

Sermon 50: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13: The Superiority of Love

OUTLINE

The inferiority of the gifts
The superiority of love

INTRODUCTION

It is common sense, that if you have to choose between buying a car that has low mileage, has a full service record and is a reliable brand, versus buying a car that has 300k on the clock but is a flashy brand and might have some body kit and bling. Common sense teaches us that we should choose the car that will last longer and serve us better. But too often we don't make our choices according to common sense. We don't think clearly when it comes to making wise decisions. Too often a believer has chosen attractiveness over godliness in a spouse; or chosen to attend a church that has a good band rather than a faithful preacher. The Corinthians were prioritizing the spectacle and limelight that certain miraculous gifts gave rather than humble servant-hearted love. When we are young and immature we make these wrong types of choices, the self-absorbed self-gratifying way we make decisions gives priority to the wrong things. Friends before family, vice before virtue, externals before internals. Paul has charged the Corinthians as being carnal and acting like children 1 Cor. 3:1-3, again in this portion he tries as a wise father to instruct these wayward children to choose love and service over allowing the spectacular and flashy to dominate the church.

We come full circle to how Paul started this chapter. Paul spoke about the greatness of love as being greater than the greatest miracles and the greatest acts of religious sacrifice. Paul ends the chapter emphasizing the same thing, the superiority of love over the gifts, and even other virtues. We have two points as we look at this section: the inferiority of the gifts; and the superiority of love.

The inferiority of the gifts

V8, 'Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.' We have now the last of Paul's descriptions in his list about love. We have seen the give and take of love, how it is patient in receiving wrong and kind in its responses. We have seen that love delights in other receiving good and so it does not envy what others have, nor boast in what it has that others don't. That love is humble, and so it is not arrogant and think itself better than others, or rude and mistreat others. Love we saw does not insist on its own way. That it does not give way to anger, and so is not irritable or resentful, having a long fuse and a short memory. That love is principled as it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Last week we saw how love is resilient and is able to put up with difficult people and difficult situations as it endures all things because it believes all gospel things; and it endures all things because it hopes all gospel things. Paul now places a great capstone on the great nature of love as he highlights that love is truly eternal, love never ends. Where other things end or fail, love goes on into the new creation.

Now 1 Cor. 13 has been subject to more sentimental misreadings than most other parts of scripture. So we do want to stop and note how Paul is not writing

a hallmark card but saying something about love as it relates to God and the gospel not the unquenchable flame of the human spirit. Many think of love as a substance that goes on even after death, that love is a motivation that enables the human spirit to go on as a ghost because it cannot depart its loved one, and even worse that our loved ones are eternal as the love we have for them in our hearts goes on. Many have read Paul's words, 'love never ends' in this sentimental non-theological way. But Paul is not being effusive in a sentimental fashion but putting forward hard truth about love as it relates to God and the gospel.

What does Paul mean that love never ends? Paul could mean that because God is love, and God is eternal, love in God will never end. And this is 100% true, but I don't think Paul is talking about God's love but our love. Does Paul mean that husbands and wives will go on loving each other after death, or that parents will go on loving their children despite death? No, Paul is not merely touching on the possibility that because of the human soul existing beyond death that love never ends. No, in comparison to the things of this life, things like the gifts which are temporary and have a shelf life, love is something that will always be a part of the new creation. Human existence will not always have the miraculous, or marriage, or parenting but it will always have love. For this reason we must invest more heavily in love than selfishly pursuing the miraculous.

That is common sense but we don't use common sense do we. We don't invest in the eternal we invest in the temporary. We work and sacrifice for treasures that rust and decay; give our attention and our affection to sins that will perish and not pursue holiness with a deep hunger and thirst. We don't live with our eyes set on things that are eternal walking by faith and therefore able to suffer knowing that there are long term returns on our investment. Paul teaches us here that in order to live right we need to think right, to think in light of eternity. The Corinthians were fixed on present gains. No doubt they were thinking about the impact of the miraculous, 'wouldn't it help people get saved and encourage the church?' Maybe they were even talking about not quenching the Holy Spirit as they ran rough shod over the worship service of God drawing attention to themselves instead of Him. Focused on the fact that miracles were happening they took their eyes off their reason for being a church which was to be a witness for Christ and sharing the gospel by which people would be saved. Disruptive, forceful, drifting from their mission, this and more was happening and so Paul has to put things in perspective.

'As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.' Paul chooses three gifts to make his point. Prophecy which is the most superior of the gifts that he wants them to pursue. And tongues and knowledge which are likely the key gifts that were featuring prominently in the church of Corinth. Paul tells us that prophecy which is God given and inspired exhortation and encouragement; tongues which is the miraculous ability to speak languages we have not learnt, and knowledge, the supernatural revelation of mysteries will all one day cease. This brings us to the question of when the gifts will cease. This section has been a favourite section for dispute. On the one hand you have the continuationists, that is those who believe that all the gifts are supposed to be found in the church, that the book of Acts is the norm not the exception, and who want to see the five-fold offices restored. This usually goes hand in hand with teaching a second blessing, the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues as a private prayer language for all believers; some even teach that all Christians can

prophecy as well. They come to this portion of scripture where Paul addresses this question. They insist that the full experience of miraculous gifts as experienced in Corinth and Acts should be expected to continue until the perfect comes, in other words, when Jesus comes to bring in the new creation. On the other hand there are cessationists, these are those who believe that certain miraculous gifts are for a particular purpose and period. Some cessationists have attempted to use Paul's teaching about the gifts ceasing when the perfect comes as teaching that 'the perfect' is the bible, and that the miraculous gifts were only needed until the bible came and that this is what Paul is teaching in these verses.

A number of questions occur to us as we address this matter: can every Christian speak in tongues; is there a second blessing baptism of the Spirit to be had by all; should every believer have a private prayer language; are tongues actual languages or Spirit filled babbling; can the function of prophecy continue without the office of prophet; is there higher and lower order prophecy; why aren't we experiencing miracles, is this due to a lack of faith and seeking them or because they have ceased? And we could multiply the questions. We will be addressing these matters as we continue moving forward into the next chapter. For now though we need to answer a particular question, is Paul positively stating that gifts will and should continue until Jesus comes again?

I agree with the continuationist and some cessationists that the 'perfect' is the second coming of Christ not the coming of the bible. But I disagree with the continuationist that Paul is setting forth positive information about our expectation that for the next 2000 years we should expect to see God continuing to work in all the miraculous gifts as He has done through the apostles and in the apostolic age. Paul is not giving a detailed and positive explanation about what to expect regarding the gifts in this age but is drawing a contrast between this age and the next in order to underline that love lasts longer than the gifts which belong to this age not the next. To press these verses too hard in either direction will yield a wrong understanding. I think that the answer to the question about whether we should expect the gifts to continue is answered from other scriptures not a cheap appeal to this section.

I am a cessationist and here are my reasons for not expecting all the miraculous signs to continue in the same fashion as in the age of the apostles.

Firstly, history proves that they have not. The expectation of daily miracles and every church service filled with the supernatural is not the witness of church history. No doubt this will be explained away as disobedience or a lack of faith or blame will be placed on religion, but the bottom line is that church history is not filled with the same intensive amount of the supernatural that we see in Acts and the gospels.

Secondly, the bible itself leads us to expect certain offices and functions associated with those offices to cease. Eph. 2:20 points to the foundational role of apostles and prophets, and you only build the foundation of a building once. The unrepeatable nature of apostles as eye witnesses to the resurrection, and prophets as playing a foundational role in the church lead us to at least expect a ceasing in certain offices and the miraculous associated with those offices like the signs of the apostles, and prophecy.

Thirdly, the NT itself does not sustain the hypothesis that all the gifts should be functioning all the time. For example in the case of tongues, when discussing the gifts it is only mentioned to the Corinthians who were especially blessed, and it appears peculiarly blessed in this regard. Likewise in the book of Acts instead

of seeing every believer exercising a private prayer language we only see tongues as a sign of authentication when the gospel breaks new ground first in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, then when Gentiles are incorporated into the church, and lastly when the disciples of John the Baptist are rebaptized. As you move chronologically through the NT Paul's later letters where he is giving explicit instructions on how to run the church to Timothy and Titus, conspicuous by their absence is any mention of the gifts as a normative for every Christian and the worship service. The author of Hebrews a second generation Christian speaks of the apostolic gifts in the past tense, 2:3-4, 'It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴ while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.'

I know this is a very short statement but it appears to me that history; the biblical teaching on certain offices and their functions, along with the data of the NT I cannot sustain the continuationist position. I hold to what I like to call a revelatory cessationist position. This says that God is not giving any new revelation or using offices related to that function. However, God is the God of the impossible who acts powerfully and answers prayer, so although I am not expecting any new revelation this does not mean that I am not expecting God to act in miraculous and powerful ways. God can and does do exceptional things that we call extraordinary works of providence that do not mean that we have to rehabilitate the offices of apostle or prophet, or that pressure us to try and revive a Corinthian worship service as normative for our worship on the Lord's Day.

V9-10, 'For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.' Not only does Paul indicate that love will outlast the gifts because they are temporary, Paul also casts light on the gifts by showing that they are partial. Some think that Paul might be addressing those who might have an overrealized eschatology who think that the resurrection has happened and that miracles are a sign of the new age arriving. Perhaps, the point is that we cannot put too much stock on these things as amazing as they are, they are temporary and they are partial. I remember when I was in the charismatic church that I thought, that if only we had more miracles, more healings, more signs, more people would believe; if we have more miracles in the worship service Christians would be more holy, more sacrificial. The miraculous gifts are not a cure all, many saw Jesus perform miracles and did not believe in Him. In fact He was even persecuted for the miracles themselves. We have to have a realistic view of miracles, not an inflated one.

V11-12, 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.' Paul compares this age to childhood; and the new creation to adulthood. It seems there is a subtext not as Paul says that everything related to this age is childish but that the Corinthians with their fixation on gifts and the way they have been pursuing them is immature. Paul's point is that love which will be all of our ways in the new age is the adult way but the need for loud spectacles and shiny things where there is pageantry and performance is the childish way. What does Paul mean by 'speaking like a child?' Using outside voices inside; no please and thank you, no manners and no respect but demanding; speaking before thinking; speaking without listening; speaking over others; needing to have the last word. What does Paul mean by thinking like a child? The most popular person or the most attractive person is the most qualified to lead. There tends to be an emphasis on the external

appearance; instant success; what works not what is faithful, etc. Why does Paul compare love to adulthood? Well where childhood can be characterized as being self-absorbed, adulthood is when we have learned to live for others. Children have toys, but adults have tools; children play but adults work; children demand, adults sacrifice; the immature steal glory, the mature give away glory; the childish are taken in by a spectacle, the mature test all things; children disturb the peace of the home, adults are peacemakers. Paul calls the differences between childish and mature to mind to encourage the Corinthians to pursue the gifts in a mature way and to put away their immature ways that are hurting the church. He orients our present practice by getting us to think about the community we will be one day. When every act is ever only love.

Again Paul underscores the partial nature of the gifts by talking about how we know in part, how we see in a mirror dimly; but one day we will see face to face, we will know as we are known. The Corinthians prided themselves in their knowledge, the eating meat offered to idols debacle was a clear instance of their knowledge puffing them up while being loveless. It seems that Paul wants to put them in their place by putting their what they think great knowledge into perspective. It is no mistake that Paul redirects their thinking from what they know, to being known by God as all important. After all Paul has been trying to get the proud Corinthians to think of the saints they despise as those for whom Christ was willing to die putting their value not in their performance or intellect, but in their value to God.

The superiority of love

V13, 'So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' Not only does Paul show how love is superior to the gifts by the fact that love outlasts the gifts. But here he shows how love is superior to other key virtues, namely faith and hope because it likewise outlasts them. In this age, faith, hope and love are greater than the gifts. Howso? Faith is greater than miracles because it is by faith that we take hold of Christ as our Saviour and Lord. It is by faith that we are justified and receive a righteousness not our own. Faith is a virtue that glorifies God in that it points to the fact that we are not saved by our works and what we give to God, by rather that we are saved by what we receive from God, the free gift of righteousness. Faith continues to sustain us in the Christian life. Hebrews 11 is filled with many examples of those who overcame great odds due to their persevering faith. Paul rightly characterizes faith as a shield that enables us to put out even Satan's fiery darts. It is more important that we believe that we are sinners and a God of love has provided a sin bearer in Christ to pay for our sins than we have the power to raise the dead. For if we could perform great miracles by faith but not be saved we would end up with nothing. For this reason faith is greater than miracles. But one day, faith will give way to sight. There is no need for faith in heaven. Faith is for this age but love is for this age and the age to come.

Hope like faith is a great virtue that speaks of our certain future. Our hope expresses itself in a joy inexpressible and full of glory. The Holy Spirit is given to us as a guarantee of the hope that we will have when Jesus returns. Hope fuels our ability to rejoice in our sufferings. Paul characterizes hope as a helmet that protects our minds and lifts our eyes above the tumult of this age giving us an eternal perspective and enabling our perseverance. Hope like faith is greater than miracles, but one day hope too must fall away. We can only hope for what we do not see, but one day we will see and hope will give way to reality. Now we

look forward with earnest yearning and desire, but one day desire will be satisfied. And hope as a function of our heart will be retired but love will continue on.

Paul is not saying this in order to denigrate the importance of faith or hope, but rather to further demonstrate the importance of love by showing that it will outlast not only the gifts but even key virtues. It is an interesting mental exercise to think about how love is the greatest virtue. Why is love greater than patience? Because patience will also be brought to an end with sin in the new age. Why is love greater than joy? Because where joy measures our response to God's greatness love is wearing a resemblance of God's glory. Why is love better than self-control? Because some can be self-controlled without love but love masters itself automatically as love. Why is love greater than peace? Because peace is describing my own state of wellbeing in God, but love is pursuing another's wellbeing in God. Love is greater than gentleness because gentleness can be unloving, but love can be both gentle and firm when needed. Etc.

We must pursue love because love does not come to an end but is always useful, will always be a part of our lives. Love is what will characterize our lives in the age to come and we need to be the future people we will become now by manifesting that love. In being loving we resemble God's own love for sinners, and make the invisible God visible by our love. 1 John 4:12, 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.'