



Chapter 6

Spiritual Gifts and the Gift of Love

1 Corinthians 12-13

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read 1 Corinthians 12–13

The Big Picture

No matter what gifts we possess, the gift of love rises above all.

In chapters 12 and 13, St. Paul explores the topic of spiritual gifts. Apparently, some members of the community were boasting about their own gifts and questioning others who lacked them. St. Paul will give a more well-rounded picture of how the Church is to function while asking the Corinthians to place love above all else.

Concerning Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:1–11)

Referring again to the questions in the letter sent to him, St. Paul addresses the role of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Corinth (v. 1). Verses 4–7 set the tone for his message: Different people have different gifts, abilities to serve, and ways of working for the kingdom. God gives everyone—not just a few leaders or super-charged Christian specialists—the particular gifts that will benefit the entire community

(v. 7). At the same time, St. Paul refers to each member of the Trinity as he goes through this list—“same Spirit” (v. 4), “same Lord” (v. 5), and “same God” (v. 6). Perhaps there was a controversy concerning different spirits giving (or not giving) particular gifts. St. Paul emphasizes that all gifts come from the same source (v. 11).

One Body (1 Corinthians 12:12–31)

St. Paul’s metaphor is well-known by many Christians today; it would have been well-known in the ancient world as well. Leaders often used this metaphor to call for social order and, in particular, to keep the lower classes from an uprising. Here, St. Paul steers the metaphor in a different direction. Rather than calling on the lower classes to know their place, he is hoping that the more prideful members of the Church can see the value in the Christians they deem lower than themselves (either spiritually, physically, or both).

Just as there is no “bad” part of Jesus Christ, the Church (as the mystical body of Christ) has no bad members, either. St. Paul makes this point in the analogy by showing more care to the less honorable or unpresentable parts of the body (vv. 23–24). God does this in order to prevent discord and to encourage the proper care of all (v. 25).

Reacting to the notion that all true Christians should have the same gifts, St. Paul notes the different gifts that can be within the Church, starting with the members with the most authority: the apostles (v. 29).

Application to Jesus

The Church is truly the mystical body of Christ.

True Love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

1 Corinthians 13 is perhaps the most popular passage in St. Paul's letters, bringing to mind romantic love and weddings. As we have seen elsewhere, no passage remains detached from the letter or from the point he is trying to make. Our cultural association with the passage can distract us from the original meaning that St. Paul was hoping to convey: For him, the ultimate equalizer in the argument over gifts and disunity is love. The message of love is meant for the community as a whole, not just for a spouse.

Pharisees

St. Paul begins by noting how our actions look without love: ineffective. Even if we are absolutely faithful (enough to move mountains) or give up our lives (in martyrdom), these acts are nothing without love.

St. Paul would have known this all too well in his former life as a Pharisee. While Jesus' own teachings and life are more like the Pharisees' than any other group of Jews, He is also very critical of them. The picture that Jesus paints of the Pharisees in the Gospels is of people who are able to follow the law but do not do so with love (see Luk 7:36-50, 11:37-54). They may tithe ten percent of their possessions, but they do not realize the love of God (Luk 11:42). They may be able to teach

everyone the law, but they care little for actually helping others, especially the weak.

St. Paul's message to the Church in Corinth is clear: If you have amazing gifts but do not love those in your community, all your gifts are ultimately nothing.

What Is Love? (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

St. Paul's poetic poem about love tends to direct our minds toward an emotional, romantic side of love, and yet the characteristics of love he describes don't exactly match the American dream for romance. Notions of patience and bearing all things don't usually play into the normal "chick flick" love story. This whole love thing is not an easy idea to live out! The Corinthians would know this all too well: As St. Paul lists what love is and is not, the issues that he has addressed up till now should flip like flash cards through our minds. (See the chart below. At times, the English words used are different, but they have the same Greek root. In these cases, the word in parentheses shows an alternative English translation of the Greek to show the connection.)

1 CORINTHIANS 13

- "is not jealous" (v. 4)
- "is not boastful" (v. 4)
- "is not arrogant (or puffed up) (v. 5)
- "is not insisting on its own way" (not self-seeking)
- "does not rejoice at wrong (or injustice) (v. 6)

THE LETTER AS A WHOLE

- "jealousy...among you" (3:3)
- Boasting mentioned in 3:21, 4:7, 5:6
- Puffed up mentioned in 1:29-31, 4:6; 4:18-19; 5:6 1-2
- "Do not seek your own advantage" (10:24)
- Injustice is the theme of 6:1-11

Understanding / Spiritual Gifts and the Gift of Love

St. Paul's point is that ultimately love can solve all the Corinthians' problems, if they put love first above all things. All other gifts will ultimately cease (v. 8). In the end, the true higher gifts (12:31; 13:13) are faith, hope, and love. Most translations do not properly convey verse 13: Ultimately, Paul points to love as the only gift that lasts into eternity. There is no need for hope or faith in heaven, because there we will see God face to face.

Application to Our Lives

Without love, our knowledge and our good deeds amount to little.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

1 Corinthians 12–13

STEP 1: OPENER

Have you ever received an amazing gift?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In chapters 12 and 13, St. Paul explores the topic of spiritual gifts. Apparently, some members of the community boasted about their own gifts and questioned others who lacked them. St. Paul will give a more well-rounded picture of how the Church is to function while asking the Corinthians to place love above all else.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Today's passage is 1 Corinthians 12–13. Start by reading 1 Corinthians 12:1–11.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

1. What problem is St. Paul trying to address?

Answer: Perhaps some of the Corinthians believed that everyone should have the same gifts, or that certain gifts came from different spirits.

2. How does St. Paul try to solve it?

Answer: St. Paul tries to illustrate that there are a variety of gifts that all come from the same source (a member of the Trinity).

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.

3. What analogy does St. Paul use?

Answer: St. Paul uses the analogy of the body.

4. What other problems is St. Paul addressing in this passage?

Answer: It appears that some members consider themselves more important than others. This division is causing problems in the community.

5. What gifts or parts of the Body of Christ do you value the most in the Church?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. What gifts or parts of the Body of Christ do you look down on?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. How do we overcome these attitudes?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. A part of the solution lies in treating everyone in the Body of Christ the same, no matter who they are.

8. How can this be helpful in building up our own character?

Answer: We grow as people when we are concerned about others and not just about ourselves.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

9. What is St. Paul's ultimate answer for this debate in chapter 12?

Answer: Love.

10. St. Paul, who was a Jewish Pharisee before his conversion to Christianity, would have known what it was like to live the faith without love. Read Luke 7:36-50.

Answer: No answer is needed.

11. Give some background on the Pharisees from the "Pharisees" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?" What do the Pharisees do well?

Answer: They are able to follow the law and live a righteous life.

12. How do the Pharisees fail?

Answer: They fail to love because they are caught up in their own obedience and not God's mercy. They lose sight of God's love and the love they are supposed to give to others.

13. How do we avoid the mistakes of the Pharisees?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–13.

14. What is the world's view of love?

Answer: At times, the world sees love as an emotion, something that can come and go rather than a choice to be made.

15. How is this different from Paul's view of love?

Answer: The picture of love that St. Paul paints is a difficult one to live up to. Love is meant for the hard times, not just for your emotional happiness.

16. How do the characteristics of love apply to the themes throughout the letter?

Answer: See the chart in the "What Is Love?" section in "What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?"

17. Which of the characteristics is the hardest to live out?

Allow the group to discuss.

18. What do you think you need to do to overcome this difficulty?

Allow the group to discuss.

