

“The Supremacy of Love”

I Corinthians 13:8-13

November 10, 2013

Scripture Reading: I Cor. 13:1-13

Series: Life in the Body: Spiritual Gifts and the Supremacy of Love in the Ministry of the Church.

In order to catch up with ourselves, let's retrace our steps so far in our study of I Cor. 12-13. At the beginning of our series I suggested to you that Paul's teaching in 1 Cor. 12-14 was most likely in response to a question posed by the Corinthian church as to whether or not a particular manifestation of the Spirit must be present in a person's life in order to verify that they indeed had received the Holy Spirit. For example, was it necessary for a person to speak in tongues as evidence of receiving the Spirit as many had done in the book of Acts?

Paul's response in I Cor. 12:1-3 was that the Spirit's mark on a true believer's life is one's allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord—"no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit" (vs. 3).

Paul then went on in 1 Cor. 12 to clarify that every believer is uniquely gifted to display the Spirit's influence for the benefit of God's people (vs. 7). What we discovered in chapter 12 is that there are actually many differing gifts and ministries and effects of the Spirit, and because God has designed one body out of many members, the body needs you, you need the rest of the body, and the members of the body should express mutual care and honor toward one another. *Spiritual gifts are extremely important.* They are the way God has intended for each one of us to be used by Him to extend the Spirit's influence and build the church.

Yet Paul continues in 1 Cor. 13 to remind us that there is something even more essential than the use of our gifts—the ministry of love. Apart from love, the exercise of our gifts is shallow and vain.

Do you remember the icing tube? Love is the sweet substance of the Spirit (frosting) that is to be squeezed out of our lives. The shape in which it comes out is determined by our gifts like the little nozzle at the end of the tube. Love is the function; Spiritual gifts are the form. Love is the gift; Spiritual gifts are the wrapping paper. Love is the meal; spiritual gifts are the table setting. What good is pretty wrapping paper without a gift inside? How beneficial is a beautiful table setting without a meal? (13:1-3)

Paul is not setting love and gifts against one another. He is saying that our gifts must not be used without love. Not either-or but both-and. Spiritual gifts must be displayed through love.

So last week we investigated Paul's 15 descriptions of true love. As we conclude 1 Cor. 13 this week, Paul is going to drive home his point that ***even though spiritual gifts are vital to the health of the church, love is superior.***

In vs. 8-13 Paul shows how love is superior to gifts in 3 ways:

1. Spiritual gifts are temporary [vs. 8].

So there is a coming time when spiritual gifts will become obsolete. There is a time coming when these gifts such as prophecy, tongues and knowledge will no longer be necessary. Yet, love will never fail, meaning that love will be the enduring quality of the church for all eternity.

2. Spiritual gifts are partial [vs. 9-10].

The use of our gifts now is only a partial representation of what we will experience fully in eternity. For example, a person may have the gift of knowledge that the Holy Spirit uses to benefit the entire body, yet the person with the gift of knowledge does not have full knowledge like he will have in heaven. The gift of knowledge is extremely helpful, yet his knowledge is only partial.

Vs. 10 indicates that when the perfect comes the partial (referring to the gifts) will pass away. The question is, what is “*the perfect*” that will come and make spiritual gifts obsolete? A lot of suggestions have been offered over the years but only one is convincing in light of the context of chapter 13. The perfect is the eternal state. We have been justified (saved); we are being sanctified (made like Christ); yet a day will come when we will be glorified. And in that day the partial effect of spiritual gifts will no longer be necessary because we will be whole and perfected.

Vs. 12 not only indicates what the perfect is, it also stimulates our hope: “*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.*” I Corinthians 15 goes on to explain how when Christ returns we will all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye; and in that first moment of our glorified state, we will experience fully (and for all eternity) what even the best of our spiritual gifts now can only be a faint foretaste of.

Spiritual gifts are a partial, temporary manifestation of the Spirit’s presence in our lives now, but love is superior because love is the lasting mark of Spirit’s life in us—love will never fail!

3. Spiritual gifts are elementary [vs. 11-12].

Here Paul uses an analogy of childhood to compare our current experience with the maturity we will suddenly experience when we see Jesus face to face. Children can understand a lot and yet their understanding is only partial. It’s amazing to watch the comprehension of a child develop when they are only able to speak in phrases and partial sentences. That is what our spiritual understanding is like now. But when we see Jesus face to face, vs. 12 says, “*we will fully know, just as we are fully known.*” This doesn’t mean that we will be omniscient in the sense that God is but that we will be freed from our misconceptions and our limitations for

understanding that are inescapable in this present age. All false impressions will be replaced with true knowledge.¹

So spiritual gifts are temporary, partial, and elementary, yet love is the everlasting quality of the church whereby we reflect the character and heart of God Himself to one another.

Here’s the bottom line: **The most significant mark of the Spirit by which we are to be identified is Christ-like love.** Gifts are vitally important—they are the means by which the Spirit works through us now. Yet they are secondary in importance to the ministry of love which is the lasting reflection of God Himself—*God is love!* (I John 4).

There is a tremendous implication here. If love is the greatest enduring quality of the church; if love is the best demonstration of the Spirit, then the most significant way for the eternal, spiritual realm to break into our temporary, earthly realm is not through signs and wonders or the impressive use of gifts but through genuine, Christ-like, day-to-day love for one another.

We must give one another and the world the opportunity to see the image of God, who is love, being manifested through us in day-to-day life. I John 4:12—“*No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.*” The way for the world to see the reality of the invisible God of love is through our love for one another as we die to ourselves and He abides in us and we abide in Him. (John 13)

Remember Jesus’ words in John 13:35—“*By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*” Not by miracles; not by great preaching; not by speaking in tongues; not even by prophesying. You will prove to be My disciples by your love—by the transformed character that bears the fruit of Christ-like, I Cor 13, love.

¹ John Piper, March 18, 1990 sermon, pg. 5.

Vs. 13—*“Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; But the greatest of these is love.”* In other words, after the perfect has come and spiritual gifts have become obsolete, what remains is faith, hope, and love.

In one sense, our faith will become sight and our hope will be fulfilled; and yet is Christ not the very object of our faith and the anchor of our hope that we will adore for all eternity? On that glorious day when we see Jesus, all doubts will be stripped away, leaving only perfect faith and fulfilled hope. Yet the greatest of all that will remain is love, because love is the perfect, enduring reflection of God Himself.

“God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:8-11).

Prayer:

Benediction: 1 Thess. 3:12—*“May the Lord cause you to increase and abound in love for one another, and for all men.”*