

“Spiritual Gifts: Duration”

1 CORINTHIANS 13

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This morning I would like for us to jump back into our series of lessons based on three chapters in the book of 1 Corinthians. If you were here with us last Sunday morning, you might remember that the church in Corinth was having some serious issues. They were divided as a congregation, they were constantly arguing among themselves, one of their members was living in sexual sin with his own step-mother (and the church was proud of it), members of the congregation were taking each other to secular court over spiritual matters. They had some serious questions about marriage, they had questions about eating meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols, they had concerns over the Lord's Supper, and near the end of the book, we find that some members of the congregation were apparently doubting the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

Well, Paul had established the church in Corinth in 51 AD, and after he left, the church apparently wrote him a letter asking for his inspired advice on these issues. So, just a few years after the church was established, Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians as a way of answering their long list of questions, which explains why Paul was always saying, ***“Now concerning...”*** in this letter. He was going down their list and giving answers to all of those questions.

Last week, we started in 1 Corinthians 12 as Paul said, ***“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.”*** Last week, then, we studied some of the basics. We learned that spiritual gifts were those miraculous powers that were passed along through the laying on of the apostles' hands, miraculous powers with the purpose of communicating and confirming God's truth in those days before the Bible was completed. We learned that at a minimum, there were at least 14 years between the time the church was established and the writing of the first New Testament book. The church was established in 30 AD, and the first books were not written until the mid to late 40's AD. Most of Paul's books were not written until the 50's and the 60's, Hebrews was not written until nearly 70 AD, and most of John's books were probably written in the 80's and 90's, with the final book, the book of Revelation, being written in roughly 95 or 96 AD. And so we have this gap of roughly 65 years between the church being established and the New Testament being completed. Think about that: There must have been many Christians who lived and died without ever having seen a single book of the Bible, let alone the entire New Testament. Today, if we have a question about something, we open the Bible, but without that option, God filled the gap by providing miraculous abilities to teach and confirm His word. We also learned last week that those miraculous powers could only be passed on through the laying on of the apostles' hands.

We then did a brief survey of the gifts, and then we noted the problem in Corinth, that some people were feeling left out, and some were bragging that their gifts made them better or more important than the others. Paul, then, had to give a reminder that we are all members of the body of Christ, and that it is not about the gifts—it is about the Lord. And right at the end of Chapter 12, Paul says, **“And I show you a still more excellent way,”** which leads into our study of 1 Corinthians 13, a chapter emphasizing the importance of love, emphasizing that when compared to love, the spiritual gifts are temporary.

And so we have the love chapter this morning, one of the most beautiful pieces of writing in the entire New Testament! As we study, most of us will recognize this as a passage that is often read at weddings. And yes, Paul gives us an amazing summary of what true love is, and yes, it does apply to husbands and wives, but let us not forget that it comes right in the middle of a three-chapter section on the spiritual gifts. The point in 1 Corinthians 13 is that the spiritual gifts are temporary, and for that reason, the Corinthians were to focus more on love than they were to focus on all of the spectacular things that some their fellow Christians were able to do. This morning, then, we are looking at Paul’s instructions to a church that needed to have an attitude adjustment. I don’t think they woke up one morning and decided not to be loving, but I’m assuming that over time they just got caught up in all of the various gifts, they got excited about what was happening, and in the process they allowed love to just kind of slowly slip away. Paul, therefore, has a reminder.

This morning, I would like for us to notice the necessity of love (verses 1-3), the characteristics of love (verses 4-7), and then the permanence of love (verses 8-13).

I. **First of all, though, let us please notice verses 1-3 as we consider THE NECESSITY OF LOVE.**

As Paul speaks of this **“more excellent way,”** he says,

¹ If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Notice that Paul starts with the gift of tongues, the most outward, the most obvious of the spiritual gifts. And isn’t it interesting: Those who claim the spiritual gifts today seem to also put a greater emphasis on the gift of tongues. There are a number of denominations today who claim that the gift of tongues is the gift that everybody needs to have. In fact, when you come up out of the waters of baptism, and if you are not speaking in tongues, then something must have gone wrong! So, they emphasize tongues over the other gifts. Perhaps Paul could see that coming. Apparently they were having a similar problem in Corinth, the emphasis of tongues over the others. But for whatever reason, he starts with the gift of tongues—the miraculous ability to speak in another language without any previous study. And Paul says: If I can do this; in fact, even if I could speak the language of angels (if there even was such a thing), but if I can do what all of you consider to be the greatest and most important of the spiritual gifts, but if I do not have love, **“I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”** In other words, without love, even the coolest gift is worthless. In fact, it’s not just worthless, it is worse than that, it is irritating. And the gift of tongues was a valuable gift for the city of Corinth. Corinth was a seaport, people passed through there from all over the world, the church would have had the ability to preach the gospel in all kinds of different languages. Please correct me if I’m wrong, but as far as I can remember, the book of 1 Corinthians is the only book where Paul mentions the gift of tongues. It

was an important gift in that place and time. But without love, even such a valuable gift was like the screech of fingernails on a blackboard.

Think for a moment about a gong and the cymbals. As I think back through my limited musical experience, it seems that gongs and cymbals are normally appreciated more when they are played along with other instruments. Has anyone ever downloaded an album of cymbal music? Imagine listening to a concert of nothing but cymbals. Imagine listening to nothing but a gong for hours upon hours. It would be a rather traumatic experience! But instead, gongs and cymbals are normally played along with other instruments. Paul, then, is making the point that the gift of tongues is kind of like that: Without love, the gift of tongues is actually worse than meaningless. I have read that many of the pagan temples would have a gong hanging in the entrance, and those who came to worship would bang that gong on the way in to attract the attention of the gods, to wake them up. Paul is saying: Tongues without love is just as worthless as banging that gong to wake up gods. It does nothing.

Paul goes on to speak of those with the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and faith. He speaks of those who give all of their possessions to feed the poor, not 10%, not 50%, but 100%, everything! If we give everything away to feed the poor but don't have love as our motivation, it profits us nothing, there is no eternal benefit. The same goes for those who give themselves up as martyrs. Without love, all of this is worthless. So, the apostle Paul starts with the necessity of love.

II. We now move on to THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE (in verses 4-7).

When it comes to love, most of us realize that love is a deep and complicated subject. As a little bit of an experiment, I looked up "God" on Amazon.com, and there were 388,000 books on God. I looked up "money," and there were 507,000 books on money. But when I looked up "love," you know how many books there were? There were 2.3 million books on the subject of love! I preached on verses 4-7 back in February 2006, and we went through these 15 descriptions in detail. You might remember how I pointed out that I had never preached a 15-point lesson before, so to make up for it, I promised that the next week's lesson would be pointless! So, we won't go into great detail here, but let's notice Paul's summary of what love really is, starting in verse 4,

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵ does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶ does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1. **Love is patient;** literally, love is long-suffering. In other words, even when people treat us harshly, we can put up with a lot without taking revenge. This is not a sign of weakness, but it is a sign of great strength. It was a quality desperately needed among the Christians in Corinth who were constantly at each others' throats.
2. **Love is kind.** The word refers to being useful, gracious, or beneficial. One of the church fathers translated this phrase by saying that "**love is sweet to all.**" Basically, love is nice. We keep our eyes open for new ways to serve, for new ways to get involved. Kindness was a quality that was needed in the church in Corinth.

3. **Love is not jealous.** Jealousy refers to resenting another person because of what they have and we do not. Again, this is something that the Corinthians needed to hear as they argued over who had the best spiritual gift.
4. **Love does not brag.** This is the only time this word is used in the entire New Testament. Literally, Paul was saying that love is not a ***“wind bag.”*** Love is not a bag of hot air. Love involves not always talking about our personal accomplishments. Love is not interested in self-promotion. Good advice for Christians who were bragging about their own spiritual gifts.
5. **Love is not arrogant.** The word is very similar to the previous word, and it literally refers to being ***“puffed up”*** or ***“inflated.”*** We get the idea of being conceited. Again, a warning that was needed in Corinth.
6. **Love does not act unbecomingly.** Love is not rude. On the positive side, we might say that love is courteous. Love is sensitive to the feelings of others. Love is gracious. Love allows the other person a way out of embarrassment. Love tries not to make the other person look foolish. Good words for a church like Corinth.
7. **Love does not seek its own.** Love does not insist on its own rights. Love does not insist on its own way. Love does not insist that everyone else adjust, but love looks for a better way. Love is willing to examine a matter and look at it from a different angle. Love looks out for the interests of others. A good reminder for a church like Corinth that was in danger of splitting in four directions.
8. **Love is not provoked.** That is, love is not easily angered. Love is not quick-tempered or quick to take offense. Love does not get angry without a really good reason—excellent advice for Christians who were taking each other to secular court over spiritual matters.
9. **Love does not take into account a wrong suffered.** We might say that love does not keep score. Love does not carry a grudge. The language experts tell us that Paul was using a word from the field of accounting. It refers to calculating something. It refers to entering figures into a journal or a ledger. Today we might say that love does not keep an Excel spreadsheet of all of the wrongs that have been done us.
10. **Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness.** That is, even when we disagree with someone, we do not enjoy seeing bad things happen to them. We do not gloat when someone is embarrassed publicly, even if they deserve it. Love does not enjoy passing along bad news.
11. But instead, Paul says that **love rejoices with the truth.** Love wants people to accept the truth. Love wants people to obey the truth. Love is happy when truth prevails. Love reports on the good things that are done in the congregation. This would have been so helpful in the church in Corinth, to rejoice with the truth.
12. **Love bears all things.** As I understand it, this comes from a Greek word that refers to a ***“roof,”*** and the idea is very simple. Love is like a roof. Love motivates us to shelter our fellow Christians from the storms of life. Love is a shield. We remember what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:8, ***“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”*** Love puts a lid on it! Love causes us to protect each other from undue ridicule. Love refuses to gossip. When we really love someone, we will refuse to publish their sins, but we will cover them with a roof. We will bear all things.

13. **Love believes all things.** Not that love is naive, but love believes the best. Love causes us to give someone the benefit of the doubt. If something is said that can perhaps be taken in one of two ways, our natural tendency should be to take it the good way, to assume the best of someone instead of looking for the worst. This is certainly a quality that was needed in the Corinthian congregation.
14. **Love hopes all things.** Love is always looking for something better. Love is optimistic about the future. So needed among the Christians in Corinth.
15. And then finally, **love endures all things.** Literally, the word means that we stay put under pressure. It is a military term and it meant that a soldier would hold a position at any cost. It referred to withstanding an attack, not packing up at the slightest sign of trouble, but sticking with it and standing firm in love.

If you have time this afternoon, try reading this passage by substituting the name of Jesus for the word love (Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, and so on), and then try substituting your own name (I am patient, I am kind, and so on). It makes for a good reminder of how we are doing in this area. But again, all of this is advice that was sorely needed in the city of Corinth. Have we noticed that love is something we choose to do? So many times today, we think of love in terms of a feeling, we think of love in terms of something that happens to us, we think of love as something we fall into. But Paul says that love is an action. Love is something we do.

III. **Before we leave this chapter, we need to look at verses 8-13 as we consider the main point in this context, and that is, THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE (especially when compared to the spiritual gifts that were causing so much friction there in the church in Corinth).**

In verses 8-13, Paul says,

⁸ Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹² 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. ¹³ But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

As I was doing the research for this morning's lesson, I ran across one denominational minister who read these verses and then said that Paul "...is not teaching the doctrine of cessationism." Well, I've never heard of the doctrine of "cessationism." But I know what the man was saying. However, I would respectfully disagree, because in verse 8, Paul very clearly says, **"...if there are tongues, they will cease."** Unless I have missed something, Paul is teaching the doctrine of "cessationism." The only question is when these things will cease. He says that love never fails, and then he says that the miraculous gifts of prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the miraculous gift of knowledge will all come to an end, they will be done away, they will cease. In verse 9, he talks about how the people at the time he wrote (in the early 50's AD) **"know in part"** and **"prophesy in part."** In other words, in the early 50's AD, no one had the complete picture. No one in the church in Corinth had access to God's complete revealed word. Someone over here had one part of it, someone over here had another part of it. Over the next few decades, several apostles and other inspired writers would write it down independently of one another. But at time that 1 Corinthians was written, no one person had the whole plan, because it was still in the process of being revealed. They were right there in the middle of it.

And so in verse 10, Paul says, ***“But when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.”*** My understanding of the ***“partial”*** is that Paul was referring to those temporary gifts (the gifts he just summarized in verse 8). Those things are partial, they are temporary. And he says that they would be done away when the ***“perfect”*** comes. Of course, the big discussion, then, is on the ***“perfect.”*** The word refers to something that is complete, to something that is whole. Many people look at this word, and they say, “Oh, this must be referring to Jesus. Jesus is perfect, and so the miraculous spiritual gifts will last until Jesus comes back.” And yet we need to understand that the word ***“perfect”*** is neuter as opposed to masculine. In other words, instead of referring to “some-ONE” who is perfect, it refers to “some-THING” that is perfect. And when this perfect thing comes, at that point the miraculous spiritual gifts would no longer be needed.

Of course, this ties in to what we studied last week, the fact that the purpose of the miracles was to communicate and confirm the word of God in those days before the New Testament was written down. Personally, I think of the miraculous spiritual gifts in terms of scaffolding around a building that is under construction. As a building is going up, many times it is surrounded by scaffolding. The purpose is to provide a frame, a stable surface for those who are working on the building. However, once the building is completed, the scaffolding is no longer needed. It was very important at the time. It was critical. However, once its purpose has been fulfilled, the scaffolding is removed. We could say the same thing about a temporary spare tire, the little donut most of us have in our trunks. It is good for a purpose, but the purpose is limited. In the same way, the purpose of the miracles was to provide information and proof of God’s word to the early church until God’s word could be written down, and once God’s written word was available, there was no longer a need for those temporary spiritual gifts.

And so today, if I need to tell you to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins, I do not need to say, “Hey, God just told me to tell you this, and to prove it I will pick up this poisonous snake,” I don’t need to do that anymore, because all I have to do is have you look with me at Acts 2:38. And so you are not basing your decision on what I am saying, I do not need to prove who I am with some kind of miracle, but you can look at Peter’s words for yourself. God’s written word is now complete, it is ***“perfect.”*** And when the ***“perfect”*** came, the partial (or temporary) was taken away. The scaffolding was taken down.

In verse 11, Paul compared it to growing up. There are things we do as children that most of us no longer do as adults. We have grown out of certain behaviors. He explains in verse 12 that at the time, the Christians in Corinth were looking at God’s truth as if they were looking at it in a dark mirror. Their vision was a little bit fuzzy. I’m thinking of when we used to go to the Illinois State Fair with our 4-H group. We would stay in some kind of minimum security prison dormitories. The mirrors were not glass, but they appeared to be some kind of polished steel. Obviously, they could not be broken and used as a weapon, and you could still see yourself in the mirror, but the image was dim, it was not clear. Paul says, though, that there was a time coming when they would see God’s knowledge clearly, as if they were looking at it face to face. The gifts, therefore, were intended to get them to that point, but once God’s revelation was complete, the miraculous gifts would no longer be needed.

In fact, as we look at the New Testament, it appears that the gifts started to fade partway through the First Century. You might remember that at the beginning, people were being miraculously healed left and right. You might remember that people were being healed just by touching one of Paul’s handkerchiefs. And yet toward the end of Paul’s ministry, Paul could not even heal his good friend Epaphroditus who eventually died from his illness (Philippians 2:26-27). We remember how Paul told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach trouble (1 Timothy 5:23). Later, Paul writes in 2 Timothy 4:20 that he had to leave Trophimus at

Miletus because of his illness. You see, toward the end of Paul's ministry, the gifts were already in the process of fading away. The more books of the Bible Paul wrote, the fewer miracles he needed to perform.

Then we also have the whole problem of how the gifts were transmitted. As we know from our previous studies, the spiritual gifts were passed along through the laying on of the apostles' hands (Acts 8:4-24). John was last apostle to die. If John at the very end of his life had laid his hands on a young person, those gifts would have vanished completely roughly mid-way through the Second Century...at the latest.

Conclusion:

Due to our time limitations, I have included some additional information in the cubbyholes this morning (most of you received it in your email inboxes sometime last night), but for this morning, the main idea in Chapter 13 is that the miraculous spiritual gifts are temporary, and instead of arguing and fighting over these things (as the Christians in Corinth were doing), we are to remember that love is the more excellent way.

As we close, I should point out that Jesus took our place on the cross. We respond to that sacrifice with love, with obedience. Our love motivates us to do whatever is necessary. We turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be briefly dipped in water so that our sins can be forgiven. If you would like to discuss the lesson further, let us know. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, please let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: furlakeschurch@gmail.com