**LET THE CHURCH, BE THE CHURCH**

**Gifts Are Relative, Love Never Ends**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 (ESV)**

*8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 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. 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. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

**Introduction**

As Paul concludes this great instruction on love, he points us towards love's priority. He has shown us that to live and minister apart from love is to fail. He has taught us that love acts towards others with kindness and encouragement. We have learned that godly love has the persistence in the present because of its confidence in the future. Now he wants us to be certain of love's priority. His point is not complicated. He affirms that:

Because love is eternal is takes priority.

The discussion isn't that other things aren't important, or even necessary. His point is that love trumps all other graces because it will extend into glory. We should not think this to be bizarre. Your job is important but it is not your priority. One's soul is a priority because one's soul is eternal. This is an important life lesson: That which is eternal is by nature a priority. Some things are good and important, but they will end with this life. For example:

**The Temporary Nature of Gifts and Some Virtues**

* There is a day coming when *prophecies* will pass away/cease.
  + What are prophecies? "A simple definition would be that prophecy is “the human report of a divine revelation.'"[[1]](#footnote-1) A prophecy may include a prediction of the future, but more often it is a message of God for the present. In 1 Corinthians 14 one will see there is great value to the prophetic gift. ". . . the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."[[2]](#footnote-2) We also note that the New Testament calls us to “*. . . not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.*” (1 Thessalonians 5:20–21, ESV). But there is a day coming when that gift will **καταργέω** [kat·arg·**eh**·o] cease, pass away, become inactive. It is good for now, but it will cease. So the so-called "temporariness" of the gift does not mean it is invaluable today!
* There is a day coming when *tongues* will pass away/cease.

* + What are tongues? "The gift of tongues is simply the Spirit-energized ability to pray, worship, give thanks, or speak in a language other than your own or one you might have learned in school."[[3]](#footnote-3) This would probably surprise some of the Corinthian believers because they highly valued this manifestation of the Spirit. So why would a day come when they would cease? Again, Paul will explain this in more detail in Chapter 14, but mainly because he instructs, “*The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself . . .*” (1 Corinthians 14:4a, ESV). That need will cease some day.
* There is a day coming when *knowledge* will pass away/cease.

* + What does Paul have in mind when he says "knowledge"? Well he doesn't mean that intellect and understanding will pass away. ". . . “Knowledge” in this passage does not mean ordinary human knowing or learning, but refers rather to that special manifestation of the Spirit, the “utterance of knowledge” (12:8)."[[4]](#footnote-4) It's a knowledge that could not be known apart from the Spirit.

Paul's statement: “*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love,*” is a very difficult phrase to interpret in light of the context. The Greek text helps us for we see the verse stated this way:

νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη· τὰ τρία ταῦτα, μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη. [[5]](#footnote-5)

AND NOW abides faith, hope, love . . .

In other words: "In the present life remain faith, hope and love." So we ask, "Why does Paul single out "love" as the greatest? The answer may be in that love is not like faith and hope because love lasts into eternity. The logic is that when Christ comes, faith becomes sight (2 Corinthians 5:7 & Hebrews 11:1), and hope is finally realized (Romans 8:24), but love is eternal and will extend infinitely. So with that understanding, we can say that:

* There is a day coming when *faith* will become sight!

* + Of course we know what faith is. According to the Bible *faith* is, “*. . . the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” (Hebrews 11:1, ESV).
* There is a day coming when *hope* is realized, ∴ is no more.
  + And like faith, hope will find it's complete realization and then end. Paul wrote, “*. . . Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*” (Romans 8:24–25, ESV)

**What Causes Gifts and Some Virtues to Cease?**

This passage teaches us that these gifts of the Spirit and even faith and hope will someday come to an end – cease and desist! What will bring them to such a conclusion? Well, Paul gives us some clues:

1. He writes, “*but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.*” (1 Corinthians 13:10, ESV); and also,
2. It will be a time when we see “. . . *face to face";* and also,
3. At a time when we are *". . . fully known.*” (1 Corinthians 13:12, ESV)

This can only mean one time – one event. It is called the Second Coming of Christ. "At the coming of Christ the final purpose of God’s saving work in Christ will have been reached; at that point those gifts now necessary for the building up of the church in the present age will disappear, because “completeness” will have come.[[6]](#footnote-6) Listen to these familiar words from the Apostle John found in 1 John 3:2 (ESV), "Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is." This fact should not surprise us for Paul has prepared us for this eventuality. Turn back with me to 1 Corinthians 1:4–8 (ESV):

*4 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— 6 even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— 7 so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The spiritual gifts, the manifestations of the Spirit are given to them as they "await the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ. So this we can say with confidence: the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to the Church for the common good, for encouragement and edification; and the virtues of hope and faith are also gifts of the Spirit – but all these will come to an end when Christ appears in all His glory. It will be then that the Church is complete and brought to full maturity.

**What Is One Thing That Never Ends?**

But having said that, we are reminded that " Love never ends . . ."[[7]](#footnote-7) And that makes "love" the "greatest" gift.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**So How Are We To View Spiritual Gifts Today?**

1. We notice that spiritual gifts and spiritual virtues are temporary – they will cease; they will pass away.
2. We also notice that these graces are "time sensitive". Paul uses two analogies to state that these gifts of the Spirit are like a child in this life, but becoming a man in the life to come. They are also like looking into a glass and seeing the image as unclear, but in the life to come seeing the image clearly. The gifts of the Spirit find their clarity and completeness when Jesus comes.

So the point then, that Paul is making is that "as good as the Spirit’s giftings are, they are nonetheless only for the present; sacrificial love, which the Corinthians currently lack, is the “more excellent way” in part because it belongs to eternity as well as to the present.[[9]](#footnote-9) Love is eternal. "Even though love “continues” in the present, along with its companions faith and hope, love is the greatest of these three because it “continues” on into the final glory, which the other two by their very nature do not."[[10]](#footnote-10)

"In this statement Paul raised a crucial question for the Corinthians. As their church struggled in its worship, especially in the practice of prophecy and tongues, what was its highest priority? Paul’s position was plain. The highest virtue for them to pursue was love for one another."[[11]](#footnote-11)

**Application**

So Paul ends his appeal to emphasize love rather than giftedness. Gifts are not unimportant, but being loving ought to be our primary focus. The point to remember is this: Our present life, even with all its blessings, is simply a "foretaste of the future."[[12]](#footnote-12) According to Paul, "If the present Christian experience were to be reduced to three essential qualities they would be faith, hope, and love."[[13]](#footnote-13)

This is a challenging thought. If your life and my life was reduced to it basic essence could we say that it is all about:

1. Faith in God, trusting in Christ's finished work on Calvary?
2. Hope in the coming of Christ in all His glory?
3. And love – love for Christ, love for His Church and love for our neighbors?

And the end of the day you and I will lay our head on death's pillow and in the moments that precede our departure if you and I are not trusting in the finished work of Jesus; if we are not living in hopeful expectation of His coming and the glorious inheritance that awaits us; and if we do not love God and love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31), we will die with nothing.

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