

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Permanence Of Love I Corinthians 13:8-13

Where do you place your values in life? Are your values in money, prestige, position, power, security, friends, mates, children or something else the world has to offer? What are your priorities for life? Are they job, family, church, relationships or something else this world has to offer? There is a principle which runs all through I Corinthians 13:8-13. That principle is: We ought to seek spiritual values and not worldly values; those things that have eternal value are to be sought over those things that have only temporary, earthly value; earthly rewards must be given a second place to heavenly rewards. For a Christian, only three things can be carried into eternity -- faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.

The thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is a parenthesis between two great chapters on spiritual gifts. It was written to tell us that love is a greater way of living than that of pursuing spiritual gifts. Love, according to the Apostle Paul, is the greatest thing in the world and in heaven. These Corinthians did not understand the importance of love and were exalting spiritual gifts, especially the gift of tongues, above love. There was little or no love in that assembly of believers, but there were great spiritual gifts among them. Consequently, there was pride, arguing, backbiting, preacher worship, struggle for power and division in the church.

The Apostle Paul wrote this section to help unify the Corinthian Christians who were at war with one another. In the first three verses of the chapter Paul showed the preeminence of love over spiritual gifts in that love is indispensable. In verses 4-7 he showed the properties of love so when it is practiced, it is unmistakable. In verses 8-13 Paul shows the permanence of love against the transitory nature of spiritual gifts. For him, the greatest value in this world and the world to come is love. This is not just any kind of love. but agape-love which is a deliberate choice to act for the best interest of another person. This is a supernatural love which comes from the Holy Spirit. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Therefore, it can only be produced by those who are Christians, those who have been born-again, those who have the Holy Spirit indwelling them. Christians are the only people on the face of the earth who have the capacity and power to produce this kind of love.

PERPETUITY OF LOVE 13:8a

Love never fails. Paul sets forth his basic premise: Love never fails. The word "fail" means "to fall, to collapse, to suffer ruin." Love will never fall, collapse or suffer ruin. It is immortal, eternal and will continue forever. It is permanent and has heavenly and eternal effects. Love has an enduring quality about it.

Love, then, is a virtue that has eternal value. The love that we exercise on this earth has eternal significance and we will be exercising love throughout eternity. That is why it is important to understand love never ends; it never quits; it is never used up. Love keeps on coming; the more we use it, the more there is. The more we love, the more we can love. The more love we give away, the more we have to give away. Love is like bailing out a boat with a hole in it—the more water we throw out, the more there is; it just keeps flowing in as we give it out. We can never love too much or too hard. Why? Because love has eternal value.

PASSING AWAY OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS 13:8b

But when there are prophecies, they will cease. What Paul is doing here is contrasting the permanence of love with the temporary transitory nature of spiritual gifts. He picks out prophecy, tongues and knowledge because these three spiritual gifts were what the Corinthians were proud of and were stressing. However, these three gifts are probably representative of all spiritual gifts. He chose these three because the Corinthians esteemed them so highly and were abusing them. There is a time coming in God's program when the gift of prophecy will be caused to cease. Prophecy, in the technical sense, is receiving divine inspired revelation from God and giving it to the people in a language they understand. This technical aspect of prophecy is no longer in existence because today we have the New Testament canon. However, there is a non-technical aspect of prophecy which may be in existence today. It is the ability to speak the mind of God whether that be by preaching the Bible or telling something which God has spontaneously brought to mind. Paul's point is that there is a day coming when prophecy shall be done away with. He does not tell us when, but the context is about the second advent of Christ, the eternal state and the consummation for the people of God. When this grand day comes, the Church will no longer need the gift of prophecy. Why? Christians will have the Lord. Paul's point is that prophecy, as well as all spiritual gifts, is transitory and temporary, but love is permanent.

Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. In the eternal state there will be no need for the spiritual gift of tongues because God's people will speak the heavenly language and communicate in a redeemed tongue. Tongues are transitory, but love is permanent.

Scholars who believe the gift of tongues ceased sometime after the first century make an inference from the middle voice of this verb tense, but it is only an inference. When it says,

"Tongues will be stilled (cease)," this is in the middle voice which can be translated "shall still themselves" or "cease" themselves," indicating that the gift of tongues will cease in and of itself. The inference may be that tongues was a gift that passed off the scene of history after the first century. Those who hold _____ of Acts seems to indicate the gift of tongues faded out. Also, they are quick to point out there are very few references to tongues in the early church and after 400 A.D. there are none. If these are true facts, then it is strong inferential argument for the temporary nature of the gift of tongues, but they are only an inference.

Yet, those who are continuationists and believe that the spectacular gifts are still in existence today often quote Dr. Richard Gaffin, the leading proponent in Reformed

circles for cessation of all spectacular gifts. Gaffin believes the context is about the second coming but it is not clear when the gifts cease.

"Paul is not intending to specify the time when any particular mode will cease. What he does affirm is the termination of the believer's present, fragmentary knowledge ... when "the perfect" comes. The time of the cessation of prophecy and tongues is an open question so far as this passage is concerned and will have to be decided on the basis of other passages and considerations" (Perspectives on Pentecost).

Paul's basic point seems to be that all spiritual gifts, including tongues, will pass away.

1) "when perfection comes," 2) when "we shall see face to face" and 3) when "I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." This seems to be an obvious reference to second advent and the things happening as a result of it. This is consistent with Paul's teaching that all spiritual gifts will go on until the coming of Christ. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed (I Cor. 1:7).

It needs to be pointed out that the general meaning of the middle voice in the Greek is "shall still (cease) themselves," yet the Greek may also allow for other possible interpretations. It does not necessarily mean a subject stops under its own power. For instance, when Jesus rebuked the wind and the raging waters, the storm stopped. He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters the storm subsided, and all was calm (Lk. 8:24). The verb "subsided" is the same verb as "to still" or "to cease." It too is in the middle voice, yet the raging sea did not stop under its own power. Christ stopped it by His mighty power.

Paul speaks of prophecies and knowledge dynamically stopping at a point in time by God's power using the passive voice. He speaks of tongues being stilled in the middle voice for stylistic variety, and it is dangerous to read too much into the middle voice. Furthermore, we must be careful not to distort the actual records of events of church history to support the view that some spectacular gifts like tongues have passed out of existence sometime after the first century.

"Neither tongues nor prophecy nor miracles ceased at the end of the first-century; they continued at least into the third century and have recurred sporadically if not consistently ever since. The relative disappearance of these gifts during the later Patristic period can be attributed largely to their abuse in certain sectarian circles" (Craig Blomberg, I Corinthians).

The basic arguments against the cessationist position are: 1) No Scripture asserts clearly that any of the spectacular gifts were given only for the purpose of attesting the Apostle's ministry and message; 2) There are several clear verses which affirm that the gifts are also for the purpose of edification (I Cor. 12:7; 1 Cor. 14:3); 3) I Cor. 1:4-9 implies that all the gifts given to the Corinthians would continue to the Second Advent of Christ 4) Hebrews 2:4 when speaking of "signs, wonders and miracles" also includes "the gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will." If Apostolic attestation is the criterion of a spiritual gift being special and temporary then we could be conceivably required to remove all the spiritual gifts from today's church.

This could also include the miracle of conversion," since the Apostle Paul makes converted lives to be the seal of his apostleship (I Cor. 9:2).

Where there is knowledge, it will pass away. The spiritual gift of knowledge is the ability to deal with the theoretical and philosophical aspects of the Word of God and to systematize them in a logical manner. This spiritual gift will pass away. It is transitory, but love is permanent. There will be no need for this gift because in the eternal state we will have redeemed minds, and while we will not know everything, we will understand all things that we are puzzled with now.

PARTIAL UNDERSTANDING 13:9-10

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. All knowledge at best is incomplete and partial. Even prophecy, while it contains truth, does not give us all truth. Spiritual gifts can only give us partial knowledge, partial understanding.

But when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. The Greek word is *telion*, which may mean "complete," "mature" or "perfect." The "perfection" here in context is not perfect love, nor is it the completed canon of Scripture nor does it refer to the maturity of the church, but it refers to the goal, purpose or target for the church. It is the time when the church shall be conformed completely to the image of Jesus Christ. This consummation will be at the second advent, and when the consummation is achieved, we shall enter into perfect knowledge. With perfect knowledge, there will be no need for spiritual gifts which are only temporary, partial and produce incomplete knowledge at best.

Paul's argument is that we ought not to seek primarily that which is imperfect and obscure and which shall soon vanish away, but that we should rather seek love which is permanent and eternal.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Here Paul used the illustration of a child's knowledge to show the transitory nature of spiritual gifts and the imperfect nature of knowledge. He compares the present age with childhood and the future, eternal age with adulthood. This transformation from childhood to manhood is a vivid picture of the passing away of our present imperfect knowledge and the coming into mature and complete knowledge on that glad day when Christ will be revealed in glory. Then shall our eyes be forever opened to see the things that are abiding and eternal. Things of time cease to be, but love is eternal. When the church enters into its full maturity, there will then be perfect knowledge and it will discard the things of childhood; that is, spiritual gifts. Therefore, spiritual gifts are transitory.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror. Paul used the illustration of a mirror's reflection to show the transitory nature of spiritual gifts and the imperfect nature of knowledge. The mirror here was not unfamiliar to the Corinthians, for they were famous for their mirrors. They were not mirrors of glass but of finely polished metal. These mirrors would reflect an imperfect, blurred and indistinct image which was unsatisfactory when compared with immediate and perfect vision. Our knowledge this side of glory is a riddle; things are puzzling to us. We receive dim impressions, vague shadows and tantalizing glimpses.

Many things puzzle us as Christians. Why sin? Why suffering? Why does God elect some to salvation and pass by others? Why doesn't God kill the devil when He has the power to do so? Why doesn't God save all when He is all powerful? Our knowledge

is so limited this side of glory, but we walk by faith in the inspired infallible and truthful Bible.

Then we shall see face to face. This does not say when we shall be face to face, but it is obviously a reference to the second advent. We shall be with Christ. We shall be in direct immediate communication with Him. Then there will be no more mysteries, no more puzzles and no more enigmas.

Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. What a remarkable verse. We, right now, are known by God completely, totally and perfectly. While we will never be omniscient, there is a time coming in the eternal state when there will be no more enigmas. We shall know the mysteries of life and death. We shall know about the ways of God in history. We shall know the will and plans of God. We shall know perfectly, completely and totally because we shall have direct communication with the Lord. When that time comes, we shall have no need for spiritual gifts which give us only partial knowledge and understanding.

Notice how much time Paul spent on the transitory nature of spiritual gifts. He has gone to great lengths to impress the Corinthians that what they esteemed so highly was only temporary and transitory.

PRIORITY OF LOVE 13:13

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. Paul tells us that faith, hope and love endure forever and have eternal value. Faith, hope and love are not just for this age, this life, but they have heavenly significance. Faith is eternal. Throughout eternity we will be trusting God, depending on Him, seeking His guidance. Hope is eternal; it is the confident expectation of yet more to come, so throughout eternity God is going to keep opening our eyes to new vistas, opening our spirits to new opportunities and to new adventures. Heaven will never grow old; it will never be diminished; it will never be boring. We will go on hoping because God is infinite.

But the greatest of these is love. Love is also eternal but it is greater than faith or hope. It is a virtue which outlives all earthly things and is more important than faith and hope which are also eternal. Love is the greatest thing in the universe and the most glorious thing in heaven. Not only is it superior to the things that perish, it is also supreme among the things that abide. Of the three cardinal Christian graces, love is and ever will be chief. Why is love more important than faith and hope? First, love is more useful in that with it we serve God and others. Faith and hope are used for our own benefit, but love serves others. Second, love is the root of faith and hope, and without it we have nothing. Third, faith and hope are not the essence of God, but God is love. God is not faith; He is not hope, but He is love. Therefore, to learn to love is to achieve the absolute, paramount value in the entire universe to become like God. The end of the Christian life is to become like God in nature, character and action. We, therefore, must cultivate love now and we will be cultivating love throughout all eternity.

Paul actually concludes I Corinthians 13 in the first words of the next chapter. "Follow the way of love..." . Christians are to make love the aim of their lives. It is to be the chief goal. We are to set our hearts on it. We are to pursue it. To become loving, compassionate, patient, kind and truthful is the reason we Christians exist. Whatever else we may pursue, we must make our number one priority to follow after love.

CONCLUSION

What is the principle which runs all through I Corinthians 13? What is of eternal value (faith, hope and especially love) is of higher value than all worldly things which are of transitory value. Love is more important than winning a game or an argument because winning is transitory but love is eternal. Love is more important than manipulating people to get a business contract because contracts are earthly but love is eternal. The cultivation of faith, hope and love in our spiritual lives is more important than our social, physical or intellectual lives because these things are transitory, while faith, hope and especially love _____ as parents to teach our children by the example of faith, hope and love than that we feed them, clothe then shelter them, educate them or shower them with earthly gifts because all these things are simply of earthly value while faith, hope and love are of eternal value. If you are a doctor, it is more important that you show your patients faith, hope and love and seek to introduce them to Christ than that you heal their bodies. If you are a teacher, it is more important that you teach your students about faith, hope and love than that you teach them algebra and geography.

Christian, what place do you give to developing eternal values? Are you diligently cultivating faith, hope and love? Have you placed your boyfriend, girlfriend, mate, family, material things, social acceptance or even church service above faith, hope and love? Only the cultivation of eternal values will count for time and eternity.

If you are without Christ, I want to ask you several questions. Would you like to be loved by God with the most secure love in the universe? Would you like to be able to love others as God does? Would you like to be loved by others with a strong sensitive love? If your answer is yes, then I point you to Christ who laid down His life that people might have their sins forgiven, be granted eternal life and be given a divine reason for living. Christ died for sinners and He invites any and all men, women and children to come to Him by faith.

You must believe Christ died for your sins and you must bow to Him as your Lord and King. Then you will experience God's love. Then you will be able to love others. Then you will be loved by other Christians. These things will begin to happen to you the moment you receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Don't put this decision off or you will miss experiencing the most important virtue in the universe -- love.