

XXV. Love Never Fails

December 17/19, 2013

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Aim: To focus on love as the highest priority, since it will abide forever, whereas spiritual gifts are temporary.

Paul opened his letter to the Corinthians by acknowledging that they possessed the spiritual gifts in great abundance (1:5, 7). But it is obvious from this letter that spiritual gifts were not the only items abounding in this church. Sin was also flourishing. Spiritual gifts are, therefore, no guarantee of spiritual grace. One can have great spiritual gifts and still be unkind, critical, boastful, proud, and overbearing. Love, on the other hand, safeguards us from these things.

In this passage, Paul moves on to his second argument for the superiority of love: love outlasts the gifts. In living for the gifts and neglecting love, the Corinthians were guilty of inverting their priorities. The gifts were good but love was the best. In focusing on the gifts, the Corinthians had placed the good above the best. Paul did not tell the Corinthians to ignore the gifts, but to place love above them.

The theme of this section is that ‘love never fails.’ Throughout all eternity love will never end. Love lasts. Many of the Corinthians continually had their eyes on the wrong things. They were overly concerned about the temporary and little concerned about the permanent. In this passage, Paul proves that, because of its enduring quality, love is God’s greatest gift, His gift above all gifts. In contrast to love’s permanence, spiritual gifts are temporary, partial, and elementary.

The third part of the chapter (13:8-13) predicts that whereas the gifts of the Spirit will vanish, faith, hope, and love are to abide.

A. The Passing Gifts (1 Corinthians 13:8-12)

1. Gifts are Temporary (13:8)

a) *Love Never Fails (13:8a)*

⁸*Love never ends.*

Paul crowns his argument by widening his perspective to include the eternal realms. The primary importance of Christian love is established by reference to its everlasting character. This serves to introduce a contrast between this age and the coming age. Love ‘never fails,’ meaning that it will never be invalid. Because it is essential, the Lord will take no action to remove it.

‘Fails’ (from *piptō*) has the basic meaning of falling, and was used of a flower or leaf that falls to the ground, withers, and decays. ‘Never’ refers to time, not frequency; the idea is that at no time will divine love ever fall, wither, and decay. By nature it is permanent. It is never abolished. Love cannot fail because it shares God’s nature and God’s eternity. In heaven we not only will have no more need for faith and hope, but no more need for the gifts. None of those gifts will have a purpose or place in heaven. Yet love is, and forever will be, the very air of heaven.

It is important to note that ‘never fails’ does not refer to success. Paul is not speaking of love’s successes and failures, but of its permanence as a divine quality. ‘Love never fails’ in the sense that it outlasts any failures. For the Christian, love is life, and both are eternal.

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b) *The Gifts Will Fade (13:8b)*

As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

Paul strengthens his emphasis on the supreme nature of love by comparing love's permanence to the impermanence of three spiritual gifts: prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. Each of those gifts eventually will fall and disappear, but love will continue.

The apostle is thinking again of the gifts that were so greatly valued among his readers, but only to affirm their temporal, transient nature. The word 'if' (*eite*) occurs three times, emphasizing that in a sense Paul is, and the Corinthians ought to be, to some extent indifferent to the existence of transitory gifts. They are valuable gifts, but only in the perspective of this world with all its imperfections and impermanence. To elevate them, therefore, in our scale of values above what is eternal, is to make a huge error of judgment. If all our energies are engaged in our present experiences and use of spiritual gifts, without recognizing the priority of life, we are investing in time rather than in eternity.

Though we are told here all three gifts would someday cease to exist, two different verbs are used to indicate their cessation. Prophecy and knowledge will be 'done away,' whereas tongues will 'cease.'

'Done away' is from *katargeō*, which means 'to reduce to inactivity,' or 'to abolish.' The gifts of prophecy and knowledge will one day be made inoperative. Both forms of this verb in verse 8, as well as its form in verse 10, are passive; that is, something or someone will cause them to stop.

'Cease' is from *pauō*, which means 'to stop, to come to an end.' Unlike *katargeō*, this verb is here used in the Greek middle voice, which, when used of persons, indicates intentional, voluntary action upon oneself. Used of inanimate objects it indicates reflexive, self-causing action. The cause comes from within; it is built in. God gave the gift of tongues a built-in stopping place. 'That gift will stop by itself,' Paul says. Like a battery, it had a limited energy supply and a limited lifespan. When its limits were reached, its activity automatically ended. Prophecy and knowledge will be stopped by something outside of themselves, but the gift of tongues will stop by itself. This distinction in terms is unarguable.

Paul uses the Greek word *katargeō* to indicate what will happen with prophecy and knowledge, but he uses the word *pauō* to depict what will happen with tongues. The former means 'to reduce to inactivity,' and the latter simply means 'to stop or come to an end.' In addition to that, Paul uses a different voice to describe the cessation of tongues. He uses the future passive voice to describe the end of prophecy and knowledge (*katargēthēsetai*, 'will be canceled'), which indicates that something or someone will stop them. But he uses the middle voice with the gift of tongues. The middle voice indicates a voluntary action one performs upon oneself, or a self-causing action. God gave the gift of tongues a built-in stopping place. When its limits were reached, its activity automatically ended.

c) *The Cessation of Tongues*

A further interesting feature of Paul's discussion is that, after simply saying tongues will cease, he doesn't mention the gift in this passage. He goes on specifically to connect prophecy and knowledge with the coming of the perfect age, but nowhere does he mention the cessation of tongues in connection with the perfect. This could very well be Paul's way of saying the gift of

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tongues was to cease before the coming of the perfect age. If this is true, we may legitimately ask how the gift of tongues could possibly serve any purpose in heaven when it didn't serve a lasting purpose here.

The question remains as to *when* and *how* these gifts will end. Prophecy and knowledge are said to end 'when the perfect comes' (vv. 9-10). The cessation of tongues, however, is not mentioned in relation to the coming of 'the perfect.' They will have ceased at an earlier time. That time is most likely the end of the apostolic age.

2. Gifts Are Partial (13:9-10)

a) *The Partial (13:9)*

⁹*For we know in part and we prophesy in part...*

The word translated 'in part' (*ek merous*) occurs again in verse 10 where it is translated as 'the partial,' which disappears when perfection, or completeness, comes. 'In part' is quantitative, suggesting something incomplete, like a section of a jigsaw puzzle or part of a manuscript.

Indeed, such knowing and prophesying are only in part, since they belong within this age and suffer the limitations of this age. Therefore, whatever gifts of knowledge God may give His people in this world and whatever ability to speak out His truth in prophecy, they will always be less than complete and only partial. This is part of what it means to be God's people living in mortal bodies, in a fallen world. We have not yet arrived at home.

There are two reasons for the abrogation of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge. Negatively, prophecy and knowledge are said to be incomplete or 'in part'; positively, they are to be replaced by something that will be complete, 'the perfect thing' (13:10). The apostle's perception is that tongues, unmentioned here, are no more than a vehicle for the other two gifts. Therefore, in that tongues-speaking is no more than a carrier, it must vanish.

The cessation of tongues took place a short while after Paul wrote this letter, but the gifts of prophecy and knowledge have not yet been 'done away,' because 'the perfect' has not yet come. Like tongues and all other gifts, those two gifts are temporary, but they are less temporary than tongues. As far as his discussion of love is concerned, Paul considers tongues already to have stopped, because that gift is not mentioned after verse 8.

b) *The Perfect (13:10)*

¹⁰*...but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.*

Present prophecy and knowledge are only a pale foreshadowing, a partial and temporary substitute for the full and complete knowledge we shall have 'when the perfect comes.' When 'the perfect (*to teleion*) comes,' that is, the perfection of the new age, all that was 'in part' now will be abolished. The need and the opportunity for the exercise of these gifts, even the highest of them, will have passed.

Paul's emphasis in verses 9-10 is the partiality of knowledge and prophecy: 'we know in part, and we prophesy in part.' Those gifts are representative of all the gifts, which will be 'done away' when 'the perfect comes,' because at that time no gift will have further reason for existence. God's gifts are complete, but those to whom He gives them are limited. When the perfect comes, we will have no more need of knowledge or wisdom, preaching or teaching, prophecy or interpretation.

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Perhaps Paul's words are quite pointed here. After all, the Corinthians had the highest opinion of their spiritual gifts whose exercise may have misled them to think that 'the perfect' was a present reality in their midst.

(1) What Is 'The Perfect'?

The coming of the perfect will necessarily make the gifts obsolete. A good deal of controversy has arisen at this point. Some say the perfect represents Scripture; therefore, Paul is supposedly saying when Scripture was completely written, the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would cease. Others suggest the perfect represents the maturing of the church. Those who hold this view understand Paul to be saying these gifts were given to the church during its stage of infancy, but now the church has come to maturity and the gifts have been withdrawn.

What, precisely, is 'the perfect' thing that is to come? Some Christians believe the perfect has already come in the completion of Scripture. But that idea would have been meaningless to the Corinthians. Nowhere in this letter does he mention or allude to such Scriptural completion. The Corinthian believers would have taken Paul's meaning in the plainest and simplest way: as a reference to spiritual and moral perfection. Paul was speaking of completed holiness, of our one day actually becoming what God now counts, or reckons us, to be.

If 'the perfect' refers to the completion of Scripture, then prophecy and knowledge have already been stopped, and all believers since that time would have been without benefit of two of the most important gifts for proclaiming, interpreting, and understanding Scripture. The gift of prophecy was only partly used for revelation. In most cases it was used for proclaiming and interpreting what already had been revealed. The church would be in dire straits if the gifts of knowledge and prophecy had ceased with the completion of the New Testament.

A relatively new interpretation is that 'the perfect' refers to the maturing, or completion, of the church. It is true that 'perfect' often has the meaning of maturity or completion. But when the Lord's work with His church is completed, the end will come.

(2) 'The Perfect' as The New Testament

Naylor holds that 'the perfect thing,' *to teleion*, can with hindsight be recognized as our New Testament, a collection of books supplementing the Old Testament, and concluding the whole body of sacred Scripture. This view flies in the face of the overwhelming majority of commentators, ancient and modern.

By far the most important backing for this approach is that, as understood by the New Testament, faith and hope are disciplines for God's people in this world only. The absence of any reference to post-mortem and post-advent faith and hope has always been a problem for those commentators who hold that 13:8-13 points to the coming of Christ. The reality seems to be that terrestrial faith and hope never stretch out to anything beyond the coming of the Lord.

Admittedly, if faith and hope continue after the Second Coming, there can be no problem about 13:8-13. On this understanding the arrival of Jesus must be 'the perfect thing' when the *charismata* vanish and when faith, hope, and love endure. Yet we are told that when Christ returns, believers will obtain the 'end of faith, the salvation of your souls' (1 Pe. 1:9).

In verse 13, Paul's meaning is not that faith, hope, and love last forever, but that they are virtues that the churches possess during the present age, and that among the trio love is the most important. This is because it is more useful than faith and hope, and because it will never end.

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Chapters 12-14, focusing upon spiritual gifts, are not concerned with either the interim blessedness of the saints following death or with the resurrection state. An eschatological reference for 13:8-13 would constitute an illogical shift and even an intrusion into the flow of thought.

When considering ‘the thing that is in part’ and ‘the perfect thing,’ both entities are media of revelation. Whereas ‘the thing that is in part,’ represented in context by prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, reveals something of the mystery of redemption, ‘the perfect thing’ is anticipated as a definitive exposition of the same subject, replacing the ministry of Christian prophets.

Does Paul affirm that Christ will return as ‘the perfect thing’ at the end of the world, and that of species of perfection will then supervene? No. Had he wished to indicate this he might have written ‘the perfect man’ (*ho teleios*, masculine) instead of ‘the perfect thing’ (*to teleion*, neuter). A medium of communication, whether limited or total, is a ‘thing’ – which our Lord is not.

‘The end’ (*to telos*) occurs in 15:23-24 with reference to the advent of Christ. ‘End’ (*telos*) suggests a climax, the goal or final issue of a matter. The meaning of the word is not at all the same as *to teleion*, ‘the perfect thing,’ an entity independent and complete in itself.

The change from childhood to adulthood mentioned in 13:11 is a process rather than an event. Paul shows that the replacement of ‘the thing that is in part’ by ‘the perfect thing’ ought to be accompanied by a developing attitude among the Corinthians, and he presents himself as an example. It is doubtful whether such a gradual process could properly illustrate the resurrection of the dead, an event that will occur instantaneously at the end of the world when our Lord appears (15:52). The frames of reference seem to have nothing in common.

(3) ‘The Perfect’ as Eternity

Note: the other four commentaries all hold to ‘the perfect’ as the final state or eternity.

These interpretations seem to ignore what Paul says in verse 12, where he equates the perfect with seeing ‘face to face’ and with full knowledge. It is when Jesus is revealed and we are gathered together to Him that we shall ‘see Him as He is’ or ‘see face to face.’ When Paul is talking about the coming of the perfect, he is talking about the coming of the perfect age, or the coming of our life in heaven. It is self-evident that the coming of that perfect age will make the gifts obsolete. Think about the gifts of prophecy and knowledge for a moment. What possible purpose could they serve in heaven?

The only possibility for ‘the perfect’ is the eternal, heavenly state of believers. Paul is saying that spiritual gifts are only for time, but that love will last for eternity. The point is simple, not obscure. The eternal state allows for the neuter form of ‘the perfect’ and allows for the continuation of knowledge and prophecy during the church age. It fits the context of Paul’s emphasis on the permanence of love.

Here we find Paul saying prophecy will cease when the perfect age comes. If one believes prophecy has already ceased, is this a contradiction? Even though the gift of prophecy ceased, we have in Scripture the essential truths God delivered through the prophets. So the gift of prophecy can be said to continue in Scripture. When the perfect age comes, we shall no longer need the testimony of Scripture to guide us.

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3. Gifts Are Elementary (13:11-12)

In the two illustrations following, Paul teaches that our knowledge of God *now* compared to our knowledge of God *then* is quite limited.

To help us understand this profound important reality, Paul uses two contrasting images from the area of everyday experience. In verse 11, he compares childhood with adulthood, and in verse 12, the reflection in a mirror with the reality it represents.

a) *The Child (13:11)*

¹¹*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.*

First, he reflects on his life as a boy (*nēpios*) with that as an adult (*anēr*). Paul likens the gifts of prophecy and knowledge to playing with childhood toys. Toys are fine for children but are unnecessary for adults. So it is with the gifts. They were given to fulfill a temporary purpose, but at their very best they were only partial and incomplete. When glory dawns, we shall not need the gifts any more than the adult needs the toys of his childhood.

‘Put away’ or ‘gave up’ repeats from 13:8, 10 (*katargeō* = ‘cancel’, ‘nullify’), except that the tense transfers from the future to the past.

Perhaps Paul was comparing His present spiritual state to his boyhood, ‘as a child.’ A Jewish male was considered a boy until his bar mitzvah (‘son of the law’), after which he was considered a man. One moment he was a boy; the next he was a man. Our perfection in Christ will be a type of spiritual bar mitzvah, a coming into immediate, complete, and eternal spiritual adulthood and maturity.

However much we may mature in Christian character and behavior in this life, as indeed we should, yet, at best, it will be only a childhood, compared with our full adult status of complete maturity in heaven. Childish language, thought, and reasoning are entirely appropriate to children, but they are not the permanent state. But the tragedy unfolding in Corinth is that the Christians are continuing to hold on to their childish ways, settling for immaturity, rather than adulthood, because of their insistence on majoring on the transient gifts of time, rather than the eternal values of love. The Corinthians seem to have forgotten the realities of perfection in heaven in their squabbles about their transient, earthly gifts. They were living as if there was no life beyond the nursery.

b) *The Mirror (13:12)*

¹²*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

Second, he contrasts the very limited vision from a mirror of those times, which was made of polished metal, with ‘face to face’ seeing.

The second picture reinforces the same idea. The reference to seeing Christ face to face clearly connects the argument to the *parousia*, the second coming of Christ, when He will bring in His eternal kingdom in all its fullness. It is at this point that the reflection is replaced with the reality, and gifts will no longer be needed. Perfection removes all the imperfect precursors. The distortions of the reflections seen in a metal mirror are replaced by flawless knowledge. God’s knowledge of me is already perfect and complete, Paul states, and on the last day my knowledge of Him will be equally full, by His grace.

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Paul is using these analogies to contrast the knowledge of God we have now, in this age, with the knowledge of God we shall have ‘when the perfect comes.’ When the perfect comes, our knowing of God *then* will be like His knowing of us *now*, which is indeed perfect. Based on the gospel and the Scriptures we have a way of knowing God during this age, a knowing that is good and true. Yet this knowing of God *now*, true as it is, compared with our knowing of God *then*, will prove to be merely in part. When the perfect comes we shall know God as we have been known by God and we shall love God as we have been loved by God.

When glory dawns we shall have complete and exhaustive knowledge of heavenly things and shall no longer have any need for the dim mirrors of prophecy and knowledge.

B. The Abiding Graces (1 Corinthians 13:13)

1. These Three (13:13a)

¹³*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three...*

Note: Ellsworth is the only commentator who believes faith and hope abide in eternity.

Is ‘now’ a reference to this present age or the future age? A future meaning would not make sense, since neither faith nor hope will be needed then. Furthermore, the whole passage has shown the necessity for love to be shown *right now*, within the community of believers in Corinth. Thus, the ‘now’ is probably intended to refer to our present state of imperfection, in which we see only imperfectly and where faith, hope, and love are all greatly needed.

Faith is no longer needed when the reality is fully apprehended. Hope is no longer in existence when what was hoped for has transpired. But love never ends.

Paul says faith, hope, and love abide. They will not cease to exist when heaven’s endless day dawns. Faith is, of course, the means by which we are saved. It is that precious gift of God which enables us to see Christ as the only hope for salvation and to rest completely in what He did on the cross. We are inclined to think there will be no more need for faith once we get to heaven, but that is not the case. Even in heaven we shall still depend on God and exercise confidence in Him to provide for our every need (Ellsworth).

Hope is the gift of God’s grace that causes us to look eagerly forward to His promises being fulfilled. Faith makes us certain they will be fulfilled, but hope fills us with eager anticipation to see them fulfilled. How is it possible for hope to exist in heaven? We think there will be nothing more for us to look forward to after we get to heaven, but that too is a mistaken notion. God’s inexhaustible treasures of glories will make heaven a place where we never get bored. There will always be some new treasure to anticipate (Ellsworth).

Love is, of course, another of the abiding graces. We shall not only continue to love God and each other in heaven, but our love for both God and others will grow into perfect expression in heaven.

2. The Greatest of These (13:13b)

...but the greatest of these is love.

Faith, hope, and love will all exist in heaven, but the greatest of these graces is love. Why is this the case? I think the answer is that faith and hope are graces that are self-contained and personal.

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I have faith for myself and for no one else. I have hope in my own heart, but I cannot hope for anyone else. But love enables me to reach beyond myself and my own needs to be concerned about others. Love also makes me like God. God doesn't have faith or hope, but He is love.

Why is love greater than faith or hope? Faith and hope are immensely important, as our primary response to the gospel. Love is *who* God is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Love is different from faith and hope, however, because love will carry on into the perfect, the coming age, when we will see Christ, not in a mirror dimly, but face to face. Then faith and hope will be no more. But love will remain forever, His for us, ours for Him, and ours for one another.

Because faith and hope will have no purpose in heaven, where everything true will be known and everything good will be possessed, they are not equal to love. Love is the 'greatest of these' not only because it is eternal, but because, even in this temporal life, where we now live, love is supreme.

The business of heaven is to love God to perfection and to love all those who are around His throne. Love is the currency of the eternal kingdom and so it will never be superseded. The supreme reason, however, for the eternity of love is that it is the expression of the character of the eternal God. It is not appropriate to speak of God having faith or exercising hope, for He knows everything and understands the end from the beginning. Yet it is entirely appropriate to speak of God loving and, more than that, to recognize that His very nature is love.

Our day is a day in which many Christians bear strong resemblance to the Corinthians. We are more concerned about what will pass than we are about what will abide. Are we clear on the nature of the gifts? Do we understand that they are given to us as a means of serving the Lord, but that we shouldn't elevate them beyond measure and start defining spirituality in terms of them? On the other hand, are we clear about the graces of the Spirit? Do we understand that the graces 'abide'? Many claim to be Christians today but give no indication of continuing in faith, hope, and love.

Above all, are we clear about the need for love? Do we understand it is the supreme grace and apart from it we are nothing? May God help us to see the importance of love and to manifest it in our daily lives.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-12.