

Study in 1st Corinthians 13 - Part 1

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[0 : 00] Seeking the Lord's blessing, we'll turn to the passage of Scripture we read, 1 Corinthians chapter 13, and at verse 1.

1 Corinthians 13, at verse 1. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity or love, I am become a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Now I don't need to tell you how well known this chapter is, not just in the Church, but of course in English literature as a whole.

It is reckoned by many to be one of the most beautiful and moving pieces of English literature. It's also a chapter that's very, very important.

And although we know it, yet it's not as easy for us perhaps to practice it. Or even to know the importance of practicing it. This chapter was of fundamental importance to the Corinthian church itself.

[1 : 25] Because in the midst of all its problems, Paul was writing to them to the effect that this was really at the heart of all their problems. The fact that they had become loveless.

And that there was a lack of love shown in their dealings one to another. And I think that nothing can really be as vital to us as to understand what Christian love actually means.

And the responsibilities which it lays upon us in their relationship to God and their relationship to our fellow man, whether they be believers or not. And that's why I think it's vital that we get a true grasp of what this chapter actually means.

Now, of course, I'm not here consistently every morning. But I propose that when I am here for the next few mornings, that I will look with you at this chapter in 1 Corinthians.

Now, I suppose first it's right to say that we should take it in its wider context. And in chapter 11, right through to 14, is looking at the question of spiritual gifts.

[2 : 35] Now, the Corinthians were gifted in the church and the Lord had bestowed many gifts upon them. There's a list given us, for example, in the previous chapter here and at verse 7, chapter 12 and verse 7.

We're told that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit with all. In other words, the Spirit has given something to every believer to profit from. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge, to another faith, to another the gifts of healing, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discernment, to another different kinds of tongues, and so on.

All these were gifts that the Lord had given to his people in that congregation. And the Lord still gives gifts of different kinds to his people.

And he emphasizes, too, in that same chapter that not everyone has the same gift. That God so constitutes his church that he gifts different people differently, so that they would help and complement each other in working together for the good of the church.

For example, he says this in verse 28, and we read it together. Chapter 12, verse 28, that God has said some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, then teachers, then miracles, then healings, helps, governments, different tongues.

[4 : 10] And he says, are all apostles? Is everyone a prophet? Is everyone a teacher? No, he says, they are not. But God gives different gifts to different people as he sees fit.

Now, the difficulty was this, that in the Corinthian church, an emphasis had been placed on what I think we could call the spectacular gifts.

And the spectacular gifts we could call these, say, a gift to perform miracles, or a gift to speak in tongues, or a gift to prophesy.

We could call these spectacular gifts. Because, let's say, God gave a gift of administration to someone. Now, of course, that is a beautiful gift.

And it's a gift that he mentions here. But it's not, perhaps, something that is as noticeable, say, as a gift to perform a miracle. Here's a man who organizes well, and God has given him that ability.

[5 : 09] But here's another, and he can perform miracles. Now, of course, your attention, I suppose, is straight away diverted to the person who could perform a miracle. And that's what happened in Corinth.

Those who possessed the miraculous gifts began to become puffed up with it. And you'll notice how often that expression appears in 1 Corinthians. They became puffed up.

They began slowly, and this is so dangerous in the Christian life, they began slowly to acquire a sense of self-importance. That they were absolutely indispensable.

That the church couldn't function without them. And, of course, when a person begins to think like that, it's then very easy to despise someone who isn't like that. So the people who had gifts that weren't so spectacular, they were relegated, and they were despised.

And Paul says that, he says, you're behaving like carnal men. Sometimes, he says, I find it difficult to understand how you could be the way you are as believers in Christ.

[6 : 15] In fact, he doubted about some of them whether they had come to a real knowledge of Christ at all. In chapter 15, he makes that plain, but still he accepts them according to their profession.

Now, what does the apostle do about that? Well, the first thing he does is he reminds them that these gifts, whatever they are, and whatever God has given yourself, they are not given for show, or for boasting in, or for strutting about with them.

But they are given to edify the church. That's the first thing, to edify the church. Now, the word edify means to build up. So whatever God has given you, it's to build up the church, to help other people to grow, and to unite together in a spirit of love, a spirit of faith, and so on.

It is to build up the church. Not to knock it down. Not to make people feel completely worthless, completely useless, or disenfranchised, or whatever.

It is to build up the church of Christ. Remember that verse I said a minute ago. The gift of the spirit is given to every man to profit. It is for good, and it is for profit, that God gives gifts.

[7 : 32] And that's why he says right at the end of chapter 12, covet earnestly the best gifts. Yes, he says, desire gifts. Desire every kind of gift.

It's right to desire it. But, he says, I show to you a more excellent way. A more excellent way to build up the church.

What is that more excellent way? Well, it's the way of love in chapter 13. That's the more excellent way. He says every gift of God can be used to build up the church.

But, he says, the best way in which to build up a church, he says, is by using properly the gift or the grace of love which God has given to all his people.

And, if you don't have it, you are not of his people at all. That's the stark thing. You could have miracles. You could have a gift of tongues. But, still, if you don't have this gift or grace of love, Paul says, then you are of no use in the church at all.

[8 : 40] Now, of course, that makes the whole passage very, very important indeed. Above all things, it is to grow in love that you need and that I need.

For, without it, he says, we have nothing. Now, I want to look with you at three things. I'll only look at the first with you today. But, there are three things that I want to look with you. First of all, just that how necessary this gift is.

Or, how necessary love is. Because, he says, if I speak with the tongue of men and angels, but have not love, I am sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

In other words, it's absolutely necessary. And then, secondly, and in some detail, another time, I want to look with you at the nature of this love.

How does it work and how does it function? And, we're told that in verses 4 to 7. We're told there that charity suffers long. It's long-suffering. We're told that love is kind.

[9 : 41] Love does not envy. Love does not want itself. And, love is not puffed up. Love doesn't behave itself unseemly. It doesn't seek its own things.

Love isn't easy to provoke. And, love doesn't think evil of people. Love doesn't rejoice in iniquity. But, love rejoices in the truth. It bears all things.

It believes all things. It hopes all things. And, it endures all things. That is Christian love. That is the love which God gives to his people.

That's the nature of it. And, then lastly, again another time, we'll look at the permanence of this love. Because, we're told that all other miraculous gifts will vanish away.

But, that love will remain. Now, abides faith, hope and love, these three. But, the greatest of these is love. And, we'll see how love is made perfect in glory.

[10:43] Now, today, I want to look with you at how necessary this love is. And, he says here, right at the beginning of the chapter, that it's so necessary, that without it, you're nothing.

It's greater than faith. It's greater than knowledge. It's greater than the power to perform miracles. In fact, again, if you don't have it, you are nothing.

And, if you don't have it, every other gift is destructive. Destructive. In other words, if you see a person who is richly furnished with different kinds of gifts, but has no true Christian love, that person will be a destructive force in the church of Christ, rather than a constructive one.

And, that's a very solemn thought, indeed. Now, first of all, he compares it to tongues. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become like sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.

Now, here's a difficulty, I suppose. What's meant by tongues? Now, I suppose this question isn't really as important, in a way, to ourselves in this part of the world.

[11:54] But, I think it's right to say that young people, often leaving Stornoway or leaving the islands, will find themselves going maybe to Glasgow or Aberdeen or Edinburgh or places like that.

And, you might come across young believers who claim to speak in tongues. They belong to charismatic or Pentecostal groups.

And, they claim to speak in tongues. Now, what that means is this, that when they gather to pray, they begin to make what we could only, I suppose, say just a noise or an utterance of some kind.

We don't recognize it as a language. They claim that they are taken hold of by the Spirit in such a way that they begin to speak in tongues. Now, I suppose you've all heard that expression.

And, I suppose you've wondered about it, whether such a thing is right or wrong. Well, I have to say that such a thing, according to the scripture, is wrong.

[12:55] Because tongues in the Bible don't mean making noises of that kind. What tongues in the Bible mean is just ordinary languages.

That is what tongues mean. We use that expression anyway. We say that he has a foreign tongue. Now, that's just what tongue means. And, there's one chapter in the Bible that makes that perfectly plain.

And, that's Acts chapter 2 and verse 4. Now, I want to read these few verses with you because they're very, very important for this whole argument. And, there's a rule when it comes to understanding the scripture.

And, the rule goes like this. If you have a difficult passage and an easier passage dealing with the same subject, you understand the harder one in the light of the easier one.

Now, I know that Paul says some difficult things about tongues in 1 Corinthians. But, we have a plain passage here in Acts chapter 2 and in verse 4.

[13:58] Now, you remember this is the day of Pentecost. And, the believers were gathered together in the upper room. And, suddenly the Holy Spirit came down. Verse 4.

They were all filled with the Holy Ghost. This is Acts 2 verse 4. Now, listen to how it goes on. There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now, when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together and they were confounded.

Now, listen. Why? Because every man heard them speak in his own language. Now, there you have it. That explains what the gift of tongues was. It was the ability to speak the gospel in the languages of the people who were dwelling around them.

And, they were all amazed and marvelled, saying to one another, Are not all these people Galileans? And, how do we here in our own language wherein we were born?

[15:01] Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and so on. And, they were all amazed and said, These men are full of new wine. But, of course, it wasn't.

It was the wine of the Holy Spirit that had filled them and gave them the gift to speak in different languages. And, that's what it means in the Bible. Now, when Paul says, Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, What he's meaning there is, Suppose he says that I received from

God a miraculous gift to speak in any human language, Or even the language, say, that the angels use in heaven, whatever language that be.

Suppose, he says, I received even that gift. Suppose I received a gift to speak in any language at all. He says, It is nothing if I do not have love.

Nothing. It's just a noise. A sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Now, that's just a loud noise. It's a spectacular noise. You all know that to sound brass or a tinkling cymbal, To use a crash, crash cymbal or something like that is a very noisy sound.

It attracts attention. But, he says, That's all it is. And, that's all my speaking in tongues would be if I don't have love. It is a noise. It is a noise. I think it should frighten.

[16:22] All people, maybe especially preachers of the gospel, That they might just be a sound or a noise. Because, if we have not love, then that is what we are.

And, then again, in verse 2, he says, Prophecy. Though, he says, I have the gift of prophecy, And understand all mysteries and all knowledge. And, though I have faith to remove mountains, If I have not love, I am nothing.

The gift of prophecy. Now, what's that? Well, the gift of prophecy is just the Holy Spirit giving you a message from God.

Perhaps particularly telling some kind of future event. If the Holy Spirit were to come down upon a person, And give him a message from God to speak, Well, he says, that also is useless, Unless you have Christian love in your heart.

Let me give you an example. I'll give you a quotation from the Bible. I wonder how many people know who said this. Now, listen to this prophecy. From the Old Testament, hundreds of years before Christ.

[17:34] Listen to this. A star shall rise out of Jacob. A star shall rise out of Jacob. A star shall rise out of Jacob. And a scepter, that's a ruling scepter, Shall rise out of Israel.

And out of Jacob shall he arise that shall have dominion. What a wonderful prophecy. Who spoke it? Balaam.

And the New Testament tells us that he went to perdition. He was lost. He went to hell. Although he spoke a prophecy like that from the Spirit of God, Still he was lost.

And that again is a solemn thought. A person could speak a prophecy. A profound prophecy. And still be lost without love. Is love not becoming more important?

And then again he mentions faith. Again in verse 2. Though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains. If I have not charity, I am nothing.

[18:38] Now this is difficult. And it's difficult because I'm sure many of you would say this. Well, I thought if I had faith, that I was saved. Surely faith is the important thing that you're always telling us to have.

Well, how is it possible for me to have all faith and yet to be nothing? Well, again, we have to be very, very careful what's meant by faith here.

You'll notice he's not talking about faith in Jesus Christ and him crucified. If you have that, yes, indeed you have love and you have everything. To have faith in Christ as the one who loved you and gave himself for you.

Who died to reconcile you to God. Yes, friends, if you have that, you have everything. You can't have that faith and be lost. If you but believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, thou shalt be saved.

That's the great message of the Bible. I grant you that. But that's not what he's talking about here. What he says here is, though I have faith to remove mountains, if I have not love, I am nothing.

[19:44] In other words, this is a special kind of faith that's connected to the power of God, enabling you to perform miracles. A special faith in God's power, enabling you to perform miracles.

I'm quite sure that that was possessed by Judas Iscariot. I'm sure that when he went round with the other disciples, that he had power to perform miracles.

And listen to these words of Christ. And I think I often have reason to say that Christ's words are more searching than anybody's. Matthew chapter 7.

At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord says this personally every time I hear these words. It gives great fear. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name?

And in thy name have cast out devils. Now, hear that. In his name they cast out devils. In other words, they look to him for a power to cast out devils.

[20 : 52] And were successful. They did it. And in thy name done many wonderful works. And then Christ says, I will profess to them, I never knew you.

Depart from me, ye that work iniquity. Look at that lovelessness. Their hearts weren't spiritually changed. They weren't made new by the love of Christ and in the love of Christ.

They weren't renewed in the heart by God. So this power and this faith that they had to perform miracles, well, it didn't save. It doesn't save. It didn't save then. And if such a thing was now, it couldn't save now.

It's a true heart and a new heart that matters. It's possible to rely on God for a miracle and still to be lost. And then Paul goes even further than that.

He says, In fact, If I, in verse 3, Give away everything I've got to feed the poor. If I give everything I've got to feed the poor, And even, he says, If I give my body to be burned, Still, if I don't have love, It profits me nothing.

[22 : 06] Now that's an example. You would think, I suppose, of love. You would say, Well, here, he says now that he's giving away everything he's got to feed the poor. Surely that's love. Well, Paul's going deeper than that.

He's saying, You can do that. He says, You can give your body to be burned. You can give away all you've got. Even yourself. How more, Much more clearly could he say, Couldn't put it any more clearly than this, That if you don't have love, You're useless.

We are worthless in the sight of God. Now, I think that brings me to say one or two things that are important. First of all, Here's an old-fashioned distinction, I suppose.

The Puritans often used to make it. It's very important. We always must distinguish between gifts and graces. Gifts and graces. You can have gifts without graces.

But when we have graces, Gifts come with them. By graces, I mean faith in Jesus Christ. I mean hope in Jesus Christ as our Savior.

[23 : 15] I mean love in Jesus Christ. These are graces that God gives to his own children. By gifts, I mean abilities. Different things that he can furnish us with. Even knowledge and understanding.

These are gifts rather than graces. We must make sure that we have the graces. And you notice in the Bible that the emphasis always is on what you are in the Christian life.

Not so much on what you can do. It's on what you are. It's on our walk. It's on our attitude. It's on our attitude to each other. Our treatment of each other.

Our attitude towards God. It's not on our fantastic gifts or abilities. Or how we can speak. Or how well we can write. It is on what you are as a person. And what I am.

Christianity goes to the core. It goes to the heart. It goes inward. Down to the bottom. And how much we should, in spite of asking for other gifts, or along with asking other gifts, we should constantly pray that God would make us better people.

[24 : 19] Ensure that we have the love of God in our hearts that goes towards God and goes towards men. That love without which we are nothing. And I think that it's one of the great difficulties that we have in our Christian lives that we don't understand what Christian love requires of us.

And we're not careful enough to perform it. Many people will give you many reasons for why we've gone through what we've gone through as a church and as a people. I wonder how much of it is rooted right here.

Right here. After all, sometimes looking at the Corinthian church, we would almost call it the free church. They're divided. Some say they're of Paul. Some say they're of Apollos.

Some say they're of Cephas. Some say they're of Christ. They gather in different groups. They won't have fellowship one with another. There's a lack of understanding of each other.

All these things. They're taking each other to court. All these problems are there. Marriages are breaking down. There's a problem in the families. All these things. People asserting their liberty, their own rights, over and above consideration of other people.

[25 : 26] Right the way through from chapter one to the end, you'll say, well, that's it. Some people say the Bible's irrelevant. Well, what could be more relevant than that? It's as though God allowed these situations for us to understand, to relearn, and to re-examine.

And when Paul takes them right to the heart here, is that not right at the heart? How many of yourselves have been brought to a position in the midst of all these things where you're saying to yourself, what's my attitude been like all along?

What's my attitude been like? Do I think that my Christian life was just a matter, maybe, of just attending meetings? Was that it? I don't want to undervalue that.

Would to God that everyone here would see their obligation to attend church diligently and regularly and to make use of every means of grace. Would to God that that would happen.

But do we think that that's the sum total? Have we thought that that's the sum total? Have we thought that people are unimportant? That when someone is sick in a home, it's unimportant if I take it upon myself maybe to provide some food or something of that kind?

[26 : 29] Is that unimportant? People say that's works. Is works unimportant? Are works unimportant? Is practical Christian love, is it secondary?

I don't hear Paul saying here that it's secondary. And notice when he's talking about love in this chapter, he's not talking primarily about love to God. He's talking about love to man. He's talking about love between fellow believers.

And he says if you don't have that, he says you've got nothing. Whatever you believe, whatever powers or gifts or abilities, if you can't long suffer, if you can't not envy, if you're puffed up and so on, these things don't matter.

And how much these things should bring every one of us to say, Lord, where have I been? What have I been doing with myself? Can I help the body of Christ?

Can I help the poor? Can I help the needy? Can I bear with people? Can I help those who feel they don't fit? Can I befriend someone who's standing on his own or on her own all the time outside the church?

[27 : 31] Do I feel it's so important to be part of the clique that I don't bother going over to befriend someone who doesn't feel that they have any friends? Does God not say, you go over and you befriend that person?

And you say, well, it's difficult to befriend that person. Well, did God say love was easy? One thing I hope I'm learning and that you're all learning is that love is not easy. People say, oh, you talk about Christian love.

Well, love is hard. It's hard. If it was all soppy and easy, it would be one thing, but it is not that. One thing you discover is that the way of Christian discipleship is a difficult way and we need the grace of God for it.

We need the grace of God for it and that is what Paul is saying. And we need to know what this love requires of us. And let me say this too. We talk very often about what the world thinks.

Now, there's a great danger in governing your life by what the world thinks. That can put you in many a cocoon. If your life is just completely governed by the expectations that other people have, you'll soon find yourself in difficulties.

[28 : 44] But I'll tell you this. One thing the world does look for and one thing the world expects is exactly this.

Not my abilities, but what I am as a person and what you are too. It's not your ability to write tracts or to write magazines that matters, but how the world sees you interact one with another.

O Lord, should we not all say, have mercy upon us in the light of that. It's how the world sees us conduct ourselves, whether we have this or not.

How do I treat the people who work for me, for example? Am I hard on them? Do I pay them proper wages? I hope we think about these things as Christian people who employ others.

Do we pay them properly? Do we give them proper holidays? Do we use them as cheap labor? How do I react when I'm provoked by people?

[29 : 46] Do I fly off the handle? Am I the first person to vindicate myself all the time, irrespective of any consequences it might have for my family or for the church or whatever? How do I react in situations like that?

My walk and your walk in these day-to-day things, that is what the world sees. That is what the world looks at. Not how often you are seen reading something.

That is where it all reveals itself. And then again, there's something else. Watch any distinction that people draw between holiness and love.

I shouldn't say distinction, but a false antithesis. You always hear this. We always hear about love, but we don't hear about holiness. Well, I, for one, confess to not really understanding what that means.

When the scripture says that love is the fulfilling of the law, what it tells us is this. that this is a practical holy life. That's what it is.

[30 : 54] A practical holy life. You see, the greatest danger that you can make, I think, in our culture and in our way of thinking, the single greatest mistake you can make is thinking that holiness is a little section of your life that involves going to church and reading the scriptures.

That's your holiness. And then the other parts of your life, well, it doesn't really matter all that much. That's not so. Holiness and love are inseparably bound together.

This hard walk of love is just practical holiness in action. This is practical godliness. This is godliness. A life of love, of Christian love, is a godly life.

That's why he says that without it you've got nothing because the non-Christian cannot live this life of love. He cannot. It is spirit produced. It is the fruit of the spirit.

Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith. These are the fruits or the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Watch that distinction between holiness and love.

[32 : 02] The real relationship is this. And let's get this in our heart. I'll put it at least as best I can. The source of your life comes from God.

The energy of your Christian life, the source of your love, it comes from God through fellowship and communion with him. But if that's real, it will be worked out in your life like this.

If it's not real, it won't be. It'll be pharisaic. You might acquire a reputation for external holiness, but it'll fall short in the practical outwork.

And that's why he says that I'm like a sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. True godliness. If you know the Lord and if you live for the Lord, if you live for his word and if you know him in prayer, it'll work itself out like this.

It'll work itself out. I'm not saying you'll be perfect, but it'll work itself out like this and you'll be striving more and more towards it. And I think I should say this too in conclusion.

[33 : 08] on this point. I mentioned here that it's our love to men or to fellow believers that's spoken of here in chapter 13 and so it is.

But we have to remember that that's rooted in our love to God. Look at, for example, 1 John. I'll just quote a few verses to make this plain.

1 John 3 and verse 14 it says this, 1 John 3 We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren.

2 John 3 He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. 2 John 4 Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him.

And it's worth reading that again. We know that we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death.

[34 : 13] Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. And then this, If a man says I love God and hateth his brother he is a liar.

For he that doesn't love his brother whom he has seen how can he love God whom he has not seen. In other words the love of God is like this.

It is poured out from himself as a free gift or a grace from himself into the heart of the believer. And what happens to it there? Well it immediately flows out back towards God himself and out towards those who are in God's image and in God's likeness.

It flows out too towards the world in a slightly different way but it still flows there and it's real but it goes upwards towards God and it goes out towards his people.

If it doesn't go towards his people John says neither is it going towards God. Neither is it going towards God. If you say I love God and you hate your brother you are a liar.

[35 : 28] And that is why it's so important to look at this passage charity suffers long it's kind it doesn't envy it doesn't want itself. Now I hope I've brought something home to us first of all of the necessity of this love and the importance of practicing it seeking it and practicing it.

Let me just close with this that the way the fact that it comes from God is important in this respect. if you feel just no well maybe my love is lacking maybe my love is lacking and it's a very good sign if we feel it to be lacking the important thing is not that you just think that you can just patch it up somehow yourself the important thing is that you recognize that it is a gift of God this love is a gift of God and that we seek it and seek it by reading the scriptures especially the gospels and I say especially the gospels for a reason watch being constantly entangled in Paul's epistles now that's a that may sound a strange thing but be careful you often hear this language that I graduated from

the gospels onto the epistles well I hope we learn to graduate from the epistles onto the gospels because one of the most important things you can do is to constantly read the life of Christ constantly read the life of Christ look at him look how he lived watch him how he speaks watch him how he acts keep Christ constantly before you and pray God that he would work that self same spirit in you and that is the way to grow in love we'll come back to this next time we're together may the Lord bless your thoughts on his word let us pray our gracious God grant us the humility to know our dependence upon thyself for everything and when it is often brought home to us that we come short in every area of our lives grant us above all things that we would have the heart and the desire to walk in a better way than in which we have walked and to seek thy grace and thy help to reflect more of the goodness of the mercy and the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ that we might truly be living epistles real living letters known and read by every man for Christ's sake we pray Amen