

THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

May 7, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

There is great danger in focusing on the present. We live in a society that, on the whole, does not live life with eternity in mind. Everything around us caters to a “here and now” mentality. As one pastor put it in relation to finances, “We are encouraged to get all we can, can all we get, and sit on the can.” This little ditty describes the self-centered culture in which we live. We are told that we live in a “dog eat dog” world and our greatest concern should be for self, to watch out first and foremost for our own interests, often at the expense of others. Even professing Christians live life chasing after the pursuits of this world and its creaturely comforts that are temporary and quickly fading away, disregarding the testimony of the Preacher in Ecclesiastes and totally ignoring the truth that their “citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20).

This focus on the present did not originate in our time. It is a result of the fall and the consequent self-centered desire of man. As we have seen in our studies on spiritual gifts over the past few weeks, this problem existed in the church at Corinth and served as a source of division in the body. Some at Corinth put undue stress on particular gifts, the gift of tongues in particular. Paul began chapter 13 by reminding them that if they exercised these gifts without love, then they profited nothing, individually or corporately. He explains this truth in more detail in chapter 14. Then, as we saw last week, Paul expanded his thoughts on love by showing the characteristics of love and how love should be demonstrated, both positively and negatively. His conclusion in v. 7 covers the gamut of self-sacrificial love: it is protecting, it is trusting, it anticipates the best in all circumstances, and it endures all things, persevering when anything else would have given up. In our text this morning he continues his discourse on love by showing that the believer’s focus should be on this love, which is permanent, not on that which is temporary. Specifically, *we should use the spiritual gifts that God has blessed us with temporarily with the eternal in mind.*

I. The Temporary Gifts (13:8-12)

In living for the gifts and neglecting love, the Corinthians had spiritually flip-flopped the importance of love and spiritual gifts. I want to be careful that I do not seem to suggest that the Corinthians were wrong to focus on their spiritual gifts *at all*. Anything that is given to us by the Spirit is important. The gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge were all from the Holy Spirit and, when exercised properly, would have been spiritually profitable to this church. But there are *levels* or *degrees* of importance. What the Corinthians did was raise the level of importance of spiritual gifts above that of love. So Paul sets out to correct this inversion that had caused such turmoil in this church.

1. The inferiority of spiritual gifts (v. 8)

Paul introduces this section with a conclusion from the prior section on the characteristics of love, “**Love never fails.**” This carries the idea that love “never falls away” or “always endures.” Some translations render it, “Love never ends.” All of these capture the truth of “**love never fails.**” As one writer suggests, “This love never folds under pressure of the most intense and sustained kind. This love continues through death into eternity. This is the love of God” [David Prior, *1 Corinthians*, 233]. This writer captures Paul’s intent. The love that Paul speaks of is

rooted and grounded in the love of God, which is permanent in all situations and circumstances that we face in this life and beyond.

This does not mean that love always guarantees success from a human perspective. Paul was a living testimony of this. In his demonstration of love he often faced severe persecution: imprisonment, beaten and left for dead, stoned, flogged, and finally killed for his love. We certainly would not call Paul's life a human success story. I doubt he ever would have graced the cover of *People* magazine.

In this we are reminded that love is not to be used simply to satisfy our needs and comforts. It is not, "I love you if..." or "I love you because..." or "I love you as long as..." We will never have a true *agapē* love for others if we are simply seeking to satisfy our own desires and make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Paul did not look at love from a human perspective of success, but from a spiritual perspective. He looked at his persecution as a success for the gospel and the cause of Christ. That is the love that Paul says, "**never fails.**" It is a love that is focused on God and others that is permanent, not the lustful, selfish love of this world. It is rooted in the love of God and Christ and is consistent in the comfortable times as well as the difficult times. This is why one writer states that believers "actually participate in the grace of God himself. God is love. As followers of Christ, believers receive the grace of God to express that divine love in human form. In fact, the love Christians express in this life will extend to eternity... The experience of Christian love as Paul defined it is one of the few ways Christians now taste in part that perfection that awaits in full in the new heavens and the new earth" [Richard Pratt, *1 Corinthians*, 473].

Paul contrasts this love with three specific gifts, "**prophecy,**" "**tongues,**" and "**knowledge,**" to demonstrate the superiority of love. The "**gifts of prophecy**" and "**knowledge**" would both "**be done away,**" and "**tongues**" would "**cease.**" Much has been made of Paul's use of verbs here. He uses a different verb and voice to describe what will happen with "**prophecy**" and "**knowledge**" than he uses with "**tongues.**" "**Prophecy**" and "**knowledge,**" Paul writes, "**will be done away**" but "**tongues will cease.**" Some interpret this to mean Paul demonstrates that "**tongues**" would end at some point prior to that of "**prophecy**" and "**knowledge,**" which would be done away "**when the perfect comes**" (v. 10), which we will look at in a moment. These back their interpretation by pointing out that Paul does not speak of "**tongues**" in vv. 9-12 where he does continue to speak of "**prophecy**" and "**knowledge.**" However, while these things are true, I think this puts undue stress on what Paul is saying in these verses. While I think this distinction is important for what Paul sets forth later in chapter 14, we must not lose sight of his main point here that love is superior to these spiritual gifts. Love lasts forever; these gifts, all three of them, would not. It is better to look at Paul's use of verbs here as being nothing more than stylistic.

2. The partiality of spiritual gifts (vv. 9-12)

Paul says not only are these gifts inferior, but to further demonstrate the temporary nature of these gifts, Paul reminds them that the prophesy and knowledge they had received was partial, not perfect or complete.

a. Ignorance (vv. 9-10, 12)

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away."

“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.”

These verses parallel one another and teach the same truth. To further validate the importance of love over against these temporary gifts, Paul reminds them that they only **“know in part”** and only **“prophecy in part.”** He reinforces this truth by including himself in the matter, **“we know in part and we prophecy in part”** and in v. 12, **“Now I know in part.”** Paul is not saying that the knowledge and prophecies they received were not important. They most certainly were if they were from the Spirit of God. But they were not complete. They were **“partial.”** What Paul is showing them is that there remained much that they were ignorant of concerning the things of God. He uses an illustration of seeing **“in a mirror dimly.”** A **“mirror”** in Paul’s time was not like a mirror we have today. Their mirror was not made of glass but was the bottom of a polished pot or pan or some flat metal object that would reflect their image. The image would be much more distorted, “dimmer” in Paul’s words, than what we see when we look at a mirror today.

I will never forget an occurrence on a mission trip to Kiev. I was rooming with two other men in the group and on our first morning there one of the men realized that we had no mirror in the room. This presented a problem for him when he wanted to shave. So he grabbed a pan from the kitchen and used it as a mirror, holding it in one hand while he held his razor in the other. Needless to say, his shave that morning did not come out as he had hoped because he could only see his reflection **“dimly.”** But he continued to use that pan as a mirror all week.

That is what Paul was saying to the Corinthians. They did not have the whole picture; they only saw in part. They were ignorant of the rest of the story. It was blurred. **“But when the perfect comes,”** Paul says, **“the partial will be done away.”** In other words, on that day, all would be made crystal clear and that which was **“partial,”** their limited **“gifts of prophecy”** and **“knowledge”** would be done away, as would **“tongues”** which is implied from the context.

So what is the time **“when the perfect comes”**? There are three prominent views on this. The first view holds that this refers to the maturing of the church. In almost every case that Paul uses the word **“perfect”** he is speaking of maturity, and one of the first rules of biblical interpretation is to examine the author’s other uses of a word to interpret its use. Those that hold this view say that these gifts were given to the church in its infancy, but with its maturity they are no longer needed. However, Paul equates **“when the perfect comes”** to the time when they would see Jesus **“face to face”** (v. 12). John also spoke of this time in 1 John 3:2, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” That is the time when the church will be fully mature. So the view that **“perfect”** refers to the maturity of the church is not valid.

A second view, perhaps more popular than the first, sees this as the time when the completed canon was given. **“Perfect”** refers to God’s final revelation of Scripture. When this transpired, none of the revelatory gifts would be needed. This would still be future to Paul and those at Corinth. While this is a possibility, and I admit one that easily satisfies the belief of a cessationist like myself, it does not seem likely that Paul would expect the Corinthians to link perfection to the time of the completed canon. It is easy for us to view it that way 1800 years later, but they would not have made this connection. And further, as Tom Schreiner points out, “Paul had no conception that he was contributing to a completed canon of writings that would function together as an authority for the church in its history. Paul was keenly conscious of his authority as an apostle, and he expected the churches to submit to his authority. But he did not

have any notion that history would last a long time” [Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ, 369]. So this view too seems unwarranted.

The third view, and the more convincing in this context, is that **“when the perfect comes”** refers to the day of the Lord’s return or His second coming. Then, and only then, will all things be known. Some argue that this view cannot be correct because **“perfect”** is in neuter form in the Greek, eliminating the possibility of **“perfect”** referring to a person. They say that **“perfect”** refers to the eternal state, when we meet Christ **“face to face”** at death. However, this does not take into account the word **“comes.”** A better way to look at this is that the neuter form does not refer to the person of the event but the event itself. The second coming satisfies both the neuter form in the Greek and the context of **“comes.”** If interpreted this way, Paul says that **“knowledge”** and **“prophecy”** will continue until the day of the Lord’s return.

Now this creates an apparent problem for the cessationist who, like myself, believes that the gifts Paul mentions here have ceased or been done away. But the problem is only apparent. In Schreiner’s quote we just read, he noted that Paul did not have any notion that history would last a long time. Many have pointed out that Paul thought that he was living in the last days. When he wrote these words to Corinth, he was writing as if these gifts would remain until the last day. However, he had no knowledge that the Lord would tarry even until today. The fact that Paul says these gifts would *certainly* end on that day does not mean they necessarily would *last* until that day. And when we take into account that the gifts that Paul speaks of here are probably representative of all spiritual gifts, this warrants such an interpretation. All that is partial will be made complete when the Lord returns.

b. Immaturity (v. 11)

Paul says not only do the Corinthians, and himself, have partial understanding of the things of God, not only are they ignorant of some things, but they are also immature. **“When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”** The analogy that Paul uses is that of a child and an adult. Paul writes in the first person singular and depicts himself as a child who speaks, thinks, and reasons. We know that children are very limited in these areas. I enjoy watching Oliver as he “communicates” with Steve and Ronda. You can look at him and see the wheels turning in his little mind as he takes in the things around him. But he is unable to communicate or think or reason like his philosophical father, and that is to be expected. But as Oliver grows and matures, he will put aside that cute little pointing to the ceiling and blurting out “light.” He will begin to communicate his thoughts and reasonings in a ways that are intelligible to those more mature.

That is what Paul is saying. He does not say that he has reached full maturity. That would only come when he saw Christ **“face to face.”** Even an adult has some immaturities. He simply uses this illustration to remind the Corinthians that as they mature in the faith, they are to set aside childish ways and press on towards maturity. They were acting childish in their demonstration of spiritual gifts rather than mature adults.

Paul is not saying that we are not to be childlike as children of God. There is a difference between childlikeness and childishness. We are always to have a child-like dependence on Christ. But childishness has no place in the life of a more mature believer.

So Paul reminds these at Corinth of their ignorance and their immaturity as it related to spiritual gifts. They needed to grow up and understand the proper place of spiritual gifts. And they needed to grow in love. Their gifts would fade away, but love lasts forever.

II. The Eternal Graces (13:13)

“**But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.**” “**But now**” is not a reference to time, as in the present, but is inferential. When their gifts had ceased to be, Paul says that three things remain or abide: faith, hope, and love.

1. Faith

The “**faith**” that Paul speaks of here is saving faith, not a miracle working faith that we saw in chapter 12. Some hold that this faith will pass in eternity. The writer of Hebrews defined faith as “the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” There is a side of faith that will pass when the object of faith, Jesus Christ, is seen in all of His glory. Paul alludes to this in 1 Cor. 5:7 where he encourages the believer to “walk by faith, not by sight.”

However, there is another aspect of “**faith**” that will abide forever. Faith also refers to trust in God and unwavering commitment to Him. In this regard, our faith will abide for all eternity. We will forever have confidence in Him to provide for our every need. D. A. Carson agrees, “It is true in one sense that faith will be displaced by sight. But there is another sense in which faith is simply thankful trust in God, deep appreciation for him, committed subservience to him. Will there be any time in the next fifty billion years (if I may speak of eternity in the categories of time) during which the very basis of my presence in the celestial courts will be something *other* than faith in the grace of God?” [*Showing the Spirit*, 74-75].

2. Hope

Like faith, some hold that “**hope**” will also pass in eternity. And again, there is an element of truth to this. “**Hope**” most often refers to the future, an assurance we have that something will come to pass. For the Christian, “**hope**” is looking with great anticipation to the day when all of the promises of God will come to fruition. Paul wrote in Rom. 8:24, “For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees?” Of course, this will happen on the day of the Lord’s return.

But, like faith, there is a larger aspect of “**hope**” that abides forever. Charles Hodge wrote, “Certain it is that there will always be room even in heaven... for hope of the ever advancing and enlarging blessedness of the redeemed” [quoted by Curtis Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 138]. Roger Ellsworth reminds us, “We think that there will be nothing more for us to look forward to after we get to heaven, but that 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” [*Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 217].

Paul himself captures this understanding in 1 Cor. 15:19, “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” In commenting on this verse, D. A. Carson notes, “Presumably in one sense Paul expects hope to continue beyond this life in the continued enjoyment of that which we hoped; for there is a sense in which hope is not merely an anticipation no longer needed once those blessings have arrived, but a firm anchor in Christ himself. Our hope is in God, in Christ; and as such, hope continues forever, doubtless opening up an infinity of blessings, world without end” [*Showing the Spirit*, 74].

3. Love

The entire chapter has been dedicated to “**love**” so we will not elaborate on it here. But notice a couple of things about love. First, this section, vv. 8-13, opens with love, “**Love never fails,**” and closes with love, “**but the greatest of these is love.**” Sandwiched in between is Paul’s excursus on the inferiority of spiritual gifts because of they are temporary, where love is eternal. That is why the believer is to focus on the eternal, not the temporary thing of this earth. Spiritual gifts are important, and should be sought and used for His glory and the good of the church. But when they are used in a way that misunderstands their purpose, then one is focusing on the present, and not eternity.

Second, notice where Paul places “**love**” in this triad of graces. While all three abide, “**love**” is “**the greatest.**” What does Paul mean by this? While there are varying opinions, let me close with the thoughts of Jonathan Edwards. Many of you know that Edwards delivered a series of sixteen sermons on 1 Corinthians 13 that we have in book form as *Charity and Its Fruits*. In one of those sermons, Edwards examines the question of what makes the church like heaven. His answer: it is love. He surmises that when all is said and done, the church’s manifestation at present of the glories to come is not accomplished primarily by spiritual gifts, but by love [see D. A. Carson, 76]. Love is not greater because faith and hope do not abide forever. Love is greater because of who God is. God *gives* faith. God *gives* hope. But God *is* love. Calvin captured this better than any other, “For every one derives advantage from his own *faith* and *hope*, but *love* extends its benefits to others” [*1 Corinthians*, 432]. That is why “**love**” is the greatest – because it, unlike faith and hope, is given to others. We can’t give faith to others. Only God can. We can’t give hope to others. Only God can. But we can give love in the way we extend our lives, our blessings, and our spiritual gifts, for the common good.