

The Greatest of These is Love

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

BI: The eternal future should determine our present priorities. More important than mastering spiritual gifts, we must learn to love.

Have you thought about heaven this week? Have you taken any time to consider what it will be like to have been permanently rescued from the influence of temptation and the curse of sin? Have you considered the glory of seeing Jesus face to face with a mind that is unencumbered by the world, the flesh, or the devil; to have a perfectly clear vision of God, perfect love for people, and an understanding of reality as God sees it?

Have you thought about eternity this week for the purpose of evaluating your life and priorities in the light of God's promises of future grace? Do the biblical promises of eternal life have any influence on how we live this momentary and temporal life?

I was faced with these questions this week as I studied the passage that lays before us because in it, Paul is calling the believers in Corinth to let God's promises have their intended effect. You do realize, don't you, that the book of Revelation is in the Bible for a greater purpose than making eschatological charts? In fact, God gave it to us for purposes that are greater than simply our encouragement in the midst of difficulty. The reality is, beloved, that God has revealed the future grace of heaven and all it entails not only to keep our hearts encouraged but as a means of evaluating the values and priorities of our lives today.

Like us, the Corinthians had completely missed this point. They were not living in the light of eternity. God's promises of future grace were having little effect upon the way they lived and related to one another in the local church. Each person was concerned about edifying himself, and impressing other people. They were saved for eternity, but they were living for the present. Present comfort, earthly fame, and selfish ambition were the ruling priorities. Even their understanding and usage of the spiritual gifts was earth-bound and self-centered. This had to change.

When Paul began writing chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, he was determined to help the Corinthians see that spiritual gifts are useless if all they are used for us self-aggrandizement.

I. Understanding Gifts Through the Lens of Eternity (8-10):

Read v. 8-10

1. The first thing that needs to be pointed out about this text is that Paul is not attempting to settle the debate about spiritual gifts. The big question we have today is, Have the gifts of miracles, tongues, and healing ceased, or do they continue from the apostles to today? Paul isn't concerned

about that at all in this text. Now, as you know, I am more of a cessationist today than I was before we started studying 1 Corinthians together. But Paul is not attempting to settle that debate here. He has something completely different in mind.

2. Clearly the apostle is addressing the issue of Spiritual gifts. He began talking about them in chapter 12 and he will not complete what he has to say about them until the end of chapter 14. But what is Paul saying about them? He is saying the Corinthians completely misunderstand the purpose of the gifts. Their use of the gifts was causing serious division in the local church.

3. It's almost shocking the way he begins chapter 13. He basically says in the first four verses that you may be the greatest tongues-speaker, the greatest prophet, the greatest philanthropist, or the most self-sacrificing martyr church history has ever known... but if you don't love people you are an absolute zero in the eyes of God.

4. Then in verses 4-7 Paul reveals 15 characteristics of true love and calls us to love like that. He explains that as followers of Christ our lives should be marked by long-suffering and kindness, without any jealousy, pride, arrogance, or unbecoming behavior, *etc.* (you know the list).

5. But now, beginning with verse 8, Paul is explaining something about love that the Corinthians—and perhaps we—never thought of. Namely, that “love never fails.” If you are reading the ESV it says, “Love never ends.” And actually, that is a better translation.

6. The word for “fails” here means “to fall, as in falling apart or disintegrate, or demise.” In other words, the need to express love, the mandate to love, and the power to love will never come to an end. As long as there is God there will be love. As long as God exists, He will command us and empower us to love.

7. Someday we will enter into eternity and the change we experience will be almost universal. Nearly everything about the way we experience life will change. But one thing will never change. We will always be commanded and empowered to love.

8. This is astounding, brothers. Think about it: someday the role of the preacher/prophet will come to an end. The gift of prophecy will be “done away.” Likewise the gift of tongues will “cease.” Moreover, if there is a gift of knowledge, it will be done away.”

9. Why will that happen? Because (v. 10), because “we know in part and we prophesy in part.” In other words, our knowledge comes to us piece-by-piece. No one gets it all at once in this life and no one gets it all. We get it precept-upon-precept. Luther called it a “patchwork.” It is something that builds up over time. It comes to us in fragmentary ways. And the same is true of prophecy. God has given it to us in fragments, piece by piece, here a little; there a little.

10. But when “the perfect” comes, the partial will be done away. What is the perfection? The GK word means “completion, or wholeness, or the accomplishment of a final goal. It is a reference to the time when our hope will become sight; when the clouds will be rolled back as a scroll. It’s the day that the trumpet of God will sound and the Lord will descend and eternity with God will begin for all who believe.

11. Paul us speaking of the promised eschatological future. It will be the “Day of the Lord” when God passes final judgment upon the earth and makes all things new. On that day, imperfection will be abolished, and with it our piece-by-piece knowledge. On that day, whatever spiritual gifts are left will be made obsolete and useless. But here’s the thing... what will happen to all of the spiritual gifts on that day will have no impact whatsoever upon love. “Love never fails.”

12. Do you hear what Paul is saying? He’s telling the Corinthians that their values are all mixed up. What they value is giftedness because it brings a person honor, prestige, and influence. And they value all of this even though they produce conflict and disunity in the church. And if we are not careful we can fall into the same error. Paul is trying to help us see that the only thing that carries over into eternity will not be our giftedness, or our position, or our popularity. The only thing that will carry over on that day is our love.

13. The problem was, the Corinthians had a very temporary value system. Paul was holding up the lens of eternity to help them see that what they should really value; what they should really strive for is not greater mastery of the gifts but a greater capacity to love. So first he wants them to Understanding the gifts through the lens of eternity. Second, he wants them to...

II. Gaining Wisdom Through the Lens of Eternity (11):

1. Read v. 11-12

2. These two verses hardly need explaining. Paul is accusing them of being spiritually immature in their thinking about spiritual gifts. Notice how, instead of making a direct accusation he uses himself as an example of what he desires to happen in their lives. He says, “When I was a child I used to speak, think, and reason like a child.

3. In other words, Paul is saying: I remember when I was just a babe in Christ how I used to form opinions like a little boy. I remember when my oldest boys were little. The breadth of their world consisted of little more than Happy Meals and Legos. I mean, they had a very narrow view of life. Their opinions were formed based on whether going to be able to eat something good or play something fun. That’s what Paul says he was once like.

4. But Paul didn’t stay like that. He writes, “When I became a man, I did away with childish

things.” In other words, Paul is saying, when I came to understand something of what it will be like to stand in the presence of God some day, suddenly my whole worldview changed, and my foolish, selfish way of thinking was replaced by the wisdom of seeing myself in the light of eternity.

5. Suddenly Paul’s ambition to be the greatest Pharisee who ever lived seemed like foolishness. Suddenly his desire to persecute the church and kill Christians looked like foolishness. Suddenly his status as Jewish descendent of Benjamin and an impeccable law-keeper appeared to be nothing better than a pile of manure.

5. For the Corinthians it was a childish view of spiritual giftedness. For you it may be a childish view of attaining money, or possessions. It may be a childish view of being accepted by others, or being loved or respected by your spouse. Paul is saying: Don’t you realize these are childish priorities? When “the perfection” comes none of that is going to have any value! It will all be useless and you will have regretted living for those things.

6. Paul is saying: Come on. It’s time to put away childish things. It’s time to set aside that old selfish way of thinking and begin evaluating your life from the perspective of eternity. On that day, the only two things that will matter are 1) Did I love God with all my heart?; and 2) Did I love other people like Jesus loved people. The truly mature are not necessarily the ones who achieve celebrity status because of the giftedness. The truly mature are men and women who are mastering the art of how to love.

7. So Paul wants us to understand the gifts through the lens of eternity, to gain true wisdom through the lens of eternity, which will result in

III. Establishing Priorities Through the Lens of Eternity (12-13):

1. It is important that we observe the “now” and “then” theme in these two verses. As we have seen, Paul is contrasting an immature value-system based on immediate gratification with a truly mature value-system that is based on God’s revelation of eternity. It is a contrast between thinking that is anchored in “now” or thinking that is anchored in “then.”

2. Read v. 12

3. Right now we are all limited to seeing life as if it were through a mirror. Have you ever thought about why your car has three mirrors? It’s because not one of them can give you a complete picture of reality. Each one has a very limited scope that leaves us with blind-spots. Paul is saying, we all look at life as through a mirror.

4. As it turns out, mirrors were common in Corinth. I learned this week that some of the finest, polished brass mirrors came from the region around Corinth. In fact, the manufacturers of first-century mirrors were so good at polishing them that they were only slightly less reflective than

the mirrors we have today. The issue was not so much that looking in a mirror clouded the image, but that the image in the mirror comes to us only in an indirect manner and with a limited scope. Just as you cannot see yourself directly or completely through a hand-held mirror, neither can we comprehend reality as God sees it through the lens of our sinful imperfections. Even the truth we do have comes to us in bits and pieces and in an indirect way (through the writings of the apostles and prophets).

5. Right now, that's the best we can do in this life. But then, "when the perfect comes," our knowledge of reality will not be indirect and limited. We will no longer receive knowledge piece-by-piece. On that day, it will come to us face to face! On that day we will not need the apostles and prophets to reveal truth to us, and we will not be deceived or led astray by false ideas of our own or anyone else's. Our knowledge will be full and complete! We will know just as we are fully known.

6. What's the point? The point is, God wants us to evaluate our present thinking and living from the perspective of eternity. Paul wants us to see what it will be like when we stand before God and see Jesus face to face, *NOT* simply so we can lift our hands in praise to His name, but so we will change the way we view our own purpose and mission in this life.

7. The most important things in life are not full bank accounts and nice homes. The most important things are not good jobs and the acceptance of others. The most important things are not healthy bodies and temporary thrills. When we stand before Christ "When the perfect comes," we will see that the most important things were loving God and loving people.

8. Is faith a high virtue in the eyes of God? Yes. Is hope a high virtue in the eyes of God? Yes. But "When the perfect comes" Faith will become sight and Hope will become reality. So Paul concludes, "But now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

9. So here's the question for all of us. How is your love for people? In the light of eternity it's no use mastering preaching if I don't work in mastering love. In the light of eternity it's no good to master home-schooling if we don't master love. In light of eternity, it's no good to master your business, your golf swing, your bank account, or your education if you don't work on mastering love.

10. The question in God's mind is *NOT*, "Are you a gifted person?" but "Are you a loving person?" Will you love people before you leave here today? Will you love the guy who lives next door or in the apartment above you? Will you love that cranky woman you work next to every day? Will you love that homeless man, arrogant woman, or bothersome child you see every day?

11. "When the perfect comes," none of that stuff about your personal happiness, comfort, acceptance, or self-esteem is really going to matter. The only thing that will be of any significance is this: Did I love the way Jesus loved?

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