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Life in the Spirit #6

Sermon Summary #6

Love as a Way of Life: Putting Spiritual Gifts in Perspective 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

You probably know this, but non-Christians have their favorite Bible verses too. If I were to choose one that is probably quoted most often by those who reject Jesus, it would undoubtedly be Matthew 7:1, “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*” They love that verse!

But there are other passages in God’s Word that non-Christians love to recite. 1 Corinthians 13 is certainly one of them. If you don’t believe me, think back on the many wedding ceremonies you’ve attended where non-Christians were getting married. I’d venture to say that at least in half of them 1 Corinthians 13, the so-called “love” chapter in the Bible, is including in the ceremony. And if it’s a Christian wedding, you can almost always count on it being read or recited or in some way incorporated into the message.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with that. The principles of love described in this chapter are applicable in a variety of situations, not least of which is the relationship between a husband and a wife. ***But 1 Corinthians 13 is not directly or primarily about marriage. It is about the manner in which we are to exercise our spiritual gifts in the building up of the body of Christ.*** It’s no coincidence or accident that this chapter intervenes between chapters 12 and 14. It isn’t as if Paul broke off his train of thought regarding spiritual gifts and on a fleeting whim decided to get romantic on us and talk about love.

Paul’s point in this chapter is really quite simple and straightforward. The church at Corinth had drawn all sorts of false conclusions about spiritual gifts. Some believed that certain spiritual gifts were a sign of maturity. Others thought themselves superior to their fellow believers because they operated in the more overtly miraculous gifts. Some even argued that if you had this or that particular gift, it meant that God loved you more than others. And then of course there was the tendency in Corinth to ignore the needs of other Christians and to exploit one’s spiritual gift to gain power or prestige or influence.

Paul’s response is quick and to the point. He says in no uncertain terms: ***If love for other Christians does not control and shape how you employ your spiritual gift, your gift is worse than worthless, it is dangerous. Spiritual gifts are a wonderful blessing from God, but compared to the transcendent value of love they are but a temporary and incomplete dimension of Christian life.***

Before I go any further I suppose I should give you a definition of Christian love. One of the things 1 Corinthians 13 does is to forever put to rest the idea that love is always and only a decision or an action and does not involve affections or feelings.

Paul says love does not *envy* and is not *irritable* and that it *rejoices* in truth and *hopes*. These are all affections or feelings. If you feel envy and ungodly irritation, for example, you are not loving. So, clearly Paul wants us to understand that **while love is surely more than feelings, it is not less than feelings. Both affections and actions are necessary.**

There are at least two reasons why people have been heard to say that *love is a choice and not a feeling* (for this I’m dependent on John Piper’s insights).

First, they want to emphasize that having warm, fuzzy feelings for someone can never replace or compensate for the lack of action. John says in his first epistle, chapter 3, verse 18, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” So, clearly a genuine love for someone involves concrete actions on their behalf.

Second, people emphasize love as action because often times we lack the affections of joy and delight and we need to make the effort to love anyway. In other words, can we love someone in the absence of good feelings? Yes, but my point is that this is less than ideal. It is love, but not complete or perfect love. As you love someone concretely by seeking their best interests, pray that God would cultivate an affection for them in your heart. Pray that the Spirit would awaken the desire to cherish them.

Thus to say to someone, “I truly love you, but I feel nothing in my heart for you,” sounds empty. To say, “I genuinely love you, but nothing about you awakens joy or delight in my affections” is less than the biblical portrayal of true love.

So here is my definition of love:

Love is a deep affection for, a delight in, and a commitment to act for the welfare of another without regard for their loveliness that often comes at great sacrifice to oneself. Or again, love is the overflow of our delight in God that joyfully cherishes and seeks the best interests of another regardless of the cost to oneself.

Context!

Let’s be certain that as we explore this remarkable chapter in the NT we keep fixed in our minds the context in which it appears and the purpose for which Paul wrote it.

Paul makes it clear that “love” is not simply one more among the many spiritual gifts that are distributed to the body of Christ. Rather, “love” is *a way of life*, a virtue that is to characterize the desire for and exercise of all spiritual gifts. This “love” transcends every spiritual gift individually and all of them taken together. It is more important and more valuable and more beneficial to the body of Christ than the collective power of tongues and prophecy and healing and miracles.

But don’t draw the *wrong conclusion* from this. In saying that love is better than spiritual gifts, he does not mean that spiritual gifts are bad. His purpose in this chapter is not to devalue spiritual gifts. He simply means that in the scramble for gifts and the tendency that some of them have to produce pride and arrogance, love must be seen as preeminent.

So, spiritual gifts are good and important and, in my opinion, indispensable to the church, but only if exercised in love. In the absence of love they are utterly worthless.

Let me put it in slightly different terms. Paul is saying as clearly as he can that character always trumps gifting. The virtues of the Spirit, or the fruit of the Spirit, are always to be valued above his gifts. One of the most dangerous and destructive things that can happen in the life of a local church is when people prize a person’s gifting above their character. They witness a miracle or are impressed by someone’s eloquence or are stunned by the accuracy of a prophetic word, and then conclude that such a person is in a *special class* of Christians who must be granted *special exemptions and special privileges*. “We can’t hold them accountable to the basic principles of discipleship and the responsibilities that the rest of us embrace. After all, they are so obviously anointed by the Spirit that we dare not touch them or call them to account or expect them to live as the rest of us ordinary believers do.” That is a recipe for disaster and must be resisted at every turn.

That said, let’s turn our attention to what Paul has to say about love as a way of life.

The Preeminence of Love

Note that in **vv. 1-3** Paul speaks in the first person: “If **I** speak . . . if **I** have prophetic powers,” etc. Most likely he did this because he is later going to declare that he speaks in tongues more than everyone (14:18) and all know that he is a prophet and operates in word of knowledge and in faith and miracles. So Paul is including even himself in this responsibility. Not even an apostle is exempt.

What does he mean by the “tongues of angels”? Is he speaking in deliberately exaggerated terms to draw the biggest possible contrast with love, or does he actually envision tongues speech as being, at least in some instances, the languages spoken by the angelic hosts? Both are possible and it’s hard to exclude either option. More on this when we come to chapter 14 and our study of tongues.

Note well that Paul doesn’t simply say that “tongues” has become a “noisy gong” or a “clanging cymbal” but that **he himself** has! In other words, if a person insists on using this gift (or any other gift) in the absence of love, it will have some sort of *permanent and debilitating effect on the person himself/herself*. You personally experience a transformation that is for the worse, not only for yourself but also for those who must endure you. By the noisy gong and clanging cymbal Paul probably means to suggest that tongues loses its significance or value to the body and becomes an annoyance and irritant.

Of course, what may be said about tongues when this gift is used in the interests of love? It then would undoubtedly become a glorious symphony that pleases, sanctifies, and soothes the soul.

This is amazing. Think of the profoundly beneficial effect of prophecy and knowledge and faith that is of the sort that it can move mountains. What marvelous testimony to the power of God. What a marvelous boost to the confidence and courage of Christians. After all, in 14:3 Paul says that prophecy builds up and encourages and consoles the people of God. But without love, all gifts are empty and vain.

Even the most *extreme self-sacrificial philanthropy* is emptied of value if not motivated and governed by love. Even *personal martyrdom* is a waste if there is no love. Clearly, motivation matters!

Note well: this means that *merely possessing and exercising a spiritual gift says absolutely nothing about a person*. It doesn’t matter how eloquently one speaks and prays in tongues or how generous he or she is in giving away their wealth to the needy, if alone, without love, such gifts and powers attest to nothing about you.

It’s instructive, and convicting, when we apply this to other experiences in the church: Our worship, the passion of our praise, the energy we exude, the size of our offerings, the size of our buildings, the fact that we know a lot of theology and can out-argue anyone, amounts to nothing in the absence of love.

The Principles of Love

In **vv. 4-7** Paul proceeds to identify no fewer than 15 characteristics of genuine Christian love.

(1) Love is patient – Paul doesn’t mean that love waits a long time, as if he has in mind the man or woman who is willing to endure the passing of several years for the love of their life to agree to marriage. The idea is more of *endurance in the face of suffering*. He has in mind patiently bearing with those who don’t love you and choosing not to retaliate against them. In relation to the exercise of spiritual gifts, perhaps Paul is calling on us to be slow to react in a judgmental way when people use a gift poorly or in an embarrassing way. Be patient with them. Don’t rush to criticize.

(2) Love is kind – You can be patient but mean. You can put up with another’s sin and hate them. But genuine love cultivates feelings or affections of tender-heartedness toward others. With regard to spiritual gifts, you will make far more constructive headway in dealing with those who mess up if you approach them with kindness rather than harshness, with words of affirmation rather than condemnation.

(3) Love does not envy – If someone has received a spiritual gift that you haven’t, and perhaps they’ve been praised for the way it blessed the church community, don’t respond with envy. Genuine love rejoices at the success of others.

(4) Love does not boast – This is the opposite side of envy. When you envy you covet what another has and resent them for it. When you boast you brag that you’ve got what they don’t.

(5) Love is not arrogant or puffed up – After all, as Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:7, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” Paul particularly has in mind those

who strut about and are puffed up because they've got a spiritual gift that draws more attention and causes a stir and perhaps is more overtly supernatural.

(6) Love is not rude – Perhaps he has in mind those who are pushy and demanding when it comes to using their gift. It's the sort of person who is inconsiderate of others and thinks only of how his or her gift is going to benefit oneself. I'm thinking in particular of those occasions (hopefully rare!) when a person is so persuaded that God wants them to speak or prophesy or minister in some way that they resist and resent(!) the guidance, wisdom, and counsel of church leaders who believe it isn't the right time and should be put on hold until a more opportune moment. They "rudely" insist on using their gift then and there and disregard the advice of their leaders.

(7) Love does not insist on its own way – Even when you may legitimately be entitled to something, love defers, love takes the low road, love seeks to be second rather than first, love prompts a person always to be asking, "How might my gift be used to promote others rather than myself? How might my gift be used to affirm and praise and promote someone else rather than me?"

(8) Love is not irritable – Or, as some translations render it, "love is not easily angered." The idea here is of the person who is extremely touchy or overly sensitive, such that hiding barely beneath the surface is an explosive and defensive anger. It's almost as if some people are just waiting for the slightest offense, the slightest criticism, so they can explode in angry and irritable self-defense. It doesn't even matter to such a person if the offense is real or imagined. They are just waiting to take exception to something others say. Genuine Christian love does not do that.

(9) Love is not resentful – I actually prefer the translation, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." Here Paul is talking about those times when someone really does offend you, when they truly have sinned against you, when their offense is genuine and uncalled for. Love doesn't keep a record of it so it can be brought up at some future time and thrown back into someone's face to be used against them. Love doesn't keep score! Love is quick not only to forgive but to forget. Love does not constantly consult a filing cabinet where a list of the wrong things other people have done is kept up to date and always at hand to be used at a moment's notice.

(10) Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing – Do you realize that some people like it when others fall? They enjoy it when others mess up or abuse their spiritual gifts. It makes them feel righteous when others aren't. Some people love gossip. They get a kick out of hearing stories of how others have messed up in the church and then pat themselves on the back for not having committed a similar offense. Love doesn't do that.

(11) Rather, love rejoices with the truth – A person motivated by genuine love will look for opportunities to affirm those who have done well. Love is always on the lookout for the chance to shine a light on something done right or a truth made known.

(12) Love bears all things (or perhaps, **love always endures**) – Genuine love has a way of empowering a person to endure even in the worst of circumstances. This is not meant to suggest that we don't hold people accountable for their sinful and errant behavior. Paul's point is simply that love guards us against being excessively self-defensive and always looking at things in terms of how it is going to affect us.

(13) Love believes all things (or perhaps, **love always trusts**) – Again, Paul isn't telling us to be gullible or naïve. There are some things we must always disbelieve! His point, rather, is that love labors to be generous and accepting rather than cynical and suspicious. Love gives people the benefit of the doubt until all facts are known. Love isn't undiscerning or indiscriminating. Paul simply wants to say that love holds us back from always assuming the worst about someone or always jumping to the premature conclusion that they are in error or are motivated by selfish concerns.

(14) Love always hopes – Even when you've been hurt by repeated personal abuse, love empowers you to hope for the best and to give a person a second chance, perhaps even a third and a fourth. Love looks for the best in people and only concedes the worst when evidence is overwhelming.

(15) Love always perseveres (better than "endures") – The reason why Christian love perseveres is because the mind and heart shaped by love knows that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God

and are called according to his purpose. This especially includes the painful and distressing things that often can lead us to despair and disappointment.

Let's put together a couple of these characteristics of love and apply them to life in general and not just to spiritual gifts. Let's combine the first one, "love is patient," together with the sixth and eighth where Paul says love is not "rude" or "irritable." Being patient rather than rude and irritable isn't easy. None of us likes it when our plans are interrupted or delayed. Even the slightest opposition from others makes us irritable. We get frustrated with traffic jams and long lines at the check-out counter at the store. Our natural response is to get impatient and respond rudely to those who've been an inconvenience. We are by nature irritable people!

So how do we deal with this sordid and selfish side to our souls? Let's be honest: we aren't by nature patient and kind, we are impatient and mean; we aren't by nature satisfied and humble, we are envious and we boast; we aren't by nature easy-going and tolerant, we are arrogant and rude; and the list could go on through each of these fifteen characteristics of love, all of which we lack in so many ways.

The only hope for us is that *we die to certain expectations in life*. If you and I are going to reflect the kind of love that Paul describes, something in us must be crucified. My need for a trouble-free life with no inconveniences must die. My demand for everything to operate on my schedule and according to my timing must die. My demand that people satisfy my needs and not irritate me must die.

Such is Christian love.

Not boasting or becoming arrogant, as v. 4 describes, is incredibly hard. We like it when we are praised and promoted and our weaknesses and failures are minimized and our strengths and successes are publicly recognized.

The only way we will gain victory over such sins, the sort that are inconsistent with genuine Christian love, is if the craving in our hearts for recognition and honor and respect dies. And it will only die to the degree that what we seek from other people we find instead in Christ alone. When he becomes enough to our souls, our demand for everything else will diminish.

The Permanence of Love

In vv. 1-3 Paul drew a contrast between love and certain spiritual gifts. He now returns to that emphasis in **vv. 8-13**. His point is really very simple: whereas all spiritual gifts are for this life only and will at some point in the future terminate, love is permanent, love is eternal, love never ends. That is why love is superior to gifts and why gifts exercised without love are worthless!

Unfortunately, when people read vv. 8-13 they get caught up in debates about what these verses tell us concerning when spiritual gifts will cease. They lose sight of the fact that Paul raises that point only to emphasize that love never will! It will never cease! Everything else may fall by the wayside, all else may pass with time, but not love.

Let me try to simplify what has all too often become a complex and confusing debate about these verses. I want to address two points.

First, people who embrace cessationism point out that Paul says in vv. 8 and 10 that prophecy and knowledge will "pass away" or "be done away with" when the "perfect" comes, while tongues, on the other hand, simply "cease." They take this to mean that the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues simply dies out of its own accord. There is something intrinsic to the character of tongues speech that alone accounts for why it will cease. No one has to take any action against tongues to cause them to cease. They just stop.

I have no desire to get technical with you, and I suspect you are happy about that. Suffice it to say that most NT scholars are in agreement that nothing theologically significant can be found in the differences in voice and mood of the various Greek verbs used here. No theological conclusions can be drawn about the duration or cessation of any of these gifts based on the verbs that are used.

Second, what is of greatest importance is that Paul clearly declares that it is when the “*perfect*” comes that spiritual gifts such as prophecy and word of knowledge will pass away. I would also include tongues in this; in fact, I would include all spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are wonderful and we need them. But even when they operate at the highest and most effective level, they can only bring us knowledge that is partial. As Paul says, “we know **in part** and we prophesy **in part**” (v. 9). Spiritual gifts, for all their value and power, cannot bring us into the experience of knowing God as God knows us. For that we must await the arrival of the “perfect” (v. 10).

So what is the “perfect”? Cessationists typically embrace one of two interpretations, both of which are clearly wrong.

(1) Some argue that the “perfect” refers to the completed *canon of Scripture*. Tongues, prophecy, and knowledge, among other miraculous gifts, ceased when the book of Revelation was written. Few serious NT scholars hold this view today. Its weaknesses are obvious.

First, there is no evidence that even Paul anticipated the formation of a “canon” of Scripture following the death of the apostles. In fact, Paul seems to have expected that he himself might survive until the coming of the Lord (1 Thess. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:51).

Second, there is no reason to think that Paul could have expected the Corinthians to figure out that he meant the “canon” when he used the term *to teleion*.

Third, “in any case, the completed canon of Scripture would hardly signify for the Corinthians the *passing away of merely 'partial' knowledge* (and prophecy and tongues with it), and the arrival of ‘full knowledge’, for the Corinthians already had the Old Testament, the gospel tradition (presumably), and (almost certainly) more Pauline teaching than finally got into the canon” (Max Turner, *Spiritual Gifts Then and Now*, 294).

Fourth, in v. 12b Paul says that with the coming of the “perfect” our “partial knowledge” will give way to a depth of knowledge that is only matched by the way we are known by God. That is to say, when the perfect comes we will *then* see “face to face” and will know even as we are now known by God. Few people any longer dispute that this is language descriptive of our experience in the eternal state, subsequent to the return of Christ. As Turner says, “however much we respect the New Testament canon, Paul can only be accused of the wildest exaggeration in verse 12 if that is what he was talking about” (295).

Fifth, this view rests on the assumption that prophecy was a form of divine revelation designed to serve the church in the interim, until such time as the canon was formed. But a careful examination of the NT reveals that prophecy had a much broader purpose that would not in the least be affected by the completion of the canon.

(2) Others argue that the “perfect” refers to *the maturity of the church*. When the church has advanced beyond its infancy and is fully established, the need for spiritual gifts like prophecy and tongues will have ended. But in vv. 11-12 Paul isn’t talking about relative degrees of maturity, but of absolute perfection.

Thus, it seems clear to me that by “perfect” Paul is referring to that *state of affairs brought about by the second coming of Jesus Christ at the end of human history*. The “perfect” is not itself the coming of Christ but rather that experience or condition of perfection that we will enjoy in the new heavens and new earth.

Paul’s point is really rather simple: spiritual gifts like prophecy, word of knowledge, and tongues, and all the others as well in my opinion, will pass away at some time future to Paul’s writing, referred to by him as “perfection.” This state of “perfection” again clearly points to the eternal state following Christ’s return. We know this from *two things that he says in v. 12*.

First, in v. 12b Paul says, “Now I know in part; then [when? when the “perfect” comes] I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Paul doesn’t mean we will be omniscient in the eternal state, as if to say we will know absolutely everything in exhaustive detail. It does mean that we will be free from the misconceptions and distortions associated with this life in a fallen world. Our knowledge in the age to come will in some ways be comparable to the way God knows us now. God’s knowledge of us is immediate and

complete. Our knowledge of God will be the same when we enter his presence in the new heavens and new earth.

Second, in v. 12a Paul says, “For now [during the present church age, before the arrival of the “perfect”] we see in mirror dimly, but then [when the “perfect” comes; we will see] face to face.” The words “**face to face**” is standard biblical language for the appearance of a human in the immediate presence of God, beholding him in an unmediated way. Paul has in mind direct personal communication, such that awaits us in the age to come.

To try to make the “perfect” refer to a time in the present age, before the coming of Christ and the eternal state when all sin will be abolished, is to trivialize and minimize the language of v. 12.

To use the language of v. 11, living now in the present church age is like being a child; we are limited and our knowledge is imperfect. But when the “perfect” comes we will have advanced into adulthood; sin will be abolished, evil and corruption and the limitations of this life will have passed away; we will see God “face to face” and we will then know even as we have been fully known. Then, and not until then, will spiritual gifts cease to operate.

Conclusion:

Let’s consider again our definition of love.

Love is a deep affection for, a delight in, and a commitment to act for the welfare of another without regard for their loveliness that often comes at great sacrifice to oneself. Or again, love is the overflow of our delight in God that joyfully cherishes and seeks the best interests of another regardless of the cost to oneself.

Think about God’s love for us. God didn’t send Jesus to die for us because we were lovely. Paul says in Romans 5 we were sinners, ungodly, and at enmity with God. Yet he had a deep affection for, delight in, and was committed to our welfare that came at immeasurable cost to himself, namely, the death of his only-begotten Son.

How does this relate to 1 Corinthians 13 and the broader context of chapters 12 and 14 on spiritual gifts? Simply this: No spiritual gift is an infallible proof of the Spirit’s presence. All spiritual gifts can be counterfeited by Satan and duplicated by pagans. **But not this kind of love!** This kind or quality of love is the distinguishing mark or characteristic of the Christian. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples,” said Jesus, “that you prophesy and speak in tongues and heal the sick and teach with power and conviction.” No!

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have **love** for one another”
(John 13:35).