

A Most Excellent Way

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal, and if I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profiteth me nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3)

Paul concluded his former efforts in the previous chapter to both identify the nine specific gifts and forcefully show no one person received all these gifts; because each gift served a unique and peculiar need, they were distributed by the Holy Spirit to various members so that while no one person possessed them all, distribution in the local church would see that in that church all the gifts would be found — exercised by different members. He does not say it would be wrong to desire one of the great gifts (12:31), but adds, *"And moreover a most excellent way show I unto you."* Some translations put it this way: *"And moreover a more excellent way show I unto you."* While we may never know which of these two translations expresses the original thought with the apostle, from the statements which follows and the obvious contrast seen therein, it seems evident that Paul did intend to say that he was going to show the Corinthians something which was more profitable than the possession and exercising of a miraculous gift.

First Corinthians 13 is universally called the "chapter of love". In this chapter "love" is defined and certainly is the *"most (more?) excellent way"* to which Paul directed the attention of his Corinthian brethren. It is altogether fitting that some remarks be made regarding the word as it is found in this chapter.

Bible students understand that our English word "love" is actually the translation of primarily two Greek words and that the use of one single word cannot show the shade of differences between the two. These two words are agapao (the word here in 1 Corinthians 13) and phileo. Of these two, the word most commonly used in the New Testament is agapao. It is found at least six times more often than phileo. Perhaps nothing illustrates more clearly there is a shade of difference in meaning between the two words than the exchange between Jesus and Peter on Galilee's shore after Jesus' resurrection and Peter's shameful denial of Jesus three times before He was crucified, as Jesus had predicted (John 21:1). Whether there was an intended rebuke to Peter by Jesus' question, *"Lovest thou me more than these?"* will always be a matter of opinion: or also whether the "these" Jesus mentions refers to the "fishes" or the "disciples". But, whether Jesus intended a rebuke to Peter by asking his question three times (reminding

Peter he had denied him three times) or is asking Peter whether he loves Him more than fishes or whether he loves Him more than the other disciples; there is no dispute that in Jesus' first two questions "*Lovest thou me more than these?*" the word "*lovest*" is the word *agapao*, while Peter's answer "*Lord thou knowest that I love thee*" uses the word *phileo* for "*love*". In Jesus' third time to ask "*Lovest thou me?*" He changes His word "*love*" from *agapao* to *phileo* (John 21:15-17). Obviously Peter's "stubborn" refusal to say that he loved (*agapao*) Jesus, rather that he loved (*phileo*) Him was an affirmation that he loved the Lord as his friend for *phileo* is defined as "friend" in various dictionaries and the name "Philadelphia" means "brotherly love".

It is interesting to see some usage of these two words in the New Testament. We are to love (*agapao*) God with all our heart, to love (*agapao*) our neighbor as ourselves (Mt. 22:37-39). Yet, when Jesus had strongly rebuked Laodicea for her lukewarmness, Jesus then said, "*As many as I love (phileo) I rebuke and chasten*" (Rev. 3:19). On one hand they "*are more than conquerors through he that loved (agapao) us,*" but hypocrites "*love (phileo) to stand and pray in the synagogues*" (Mt. 6:5). Husbands are to love (*agapao*) their wives as Christ loved the church (Eph. 5:25) but "*whosoever loved (phileo) and maketh a lie*" will be without the gates of the celestial city (Rev. 22:15). Some define *agapao* as the higher form of love while *phileo* emphasizes more the emotional part of it.

Let it be noted that of the nine gifts named in 1 Corinthians 12, three of them (tongues, prophecy, and faith) are named in 1 Corinthians 13. Though one should exercise the "tongue gift" to even that of angels, if he did not have "*love*" (*agapao*), his tongue speaking "*was nothing*" more than noise: a sounding brass or clanging cymbal. Though one should through the gift of prophecy, know all mysteries and all knowledge (what prophet ever attained to that degree?), but lacked "*love*" (*agapao*), he was nothing. Should one have all faith to "*move mountains,*" yet lacked "*love*" (*agapao*) he was nothing.

Paul moved from the miraculous to the natural realm when he remarked that should one give all his goods to feed the poor — a tremendous sacrifice of personal and self-interest, or should one give his body to be burned — the highest degree of faith a man can express — yet lacked "*love*" (*agapao*), all such sacrifices would be futile, worthless.

What then, is this love that is absolutely necessary — the most, more excellent way? Such will be the topic of our next article.

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