

PREFACE

Thus far in Chapter Thirteen we have looked at the *necessity* of love (vv1-3), and the *character* of love (vv4-7). Now we consider the *persistence* of love in the remaining verses (vv8-13). In this final paragraph Paul contrasts the permanence of love with the *impermanence* of the Spirit-gifts.

As we read this paragraph, note that it begins and ends affirming the permanence of *agape*: In v8 it begins with “Love never fails,” and in v13 it ends with the statement that love (along with faith and hope) “abides.” When all spiritual gifts—even the ones so dear to the hearts of the Corinthians—have come to an end, *agape* will remain.

This last portion of Chapter Thirteen is eschatological: it is all about the nature of the Spirit-gifts we have now in relation to the end times, when Christ returns in power and the church, both dead and living, are united with Him forever. The apostle will be showing that these Spirit-gifts will come to an end along with most everything else. In contrast, *agape*, like God’s word, lives forever.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

v8

Love never fails;

Our previous session concluded with the beginning of v8—“Love never fails”—simply because of its *rhetorical* placement. But the clause does belong *contextually* to this paragraph, one clue being the next word in the Greek, *de*, (“but,” which the ESV strips out).

Last week I pointed out the two translations of the word *ekpipto*, rendered in most versions “fails,” but also rendered “fall” by some interpreters. This is a small point, for just about all agree on what Paul intends. There is small effective difference between “love is never defeated” and “love is never deprived of its force, or comes to an end.” All agree that the point Paul is making is that both in this present age and in the future Eschaton, *agape* remains.

The Corinthians were of the opinion that they, being “spiritual” people, had already attained; some thought they were already as good—i.e., spiritually gifted and mature—as they would get. This points back to the passage in Chapter Four, in which Paul sarcastically rebukes the Corinthians for thinking more of themselves than they should (1 Corinthians 4:6-8). That mindset is what makes it necessary for Paul to say what he does here. Let me share some of what I said back in September 2018 regarding that passage.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8.

The Christian in the here and now, because of the indwelling Spirit, is “filled” in ways the world will never know or even understand, and the Christian has a measure of “wealth” the world can never obtain. But the Christian also understands that there will come a day when what he has *now* in Christ will then seem like slim pickings when compared to the outpouring he will receive in glory.

The Corinthians, however, were living as if they consider that what they have by means of the Spirit in the here and now has already filled them to overflowing; they already have all there is or will be. Paul is not saying the Corinthians *literally* believe they are *already* living in the end times—in the kingdom on the other side of Judgment Day, as did some of the Thessalonians. As Fee puts it, for the Corinthians, “already but not yet”

is one of “already” with little room for “not yet.” Having received the Spirit, they have already arrived; for them spirituality means to have been transported into a whole new sphere of existence where they are “above” the earthly, and especially “fleshly,” existence of others.

It’s not that the Corinthians believe Christ’s judgment has already occurred; their problem is that they aren’t thinking about it at all (Garland). To convince them into realizing that they are *not yet* filled with what they can consume of God, that they are *not yet* overflowing with His riches, Paul seeks to shame them from their pride, into humility and gratitude for what they *do* have.

D. W. Kuck: [The Corinthians] already see themselves as morally and spiritually perfected, without having to experience the bodily struggles which Paul sees as the sign of life in Christ.

Now here, nine chapters later, Paul, in the context of comparing these Spirit-gifts to the superior *agape*, employs a different tack to get their minds right. These gifts the Spirit has given them to use are meant only for the here and now—a mere down payment on what will be theirs in the future.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

When we like a house and want to purchase it, we make a down payment—a pledge, an “earnest” in the KJV—to say in tangible terms that we are earnest in our intention to pay the full amount for the property. This is what the Holy Spirit has done in every follower of Christ. He doesn’t give us the full amount, just an earnest payment to guarantee the rest, which awaits us in glory.

but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

In v8 Paul names three gifts he will use in this paragraph as examples to drive home his point. The first, prophecy (literally, prophecies), he considers the most useful in the church; the second and third, tongues and knowledge, the Corinthians consider the most important to possess. So Paul is not just making a generalized statement regarding Spirit-gifts; he is making the point by referencing the very gifts of which the Corinthians were enamored, as well as the one he considers the most important for the church.

His point? That even those gifts the Corinthians deem special have a “built-in obsolescence” (Garland). They are not now perfect, nor will they be perfected in eternity; they will not *exist* in eternity.

- What good is prophecy when everyone is standing before the Lord God Himself?
- What good are tongues when everyone is speaking in (and understanding) the language of heaven?
- What good is supernatural knowledge when everyone will have it to the full?

These and all Spirit-gifts have been given for the edification of the church during the “between times”—the period from the death and resurrection of Jesus to the final consummation inaugurated when Christ Jesus returns in power to judge the world. That is, they have been given for the church age.

v9

For we know in part and we prophesy in part;

In vv9-10 Paul explains further what he said in v8. (And in your Bible you should draw a big red circle around this verse (just kidding). I was amazed to see that this verse is translated identically in all our common versions—even the KJV! I do not recall ever seeing that before.)

More than just agreeing on how to translate this verse, I doubt there is any disagreement on the truth of the statement. Whether one has the gift of supernatural, Spirit-informed knowledge, or one has the gift of supernatural, Spirit-informed prophecy, all can agree that not one of us has this to the full. No one still in flesh can possibly know or prophesy everything that there is to know or prophesy. The Greek word translated “part” (*merous*) can include the idea of extremity. That is, even as energized by the Holy Spirit, what little knowledge or prophecy we can speak forth is just out on the fringe of their totality.

There is no significance to Paul leaving out a reference to tongues in v9, except that speaking in tongues would not fit well into how this verse is phrased.

but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

I personally favor the old KJV for this verse: “But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.”

Note first what Paul is *not* saying; in any other context we might expect to read, *but when the perfect comes, the partial will become perfect as well*. After all—and you can’t really fault the Corinthians for thinking this—if in the end all is perfection, then it would follow that *everything*—including our Spirit-gifts—would be perfected as well. But the apostle says that they will be “done away” (*katargethesetai* = stop, cease, be discontinued, be abolished, bring to an end, to render inoperative). This is the same word used in v8 to describe what will happen to prophecy and knowledge.

Sidebar: The verb translated “cease” in the NASB of v8, regarding tongues, is different (*pausontai*), but essentially synonymous with the other. Some commentators attempt to draw some important inference from this (e.g., MacArthur), but Fee and Garland agree that the different verbs are no more than a rhetorical device.

It is clear, both here in vv8-10 and through the end of Chapter Thirteen, that Paul is thinking and speaking in eschatological terms. Later, in Chapter Fifteen, he uses the same word to describe the abolishing of “all rule and all authority and power,” and death itself at the coming of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-26.

It is not just the Corinthians who are guilty of this mindset; it is built into the human DNA to think that the way things are now is how we want them to stay. We are loathe to lose the relationships, the way of life we enjoy in the here and now. Too often we think of eternity in terms of what we will lose, rather than what we will gain. And why not: For the most part, and through no fault of our own, we remain ignorant of what our eternity with Christ will be like. Like the Corinthians, we aren’t sure we want to lose the gifts given us by the Spirit in exchange with the unknown.

Gordon Fee closes his thoughts on v10 with a quotation from the late theologian Karl Barth (pronounced “bart”; d.1968). Regarding the cessation of the Spirit-gifts when Christ returns, he writes in his book, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (1933), “Because the sun rises all lights are extinguished.”

Perfect.