

Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Title: Love Abiding, Spiritual Gifts Receding

Truth: Love abides always while certain spiritual gifts do not.

Date/Location: January 31, 2021 at FBC

Introduction

Chapter 13 is about the better way to use the gifts of God's Spirit. Last time, we learned what the absence of love looks like, the detailed definition of love, and the application of love. In this message, we will learn about the abiding nature of love as over against the temporary spiritual gifts.

I. Permanence of Love, v. 8a

- A. Love will forever be “a thing” as they say. Genuine Christian love, the love of God and Christ, the love poured out by the Holy Spirit will always exist. These will remain forever in the present age, in the age to come, in the eternal state beyond as far as the eye can see. While there is no “perfect love” today (as in perfectionist doctrine), there will be perfect manifestation of love in the heavenly future for believers. The love that exists always is not an erotic kind of love—not like in Mormon or Islamic doctrine.
- B. Love is permanent, outlasting the gifts over which the Corinthians were infatuated. Literally, the text says that “the love—this love we have been talking about—never falls away.”
- C. This love is the more excellent way to live in the church and life in general. In fact, we could almost say that all spiritual gifts could disappear, but since love remains, we would still be in good shape. In fact, many of the gifts *have* disappeared, yet we are none the poorer for it. We have *everything* that we need (spiritual resources) to live for God—and many of us have a whole bunch more (material resources).
- D. Allow me to extrapolate this notion into our every-day lives and marriages. If a spouse says, “our love is gone” or something like that, what they mean is that they do not feel like they are in love anymore. Love has seemed to fail. But this belies (disguises or contradicts) what is truly going on. True love never fails. What the

person is saying is not that some abstract thing just went “poof” into the ether. He or she is actually saying that they do not love anymore. This is not a failure of love, but it is a failure of the person who has failed to exercise love. They are failing in their promise to love their spouse. In fact, they are failing also to obey God. Ephesians 5:25 and Titus 2:4 make it clear that husbands and wives are commanded to love one another. So be realistic with yourself. It is not that “love has disappeared.” Rather, it is, “I have failed. I have sinned in not loving you as God has commanded me to do.”

II. Transience of Revelatory Gifts, v. 8b-9

A. Statement of Transience, v. 8b

1. Prophecies will be set aside. Remember the definition of prophecies. They are the miraculous and special revelation type of prophecy giving by God’s Spirit to certain people in the early church for them to authoritatively teach the church as representatives of God. This does not refer to “run of the mill” proclamation of pre-existing truth that preachers and teachers do today. *That* has not stopped.
2. Tongues will cease. The gift of a tongue is the gift given by the Spirit by which a person can speak and understand a foreign language without learning it. This was given in the early church, but at some point Paul reveals that this gift is going to run its course and become obsolete.
3. Knowledge will be set aside. The gift of divinely given knowledge. As an example of this, we might look at Acts 5:3, where Peter knew immediately that Ananias and Sapphira lied about the price of the property they sold. It is not told to us how he knew, but it may have been that God gave him that insight.

Some interpreters have made a big deal about the different verb used for tongues than for the other two gifts. I do not think this difference is that significant; the point is that these gifts will stop operating / stop being given. The focus on them is childish because they are ordained for a temporary period in the early life of the church until something else comes along.

B. True Impermanence.

1. There are millions upon millions of Christians today who believe that the above gifts are still available and operational today in 2021. Their teachers are emphatic that the gifts in fact do *not* cease in this age. And since there is evidence of prophetic activity in the Tribulation and perhaps even in the millennial kingdom, the effect of this view is that such special gifts will never cease until the heavenly state.
2. I do not take heaven to be a relevant cessation point for these gifts because that is beyond the end of time and it is sort of obvious that everything is wrapped up when it is wrapped up. It is true that there would be no need for such gifts in the presence of Christ, where we will be without sin and disease and language barriers. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Paul has in mind the second coming of Jesus or of the heavenly state. I grant that some do take the “heavenly cessation” viewpoint or say that cessation occurs at the point of Christ’s second coming. I think there is a better way to understand Paul’s intention.
3. But there is also the promise that there will be dreams and visions at the end time, so that it appears that actually there will be a restart of certain special revelations from God at that time. For example, see Acts 2:17. Coupling this promise together with Paul’s cessation statements in 1 Cor. 13:8, and bolstered by our own experience, it seems only reasonable to believe that the cessation or “impermanence” of the gifts is a real thing in the present age, not an illusion. They will not continue in the present age, and then exist again in the eschatological age. In other words, there is a *real* cessation of these gifts. We are not allowed to read Paul saying they will cease and then teach that they never cease. It’s about like saying that “Genesis says the earth was created in six days, but it really was not that way.” That is not a mindset of submission to God’s Word.

C. Why this impermanence? The Bible is crystal clear on this question: because in Paul’s day, “we know **in part** and we prophesy **in part**.” These gifts will go by the wayside because they only give **part** of the picture. They are partial, incomplete, not whole. I further

suggest that since the first and last item of the list-of-three are mentioned—knowledge and prophecy—we are right to understand that the third item is included in Paul’s intention as well: because we *tongue* in part. Something else must come in the place of these incomplete gifts to bring completion.

III. The Arrival and Identification of the Perfect Thing, v. 10

- A. Verse 10 tells what that something else is: when **that which is perfect** has come, then that which is in part will be set aside (same verb that was used twice in verse 8). Whatever the gifts of knowledge, prophecy and tongues provide *in part* will be obsolete because the perfect thing will bring the *whole*. To figure out the identity of the perfect thing we have to understand “what it perfects.”
- B. So what did knowledge and prophecy and tongues do “in part”? Well, they are gifts of the Spirit by which God reveals information to mankind. They are “in part,” meaning that they provided *partial* revelation from God. They were God’s message to man in piecemeal format, little segments at a time, incomplete in themselves and insufficient for the life of the entire church for the entire church age. They were tied to the circumstances in which they were delivered. They were not written down and so did not provide a stable doctrinal base for the church to grow on. They did not give the whole picture of God’s plan throughout this age. This material refers to that given after the coming of Christ. He was the most complete revelation of God to man, but there was more that needed to be communicated.
- C. So that which is perfect must “complete” what the partial gifts were unable to do. The perfect thing must therefore give a full picture of divine revelation. It must be entire, not segmented. It must be put in a permanent form (written down) and be generally applicable to the entire church. It must be sufficient so that the church does not lack anything that it needs to obey all the things Jesus commanded us.
- D. All of this, by the way, is why I do not take the perfect as heaven or as the second coming of Jesus Christ. Those eschatological things

do not provide what is needed in the meanwhile. We know not only from this section, but also other Scriptures and experience that no new revelation from God is coming to man through any channel. There are no prophecies, tongues, or knowledge beyond those provided through normal means of learning the Word and learning the foreign language. Therefore, the perfect thing should be identified as the completed Scriptures. Only they provide the answer to “partial” revelation in the present age. An absent Christ does not, a far-off heaven does not, and fake spiritual gifts do not complete that partial apostolic revelation or provide any benefit to the church today. Only the completed Bible can do that. When the gospel writers and Paul and James and Peter and Jude finished their writings, then the perfect was in place and the partial was set aside.

- E. One could wish that Paul would have been more plain in his statement of this news. Paul often spoke of the coming of Christ but the language he uses here does not mirror that “Parousia” language elsewhere. He does not use the concept of “eternity” or “heaven here either. He does use the neuter noun “the perfect,” which is somewhat generic.
- F. How this fits with the Corinthian situation is that they were obsessing about tongues and prophecy and such, which were destined to soon pass off the scene. It is like getting all wrapped up in worldly things when what is going to happen is that those things will be burned up.
- G. By the way, think about this in reverse. If the partial things have plainly been set aside (tongues, for example), then it seems reasonable to assume that the perfect thing has already come.

IV. Illustrations of the Movement from Partial to Complete, v.

11-12

- A. Childhood versus adulthood, v. 11. The illustration is simple to understand. Think back on your childhood and you will easily see that you had some child-like patterns of thinking. Mature adult thinking and speaking and understanding came later in life. Growth naturally brought changes to you and you put away childish things.

For instance, pretend holds less attraction to you than it did before. This illustration shows the transition from partial to complete. The early church was in a child-like stage. When the perfect came, the church was able to operate in adult mode.

- B. Dim mirror versus clear mirror, v. 12. The point of the second illustration is basically the same as the first. The partial “mode” of revelation is like seeing yourself in a dark metal mirror. Things are a bit murky. You can make out some of the necessary details, but it is not at all like seeing yourself in a perfectly clear mirror—face to face. This phrase immediately brings up the idea “face to face I shall behold Him...” but what it should raise in your mind is the mirror analogy of God’s word in James 1:22-25.

Also, I do not make too much of the “I am known” as if it is saying that God knows me perfectly, so at some point in the future I will know perfectly. That is not theologically sound reasoning. We will *never* know everything like God does, and the depth God does. The whole point of the illustrations is to convey the transition from partial to complete—in the realm of revelatory information.

V. Restatement of Love’s Permanence, v. 13

- A. The wonderful triumvirate of faith, hope, and love show up here. Each of these has a critical place in our present lives. We must live by faith, walk in hope, and exercise love toward God and our neighbors.
- B. But there is a time when we will not walk by faith like we do today, 2 Cor. 5:7. We will walk instead by sight. That will also be the time that our hope will be fulfilled, and we will not be able to say that we have a future hope any longer—because what we hoped for we will then have at that time! We pick up this notion from Romans 8:24-25.
- C. There is no time when love will become inoperative! True love for God and our neighbors will continue into the heavenly state.

Conclusion

One reason God took away these gifts is that they were abused by the church. They were puffed up in the use of the gifts and misusing

them in connection with their former pagan religious experience. In the most recent century of world history, think of how far out the charismatic gifts have gone in the name of the “Holy Spirit.” There is very much that is unholy and mistaken in the practice of these so-called gifts.

We cannot claim that we need more gifts—because we have God’s love that allows us to exercise with excellence the gifts God *does* give. We cannot long for a reversion back to gifts of the childhood stage of the church. We live in a time where we have all the gifts we need, even though the variation of those gifts has been reduced by the passage of time. Some gifts have simply become “extinct.” But they were never endangered—they experienced a divinely *planned* extinction.

We cannot claim today that we live in an era of darkness, as if looking into a dark metal mirror. We live in an era of the completed Word of God. We live in an “adult” church world, a world where God has given us His completed revelation and expects us to live with a maturity and obedience that is commensurate (proportional, corresponding in degree) to that measure of divine revelation He has given.

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