

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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1 CORINTHIANS 12-13 SPIRITUAL GIFTS; THE LOVE CHAPTER



After Paul delivered instructions on how to keep the Passover in a worthy manner, he now has to warn and correct the Corinthians regarding *other disorders*, this time during their Sabbath services.

In Corinth, a cosmopolitan city with two large ports, many languages were spoken there. So, God gave those members temporary special abilities, especially the capacity to speak and understand different languages to create a unified fellowship, similar to what happened at Pentecost in Acts 2. Yet, instead of using these blessings with humility and gratefulness, some became full of spiritual pride and it seems some false teachers were even attributing these divine gifts to pagan spirits.

This is why Paul has to warn them about these false teachers denying the centrality of Christ. He says, "Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about *the special abilities* [a better word than "gifts" - Gk. *charisma*], the Spirit gives us. *I don't want you to misunderstand this.* You know that when *you were still pagans, you were led astray and swept along in worshiping speechless idols.* So, I want you to know that *no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus*, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:1-3, NLT).

The Bible Knowledge Commentary notes, "Paul apparently believed that some of the Corinthians' problems were due not entirely to their worldly attitudes but also *to the presence of false teachers who preyed on their spiritual immaturity and exacerbated the problems.* The pagan background out of which many had come *did not help them ascertain the presence of false prophets.* When they were pagans, they had been influenced and led astray to dumb idols. Paul therefore laid down *a simple test related to the person of Christ.* The *false teachers* obviously claimed that their visions, revelations, and messages were from God, but they apparently *denied the humanity of Christ*, as expressed by the words 'Jesus be cursed.'"

This is why Paul asks them to "test the spirits," for some had manifested a "false spirit," deceiving the brethren and trying to *lead them back to idolatry.* In fact, Paul had warned them of this in 1 Cor. 10:14, 20: "Therefore, my beloved, *flee from idolatry...the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons* and not to God, and *I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.*"

Remember, in antiquity, idols represented deceiving spirits -- demons. Some false teachers could use these "false spirits" to deceive the brethren and why Paul warns them about it.

As *Wiersbe's Commentary* points out, "Paul contrasted their experience as unconverted idolaters with their present experience as Christians. They had worshiped dead idols, but now they belonged to the living God. Their idols never spoke to them, but God spoke to them by His Spirit...also note the believer is always in control of himself when the Holy Spirit is at work (1Cor.14:32) because Christ is in charge. *Any so-called 'spirit manifestation' that robs a person of self-control is not of God;* for 'the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)'...The Corinthians especially needed this reminder, because they were using their spiritual gifts selfishly to promote themselves and not to prosper the church. When we accept our gifts with humility, then we use them to promote harmony and this helps the whole church."

In contrast to those days, now, it is traditional Christianity that has set up in churches *mute idols* of statues or paintings of biblical personages such as Mary, Joseph or Jesus--that would have been condemned by Paul. As we just read, he firmly taught *the Second Commandment* against *idolatry.* It states: "You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind or an image of anything in the heavens or on the earth or in the sea. You must not bow down to them or worship them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God who will not tolerate your affection for any other gods" (Ex. 20:4-5, NLT). This includes making images and venerating any person in heaven or on earth. For the *first 4 centuries of Christianity*, this 2nd commandment was strictly kept and no religious statues or paintings existed.

As Church historian Jesse Hurlbut admits in *The Story of the Christian Church*: "It was *two generations after Constantine when images began to appear in the churches;* the early Christians having a *horror of all that might lead to idolatry...*About 405 A. D., *images of saints and martyrs* began to appear in the churches, at first as memorials, then in succession, *revered, adored, and worshiped.* The adoration of *the Virgin Mary* was substituted for the *worship of Venus and Diana;* the Lord's Supper became *a sacrifice in place of a memorial;* and the

elder evolved from a preacher into a priest" (pp. 68, 71). All these practices constitute abominable heresies, for no New Testament writer would teach the making of an image of any being to worship.

Spiritual abilities given to promote unity

Paul continues, "Now there are *different qualities* given to men, *but the same Spirit*. And there are *different sorts of servants* [*diakonia*], but the same Lord. And there are different operations, but the same God, who is working all things in all. But to every man some form of the Spirit's working is given *for the common good*" (1 Cor. 12:4-7, BBE). It is up to us, with the help of others, to find such abilities and develop them for the common good.

The main problem in Corinth was they didn't yet have a resident pastor or elder to fulfill many of the necessary functions, such as preaching, anointing and managing the Church. This is what Paul, Apollos, and other ministers would do when they visited them--shepherding them, establishing order, and correcting what was lacking. But when they left, fierce competition arose among some members over who should be left in charge and who had the most impressive abilities. Thus, factions formed around these self-proclaimed leaders, some who were false brethren that claimed to represent the various apostles or pastors of their own choice.

Nine spiritual abilities or "gifts"

So, Paul had to correct this carnal attitude and mentions *nine* of those spiritual abilities God gave them *to develop* and *unify* the Church: "For to one is given by the Spirit (1) *the word of [spiritual] wisdom* [the ability to maturely communicate God's truths]; to another, (2) *the word of knowledge* [spiritual insight] according to the same Spirit; to another, (3) faith [Gk. *pistis*, spiritual conviction] by the same Spirit; and to another, (4) gifts of healings by the same Spirit [in absence of ministers, some would pray for the sick, see James 5:14]. To another, (5) the working of miracles [for example, the power to cast out demons]; to another, (6) prophecy [Robertson: Not always a prediction, but a speaking forth of God's message under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.]; to another, (7) discernment of spirits [discerning attitudes—whether they originate from God or from demons]; to another, (8) various kinds of tongues [Gk. *glossa*, the power to speak in other languages]; and to another, (9) the interpretation of tongues [the power to understand an unknown

language]. But all these things are produced by one and the same Spirit, distributing to each one individually *as He wills*" (1 Cor. 12:8-11).

The unity of the body's organs & the Church

To build up unity, Paul compares the teamwork that ought to exist among the members in Corinth to that which exists among the parts of the human body. Paul indicates it is God who decides who will receive such gifts and that there should be no envy or competition.

He says: "For as the body *is one* and *has many members*, but *all the members of that one body*, being many, are one body, *so also is Christ*. For by one Spirit we were all baptized *into one body*—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to *drink into one Spirit*. For in fact the body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,' is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling?

"But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.' No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another [the most shameful parts of the body are those we cover the most, just as the more modest members are worthy of greater care—recall what had happened in Corinth during the Passover, when some poor brethren were belittled]. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

God was going to call many humble people into His church, as Paul had stated in 1 Cor. 2:25–29, and they must not be belittled. Quite the opposite, they should feel welcomed, respected and loved.

Paul then describes *the order and organization within the Church*, just as God did with the human body. He points out: “And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that, miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire *the best gifts*. And yet I show you a *more excellent way*” (1 Cor. 12:28-31).

Note Paul enumerates the various abilities and offices God gives to His Church. First are the apostles—the messengers chosen by God to teach and administer the Church. Second come the prophets. “They were particularly necessary until the New Testament was written and circulated among the churches” (*New Bible Commentary*, p. 1068). W. E. Vine adds: “With the completion of the canon of Scripture, prophecy apparently passed away. In this position, the teacher has taken the place of the prophet. The difference is that, whereas the message of the prophet was a direct revelation of the mind of God for the occasion, the message of the teacher is gathered from the completed revelation contained in the Scriptures,” *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*, p. 221).

Next, in chapter 13, Paul shows them that having *agape* love is more important than all the spiritual abilities they had temporarily received.

So, chapter 13 is called “The Love Chapter” because it describes that type of *agape* love.

He begins, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). The Greek term for love here is *agape*, which signifies selfless love toward God and mankind.

Christ summarized this *agape* love when He said, “You shall love [*agape*] the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...You shall love [*agape*] your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend *the whole Law and the Prophets*” (Mt. 22:37-40). In other words, *agape* love is the great *organizing principle* (1 Jn. 4:8) in the Bible, and *agape* love

toward God and man is properly expressed by obeying God’s holy, good and perfect laws.

Paul also defined *agape* love in the same way in Rom. 13:10: “If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law” (Rom. 13:10, GNB). In 1 Cor. 7:19, he also pointed out: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *keeping the commandments of God is what matters*.”

John also added: “For this is the love [*agape*] of God, that *we keep His commandments*; and *His commandments are not burdensome*” (1 John 5:3).

Now, the person who has *agape* love will respect God’s commandments—even if one doesn’t always feel like doing so—for they love God *too much to disrespect or disobey Him*. Christ explained this principle in the following parable: “But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go, work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said to Him, “The first” (Mt. 21:28-31). This is the correct answer.

So, *agape* love is shown through rightly keeping of God’s laws, motivated by love for God and one’s neighbor. It is kept even when at times one does not feel like doing so. For instance, sometimes it’s difficult to give one’s tithe, observe the Sabbath, attend Services, or travel to the Holy Days—but if one has *agape* love, one will strive to the utmost to keep these commandments, for there exists that *respectful and healthy fear of God*—the desire to not disappoint Him and do what pleases Him.

For this reason, Paul states that even if one possesses the most beautiful and eloquent voice given by God to offer Him praise, yet fails to render that basic obedience to God’s law, such a beautiful voice is of no avail in God’s sight.

James adds, “Thus also faith, if it does not have works [that is, the result of keeping God’s commandments] is dead in itself...Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?” (Jam. 2:17, 21).

In the next study, we plan to carefully examine the 16 characteristics of this *agape* love as Paul, under the inspiration of God, defines it. Remember, this chapter 13 is a key chapter in the whole Bible!