

WHERE WE ARE HEADED

Although there is a tendency to separate 1 Corinthians 13 from the rest of the letter, Paul wouldn't want us to do that. Chapter twelve ends with a call to earnestly desire spiritual gifts, words that are echoed in the opening verse of chapter fourteen. Chapter thirteen is part of that flow. Paul is neither changing subjects nor is he pitting love against the gifts.

This week we merely dip into the first part of chapter thirteen and begin our exploration of the role of love in the life of a Spirit-gifted community of faith.

WALKING THROUGH THE DISCUSSION

The Corinthians prized various "markers" of spirituality. Early in the letter we saw evidence of divisions over preferences in teachers. Some apparently thought that a certain style or a particular delivery was indicative of greater spirituality. There were issues of marriage and singleness that Paul had to address. Some seemed to privilege one state over the other as an indication of real spirituality. Eating or not eating meat was also a problem. Some took one side and some took the other, arguing for real spirituality to be identified with the position taken.

When it came to the gifts of the Spirit, some prioritized and privileged certain gifts over others as the marker of having arrived spiritually. And that problem is what Paul is addressing in chapters twelve through fourteen. That means that chapter thirteen is not a disconnected sermonette on love, but Paul's means of addressing the spiritual disconnect in the lives of the Corinthians in the way they were assessing spirituality.

The opening questions are intended simply to raise to the surface the various ways that people tend to assess spiritual maturity. Perhaps we don't privilege the specific gifts the Corinthians did. Maybe we don't look for the eloquence they did; we might not laud the wisdom they hoped the most spiritual would display. But most of us do have yardsticks by which—consciously or not—we evaluate both our own spiritual maturity and that of others. Those who "have arrived" spiritually will . . . (and we fill in the blank!).

Having begun to address the topic of spiritual "things" (12:1), Paul has laid the ground work for understanding the gifts of the Spirit. Some in Corinth were ranking themselves and others on particular manifestations of the Spirit; certain gifts were seen to be markers of maturity or vibrant spirituality. And the way they were drawing lines around

the gifts was resulting in division. So Paul is going to bring a corrective word.

It is critical to note that Paul is not pitting the gifts of the Spirit against the fruit of the Spirit. He is not arguing for replacing gifted ministry with loving ministry. He insists that the Corinthians (as well as we ourselves) should earnestly desire spiritual gifts. But he wants them (and us) to realize that the healthy and holy and mature way to exercise spiritual gifts is to do so in love. This is the "more excellent way" (12:31); it is the *way* the gifts are to be exercised, not something that should be substituted for the gifts of the Spirit.

Some in Corinth prized tongues. But Paul insists that even if that gift is exercised and the tongues-speaker was worshipping God, apart from love the ultimate result is really only noise.

Some in Corinth made much of gifts like prophecy and the kind of faith that would result in miracles. But Paul wants them to know that even when such gifts are exercised and God's power is seen, apart from love the one ministering is not necessarily spiritually mature.

Some in Corinth recognized that "doing good" to others had some place in the life of the church. But Paul clarifies that even if one went to extraordinary measures to meet the needs of others, apart from a heart-felt motivation of love such sacrifices are of no real benefit.

As we get farther into chapter thirteen, Paul will explain some of the dynamics of love that need to be more richly appreciated among the Corinthians. But in these few opening verses of the chapter, he simply calls attention to the priority of love as the *way* in which Spirit-empowered life is to be lived.

As you reflect with your group on these few verses, the critical thing to notice is that *the way one lives* (as an expression of Jesus' life through the power of the Spirit) is to be valued more than *what one does*. Paul would not denigrate or demean the gifts; he insists that they are necessary and good. But even the greatest gifts, if not exercised in and through an atmosphere of love, will not have the impact on the life of the gifted individual and the lives of those being ministered to that God intends.

Love doesn't trump gifts. Love is the only right way to live out one's giftedness . . . whatever the gift, whatever the ministry, whatever the calling.

We will be
looking at 1
Corinthians
12:31-13:3

INITIAL THOUGHTS

What do people tend to identify as markers of “spiritual maturity” or “vital spiritual life”?

What yardsticks are typically used to evaluate if someone is growing as a follower of Jesus or if he or she has become mature?

REFLECTING ON THE TEXT

Throughout his letter to the Corinthians, Paul has been addressing issues in their lives that are hindering their experience of the life that Jesus wants for them. In chapter twelve, he begins to explore the issue of “spiritual gifts.” And as we turn the corner into chapter thirteen we catch a glimpse of what was hindering their experience of life as Spirit-gifted people.

Is Paul pitting the gifts of the Spirit against the fruit of the Spirit? Why or why not?

From what Paul writes in these opening verses of chapter thirteen, what was hindering the Corinthians’ experience of life as Spirit-gifted people?

What do you think the Corinthians were using as a yardstick for measuring spiritual maturity or spiritual health? What does Paul offer them instead?

How does the issue of love address what was going on in the Corinthian church (as reflected not only in chapter twelve but in other parts of the letter as well)?

BUILDING BRIDGES INTO LIFE

Perhaps you don’t privilege tongues or prophecy or even generosity the way the Corinthians do. That being the case, what yardstick for spiritual maturity do you sometimes substitute for loving others?



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