

# KEENER THOUGHTS

APRIL, 2012

## THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY

**T**hough I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. **And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.** (1Co. 13:1-13)

I will not invest time defining the word charity (agape) at this point. I think it is sufficient to define it as what Paul declares in Rom. 5:5. There he refers to "*the love of God ... shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*" At least, that definition will carry accuracy for the present discussion of charity, which I offer in this article. Paul emphatically says it is greater than either faith or hope. I expect that Paul does not mean it is greater than that simple faith given us in

regeneration, by which we lay hold on The Lord Jesus Christ, and which is given to us in the new birth, by the Holy Ghost, who installs that "*love of God*" in our hearts. He is rather saying it is greater than that faith mentioned in 1Cor. 13:2, by which miracles could be performed, even to the moving of mountains. Regardless of the accuracy of my definition, or the lack thereof, we must look at this thing called charity, divine love, or *the love of God shed abroad in our hearts*, and admit to how supremely great it really is. Regressing through Rom. 13:1-13, let us notice some things Paul places at less value than charity, and ask ourselves, "Have I been guilty of under rating it to the injury of my Christianity, or in my case, my ministry?"

Verse 1 says it is greater than the most excellent gift of oratory, of men, or even of angels. If I had that greatest gift of oratory, but were without charity, I would be as the noise of musical instruments, without either melody or harmony. Verse 2 says if we had the gift of prophesy so that we might utter truths which were, hitherto, never revealed to men; Or if we had the understanding of all mysteries so that we might expound Scripture like no man ever has; Or if we had all knowledge which diligent study, or the highest levels of education might afford us; Or if we possessed such faith that we could remove mountains, without charity we would be nothing at all. He says if we gave all our wealth to feed the poor, (Note Luke 18:22) and even sacrificed our very life and body, without charity there would be no eternal profit in it.

In verses 4-7, Scripture lists some of the excellent attributes and conducts of charity. Charity puts up with errors and faults, yes even sins, for long periods of time, without becoming unkind. It does not envy others for the goods they possess, or gifts God has given them, or allowed them to accumulate. It does not allow us to boast of our character or accomplishments. The man of charity is not proud of himself, and does not feel haughty about who he is. You will not hear charity saying I am just as good as anyone else. A person possessed by charity will more likely be heard saying, "*Oh, wretched man that I am!*" The person who concentrates on practicing charity will not often behave improperly, will not display selfishness. That person is not quick tempered, and does not constantly see or suspect evil in other

people, but is rather likely to give others the "benefit of the doubt." We are not hoping for injustice, or cruel justice, even toward those who hate us. We rather love justice and goodness, even to the benefit of those we know hate us. Charity motivates compassionate tolerance of failure in our fellow man, and confidence, where logic might well warn against it. It produces perseverance with our fellow Christians, as with a beloved brother or a little child. If this could be in us and abound, what a multitude of sins it would cover. How greatly it would reduce fighting and wars, divorces, abandoned children, destroyed churches, separated families, thefts, murders, lost friends, and other innumerable tragedies that we regularly experience when charity is lacking. Where other gifts fail, charity does not.

Prophesies fail, and tongues cease. Knowledge vanishes away, like a candle's light fading into the fog, but charity never fails. Do we believe that? Oh that we might see charity's greatness, and look for grace to pursue it with all our hearts. In this body of flesh we do so many things erroneously, or with partial correctness. That is because we are yet in the flesh, and our flesh lusts against the Spirit so that we fall so far short of God's revealed will for us. We act selfishly, often out of pride, often out of love of money, and therefore, we fall into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition."

... "Now we see through a glass, darkly." Yes, though I have the completed word of God, I still see so poorly. But then, when we are glorified, that is to say, when we are conformed to the image of His dear Son, to which state we are predestinated, we shall see clearly, "face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

BUT UNTIL THEN, let me trust Paul's inspired revaluation that **the greatest of all spiritual gifts is charity**. If we can believe that, we will be able to let brotherly love continue. (Heb. 13:1) And when our judgment and understanding utterly fails, charity in our hearts will cover the multitude of sins, not just in our fellow Christians, but in ourselves.

--FLK