

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 4

### 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-11:34

#### THE BACKGROUND

Several of the issues Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 8–11 deal with the intersection of Christianity and culture. Although the cultural specifics differ from time to time and place to place, as long as we are in this world we as Christians cannot escape relating to society at large. The Corinthian believers faced challenges such as those in the following list.

#### 1. What limits should Christians exercise in eating food that had previously been sacrificed on a pagan altar?

Evidently the temples for idol worship in Corinth had a lot of leftover meat. In many of the pagan sacrificial rituals only part of the meat was burned on the altar. The remainder was either eaten in sacrificial feasts at the pagan temples or in homes or was sold in the marketplace. Was it a spiritual compromise for a follower of Jesus to accept an invitation to such a feast? Was it acceptable for believers to buy such meat in the marketplace?

#### 2. What was acceptable attire regarding head coverings for men and women in public worship?

If cultural standards of modesty expected women to wear head coverings, was it acceptable for Christian women to claim freedom in Christ and refuse to wear veils in worship? Should a man cover his head in public worship? Neither of these issues directly relates to our lives in 2010. You probably cannot find meat previously sacrificed to an idol for sale in your town or city, nor does the current American cultural standard of female modesty expect women to be veiled in public settings. Nevertheless, the principles Paul developed for dealing with these and other cultural matters have guided Christians well through the centuries. As we will see, in a nutshell Paul's advice was: Exercise your freedom in Christ but remember there are limits.

#### 1. IS IT BASED ON LOVE? (1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-3)

**Verse 1:** *About food offered to idols: We know that “we all have knowledge.” Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up.*

Apparently some of the Corinthians were arrogantly flaunting the slogan, “We all have knowledge.” They were claiming the gospel had enlightened them to the reality that idol statues are merely that — statues. Idols are

nothing and there is only one true God (8:4). Thus these enlightened believers had no qualms about eating food that had been offered to an idol. However, these church members were flaunting their freedom in front of other believers who, perhaps only a short time earlier had been unbelievers and were eating such food as if it were truly a meal eaten in the presence of a god.

Paul immediately made the point that living this way, based on knowledge alone, inflates with pride. Conceit is deadly to relationships. On the other hand, love builds up relationships. Knowledge too often is all about self and self-importance; love is about others and their importance. Paul was not denying the importance of truth and sound doctrine; rather, he was pointing out that knowledge is not the only thing believers must pursue as they live day by day.

**Verse 2:** *If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it.*

You have no doubt heard the proverb, “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” This observation applies to Christians as well. All human knowledge — even the insights of philosophers and the conclusions of the most highly educated scientist or Christian theologian — is limited and subject to correction. There will always be more for any individual to know ... as he ought to know a certain topic. God alone has exhaustive knowledge of everything. Furthermore, the one who thinks he knows a subject is especially susceptible to pride.

**Verse 3:** *But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.*

Paul continued his emphasis on love. Loving God is far more important than gaining theological knowledge. Furthermore, isn't it more important for a person to be known by God than to know facts about God and theology? According to Paul, our confidence that we have a personal relationship with God is based more on our experience of love for God than on our knowledge of facts about Him. The best way to demonstrate we have been redeemed is by focusing on love rather than by flaunting knowledge. Some of the Corinthians were flaunting their knowledge, and some Christians have done the same thing down through the ages.

With regard to eating food offered to idols, Paul urged the Corinthians to base their behavior on love, especially on their love for God. How do verses 1-3 apply to our lives today? Paul stated the principle that we are to base our behavior toward others on our love for God. Our actions

are to grow out of this love more than out of the knowledge we have about a particular issue.

#### 2. WILL IT HARM OTHERS?

(1 CORINTHIANS 8:9-13; 10:23-24)

**Verse 9:** *But be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.*

The phrase this right of yours meant the freedom to eat food offered to idols based on the understanding that “an idol is nothing in the world” (8:4). The weak referred to believers who still thought that idols were real. A stumbling block is an obstacle, based on the literal experience of someone striking a stump or stone on a path and falling as a result. Figuratively, it refers to any action, word, or attitude that would cause another person to sin. Paul was urging more mature believers to take responsibility for helping less mature Christians to grow spiritually.

**Verse 10:** *For if somebody sees you, the one who has this knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, won't his weak conscience be encouraged to eat food offered to idols?*

Paul set up a potential scenario for “knowledgeable” believers to ponder carefully. Suppose you have accepted an invitation for dining in an idol's temple. You have a great time with your (non-Christian) friends and enjoy a good meal, thinking nothing much about the spiritual implications of such a meal. After all, you have this knowledge that idols have no reality, and you have simply enjoyed good food and a good time.

But what if somebody, a Christian with a weak conscience, sees you there? What if this person is encouraged by your action to behave contrary to his or her own conscience? Imagine that this weaker believer then goes to an idol's temple for dinner — and is then stricken with a sense of guilt. What if this guilty conscience then leads this somebody into a state of spiritual coldness?

Have you ever done something you felt might have been wrong for you to do but you did it because another believer was doing the same thing? How did you feel afterward? What did you learn from that experience?

**Verse 11:** *Then the weak person, the brother for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.*

Paul drove home the spiritual point. Each follower of Jesus, whether a brother or sister, is precious to

Him. Showing His sacrificial love, Christ died for each of them. Yet you have acted selfishly by flaunting your knowledge. You have become an agent for ruining another. The verb ruined refers to a weak believer having his or her spiritual growth adversely affected, not to a Christian losing salvation. All true believers are eternally secure in Christ.

**Verse 12:** *Now when you sin like this against the brothers and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.*

Paul continued relentlessly to draw the conclusion. Let's follow his thinking.

- Suppose a mature, “knowledgeable” Christian has chosen to behave based on knowledge, not on love. The particular behavior is not sinful in itself.
- Brothers or sisters with a weak conscience may see this behavior, follow it, and wound themselves spiritually.
- Whether intentional or not, the original action has become sin ... against fellow believers.
- When Christians sin against another believer, they are sinning against Christ, because Christ is united to believers who are part of His body (12:27).

What a tremendous price to pay for the momentary exercise of Christian freedom! Surely no believer, confronted with this thinking process, would ever intentionally go down such path that leads to ruin.

**Verse 13:** *Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I won't cause my brother to fall.*

Paul stated the personal conclusion he had come to as far as limiting his own freedom. For love of Christ and for love of other believers, Paul was willing to limit himself drastically. It was more important to him to protect the spiritual growth of fellow believers than to display his personal Christian liberty.

We should not assume that Paul's affirmation “I will never again eat meat” means Paul was always a committed vegetarian. In the context, his pledge was limited by the following considerations:

1. The food was meat that had been sacrificed previously to an idol.
2. The phrase if food causes my brother to fall means that Paul had exercised due diligence in determining this matter was a cause of difficulty to another believer.

3. In some situations eating meat was the right thing to do (10:27).

Paul's great concern in verses 9-13 was to get believers to ask themselves the question, Will my behavior harm others? The specific situation he had in mind was eating in a place of idol worship that leads another believer astray. This truth applies to us in different ways. Do you freely go to certain places that might become a snare for a weaker Christian? Which, if any, of the following places or activities, might be acceptable for a mature believer but become a stumbling block for another? Going to an “R” rated movie? Eating in a casino? Going to a bar with friends? We are to base our behavior on how it will affect others spiritually, and we are to do nothing to harm them or the cause of Christ.

**Chapter 10. Verse 23:** *“Everything is permissible,” but not everything is helpful. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up.*

Paul quoted a slogan some members of the congregation — those who wanted to exercise their liberty — were tossing around: “Everything is permissible” (see also 6:12). Within the context, permissible applies only to cultural issues for which Scripture provides no clear guideline. Certainly some actions are always off limits. Yet Paul acknowledged that Christian freedom is extensive.

Another issue, however, must be addressed. Even if a particular action is allowable, is it helpful? Will it edify other believers if they see another participating in the questioned act? Paul was certain that although many acts are permissible, not everything builds up. The apostle wanted the believers to conclude that if an action isn't helpful to others and doesn't build them up, then a thoughtful Christian should be more than willing to give it up.

**Verse 24:** *No one should seek his own good, but the good of the other person.*

Paul challenged his readers to put the good of others — their spiritual welfare — ahead of one's personal interests and concerns. Love means willingness to sacrifice one's own interests. We are, of course, responsible to maintain our own spiritual well-being. Yet we are never to let what we feel is good for us (such as the free exercise of our rights) outweigh what is good for fellow believers (helping build them up by not causing them to stumble).

Throughout verses 25-30 Paul continued to emphasize the theme we have already seen. Believers are to ask themselves: Even if I am free in a particular situation, will

my behavior harm others?

### 3. IS IT EVANGELISTIC? (1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-23)

**Verse 19:** *For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people.*

Cities in the first-century Roman Empire were multicultural. Paul encountered rich and poor, free and slave, Jew and Gentile, and other people who made for a complex, cultural situation. Everywhere he went, he had to think about the intersection of Christianity and culture. On one hand the apostle could affirm, “I am free” (see also 9:1). As a result of his close personal relationship with the Lord, his vast knowledge of Scripture, and his understanding of the meaning of Christianity, he experienced liberty in Christ. In fact, earlier in the letter he had stated he really didn't care about the opinion the Corinthians had about his ministry because Christ's evaluation of him was what mattered (4:3-4).

On the other hand, Paul confessed, “I have made myself a slave.” He had deprived himself of certain rights to live according to his own cultural preferences and had sought to relate to each separate group he encountered by behaving according to their preferences within the limits of his relationship to Christ. Why did he go to such extremes? He did so in order to win more people to Christ.

It's important to note that verses 19-23 do not call for insincerity in behavior or “faking it” before others. Neither are believers ever to stoop to unchristian or immoral actions for the sake of evangelism. A righteous goal can never be justified by an immoral means. Nor can we water down the content of the gospel so that we can get more people to indicate decisions for Christ. However, this passage expresses Paul's willingness to look at life as others see it and to approach them from that perspective.

**Verse 20:** *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law.*

Paul grew up racially and culturally as a Jew (Philippians 3:5-6). As a Christian, however, he moved beyond the restrictions Judaism put on him (Galatians 5:1-6). Yet whenever he had the opportunity to minister in a Jewish context, he did whatever he needed to do culturally to win Jews for Christ. In the first century, one of the chief concerns of devout Jews was to live under the law of the Old Testament. Paul knew

that living this way had no saving value, and as a Christian he was not under the law. Yet when the occasion called for it, Paul respected the restrictions of living culturally as the law expected. See Acts 16:3 and 21:17-26 for specific examples of how Paul followed Jewish ceremonial regulations.

**Verse 21:** *To those who are outside the law, like one outside the law — not being outside God's law, but under the law of Christ — to win those outside the law.*

Of course, most persons of the first-century world were Gentiles, outside the law. Their food, customs, religious beliefs, and family practices were often quite different from those of Jews. When Paul was trying to reach Gentiles, he became like one outside the law, evidently meaning he adopted the customs of Gentiles as much as possible while remaining true to his faith in Christ.

Paul was quick to explain that his willingness to live like a Gentile did not set him free from the moral teachings of Scripture. He was careful to acknowledge he was always conscious of God's law. By the law of Christ, he probably meant the teachings of Jesus when He was on earth, now recorded in the Gospels.

Surely Paul's commitment to win those outside the law put him in situations where he was eating foods he personally would have preferred not to eat. Perhaps you have heard stories about missionaries who have been sorely tried in their efforts to adapt to the unusual foods and cultures of the people group they were sent to evangelize.

Have you ever taken steps to move outside your own cultural comfort zone for the sake of helping someone different from you understand the gospel? What was the result?

**Verse 22:** *To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some.*

By the weak Paul meant those who had scruples against certain foods or customs in which he personally had freedom. He was returning to the point he had made in 8:9-12. How was it that Paul — with so much strength and freedom — became weak? He did so by giving up his rights. Perhaps the best commentary on the first part of verse 22 is what the apostle wrote in 8:13.

The phrase all things to all people means that Paul adapted himself for the greater good of God's kingdom. God used Paul's curtailment of his freedom as the means to save some from eternal judgment. Seen in this light, such self-denial was no huge price to pay.

**Verse 23:** *Now I do all this because of the gospel, that I may become a partner in its benefits.*

Why did Paul take such pains in his evangelism? For him, the gospel was not just the good news of conversion; it was the good news of an entire way of life that led to everlasting benefits. Paul considered himself a partner in the good news, sharing in the blessings Christ gives to all who respond to Him in faith.

Verses 19-23 record Paul's account of how he accommodated his behavior to reach different groups of people for Christ. How does this accommodation relate to us? The answer is simple. We are to base our actions on what will lead others to become Christians. We are to do everything we can that is evangelistic. Consider for a moment the kinds of people who live within three miles of your church meeting place. What can you do differently or better to adapt your church's outreach so that some of these people can be won to Christ?

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 11

### 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31; 14:1-40

#### THE BACKGROUND

This week's lesson examines Paul's response to the difficulty the church was facing with regard to spiritual gifts. In the congregation's life, some of these gifts were being overemphasized; others were being abused. Apparently some church members with "showy" gifts had made the mistake of thinking their exercise of spiritual gifts was proof of their spiritual maturity.

1 Corinthians 12–14 is Paul's lengthy teaching about the matter of spiritual gifts. Tucked in the middle of this teaching is the apostle's grand oration on love and the centrality of love in the exercise of gifts (chap. 13). Because love is so crucial — not only for the exercise of spiritual gifts, but also for everything believers do in life — we are devoting next week's lesson to an in-depth study of 1 Corinthians 13. This week, however, we are diving into what Paul taught the Corinthian Christians about the exercise of spiritual gifts in chapters 12 and 14.

#### 1. FEELING GIFT-LESS? (1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-10)

**Verses 4-6:** *Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but the same God is active in everyone and everything.*

**Three Persons of the Godhead.** Note the reference to the same Spirit and the same Lord and the same God. Although we are used to the order "Father, Son, and Spirit," there's no question that Paul was here expressing the unity within diversity that lies at the essence of the triune God. Furthermore, we are to recognize that the Father, Son, and Spirit are intimately concerned with the spiritual success of local congregations.

**Three aspects of Christian service.** The terms Paul used are closely related, and they represent a kind of logical sequence. They too express unity within diversity. (1) Gifts. The Greek term is related to the Greek term for grace and refers to something given as an expression of God's grace. No believer deserves any spiritual gift; therefore, whatever particular gift each believer has received is to be used gratefully. Gifts logically precede ministries. (2) Ministries flow from the exercise of gifts. The Greek term translated ministries is closely related to the word translated deacon.

The term ministries refers to a variety of different kinds of useful, everyday service. (3) Activities flow from the exercise of ministries. The Greek term translated activities is related to our English term energy, but it refers particularly to effective outcomes or results.

**Verse 7:** *A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person to produce what is beneficial:*

A manifestation is something that can be seen or otherwise recognized by the senses. Thus, Paul was saying that one of the main ways the Spirit is perceived as present and active in the life of a believer is through His gifts at work through that believer. Paul also noted the main outcome of gifts is to produce what is beneficial to others in the fellowship of the church. Gifts were not to be used for selfish purposes — for example, to build up a personal following — as may have been happening in the badly divided Corinthian congregation.

**Verses 8-10:** *to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of languages, to another, interpretation of languages.*

In verses 8-10, Paul listed nine representative gifts. The apostle was sure that the Spirit (mentioned four times in these verses) was the source of this great cornucopia of gifts.

**1. Message of wisdom.** Earlier in the letter Paul had contrasted earthly wisdom with God's wisdom, which centers on Jesus Christ, the crucified Lord (1 Corinthians 1:21-25; 2:6-7). Paul described his preaching ministry this way: "we speak God's hidden wisdom in a mystery" (2:7).

**2. Message of knowledge.** Here, Paul used knowledge to refer to the ability some have to teach spiritual truths to others.

**3. Faith.** Paul was probably talking about the special ability God has given some of Christ's followers to take the lead in helping other Christians see that God will move in a particular way in a specific situation.

**4. Gifts of healing.** The Scriptures refer to miraculous healings as well as to the use of medicine. Paul was no doubt thinking of physical healings, but God also powerfully works through Christian counselors to help bring about mental health.

**5. Performing of miracles.** Literally, the phrase is "works of power." Both the Gospels and Acts show the power of God at work in miraculous deeds. These acts could not be explained by natural means and pointed to God's presence and power.

**6. Prophecy.** In the Old Testament, prophets of God foretold or predicted the future as well as forth-told or proclaimed God's truth.

**7. Distinguishing between spirits.** God gifted some within the church with the ability to distinguish between a true preacher or teacher and a false one (1 John 4:1-6).

**8. Different kinds of languages.** Some believe Paul was thinking about the ability to speak a known foreign language without studying it. Others believe Paul had in mind ecstatic speech unlike any human language. Whatever the nature of this language, it was a spiritual gift, but it was mentioned next to last here and in 1 Corinthians 12:30.

**9. Interpretation of languages.** Paul was concerned that everyone present understand the meaning of everything spoken during a Christian worship service (14:5-28).

The Spirit of God has endowed His people with all the gifts they need in order to minister effectively. Furthermore, all Christians have at least one spiritual gift.

#### 2. OUR GIFTS ARE IMPORTANT (1 CORINTHIANS 12:11-13,18-19)

**Verse 11:** *But one and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each one as He wills.*

For the third time in this chapter, Paul noted that every believer receives at least one spiritual gift (12:6,7,11). What's more, spiritual gifts are important because they all come from one and the same Spirit. The Spirit is sovereign in determining the precise gift or gifts you and I have; therefore, we cannot feel superior to another because we have received a particular evidence of the Spirit.

**Verse 12:** *For as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body — so also is Christ.*

Here the apostle began developing his illustration that the human body with its many parts helps us understand the way spiritual gifts work in the church. Unity within diversity was still at the forefront of Paul's thinking. The one body of Christ with its many gifted members is like the one human body with its diverse parts.

**Verse 13:** *For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

Believers are given spiritual gifts at the time of their conversions, the tremendous moment of change from death to life when the Spirit first came to dwell within them. Conversion marks the occasion that the Spirit begins His permanent indwelling presence in each believer's life. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul used two intriguing phrases to refer to this wonderful change: baptized by one Spirit and made to drink of one Spirit.

First, Paul described conversion with the picture of Jesus plunging believing sinners into the Spirit so that the new convert is placed into one body. The second way Paul described conversion was with the picture of taking a good long drink of the Spirit (see John 7:37-39). Although water baptism is a fitting external symbol of this change from death to life and the Lord's Supper is a sign and seal of the new covenant, Paul most likely was not thinking about the Christian ordinances here. Rather, he was thinking about the inner transformation that began when we repented and believed the gospel.

### 3. OUR GIFTS ARE FOR THE CHURCH (1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-30)

**Verse 27:** *Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it.*

At last Paul made explicit where his body illustration was heading. The term you is plural, referring to the individuals who made up the local Corinthian congregation. They constituted a legitimate expression of the worldwide body of Christ. The term translated members means a part or portion, as opposed to the whole.

**Verse 28:** *And God has placed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, next, miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, managing, various kinds of languages.*

The phrase God has placed again stresses God's sovereignty in distributing spiritual gifts according to His plan (12:11,18). Here Paul also conveyed the idea that spiritual gifts for all intents and purposes are meant to help the church.

In this verse Paul listed eight gifts of the Spirit, partly overlapping his previous list of representative gifts. Like the list in 12:8-10, each deserves specific comment.

**1. Apostles.** These men were personally designated by Jesus as His official representatives to be with Him and to preach the gospel. They included those whom the Lord appointed during His earthly ministry as well as Paul (Matthew 10:2-4; 1 Timothy 2:7).

**2. Prophets.** In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul explicitly elevated prophecy above speaking in languages. Prophets are listed after apostles because the role of prophet was also foundational to the church.

**3. Teachers.** In Ephesians 4:11, Paul linked the work of teachers with that of pastors. The gift of teaching is extremely important for a local congregation to grow properly.

**4. Miracles.** See comments on "Performing of miracles" on page 63.

**5. Gifts of healing.** See comments under this heading on page 63.

**6. Helping.** This word occurs here only in the New Testament. Cheerfully lending a hand to assist the congregation's needs is spiritual work.

**7. Managing.** This term occurs here only in the New Testament. The work of a congregation is always more effective when good leaders are involved in organizing the work.

**8. Various kinds of languages.** See comments under "Different kinds of languages" on page 63.

**Verses 29-30:** *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all do miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in languages? Do all interpret?*

They were rhetorical questions, asked for effect, for the apostle phrased them all in a way that expected no for an answer.

### 4. USE GIFTS UNSELFISHLY (1 CORINTHIANS 12:31; 14:1, 39-40)

**Verse 31:** *But desire the greater gifts. And I will show you an even better way.*

Paul's theme turned to the importance of using spiritual gifts unselfishly. We can long for and seek other spiritual gifts, but we cannot overrule the Spirit's right to refuse us one or more of these gifts.

This verse has strong implications for how we go about our Christian service. It does not encourage us to focus our spiritual energy on seeking new gifts and spiritual experiences. Rather, we are to seek an even better way, that of loving other believers through sacrificial service.

**Chapter 14. Verse 1:** *Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts, and above all that you may prophesy.*

After Paul's great oration on love, he summarized with the simple phrase pursue love. The verb translated pursue carries with it the idea of unrelenting persistence. When love is primary, then Christians will want to exercise the spiritual gifts that are the most beneficial for the congregation.

**Verse 39:** *Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in other languages.*

Paul concluded his discussion of these two spiritual gifts with two brief commands. Concerning prophecy, those with the gift were to be eager or "zealous" to exercise their gift, knowing that all the members of the congregation would benefit from clear communication of God's message. Concerning speaking in other languages, no person should forbid the usage, as long as the limitations Paul had noted previously were observed.

**Verse 40:** *But everything must be done decently and in order.*

Paul was concerned that the unbridled use of some spiritual gifts could lead to chaos in the worship service.

Verses 39-40 serve as a fitting conclusion for this lesson because they further stress the importance of using spiritual gifts unselfishly, in ways that benefit the entire congregation.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 18

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3

#### THE BACKGROUND

How closely connected is the number of a church's internal problems to the degree that its members express love for one another? Surely all Christians would agree that the two are related to a high degree. Why then do we as church members not do more to show we have love for one another? Is it our own stubbornness? Selfishness? Immaturity? Or is it that we let stubbornness, selfishness, and immaturity in others frustrate us? When we recognize the importance of preventing problems in a church, we can also recognize the importance of letting Christian love become the guiding principle for all we do in our churches. This kind of behavior is what Paul urged on the stubborn, selfish, and immature Corinthians in the Scripture passage for this week's lesson.

Last week's Background passage of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 focused on the truth that all Christians have spiritual gifts we are to recognize, develop, and use. Because Christian love is so crucial — not only for the exercise of spiritual gifts, but also for everything believers do in the church and in the rest of life — we are devoting this lesson to an in-depth study of Paul's teaching in chapter 13. Note his intentional transition in 1 Corinthians 12:31 from the topic of spiritual gifts to the topic of love: "I will show you an even better way."

#### 1. AUTHENTIC LOVE (1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3)

**Verse 1:** *If I speak the languages of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

Love translates the well-known Greek noun *agape* [ah GAH pay]. In Scripture, forms of *agape* usually refer to Christian love in the sense of showing sacrificial concern or interest in another. Such love results in action. In the Gospels, Jesus said that love for God and love for neighbors were the most important commands of Scripture (Matthew 22:37-40). In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul used *agape* an astonishing 9 times in 13 verses (13:1,2,3,4 [3 times], 8,13 [2 times]).

In the following commentary, wherever you see the term love, you might mentally insert the definition, "concern for others that leads to sacrificial action." Clearly

Paul understood that such love is God-given, not a mere human trait. Because of Christ's love in giving Himself for us, we can love (Galatians 2:20; see 1 John 4:7-12).

The expression languages of men probably refers to one of the spiritual gifts on which some of the Corinthians were putting a premium. Bible scholars do not know exactly what Paul meant by speaking with the languages of angels because it is mentioned only here in Scripture. There is no biblical evidence that Paul or any other human ever spoke in this manner. Whatever gifts of speech a believer may exercise, such as preaching, teaching, and singing, the underlying motive is more important than the exercise of the gift.

**Verse 2:** *If I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

Prophecy was another speech-related gift from God that could be exercised without the right motive. Even though prophecy surpassed languages in value as a spiritual gift, the prophet without love is nothing.

Two valuable spiritual gifts Paul already had identified were the "message of wisdom" and the "message of knowledge" (12:8). No human being could ever begin to come close to such knowledge. Yet even if such a spiritual gift were possible, the wisest Christian sage without love gains nothing.

Another spiritual gift Paul recognized was faith (12:9; see the discussion on page 63 in last week's lesson). People with great faith can in fact move mountains, both literally and symbolically, as Jesus Himself taught (Mark 11:23). Yet the Christian with staggeringly great faith gains nothing without love as the motivation.

**Verse 3:** *And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

The deeds the apostle mentioned here are not so much spiritual gifts in action as they are examples of extreme self-sacrifice. Many people may give to feed the poor. Not many would donate all for such a cause, even though Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do so (Mark 10:21).

Throughout these verses, Paul used first-person pronouns. He lived a life of great personal sacrifice. Yet he had not achieved all the extremes noted in the examples he gave. For example, he apparently had not given his body to be burned. The apostle was deliberately engag-

ing the reader's attention. He wanted each of us to insert ourselves into the examples.

#### 2. HOLY LOVE (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7)

**Verse 4:** *Love is patient; love is kind. Love does not envy; is not boastful; is not conceited;*

Paul used five verb forms in this verse, emphasizing the actions springing from love.

**1. Patient.** The term indicates forbearance or restraint, a slowness to repay another for offenses. Patience works actively to bring about change for good. To another church, Paul counseled believers to "be patient with everyone" (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

**2. Kind.** To be kind is to proceed considerately and mercifully with others. God has been kind and good to us (Ephesians 2:7; 4:32); therefore, we are obligated to be kind to others.

**3. Does not envy.** Here Paul began describing love in terms of what it is not. He listed eight such negatives in a row before returning to positive characteristics. To envy or to be jealous implies resenting others for who they are or what they have or do.

**4. Not boastful.** This verse is the only time in the New Testament that any form of this word is used. The verb carries the idea of bragging or showing off.

**5. Not conceited.** This verb suggests arrogance or false pride. The Corinthian believers were overly ambitious for knowledge.

**Verse 5:** *does not act improperly; is not selfish; is not provoked; does not keep a record of wrongs;*

In this verse, Paul quickly listed four more "nots" of love.

**6. Does not act improperly.** Another translation could be "is not rude." To act without consideration of proper social behavior is to disrespect others. Little things count a lot, even in church. Politeness is an act of love.

**7. Not selfish.** Literally this expression means "does not seek its own things." Genuine Christian love will cheerfully put the interests of others first.

**8. Not provoked.** This verb indicates irritation and anger at a person or situation.

**9. Does not keep a record of wrongs.** Those who nurse grudges are unlikely to act with love. Jesus urged repeated forgiveness of the offenses of one's brothers and sisters (Matthew 18:21-22). Paul clearly taught that unrepentant evil in a congregation must be exposed in order to deal

with it. Nevertheless, we as Christians are to take care lest a resentful attitude spoil our love for others.

**Verse 6:** *finds no joy in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth;*

Here the apostle put the positive and the negative aspects of love side by side in vivid contrast.

**10. Finds no joy in unrighteousness.** Sometimes, to our shame, Christians can be happy when bad things happen to other people or when other people sin. Unrighteousness or sin destroys people's lives. Thus as believers we should never even secretly admire or approve of evil.

**11. Rejoices in the truth.** Here Paul moved from negatives to positives. He contrasted unrighteousness with truth. As believers, we are to be pleased when we see fellow Christians trying and succeeding at lifestyles consistent with the truth of the gospel.

**Verse 7:** *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

**12. Bears all things.** The verb translated bears suggests putting up with unpleasant circumstances. There is no end to the difficult circumstances Christian love will face triumphantly.

**13. Believes all things.** The thought behind this phrase may be that love gives the benefit of the doubt. Furthermore, it is foolish to believe someone who has proved to be a habitual liar. Trust can be destroyed. There is no end to the trust that Christian love demonstrates.

**14. Hopes all things.** Christian hope recognizes the power of God to transform apparently hopeless situations into something beautiful. Christ has promised to complete the work He has begun in the life of every believer (Philippians 1:6). Christians who love will continue to express Christian hope for the best in others.

**15. Endures all things.** To endure is "to persevere," whatever the obstacles. Paul used the same Greek verb in Romans 12:12, "be patient in affliction." An outstanding instance of this same verb appears in Hebrews 12:2-3, of Jesus who endured the cross for our sake. Because Jesus endured such hostility, He enables His people to bear up under every difficulty we will face.

### 3. UNCONDITIONAL LOVE (1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13)

**Verse 8:** *Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for languages, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.*

Paul mentioned three representative gifts from chapter 12:8-10: prophecies, languages, and knowledge. In God's design, they are temporary. On the other hand is love. It never ends, literally "never falls." One of the clearest teachings of the Bible is that one of God's eternal attributes is His love.

**Verses 9-10:** *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end.*

Those who appropriately exercise great spiritual gifts recognize that such gifts are only in part. Even the greatest human prophet has only known God's revelation partially. The wisest of spiritual leaders understand that the more knowledge they have gained, the more there is yet to know. But what if there comes a time when all God's people have attained full knowledge?

Thus Paul recognized that spiritual gifts such as knowledge and prophecy can last only until they are no longer needed. In eternity, who will need the gift of knowledge? In heaven, who will need the gift of prophecy?

Bible scholars have discussed at length what Paul meant by the perfect. One clue is that he contrasted it with the partial. Another clue is that the perfect will be a "face to face" experience (1 Corinthians 13:12). Surely the apostle had in mind the second coming of Christ.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR JULY 25

### 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-16:24

#### THE BACKGROUND

This lesson marks the last in our series of lessons from 1 Corinthians. For several weeks, we have been following Paul's written responses to the questions the Corinthians had asked. After his long discussion of spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14), the apostle was at last ready to conclude the letter.

In chapter 15, he focused on the resurrection of Christ and the future resurrection of believers. He had learned that some Corinthian Christians were denying the doctrine of the future bodily resurrection of believers (1 Corinthians 15:12). Paul patiently and logically showed the close relationship between Jesus' resurrection and the future resurrection of believers. Under divine inspiration he provided marvelous insight into the nature of the resurrection body.

Finally, in chapter 16, the apostle brought the letter to a close. He wrote about the financial collection for the Jerusalem church in which he wanted the Corinthian believers as well as believers in other churches to participate. The apostle made some personal requests. In his final comments he indicated something of his situation as he continued his ministry in the great city of Ephesus.

#### 1. IT IS THE GOSPEL (1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-6)

**Verse 1:** *Now brothers, I want to clarify for you the gospel I proclaimed to you; you received it and have taken your stand on it.*

We are always to remember that the term gospel means “good news.” Paul began by addressing his Corinthian Christian friends affectionately. These believers had many flaws, but Paul had often called them brothers earlier in the letter and continued to do so throughout chapter 15 (see 15:1,50,58).

Paul reminded these Christians both of his first preaching in Corinth — I proclaimed — and of his ongoing commitment to keep the content of the Christian message crystal clear — I want to clarify for you. He knew that persons who have believed in and followed Christ for many years still need to hear the gospel on a regular basis. The gospel had been good news at the time the Corinthian believers were converted — you received it; it was still good

news each day as they lived it out — you have taken your stand on it. The gospel is for everyday living as much as it is for initial proclamation or conversion, and sometimes taking a stand for the gospel can be costly.

**Verse 2:** *You are also saved by it, if you hold to the message I proclaimed to you — unless you believed to no purpose.*

Paul noted two different kinds of “believing” the good news. On one hand are those who put their trust in the message and hold to it. These are persons who stand (15:1) and endure, thus giving evidence their faith is genuine. On the other hand are those whose profession of faith proves to be of no purpose because it is merely intellectual assent. Paul knew that saving faith proves itself genuine over time. He did not mean that truly born-again persons could lose their salvation, or that those being saved were without weaknesses and failures. Endurance is evidence of salvation, never the means of salvation.

**Verse 3:** *For I passed on to you as most important what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*

When it came to the gospel, Paul was no innovator. He was simply one member in the chain of faithful transmitters of the message. He had received the gospel from eyewitnesses of the resurrection. The term received in rabbinic Judaism described the transmission of authoritative religious teachings. Furthermore, Paul himself had seen the resurrected Lord (see 1 Corinthians 15:8; Acts 9:4-5). Then Paul the preacher had passed on the message without altering it, like a steward entrusted with a priceless treasure (2 Timothy 2:2).

The verb translated passed on is related to a noun translated “traditions” in 1 Corinthians 11:2. Today, we have the written Scriptures as our final authority and supreme standard as Christians; we aren't limited to the oral teachings of earlier generations. Yet we must be clear that the most important elements of the Christian message are the same as when they were first spoken. Further, they center on events in the life of Jesus Christ including His death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances.

Christ died. The crucifixion was a public event. Surely many who saw Him die that day supposed He was dying for His own crimes. What mattered and became an essential part of the gospel was God's view of Jesus' sacrifice

— His death was for our sins.

It wasn't generally obvious that the crucifixion was the sacrificial death of God's Son, so how did Paul and the original eyewitnesses reach this conclusion? This interpretation was according to the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Furthermore, during His public ministry Jesus had taught that He was to die as “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

**Verse 4:** *that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,*

The first line of evidence to prove the resurrection was the Scriptures. Again, Paul did not refer to a specific text, but he surely had verses such as Psalm 16:8-11 and Isaiah 53:10-12 in mind (see Acts 2:25-28; 13:35). The language He was raised refers to the fact the Heavenly Father raised His Son by the power of the Spirit (Romans 1:4; Galatians 1:1).

**Verses 5-6:** *and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then He appeared to over 500 brothers at one time, most of whom remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.*

How did the earliest believers know He had been raised? The first line of historical evidence was the empty tomb, persuading some to believe He had risen (John 20:1-8). Paul, however, was more interested in the second line of evidence — He appeared alive to individuals who served as eyewitnesses. They knew the crucified Jesus was alive again, never ever to die.

The Gospels noted additional witnesses to the resurrection to whom Paul did not refer, such as two travelers on the road to Emmaus and Mary Magdalene (Luke 24:13-32; John 20:11-18). Those witnesses mentioned here, however, included individuals to whom Paul had talked personally.

- *Cephas* [SEE fus] is the Aramaic form of the Greek word written in English as *petros* from which the English name Peter is derived (John 1:42). Peter stood front and center among Jesus' apostles and led the early Christian movement.

- The Twelve was the title given to the group of men Jesus had commissioned. Obviously Judas the traitor wasn't included as a disciple at this point. This appearance to the Twelve likely referred to the event described in John 20:19-20, occurring Sunday evening, when Thomas was absent from the group (John 20:24).

- Over 500 brothers at one time. Perhaps Paul referred

to the large number as a way of further emphasizing the reality of the resurrection. This event may be the one that occurred in Galilee as described in Matthew 28:10,16-20. Jesus' resurrection occurred about 25 years before Paul wrote the Corinthians.

## 2. IT'S REASONABLE (1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-18)

**Verse 12:** *Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say, "There is no resurrection of the dead"?*

Influential Greek philosophers before Paul's time had taught that there is no resurrection. Some of these philosophers believed that at the death of the body, a person's soul continued to exist but they did not believe in a bodily resurrection of the dead. The Jewish sect of the Sadducees also denied the resurrection (Acts 23:8). Some of the Corinthian Christians no doubt had held such beliefs before their conversions; Paul wanted to show that holding such a belief was inconsistent with believing in Christ . . . raised from the dead.

Paul's argument was that Jesus' bodily resurrection proves that bodily resurrection has happened in the past. Since it has happened in the past, then it makes sense that it will happen to all those who die as believers in Christ.

**Verses 13-14:** *But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without foundation, and so is your faith.*

For the sake of argument, Paul assumed the false position of those who denied the bodily resurrection of believers. He then showed how following this kind of reasoning leads to impossible conclusions. The following statements expose this reasoning as faulty. In these statements, I have followed a traditional format for presenting a logical argument. I have also indicated the truth or falsehood of each statement. You will observe that the conclusions are all false because one of the premises is false.

**Premise 1:** No person who died can be raised. [There is no resurrection.] (False)

**Premise 2:** Christ died. (True)

**Conclusion:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

Obviously, this conclusion is impossible in light of the reasons for the bodily resurrection of Jesus cited in verses 3-8. Consider the second argument, based on the false conclusion of the first argument:

**Premise 1:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

**Premise 2:** Christian preaching has Christ's resurrection as a foundation. (True)

**Conclusion:** Christian preaching is without foundation. (False)

Again, to reach a conclusion like this one is impossible for any person who believes Christ has been raised. Paul also cast this same argument in a different fashion:

**Premise 1:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

**Premise 2:** Your Christian faith requires Christ's resurrection as a foundation. (True)

**Conclusion:** Your faith is without foundation. (False)

It is unthinkable for any Christian to suppose that his or her faith is based on thin air. Christianity is not faith in faith; it is faith in facts to which evidence clearly points.

**Verses 15-16:** *In addition, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that He raised up Christ — whom He did not raise up if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, Christ has not been raised.*

Again he assumed the false assumptions of those who denied the resurrection of believers. He spoke personally of his own role as an apostle. He recognized that apart from the resurrection, his preaching was a lie.

**Premise 1:** We apostles have proclaimed Christ's resurrection [we have testified about God that He raised up Christ]. (True)

**Premise 2:** Christ has not been raised [whom He did not raise up if in fact the dead are not raised]. (False)

**Conclusion:** Therefore we apostles are bogus witnesses [we are found to be false witnesses about God]. (False)

Verse 16 is like the argument of verse 13, couched in slightly different language.

**Premise 1:** No person who died can be raised. [The dead are not raised.] (False)

**Premise 2:** Christ died. (True)

**Conclusion:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

Paul's argument so far might be summarized as follows — to be a Christian is foolish if Christ were not raised. The following verses describe the pain and loss that Christians would experience if Christ were not raised.

**Verses 17-18:** *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Therefore those who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished.*

Paul drew out the implications for daily living if Christ

were not raised from the dead. Again, Paul assumed for the sake of argument that the resurrection of Jesus did not happen.

**Premise 1:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

**Premise 2:** Christian faith is based on Christ's resurrection. (True)

**Conclusion:** Christian faith is based on a lie [your faith is worthless]. (False)

Or, to drive the point home even more sharply, Paul put it this way.

**Premise 1:** Christ has not been raised. (False)

**Premise 2:** Forgiveness of sins is based on Christ's death and resurrection. (True)

**Conclusion:** There is no forgiveness of sins [you are still in your sins]. (False)

Paul made one more argument, this time about the Christian dead.

**Premise 1:** There is no forgiveness of sins. (False)

**Premise 2:** The Christian dead have died [fallen asleep] believing Christ's death and resurrection has forgiven their sins and saved them for eternity. (True)

**Conclusion:** The Christian dead died without forgiveness and are eternally lost [have . . . perished]. (False)

The gospel claims to offer both emotional comfort and spiritual hope to those who cling to it. If its central premise is false, then the emotional comfort it offers is a pitiful sham and the spiritual hope is a horrible hoax. From the first generation of Christians until today, Christians have lost families, friends, security, and even their lives for the sake of the gospel. If they died for a lie, they deserve only pity (1 Corinthians 15:19). What wonderful good news that the resurrection of Christ is a reality and that His followers will also experience resurrection!

Paul explained that the truth of the resurrection of believers, like other truths of the gospel, is based on the reality of Jesus' resurrection. On the basis of Jesus' resurrection, the resurrection of Christians is reasonable and we can believe in it.

## 3. IT'S CERTAIN (1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-52,54B-58)

**Verse 50:** *Brothers, I tell you this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and corruption cannot inherit incorruption.*

The phrase flesh and blood means natural human life, subject as it is to physical death (corruption). We begin

our experience of the kingdom of God in this life when we are “born again” (John 3:3). Yet we cannot enjoy the full benefits of our kingdom inheritance until we inherit incorruption, that is, resurrection bodies that cannot die.

**Verse 51:** *Listen! I am telling you a mystery: We will not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed,*

Some of Paul’s readers may have worried that those who are still alive at Christ’s return would miss out on receiving an incorruptible body. Paul’s answer was a mystery, a spiritual truth not previously made known. His point was that at Christ’s return we will all be changed and will receive resurrection bodies. We will not all fall asleep means that there will be some Christians still living in their natural bodies when Christ returns. They will receive resurrection bodies too! They will not pass through death’s door.

**Verse 52:** *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed.*

The apostle piled up wonderful phrases to describe the occasion when all believers will be changed and given resurrection bodies. Interestingly, in these verses Paul did not refer specifically to the second coming of Christ, but there can be no doubt that he had that event in mind.

- The change will happen rapidly, not gradually: in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.
- The change will happen publicly, not secretly: at the last trumpet (see Revelation 1:7).

**Verses 54b-55:** *Death has been swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?*

Isaiah 25:8 forms the basis of the first part of Paul’s Scripture quotation. In that chapter, Isaiah prophesied God’s final, everlasting victory when “the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from every face” (Isaiah 25:8). Included in this wonderful time will be the death of death, which Paul connected with Christ’s return.

Hosea 13:14 is the foundation of the second Scripture quotation (1 Corinthians 15:55). Death lies vanquished, conquered through Christ. The quotation expresses a taunt against a powerful enemy made impotent. Even though the bodily resurrection of believers is still future, Paul thought of it as already present. Christ’s resurrection has guaranteed the ultimate end of death for all those in Him.

**Verse 56:** *Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*

Paul next explained the sting the death-monster had so successfully used. The venom is sin, and those infected with the poison of sin die (Romans 5:12). Another way of expressing this truth is, “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Paul also noted that sin gains potency to kill from the law (see Romans 7:7-12).

**Verse 57:** *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

Paul burst into a brief doxology of thanksgiving. Thanks be to God, sin and death are not the final word! The gospel is that Christ is risen. He has defeated death forever. This fact proves believers are not “still in ... sins” (15:17). Thus, through our Lord Jesus Christ — everything He has gained through His own resurrection — we have victory. This victory is not only the victory of joyful Christian living now; it is the anticipated victory of the resurrection body.

Paul’s exhortation in verse 58 is based on this victory. We Christians are to stand firm and work hard, knowing that the Christian life really matters. We can accomplish much good if we are confident we are living between two resurrections — the resurrection of Jesus and our own future resurrection.