

Sunday Seconds

Are Supernatural Sign Gifts for Today?

1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

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Are Supernatural Sign Gifts for Today?

Scripture

This is our second “Sunday Seconds” service. In tonight’s message I would like to address the question, “Are supernatural sign gifts for today?” Usually, the supernatural sign gifts refer to tongues, interpretation, prophecy, healing, and miracles. Let’s read 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13:

³¹ But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ 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.

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13)

Introduction

First Corinthians 12 – 14 is Paul’s discussion about spiritual gifts. Even though chapter 13 is often called “the love chapter,” it is not in fact a description of marital love. Instead, it is description of spiritual gifts that are motivated by love.

The Corinthians were interested in personal fulfillment. They were not interested in building up their brothers and sisters in Christ. In this chapter, Paul gave them a new orientation toward life that focused on putting other people first. He taught them to love, knowing that if they loved one another rightly, they would use their spiritual gifts properly.

If there is any similarity between ancient Corinth and our modern-day church, it lies in our failure to love one another well. In fact, by many accounts we are often worse than the Corinthians. They had at least managed to stay united, in spite of the many abuses that were taking place in their fellowship. Today, most Christians are so self-centered that if we don’t get our way, we simply go to the church down the street. We do not place others first, and we certainly do not commit ourselves to loving others in the way that Paul teaches.

Lesson

So, in our lesson today, we learn that Christian love is the most important of all the gifts from God. We are called to pursue love, without which all of our spiritual gifts amount to nothing.

I. The Preeminence of Love (12:31)

First, notice the preeminence of love.

Paul introduced chapter 13 with 1 Corinthians 12:31, where he said: **“But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”**

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to **earnestly desire the higher gifts**. He acknowledged that some gifts were more visible than others. He also recognized that the Corinthians were abusing spiritual gifts by being enamored with some of them and looking down at Christians who did not possess them.

Paul was about to show the Corinthians **a still more excellent way** to live as a Christian in the body of Christ.

It would be difficult to overemphasize Paul’s commitment to love among Christians. Love was to guide believers in the way in which they worship God. Love was to guide husbands and wives in their relationship to each other. Love was to guide Christians in the way they participate in the Lord’s Supper. Love was to guide believers in restricting their freedom for the sake of others.

For Paul, love was the greatest of all gifts.

II. The Necessity of Love (13:1-3)

Second, let’s look at the necessity of love.

As we move into chapter 13, it is important to note again that Paul was talking about the way in which Christians exercise their spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 is not about sentimental love. It is about the necessity of love in the exercise of our spiritual gifts.

Verses 1-3 contain several conditional statements. A conditional statement has two parts, known as the *protasis* and the

apodosis. The *protasis* contains the “if” part of the statement, and the *apodosis* contains the “then” part of the statement (although “then” is not always stated). So, for example, a conditional statement is, “If the weather is good (that’s the *protasis*), then we will go to the beach (that’s the *apodosis*).”

In the conditional statements in verses 1-3 there is also a qualifying clause added to the protasis, which is: **but have not love**. Paul set out six conditional statements, and they each follow the same basic structure: “If I have this particular gift, but have not love, then I am nothing.” In essence, Paul said that a particular gift is useless without love. Let’s see how he put it.

A. The Gift of Tongues Is Useless Without Love (13:1)

First, the gift of tongues is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 1: **“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”**

Tongues topped the list because of the overemphasis that the Corinthians put on the gift of tongues. He not only talked about **the tongues of men** but also **of angels**. There is no evidence anywhere in the Scripture that Paul or anyone else was able to speak an angelic language. Paul’s point is simply that even if he had such an extraordinary gift—of being able to **speak in the tongues... of angels—but did not have love**, then he would simply be **a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal**.

Love is absolutely necessary for the proper functioning of a spiritual gift.

B. The Gift of Prophecy Is Useless Without Love (13:2a)

Second, the gift of prophecy is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 2a: **“And if I have prophetic powers, but have not love, I am nothing.”**

Paul did have **prophetic powers** (cf. Acts 13:1-2). But without love, it is useless.

C. The Gift of Knowledge Is Useless Without Love (13:2b)

Third, the gift of knowledge is useless without love.

Verse 2b: **“And if I... understand all mysteries and all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing.”**

We would greatly esteem a person who **could understand all mysteries and** who had **all knowledge**. Can you imagine how sought after such a person would be? But, again, without love, such knowledge is useless.

D. The Gift of Faith Is Useless Without Love (13:2c)

Fourth, the gift of faith is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 2c: **“And if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”**

Paul was not talking about saving faith here. Every Christian possesses faith in Jesus Christ. But the spiritual gift of **faith** is that faith that enables a person to trust God to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Nevertheless, should a person who had such great **faith, so as to remove even mountains**, but not have love, it would be useless.

E. The Gift of Giving Is Useless Without Love (13:3a)

Fifth, the gift of giving is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 3a: **“If I give away all I have... but have not love, I gain nothing.”**

Surely a person who gives away everything must have love? Not necessarily, according to Paul. The difference between a person who gives away everything who does not love and one who does love is this: a person who does not love gives away everything because of how it makes him feel, whereas a person who does love gives away everything because of how it benefits others.

Love is other-person centered, as we shall see.

F. The Gift of Martyrdom Is Useless Without Love (13:3b)

And sixth, the gift of martyrdom is useless without love.

Paul said in verse 3b: **“And if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”**

Even becoming a martyr is useless without love.

All six of these conditional situations suggest an incredible gift or act. Nevertheless, Paul responded that each one was absolutely useless without love.

Paul followed Jesus, who placed “love your neighbor as yourself” second only to “love the Lord your God” (Matthew 22:37-40). The command to love one another is the second most important command in the entire Bible. It is no wonder Paul argued that all spiritual gifts are useless without love for others.

III. The Characteristics of Love (13:4-7)

Third, let’s now look at the characteristics of love.

Paul realized that the Corinthians needed to understand what love was. So, he described the characteristics of love.

He gave fifteen characteristics of love in verses 4-7. Do you know what is fascinating about these characteristics? Not

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one characteristic is a noun or adjective. Every single one of them is a verb. In other words, Paul did not focus so much on what love is as on what love does and does not do. Love is not so much a feeling as much as it is an action.

So, let us examine briefly the characteristics of love.

A. Love Is Patient (13:4a)

First, love is patient.

Paul said in verse 4a: **“Love is patient.”**

Patience signifies forbearance, slowness to repay for offenses. God is patient because he does not immediately punish those who offend him. God’s patience slows down the judgment process and opens the way for reprieve from punishment altogether. We should behave similarly because of our love for one another.

B. Love Is Kind (13:4b)

Second, love is kind.

Paul said in verse 4b: **“Love is... kind.”**

Kindness takes many forms. In general, it is soft and gentle. Occasionally, however, kindness must take the form of a careful rebuke designed to bring about a good result. Paul demonstrated this as he dealt kindly, but firmly, with the Corinthians. Jesus’ own life demonstrated such kindness (cf. Luke 13:15-17).

C. Love Does Not Envy (13:4c)

Third, love does not envy.

Paul said in verse 4c: **“Love does not envy.”**

One may admire another for something that person is or

has, and he may desire many of the same good things for himself. Envy begins when admiration and desire turn to resentment of others for what they have. Envy is the root of many terrible actions in the world. The Bible illustrates this time and again. To envy is not to display the love of Christ, who gave up all for the sake of others (cf. Philippians 2:3-8).

D. Love Does Not Boast (13:4d)

Fourth, love does not boast.

Paul said in verse 4d: **“Love does not... boast.”**

Paul’s word for **boast** (*perpereuomai*) appears only here in the New Testament, and the meaning seems to be “bragging without foundation.” Loving other people does not mean failing to acknowledge the good God has done in oneself and in others. Paul was not beyond complimenting the Corinthians. He even asserted his own standing on occasion. Love does not mean lying about human accomplishments. Rather, it means not exalting ourselves over others as if our accomplishments were based on our own merit and ability.

E. Love Is Not Arrogant (13:4e)

Fifth, love is not arrogant.

Paul said in verse 4e: **“Love... is not arrogant.”**

To be arrogant is to be overly self-confident or insubordinate to God and others. Arrogance is the source of much destruction and pain in the world. When one cares about other people, he does not find himself full of self-importance or arrogance toward others.

G. Love Is Not Rude (13:5a)

Sixth, love is not rude.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“Love... is not... rude.”**

Paul at least expressed the need to follow customary decorum. The definitions of **“rude”** vary from culture to culture. At the heart of rudeness is a disregard for the social customs that others have adopted. When one does not concern himself with the likes and dislikes of others, he shows a disrespect for them. Proper regard, on the other hand, indicates love for other people.

H. Love Does Not Insist on Its Own Way (13:5b)

Seventh, love does not insist on its own way.

Verse 5b: **“Love... does not insist on its own way.”**

Paul probably had in mind here the practice of always putting oneself in first place without due consideration of others. Many situations in life call upon Christians to choose between benefit to themselves and to others. The loving person puts the benefit of others over his or her own good. Paul exemplified this practice when he refused to receive money for his work as an apostle (9:6-15). Jesus' humiliation was the greatest expression of putting others' benefit above one's own (Philippians 2:4-8).

I. Love Is Not Irritable (13:5c)

Eighth, love is not irritable.

Paul said in verse 5c: **“Love... is not irritable.”**

Those who love others do not become irritated and angry when others do wrong, but rather are slow to anger. They are patient. Still, there are times when anger is appropriate. Paul himself became angry when he saw the idols of Athens (Acts 17:16). Jesus became angry when he saw people's hardness of

heart (Mark 3:5) and the money changers in the temple (John 2:14-17).

J. Love Is Not Resentful (13:5d)

Ninth, love is not resentful.

Paul said in verse 5d: **“Love... is not... resentful.”**

The word for **resentful** has the connotation of “keeping a record.” People who love others do not keep meticulous records of offenses. They offer forgiveness repeatedly. Both Jesus (Luke 23:34) and Stephen (Acts 7:60) demonstrated this type of love by forgiving the people who put them to death.

K. Love Does Not Rejoice at Wrongdoing (13:6a)

Tenth, love does not rejoice at wrongdoing.

Verse 6a: **“Love... does not rejoice at wrongdoing.”**

Those who truly love do not enjoy seeing their loved ones stumble into sin. They take no pleasure in evil and wrongdoing because they understand that sin and evil and wrongdoing destroy people’s lives.

L. Love Rejoices with the Truth (13:6b)

Eleventh, love rejoices with the truth.

Paul said in verse 6b: **“Love... rejoices with the truth.”**

This characteristic is the opposite of the previous one. Many commentators link the two together as one characteristic. The term **“truth”** here suggests “living according to the truth.” Love lives according to the truth.

M. Love Bears All Things (13:7a)

Twelfth, love bears all things.

Paul said in verse 7a: **“Love bears all things.”**

Major English Bible versions translate the term **bears** (*stego*) very differently from one another. The word means “to cover or to support, and therefore protect.” Thus, love protects others from exposure, ridicule, or harm.

N. Love Believes All Things (13:7b)

Thirteenth, love believes all things.

Paul said in verse 7b: **“Love... believes all things.”**

Perhaps this characteristic of love is best expressed in contemporary English idiom as: “Love gives the benefit of the doubt.” Suspicion and doubt toward others do not indicate affection or love. On the contrary, when someone loves with Christlike love, he entrusts himself to the person he loves time and again.

O. Love Hopes All Things (13:7c)

Fourteenth, love hopes all things.

Paul said in verse 7c: **“Love... hopes all things.”**

Loving someone requires maintaining a measure of optimism on that person’s behalf. Hope is an attitude that good will eventually come to those who may now be failing. Failure invades every Christian’s life, and it often causes others to give up on the one who fails. Yet, Christians who love continue to hope for the best. This optimism encourages others to keep moving forward. This hope is based not on the Christian, but on Christ. The hope of each Christian is that Christ will preserve him to glory. When a brother falls, it is Christ who picks him up and makes him stand (Romans 14:4). Christ is the one who promised to finish the work he began.

P. *Love Endures All Things (13:7d)*

And fifteenth, love endures all things.

Paul said in verse 7d: **“Love... endures all things.”**

Loving someone is easy when the other person does not challenge one’s affections by offending or failing. Love’s quality becomes evident when it must endure trials. The New Testament encourages Christians to persevere in their Christian walks (1 John 5:2-5). Here Paul had in mind particularly the need to persevere in love for others. Christians should look to the length and perseverance of Christ’s love as the standard for their own.

IV. **The Permanence of Love (13:8-12)**

Fourth, observe the permanence of love.

Paul said in verse 8a: **“Love never ends.”**

By nature **love** is permanent because, as the apostle John says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). In verse 13 Paul says that “faith, hope, and love abide.” However, in heaven we will have no more need for faith and hope, but we will still have **love**. In heaven we will no longer need the spiritual gifts of wisdom, knowledge, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, interpretation of tongues, teaching, mercy, leadership, and so on, but we will still have **love**. John MacArthur says, “Yet love is, and forever will be, the very air of heaven.”¹

In the rest of verse 8 Paul then contrasts the permanence of love with the impermanence of three spiritual gifts: **prophecies, tongues, and knowledge**. Each of these three gifts will eventually pass away, but love will continue.

¹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 358.

A. Gifts Are Temporary (13:8)

First, gifts are temporary.

Look how Paul put it in verse 8b: **“As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.”**

Though Paul said that all three spiritual gifts would one day pass away, two different verbs are used to indicate their cessation. Look closely at the text. Paul said **prophecies** and **knowledge** will **pass away**, whereas **tongues** will **cease**.

The Greek word for **“pass away”** (*katargeo*) means “to be (render) entirely idle (useless)” or “to abolish.”² The spiritual gifts of **prophecies** and **knowledge** will one day be abolished. Both forms of the Greek verb in this verse, as well as in verse 10, are passive. That means that something or someone will cause them to stop. As we shall see in a moment, that something is the coming of “the perfect” (v. 10).

The Greek word for **“cease”** (*pauso*) means “to stop.”³ Unlike **pass away**, the verb for **cease** is used in Greek in the middle voice, which, when used of persons indicates intentional, voluntary action taken upon oneself. Used of inanimate objects it indicates reflexive, self-causing action. The cause comes from within; it is built in.

What Paul is saying is that God gave the gift of **tongues** with a built-in stopping point. “That gift will stop by itself,” Paul was saying. Like a battery, **tongues** had a limited energy supply and a limited life-span. When its limits were reached, its activity automatically ended. **Prophecies** and **knowledge** will be stopped by something outside of themselves, but the gift of

² James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., vol. 1, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 40.

³ James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., vol. 1, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), 56.

tongues will stop by itself.

“So,” someone asks, “*when* and *how* will these spiritual gifts end?”

Paul addressed **prophecies** and **knowledge** in verse 9-10. He said in verse 10 that “when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.” That is the same word that is used for **prophecies** and **knowledge**. So, **prophecies** and **knowledge** will pass away “when the perfect comes.” We will look at *when* and *how* that takes place when we get to verses 9-10.

The cessation of **tongues**, however, is not mentioned in relation to the coming of “the perfect.” From Paul’s perspective, **tongues** will cease at a different time.

It is my conviction that tongues, along with the gifts of healing, and miracles, ceased to function at the end of the apostolic age. Here are some reasons for my conviction.

First, tongues ended with the apostles because it was a sign gift to authenticate the revelation of God. Tongues, along with gifts of healing and miracles, ceased to operate when the New Testament was completed. Now, let me be clear: God has never ceased to heal or perform miracles. He continues to heal people today and to perform miracles today. He does all of this in accordance with his sovereign will. What I am saying though is that no Christian today possesses the supernatural sign gifts of healing, miracles, or tongues. So, why did they occur in Biblical times?

If you study the Bible carefully, you will discover that the Bible records only three periods of history in which a significant number of human beings were given the supernatural gift of performing miracles. The first period was during the ministries of Moses and Joshua. The second period was during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. And the third period during the ministries of Jesus and the apostles. Each period lasted only

about 70 years and then abruptly ended. During these periods there was significant new revelation from God. And the purpose of the miracles, tongues, and healing was to authenticate the revelation of God.

Second, tongues ended with the apostles because its purpose as a sign confirming apostolic authority and doctrine ended when the New Testament was completed. Genuine tongues-speaking involved direct revelation from God to the speaker, though it was veiled revelation that always needed translation or interpretation, often even to the speaker himself (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). Revelation of God's Word was completed, however, when the New Testament was completed, and to that nothing is to be added or subtracted (Revelation 22:18-19). The confirming purpose of tongues was completed.

Third, tongues ended with the apostles because its use is mentioned only in the earlier New Testament books. Most of the New Testament books, in fact, do not mention tongues. Paul mentions it only in this letter to the Corinthians, and James, Peter, John, and Jude make no mention of it at all. Nor does reference to tongues appear in the book of Acts after 19:16. It seems clear from the New Testament record itself that tongues not only ceased to be an issue at all but ceased to be practiced well before the end of the apostolic age. Nowhere in the epistles is it commanded or enjoined on believers as a responsibility or spiritual exercise.

And fourth, tongues ended with the apostles because they were an inferior means of edification. When properly interpreted, tongues had the ability to edify in a limited way (1 Corinthians 14:5; 12-13; 27-28). But the primary purpose of 1 Corinthians 14 is to show that tongues were an inferior means of communication (vv. 1-2), an inferior means of praise (vv. 13-19), and an infe-

rior means of evangelism (vv. 20-25). Tongues provided limited and inferior edification, whereas prophecy is far superior in every way (vv. 1, 3-6, 24, 29, 31, 39). Five words spoken intelligently and intelligibly in ordinary language are of more value “than ten thousand words in a tongue” (v. 19).

B. Gifts Are Partial (13:9-10)

Second, gifts are partial.

The cessation of tongues took place a short while after Paul wrote this letter, but the gifts of prophecy and knowledge have not yet passed away, because the perfect has not yet come.

Paul said in verses 9-10: **“For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.”**

It is clear that Paul wanted his readers to know that knowledge and prophecy are partial gifts. That is, the gifts will one day pass away. It seems that Paul also was using knowledge and prophecy to represent all the other spiritual gifts.

One day, **when the perfect comes**, we will have no more need of knowledge or prophecy, preaching or teaching, wisdom or interpretation, mercy or leadership. We will not have need of the Bible. We will no longer need the written Word of God because we will be eternally in the presence and full comprehension of the living Word. **“The perfect,”** therefore, refers to the eternal state of believers. Paul is saying that spiritual gifts are only for a time, but that love will last for all eternity. His point is simple and clear.

C. Gifts Are Elementary (13:11-12)

And third, gifts are elementary.

Paul now illustrated what happens when “the perfect comes.” In our earthly lives all Christians are children compared to what we will know when we are perfected in heaven.

So Paul said in verses 11-12: **“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. 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.”**

Perhaps Paul was comparing his present spiritual state to his boyhood, as **a child**. A Jewish child was considered a boy until his bar mitzvah (“son of the law”), after which he was considered **a man**. One moment he was a boy; the next he was a man.

Our perfection in Christ will be a type of spiritual bar mitzvah, a coming into immediate, complete, and eternal spiritual adulthood and maturity. At that moment everything **childish** will be put away. All immaturity, all childishness, all imperfection, and all limitations of knowledge and understanding will be forever gone.

In this present life, even with God’s Word completed and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, **we see in a mirror dimly**. In our present state we are not capable of seeing more. But when we enter the Lord’s presence, we will then see him **face to face**. **Now** we can only **know in part; then** we **shall know fully, even as we have been fully known**.

V. The Superiority of Love (13:13)

And finally, notice the superiority of love.

Paul said in verse 13: **“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”**

Returning to the temporal, to the Christian's earthly life, Paul mentioned the three greatest spiritual virtues: **faith, hope, and love**. These three spiritual virtues are also known as the "Pauline triad."

Actually, **faith** and **hope** are encompassed by **love**, which "believes all things," and "hopes all things" (v. 7). Because **faith** and **hope** will have no purpose in heaven, where every truth will be known and every good will be possessed, they are not equal to **love**.

Love is the greatest of these not only because it is eternal, but because, even in this temporal life, where we now live, love is supreme. Love already is the greatest, not only because it will outlast the other virtues, beautiful and necessary as they are, but because it is inherently greater by being the most God-like. God does not have faith or hope, but "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

Conclusion

The supernatural sign gifts have already ceased. Other spiritual gifts, ministries, faith, hope, and patience will all one day cease to exist because they will cease to have purpose or meaning. But in that perfect day, when we see our Lord "face to face," love will be for us just beginning. But our showing love, practicing love, living love *now* are of utmost importance, more important than having any of the other virtues or gifts, because love is the link God gives us with himself in his eternal Self. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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