VCBC SLG Fall Term 2023
The Book of I Corinthians
Lesson #9
Answers to Their Letter (III)
Chapters 12 & 13

I. Introduction:

Having addressed the issue of "abuse" concerning the Lord's Supper, now Paul turns to the 3rd "abuse" at their public worship, concerning the unrestrained use of the gift of tongue speaking and uses three chapters to address:

- Chapter 12: Spiritual Gifts are given and arranged by the Spirit for common good of the church.
- Chapter 13: Pursue the Most Excellent Way (instead)
- Chapter 14: Gifts should be used to edify the body in orderly fashion

Chapter 12: The 3rd Abuse (I)

12: 1 -3 Dealing with matters of the Spirit

"Now about (the gifts of) the Spirit, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. [2] You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. [3] Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus be cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit."

"Now about": This new topic is introduced by the words, "Now about" which point back to the matters (7:1) presumably asked by the Corinthians for Paul to address or clarify.

While the matter definitely concerns spiritual gifts, Paul begins, first, to address things of the Spirit (the original does not say gifts, and best to be interpreted as "things of the spiritual"), contrasting *voiceless* idols that they formerly worshipped and the Holy Spirit who empowers them *to speak*.

The points Paul seeks to address include:

- The Corinthians were ignorant before, that was why they were influenced and led astray to worship idol; but now they have been led to acknowledge Jesus, so they should not remain ignorant as before.
- The first thing Paul wants them "to know" (which is the opposite of ignorance) is:
    - The Holy Spirit, unlike mute idols, does speak and enables people to speak, and
    - It is the Holy Spirit that enables them to acknowledge Jesus is by proclaiming that "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9).
    - However, if anyone says, Jesus be cursed", it is not the work of the Holy Spirit.

Of course,

- Paul is referring to those who genuinely acknowledge Jesus as their Lord, and not to those who only acknowledge Jesus as Lord with their libs and not with their hearts (Matthew 7:21ff), and
- One can understand that many zealous and devout Jews at the time vehemently opposed Jesus including many pharisees, priests, and even the High Priest. For them to say, Jesus be cursed" (as a blasphemer) was not unthinkable. Thus Paul asserts that as much as they might say it in the name of God, it was not from the Holy Spirit.

Paul points out that the work of the Holy Spirit does not stop at converting people to acknowledge Jesus as Lord but continues to give gifts to each of them "for their common good" (12:7) as "body of Christ" (12:12ff) which he now addresses.

12: 4 -31 Dealing with Spiritual Gifts

12: 4-6 One Same Gift-Giver, Office-Appointer, and Enabler

"**4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.**"

Here Paul invokes the Spirit, Lord and God not as a different source, but as one the same, highlighting the work of the Triune God in the empowerment of gifts to believers: "Lord refers to Christ…passages like this are distinctly Trinitarian in character." (Morris, 166). Therefore, one should not narrowly confine each person of the Trinity to a specific function as such, but view this as the collectively work of the One God.

However, the three aspects highlighted of the gifts are very important to understand; allow me to use a more literal translation for each:

- "There are now differences of gifts, but the same Spirit"
- "And there are differences of ministries, but the same Lord"
- "And there are differences of workings, but the same God working in all."

And so:

- That everyone has some gifts, and they are not necessarily the same is a given:
    - As Paul goes on to explain later, using a body analogy, no matter how small a part is to the body, it has its use or function. Thus it is not an exaggeration to say that God creates no garage—everyone has his or her function in the Body of Christ.
- In the exercise of such gifts, often they are put into work through ministry opportunities within the church (though not exclusively)
    - Such opportunities are also distributed by God. Thus, if God has desired that we should use our gifts, He will provide the opportunity whether within or without the church. However, it is God's prerogative, and so is His timing. We should not push for or rally to secure such opportunities or offices. These opportunities or offices, like gifts, are to be given by God.

- Even if we have the appropriate gifts the use of which can be exercised through God-given opportunities or roles, whether the gifts can yield their function is entirely the "working" of God. He is the one who alone can give us the power.

12: 7-11 Gifts are determined and given by the same Spirit—A List of "Spiritual" Gifts

"**[7] Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. [8] To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, [10] to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and He distributes them to each one, just as He determines**."

In emphasizing the fact and necessity of "differences" or "varieties" in gifts, Paul points out first and foremost that gifts are given to us

- Not for our own sake, but for the "common good"
    - In which case, we cannot use gifts that we are given
        - As our identity in Christ or in the church
        - Nor for any self-seeking purposes,
        - Nor can we bury them in the ground, without using them (Matthew 25:18)
- And are so disturbed as determined by the Holy Spirit
    - While Paul later urges us to desire "greater gifts" the meaning of which will be explored later in chapter 14
    - It is obvious that no matter how one might desire a certain gift, it is ultimately determined by the Holy Spirit and "arranged…just as He wanted them to be" (12: 18)
    - Which really begs the question, should we desire gifts that the Holy Spirit, in His wisdom, does not bestow upon es.

In pointing out there are a variety of gifts but given by one same Spirit, Paul goes on to list the following:

- **message of wisdom**
- **message of knowledge**
- **faith**
- **healing**
- **miraculous powers**
- **prophecy**
- **distinguishing between spirits**
- **speaking in different kinds of tongues**
- **interpretation of tongues**

We shall explore the meaning of "different kinds of tongues" when we look at chapter 14. For now, the list given here contains gifts that are definitely of a "supernatural" nature the exercise of which "manifests" the Giver, the Holy Spirit. Hence, many would call this list of gifts as "Spiritual Gifts."

12: 12-26 Gifts and the Body of Christ

(1) The Indivisibility of the Body of Christ (10: 12-13)

"[12] Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. [13] For we were all baptized by[c] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

The divisions in the church of Corinth obviously have spilled over to their view on and their exercise of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit. While Paul has reminded them of the one same source and the communal purpose of the gifts, Paul now sees the need to address how they have divided the church in this respect. And thus he uses this famous analogy of his—church as a Body of Christ to hammer home his point:

- The human body is necessarily formed by many parts, but every single part is part of the same body, and that is indisputable.
    - Then Paul points out that such is also the truth concerning the church which is the Body of Christ.
- And Paul indirectly gives them a warning, alluding to the metaphor he used in chapter 10— the analogy of the Israelites being baptized and having drunk from the same spiritual rock which was Christ (10:4) and their disobedience that led to severe disciplines by the Lord (10: 6-10), Now, he reminds the Corinthians that they too, have been baptized and are drinking from the same Spirit. So, if they divide the Body of Christ, they'd better watch out.

(2) The Unwillingness to Belong to the Body (12: 14-20)

The first cause of their division in this respect concerns those who for some reasons, are not willing to be part of the Body:

"[14] Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. [15] Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. [16] And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. [17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? [18] But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. [19] If they were all one part, where would the body be? [20] As it is, there are many parts, but one body."

In appealing really to common sense, Paul uses a foot and an ear as examples contrasting them to a hand, an eye and a nose (to smell), yet as different as each one is

- each has a different function that
- the other parts cannot substitute, and
- each one is very much needed for the "common good" of the same body, and
- each is placed by God in a way that best fits the body.

Of course, Paul is applying these same principle concerning the different gits each member of the Body of Christ has. But the emphasis appears to be that the problem of division lies in the unwillingness of each part (with their different gifts) to belong to the same Body (the church).

From our own experience, it is not hard to see some of the possible reasons behind this unwillingness to belong:

- Sense of insignificance or envy:
    - Just as the foot might say, "I am not a hand"—or an ear might say, " I am not an eye", one might compare their gifts with others' and feel rather insignificant, and wonder: "My gifts are so small that, it really does not matter if I am part of the body. It will do just fine without me."
    - Or, "See how happy they are with their gifts; they have recognition and thanks all the time. But I with my gifts—well, no body notices, nobody cares!"
- Lacking a concern for the "common good":
    - Ultimately, the more fundamental reason is when we are baptised into the Body of Christ, we never have properly understood that we have been called not just for our own sake, but for Christ and His body's sake.
    - We fail to understand that the Body is definitely incomplete "without me" and would not yield its proper function or usefulness "without me"—however small a part "I" play!
    - It is not necessarily a case of being "egoistic", but the basic flaw of our faith!
- The bottom line therefore is to realize that "**But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be."** (12:19)

(3) <u>The Unwillingness to Accept other Parts</u> (12: 21-26)

"[21] The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" [22] On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, [23] and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, [24] while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, [25] so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. [26] If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

The other reason for their divisions based on giftedness, has already been pointed out by Paul in his introductory "no praise" reprimand in 11: 18-19:

"**In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to <u>show which of you have God's approval</u>.**"

In other words, the reason is pride. Just as the eye or head would say to the hand and feet that "I don't need you!"

- Some Corinthians with their intellectual pride and social status either look down upon those who lack philosophic knowledge and/or social status or financial means or seek to put those who "have" on a pedestal.

Paul appeals to them, again using common sense based on a human body and applies to the Body of Christ

- 1st: **Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable**
  - The "pinkie" comes to mind right away: it is the smallest of all fingers and yet it is really indispensable—not only we would not look good without it, but it will also affect our ability to eat with our hands, and even more practically in today's situation, our ability to type properly on the keyboard.
  - No one in his or her right mind would say to the pinkie, "I don't need you!"
  - But our prideful hearts are foolish enough to think otherwise in the Body of Christ, sometimes.
- 2nd: **The parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.**
  - Pardon me to use the example of a balding head—I am saying a balding head and not a bald hear.
  - As we notice our hair beginning to bald or other hairline beginning to recede, we often want to cover our head with a hat or even with a wig, because we wish to honor our look.
- 3rd: **The parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, [24] while our presentable parts need no special treatment.**
  - The "unpresentable" parts and the "less honorable" parts are essentially the same in Paul's argument, and women can identify with this sentiment more readily as they seek to spend more time on certain parts for "special treatment".

The conclusion is: **"But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it."**

- We may wonder how does God do it?
- Many commentators point out the verb "put" is best translated as "mix together" which gives us a more complete picture of the Body of Christ in that
- God purposely puts some so-called "less honorable" ones with others so-called of "greater honor", and such a mix is meant to give a total picture of greatest honor, provided:
- Each is not trying to compete with one another, but rather seek to "blend together" (as some translation would say) as one. Thus no one claims their own honor but share it with one another.

With this in mind, Paul urges us to do the following:

"**so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.**"

Yes, "equal concern" for each other is the heart of serving together, but such concern extends beyond honor and recognition, but to sharing of life together:

- It is presumably easier to share suffering in that we can all feel the pain of others in need, especially in suffering prolonged or terminal illnesses, or the loss of a loved one—I see such sharing of pain in suffering beyond that of intercession and verbal comfort, but in sacrificial actions.
- But what about rejoicing when others are honored?
    - Well, if we understand God's intentional mixing the honorable with the less honorable (in the eyes of men) and we are in a habit of seeking to "make others look good", sharing all successes and recognitions together, then this is also doable!

12: 27-31 Desiring Greater Gifts within the Body of Christ

"[27] Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. [28] And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of administration, and of different kinds of tongues. [29] Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? [30] Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? [31] Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet, I will show you the most excellent way."

Now, with the truth about being one Body of Christ in which we have "equal concern" for each other and that we recognize God's intention to "mix" and "blend" us together to suffer and rejoice as one body, with no concern for who has the greater gifts, then they are ready to understanding that there are actually differences also in terms of importance of each for the edification of the church as a Body of Christ.

Several things are of note in this pericope:

- "First", "second" and "third" are clear indication of "ranking", there is no doubt about it.
    - But it is not so much about authority, but about the significance in the building up or the edification of the church, as chapter 14 clearly explains why "prophesy" is a greater gift than "tongue speaking"
- Apart from the first thee, Paul does not rank the rest. The word "then" lumps all the rest which follows into one category in terms of importance.

What then should the first three be so "ranked"? Allow me to simply quote from Morris:

- "***Apostles*** were originally chosen by Christ to be with Him, and that He might send them to teach and to cast out devils (Mk. 3:14f.) In time there were others than the Twelve, such as Barnabas, James and Paul himself. They seem always to have been held in high esteem as custodians of the authentic gospel and witness to what God has done." (And I might add that their importance is also reflected in Eph. 2: 19-21: "…God's household built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Himself as the chief corner stone.")
- "For ***prophets***…Chrysostom remarks that every church 'had many that prophesied', which makes the prophets local officials, rather than belonging to the church at large as did the apostles." (And perhaps, even seen as a succession of the role of the OT prophets as mentioned in Eph. 5 above)

- As for ***teachers***, "The fact (that it is ranked so high) indicates the importance of teaching in the apostolic age. We must bear in mind that the cost of hand-copied books was high, and few believers could look forward to owning a Bible. The function of a teacher in such a church must have been tremendously important, even if we do not know precisely what he (teacher) did and why he needed a charisma (gift)." (Morris, 175)

Definition of "Spiritual Gifts":

- Of note is Paul's giving a different list of gifts than the previous one, adding the gifts of helping and administration before the gift of tongue speaking.
- As such, the gifts of helping and administration are also distributed by the Holy Spirit and thus, these apparently non-supernatural gifts are also the manifestation of the Spirit in as much as they are exercised for the "common good" of the Body of Christ.
- In essence then, when a gift is used for the purpose of the "common good" of the church, there are no such difference between "supernatural" or "natural gifts", they are all "spiritual gifts" given and enabled by the Holy Spirit.

The list of rhetorical questions in vv. 29-30**:**

- **"Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? [30] Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?"**
- Serves to highlight the prideful and divisive mindset of the Corinthians, the implication of these questions seems to be:
- Submit to the "determination" of the Holy Spirit (v.11) and do not envy, do not compare.

Why then does Paul end with these words in v.31: "**Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet, I will show you the most excellent way."**

- While opinions vary as to what Paul means, I think, to be in harmony with the context and the way Paul confronts their divisive spirit, we should take v.31a as a sarcastic remark by Paul, followed by what he really means in v.31b.
- And allow me to put it as follows:
- "Since you are so keen in who has what kind of gifts, if you really want to pursue, pursue not the lesser gifts like tongue-speaking, but greater ones which are of more use to the church. But, whatever gifts you happen to be bestowed by the will of the Holy Spirit, exercise it (or them) in the most excellent way, Agape love. Or else, it really does not matter if you have the greater gifts, you are nothing without Agape love!" (which Paul goes on to explain in the most moving and supreme fashion about Agape love in the next chapter).

Chapter 12: The 3rd Abuse (II)
The Counter-Abuse Way—The Way of Love

13: 1-3 Gifts without Love

"**If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all**

knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. [3] **If I give all I possess (to the poor) and surrender my body to the flame, but do not have love, I gain nothing.**"

Paul is likely using what the Corinthians think as the highest gifts in which they take pride to point out the futility of such a pursuit and pride.

- **If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal**
    - The entire chapter 12 is paving the way for Paul to deconstruct their prideful mindset in glorifying "tongue-speaking" as "the" gift to pursue and "the" sign that one has gained God's approval (11:19). This has contributed to much of the divisions within the church in Corinth.
    - Here, Paul lumps together two kinds of tongues: one is that of speaking in a foreign language that the speaker would not have prior knowledge of, and the "tongue" that has no earthly parallel and thus one has to conclude belongs the tongue of angels.
    - In either case, if such a gift is exercised, and in this case, spoken, without love—it only amounts the sound of resounding gong or a clanging cymbal—
    - Meaning, it is nothing but "noise", if fact, loud noise that only attracts attention but nothing more.
    - Gong or cymbal is a musical instrument that does not have distinctive notes its continuous sounding is not only meaningless but annoying!
    - Such is the result of speaking in tongues without love.
- **If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge**
    - Second in line of their prideful pursuit appears to be the gift of prophesy which includes the ability to probe the deeper mysteries of God.
    - Paul, in chapter 14 does recognize the gift of prophesy as superior to tongue-speaking as it edifies the Body of Christ, but just the same, the exercise of which has to be done in love, Agape love, or "I am nothing",
- **If I have a (all) faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.**
    - Next to prophesy, is the rare gift of faith which is exercised mostly in times of challenges and crises. It is rare, because this is what Jesus seems to speak often of what the disciples were lacking and so are we today.
    - However, as great as a faith that can move mountains, perhaps not literally but referring to huge challenges and obstacles confronting the church community, if exercised without love, then "I am nothing"
    - Paul is not saying that the "gift" amounts to nothing, but we who exercise the gift (of prophesy or faith) are nothing—that is before God!
        - Not only it does not count in God's eyes, but we ourselves are reduced to nothing!
    - Note: the Greek original ties mysteries, knowledge and faith together with the word, "all" used in all three terms, highlighting the supreme manifestation of such gifts. The "all" versus "nothing" highlights the futility of gifts without love!
- **If I give all I possess (to the poor) and surrender my body to the flames, but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

- This is one that bothers most reader as such a supreme form of sacrifice is often taken as a sign of the highest form of love, sacrificial love. So, how can this be?
- Well, Paul insists that it can be done without love, and thus "*I gain nothing*" or "it profits me nothing!"—meaning it does not count at all in the eyes of God.
- In other words, however sacrificial an action we do, if it is done to *gain* something other than simply out of love, that's where the problem lies. So:
    - If I dole out of the goods (possession) I have
        - While the original does not have "for the poor", this could be one of the reasons, or for a good cause or an ideology
    - Some would even burn themselves in the flame in protest over some injustice or again, for some ideology
    - But if such sacrificial actions are not done with love, Paul says, at the end, it does not "profit" or count for anything before God.
        - If one sells all his possessions, say, for the poor, yes, there are those who do so to gain fame for oneself, but there must be some that have done so out of the love for the poor? Right?
        - Yes, some give themselves to the flames out of misguided ideology, political or otherwise, but still some must have done so for love of justice? Right?
    - So, the most important question is thus, "What then is love?"

13: 4-7 What is Agape Love?

"**4 Love is patient, love is kind and does not envy; love does not boast and is not proud, 5 it is not act rude; it is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always persevere.**"

While many modern scholars argue that "*Agape*" does not necessarily refer to God's love and can be interchangeably used with "*phileo*" love. However, the word, *agape*, which "was not in common use before the New Testament (it occurs twenty times in LXX and a few times in writings like *the Epistle to Aristeas*). But the Christians took it up and made it their characteristic word for love (it occurs 116 times in the New Testament)…It is a love that proceeds from a God who is love." (Morris, 177). Indeed, it is God's kind of love that "we see on the cross." (ditto).
The following poetic rendering of *Agape love serves* to illustrate this God's kind of love. Some call it the "Psalm of Love", some the "Essence of Love", and some the "Test of Love".

A famous Chinese singer once had the opportunity to do a concert in China when it was yet to adopt a more open policy in the 1970s. She was a Christian and she wondered how she might be able to share the gospel at the concert. Then, she felt led to sing a Mandarin gospel song which, while its lyrics do not mention God or Christ, but fully conveys the message of God's love. She chose this "Psalm of Love" that contains the words of I Corinthians 13: 4-8a.

The beautiful music and its lyrics captured the hearts of the audience. At the end of the concert, someone approached her and said (to the effect that), "I have never heard of such love before. Where can one find such love?"
The answer is obvious, "Only in Christ Jesus!"
We will not be able to meditate on it in details during the class, but I urge you to go home and measure your love against this "Test of Love".

Love is patient: Most older versions translate it as "Long-suffering", and indeed our God is longsuffering (Ps, 86:15), slow to give us what our continuous rebellions deserve.

Love is kind: This is a rare word unique to Paul (and likely coined by Paul). While it is hard to fully translate its meaning, but "not being mean", perhaps captures its essence.

Love does not envy: This is one of the main problems of the Corinthians that has led to divisions as they seek to compare with one another, especially in the area of giftedness. However, for those who are involved in Christian leadership, this is one of the most common and destructive sins to ministry and to the church. I, for one, am not immune to it. John the Baptist, however, provides us with the best example in leadership: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Love does not boast: The Corinthians are certainly guilty of boasting which Paul has admonished them against many times in the letter (1:29, 31; 3:2, 21; 4:7; 5:6). On the contrary, even in administering justice on earth, the prophet Isaiah says of the way of the Suffering Servant (the Christ): "**He does not raise His voice in the street**." (Isa. 42:2) How different is our Lord from us!

Love is not proud: Or some translate it as "puffed up" which is something that Paul warns the Corinthians against over and over again (4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 8:1). Such a sin is not as easily detected as pride is often well hidden within us. Only through constant self-examination in solitude before the Lord can we be shown of such a deceitful sin!

Love is not rude: this Greek word is variously translated: unseeming, improper etc. Fee's translation seems to fit the context of this letter better: "The verb means to 'behave shamefully or disgracefully,' In this letter it recalls (i) the activities of the women in 11: 2-16 who are bringing shame on their 'heads' by attiring themselves so as to disregard the distinctions between the sexes, or (ii) the actions of the 'haves" at the Lord's Table who are humiliating (shaming) 'those who have nothing.' Christian love cares too much for the rest of the community to behave in such 'unseeming' ways." (Fee, 638)

Love is not self-seeking: Indeed, God's kind love does not allow any element of "self" in it, and Christ demonstrated his "selflessness" as He emptied Himself on the cross! (Phil. 2: 6-8)

Love is not easily angered: Christ demonstrated this characteristic of love fully at His trial and His eventual suffering all the way to the cross. He is not easily provoked as He, "**Like a sheep before the shearer, is silent.**" (Isa. 53:4)

Love keeps no record of wrong: "**if you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand**?" (Ps. 130:3). We, who are at the receiving end of such grace of complete forgiveness often fails to extend the same grace to others who offend us. Yes, to forgive and forget is divine and is humanly impossible to do by ourselves; at least, when some old, unpleasant memory returns, we can say to it, "By the grace of God who has removed my sin as far as the East is from the West, I too will consign you to the bottom of the ocean!"

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth: "It is probable that they are to be understood together, as two sides of the same reality." (Fee, 639) This speaks to agape being a "principled" love that plays no favoritism, is not after popularism, nor is concerned with the negative consequences of our siding with truth.

While the list contains mostly in the negatives, Paul ends it with four forceful positive assertions of what *Agape* love is:

"**Love always protects**": a more literal translate is "In all things it covers"

- In applying God's kind of love that seeks always to cover our sins (with His blood)
- We might emulate His love by seeking not to "uncover" the wrongs of others, but always seek to "cover", not in the sense of condoning, but in the sense of "protecting" so that it might give the person a better chance of repentance.

"**Love always trusts**"

- In the various parables of the "talents", Jesus has clearly put His trust in us, as worthy of His charge (e.g. Mat. 25)
- Paul speaks of us being entrusted with the gospel, as we have been approved by God as worthy of His trust." (I Thess. 2:4)
- So, God trusts us even though He knows we'd often fail Him, we too should trust other parts of the Body of Christ, with the attitude that, "Since God trusts an unworthy person like me, I too will trust you, even you might fail me."

"**Love always hopes**"

- As part of this trust is "hope"—hope that always seeks to look at the good, instead of the ills in people. If we focus on others' shortcoming, we will lose hope, but if we seek to focus on others' goodness (and we will find some, if we care to look), then there will be hope.
- The father in the parable of the "Prodigal Son" demonstrates hope as he undoubtedly never gives up on his wayward son. (Luke 15)

"**Love always perseveres**"

- It undergirds the "long-suffering" of God and we do well to emulate His love in that even in the face of great disappointments, we make a conscious decision to say, "It still does not come close to being the 'last straw.'"

While Paul is writing primarily with the faith community in mind, for those who are married, the most immediate test should be applied to our spousal relationship.

13: 8b-13 Love Never Fails

"**Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. [9] For we know in part and we prophesy in part, [10] but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. [11] When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. [12] For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**"

"Love never fails" certainly brings the "Psalm of Love" to a climatic end, but it also serves to reinforces why Paul calls it "the most excellent way" in cautioning the Corinthians in their wrong-headed pursuit of "spiritual gifts".

In fact, with this contrast with the three most coveted gifts of the Corinthians, some see that Paul takes *Agape* love as the greatest gift that we should all desire.

Agape Love versus Prophesy, Knowledge and Tongue-speaking:

- The temporariness of all gifts, using these most coveted gifts of the Corinthians as examples:
    - Prophecies will cease: indeed, upon Christ's return and with all prophesies fulfilled, there is no need for prophecies, nor prophets.
    - Tongues will be stilled: We all be in heaven with one same tongue (whatever it may be). It will be foolish if we cherish our gift of tongue-speaking when it is of no use at all in heaven.
    - Knowledge will pass away: we might pause and think twice before agreeing with Paul in this respect. But Paul goes on to explain:
        - Knowledge is just like prophecies in that what we know and what we prophesy are only "in part", not complete.
        - But when completeness comes (which will be hundreds or thousands of times more than what we know now), the "part" disappears—because we will come to know that what we know is really incomplete, small, insignificant or even distorted.
- The analogies:
    - Like a child: It is quite humbling to realize that, even the best of scholars or teachers with all knowledge, and wisdom, at best talk (teach) and reason (after deep reflection and intensive research) like a child when compared to what will be revealed to us in heaven!
    - Like a mirror: ancient mirrors are blurred, polished metal which cannot be compared to today's mirrors. The word translated by NIV as "reflection" is the Greek word, "*ainigmati*" from which comes the English word, "Enigma". Like the mirrors of old, what we think we know is really a blurred and somewhat distorted

image of the real thing (even with modern-day mirrors, the reflection reverses the left from the right). But when we reach heaven, "we shall see face to face"

- Yes, we shall know fully in the way that "even as I am fully known" by God at the present.

Finally, Paul compares Agape love not only to their most coveted gifts, but with faith and hope, and Agape love is the greatest, because "Love never fails (*piptei*)".

- "*piptei*" is variously translated as "fails", "ceases" "falls" with the latter appears to be the common usage of the word. Fee remarks that "it is not immediately clear what Paul intends" when it comes to its meaning.
- If the latter sense is meant by Paul, then Paul says, "Love is neve defeated, is never brought to the ground" (Fee, 643).
- However v.13 uses the word, "remain" to describe faith, hope and love, and within this context, it is perhaps, best understood as referring to the fact that Agape love will never pass away or cease, or become invalid!
- If we make love our pursuit, not only we shall not fail, disappoint, or stumble, love is the only thing among all three (and for that matter, all gifts) that will last forever!
- Paul somehow drags faith and hope into the picture, likely for the sake of boosting the superiority or supreme excellence of Agape love, as even faith and hope which are extremely important to us, will last (or remain) only up to the time we see our Lord, face to face.