

PREFACE

Children are remarkable beings. Solomon tells us that they “are a gift of the LORD,” and that “the fruit of the womb is a reward.” (Psalm 127:3) Jesus rebuked His disciples when they tried to prevent children from coming to Him for a blessing, telling His men, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matthew 19:14) In the other gospel accounts Jesus went on to say, “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.” (Luke 18:17) So clearly, in God’s eyes, there is something to be said for the simple, direct, untainted, “uncynical” faith of a child.

It is easier for children to believe because they have not yet built up their layers of crust: doubt, cynicism, and prejudice. At the same time, however, children lack the experience, the foresight, the knowledge and wisdom of the adult. They may be better at believing, but they fall short in *reasoning*, comprehension, perspective. They are, for the most part, lacking in the scars of life that give wisdom.

The point of this passage is not to denigrate the childish behavior of children. One cannot expect a five-year-old to act and speak like a Rhodes scholar. Nor is Paul claiming that the Spirit-gifts of the Corinthians are in any way childish. The point of the passage is to make clear to the Corinthians and all believers that, as Solomon also wrote, “There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1) In fact, much of the book of Ecclesiastes makes a pretty good companion for our passage, for the overarching point of that portion of Scripture is captured in “the preacher’s” repeated refrain: “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Not just our Spirit-gifts, but much of everything we now deem terribly important, even vital, will pass away. It’s time will be over. All this will be replaced by “the perfect,” as Paul puts it in v10. This time of perfection will be brought about by the parousia—the presence of Christ once again on earth.

Paul is not saying that the Corinthians’ Spirit-gifts are childish and should be discarded, but that these gifts should be employed with love, for love is one of the few things that will survive into perfection. Lacking that love, their gifts are spiritually barren (Garland).

Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

Let's stay with this point of transition described in v10 for just a moment more, for this is the context for how the apostle closes out this treatise on love. Here is how David Garland puts it.

Garland: The disappearance of the partial replaced by the complete [perfect], and the reference to knowing as God knows us, all point to the end time. He contrasts the present age with the age to come. The "perfect" is shorthand for the consummation of all things, *the intended goal of creation*; and its arrival will naturally displace the partial that we experience in the present age. Human gifts shine gloriously in this world but will fade to nothing in the presence of what is perfect. But they also will have served their purpose of helping to build up the church during the wait, and to take it to the threshold of the end. When the anticipated end arrives, they will no longer be necessary. (emphasis added)

With that statement, "The 'perfect' is shorthand for the consummation of all things, *the intended goal of creation*," Garland raises an important point that we will revisit thoroughly in our next class on the "Last Things"—in fact, it will be the foundational premise for the entire study. Just as God's word, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, points to Christ, so the purpose and narrative flow of God's economy (as told in Scripture) runs inexorably from the initial "perfection" of creation to the perfection of the parousia (i.e., the ultimate rule and authority of Christ in eternity). Put another, if more base, way, it is as if in eternity past the Godhead put their collective heads together and agreed, *Here is where we are going, and this is how we are going to get there*. The completeness, the perfection of the "Last Things" (Eschaton) is the ultimate destination that was set in place before time began.

v11

When I was a child,

The word Paul uses here is *nepios*, which can refer to anything from an infant, to an older child or adult who is immature. (My guess is that Paul might even include his time before Christ nailed him on the road to Damascus.) In any case, Paul is simply using this example of being a child—and being childish—to illustrate how some things are meant to come to an end, or transition to something better.

I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child;

This in no way denigrates children or their behavior. It is simply a statement of fact: children speak, think, and reason like children!

when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

But there is a time for that to end. The child is meant to grow up into adulthood. Most of us have experienced the sad absurdity of adults who still think and behave like children.

Sidebar: There are some who posit that with the use of the word “speak,” or “talk” (*elaloun*), Paul refers to speaking in tongues, and thus labels that gift as childish or immature. Not at all. Why would someone who will go on to say, “I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all” (1 Corinthians 14:18), refer to that gift as childish?

Again, Paul is simply drawing an analogy between “childish things” coming to an end, and Spirit-gifts coming to an end.

v12

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face;

There is a scene from the Pentateuch that illumines the analogy Paul uses here.

Read Numbers 12:1-9.

Yahweh draws a distinction between how He communicates with prophets (v6)—as it were, secondhand, by means of visions or dreams—and how He communicates with Moses—“mouth to mouth.”

When we awaken from a dream, even a strong, clear dream, we are left a bit unsettled: *Who was that person, why did they look that way, where did it take place, what does it all mean?* Even seemingly harmless dreams (as opposed to nightmares) leave us feeling off-balance; there is a measure of strangeness, of ambiguity, even dread.

In Numbers the Lord uses the Hebrew *chidah* (khee-dah'), translated “dark saying” in the NASB (v8), which means a riddle, an enigmatic, perplexing saying, a conundrum or question. This is how He describes His prophetic communication through visions and dreams—not unlike how Jesus would communicate to some in His hearing through parables to be purposely obtuse (Matthew 13:10-17). Even the disciples would answer Him with, “What are you talking about? What does that mean?”

Yahweh contrasts this with speaking “mouth to mouth” to Moses. This, as well as “eye to eye” and (as in our Corinthian passage) “face to face” are OT idioms that imply something comes directly, not through an intermediary or medium, such as a vision or dream (Garland). Along with seeing oneself in the mirror, it is like the difference between seeing someone in a photograph or video, and seeing them in person—a big difference. Jesus made a similar comparison to His disciples, speaking of how it would be in the Eschaton.

Read John 16:25.

We may *think* that we see things with sharp clarity and comprehension, but so long as we dwell this side of Christ's return, we are, in actuality, seeing things only secondhand, as if looking at them reflected in a darkened mirror. When Christ returns, when the fullness of His presence (*parousia*) overwhelms every citizen of His kingdom, the blinding clarity of His light will reveal what we have never seen before.

now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

Just as there will be a change in how we "see," there will be a change in how we "know." Even as we have spoken many times in this class about the precious gift of the Holy Spirit, how He graciously implements and enhances our communication with, and understanding of, God, the truth is that what we know through the Spirit now is but a tiny subset of what we will know after Christ returns.

How much, and to what level of clarity and insight will we then know? "Just as [we] also have been fully known" (implied, by God). God has always—even before we were born—known us "face to face": completely, inside and out, directly. But only in the Eschaton will we have the privilege of knowing Him and the Son to that same level.

The apostle Paul is saying that in the life of every human being there is a time for one thing to be replaced by another: childish things are to be replaced by adulthood. Likewise, there comes a time in the life of the individual believer and the church when the imperfect things of this earth—including gifts from the Spirit—will be replaced by the perfect, when life as we know it now, and the church as we know it now, will have been replaced by eternity in the presence of the Lord Himself.

v13

But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

There is argument over whether Paul suggests here that along with love, which he has already stated (v8) will continue when all Spirit-gifts have ceased, faith and hope will continue into eternity as well. But one must stand on his head to make the case that faith and hope continue on in the Eschaton. Common sense tells us otherwise, but Scripture does as well.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:6-8.

To that we could add,

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

When we have that sight, when we are seeing with our own resurrected eyes the eyes of our Lord, faith will no longer be necessary. It is a temporal gift, for the here and now.

Read Romans 8:24-25.

Once again, what we “hope” for in the here and now is our resurrected life with our resurrected Lord. Once that hope has been realized, there is no longer any need for that hope.

But love never fails or falls. It endures. It will not just remain when the perfect comes, it—along with faith and hope—remains essential to the Christian life in the here and now.

Spirit-gifts are dispensable. The presence of particular gifts listed by the apostle in Chapter Twelve are not essential in order to be a Christian and spiritual. One is no less spiritual if one does not have the gift of tongues—and no more spiritual if one does. Beyond that, these gifts are temporal only; when Christ returns, they will cease.

Agape, however, is *never* dispensable. It endures now. It will endure forever. Because *God* is love (1 John 4:16), our love for Him and each other will endure, alongside God’s word, for all eternity.