lesson. (1) The utmost sacrifice is unacceptable apart from love. (2) No personal benefits come from any sacrifice which is not motivated by love. That is surprising, isn't it?

Love is sovereign in all Christian service. Even the greatest of the gifts fails to elevate the person who ministers them apart from love. *"I am nothing. . . . It profiteth me nothing"* (verses 2, 3). What a challenge that is to evaluate your motive as you give yourself to serving people in the name of God!

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

Fourteen blessed qualities of love are listed in verses 4-8 of the lesson text. Evaluate your attitude toward God and others by those qualities.

A. Love is patient. It is not hasty, demanding immediate satisfaction of its preferences. It strengthens us *"unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness"* (Colossians 1:11). It is patient because it is unselfish, desiring the best for the other.

B. Love is kind. It is *"kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another"* (Romans 12:10). Waiting in patience, it does not become restless or harsh. Its attention is always on the beloved and not on itself.

C. Love is not envious (verse 4). It never becomes motivated by the desire for personal honors; therefore, it does not envy the honor which comes to another (Galatians 5:26). Can you imagine God becoming envious of us for some good thing we receive? Neither will one who is motivated by the love of God.

D. Love is humble (verse 4). It does not exalt itself or permit pride to influence its attitudes or actions. It never thinks of itself more highly than is proper, knowing that whatever good it does comes from the blessings of God

(Romans 12:3). A person who is conceited is unloving.

E. Love has good manners (verse 5). It is never rude. It has no self interests to promote. It looks for opportunities to promote another. So its actions and attitudes are always proper.

F. Love is not irritable (verse 5). In patience the loving person possesses his soul (Luke 21:19). You can't make love angry!

G. Love is unselfish (verse 5). A mother thinks nothing of her sacrifice for the sake of her precious infant. The loving Christian is willing to “*spend and be spent*” (II Corinthians 12:15).

H. Love is charitable (verse 5). It thinks evil of no one. Such fervent love covers the faults of others (I Peter 4:8).

I. Love is ethical (verse 6). It rejoices in right and never rejoices when another goes wrong (III John 3, 4). It desires the best from everyone.

J. Love is forbearing (verse 7). It does not expose the faults of another but seeks to cover and heal them.

K. Love is optimistic (verse 7). It expects the best from everyone as it “*believeth all things.*” It is not gullible but expectant (Philippians 1:6).

L. Love is hopeful (verse 7). It “*hopeth all things*” and expects the best to come out in each person.

M. Love is enduring (verse 7). It endures all that comes its way. It endures without complaint or plans of vengeance. It is like Jesus, quiet as a lamb before its shearers. It knows God will work out good at the end.

N. Love is inexhaustible (verse 8). “*Love never faileth.*” What blessed assurance! Passion might blaze up like straw and soon die down, but love shines as the sun. It never comes to an end. It never disappears. It is as enduring as God himself, for God is love.

Evaluate your life and service in the light of this study. Having received the love of God by the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), let it flow freely through you as you serve Him. “*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another*” (John 13:35).

Questions

1. How would you define love?
2. How would you distinguish between human love and divine love?
3. In what way is love a gift of the Holy Spirit?
4. How is love superior to our emotions?
5. How is love superior to our intellect?
6. How is love superior to our will?
7. How does verse 4 describe love?

8. How does verse 5 describe love?
9. How does verse 6 describe love?
10. How can you show the love described in verse 7?