

Title: Love is the Greatest – Forever!

Text: 1 Corinthians 13.8-12

Theme: The Superiority of Love

Series: 1 Corinthians #75

Prop Stmt.

Read Text:

Many years ago now, Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo wrote a song entitled: Where Everybody Knows your Name. The song, many of you recognize as the theme song for the sit-com Cheers. “Where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same You wanna be where everybody knows Your name.”

Built within each of us is a need and a desire for relationship. We long for the kind of relationships where we do not have to perform for approval, but ironically, we think that we have to perform or pretend in order to get that kind of friendship. We hurt people and we have been hurt. We are frightened by and awkward with the very thing that we need. Why do I keep making the same mistakes? Why do I say the things I say or do the things I do? Will I ever make progress in this thing called life? Will I ever be able to have a relationship where I am free to be honest without fear of losing the relationship?

Will there ever be a day, when I will know, even as I am fully known? Will there ever come a time when the truth about me and others has no secrets and no fears of discovery? Will I ever know what it is like to really, really love and be loved? In verse 12, Paul speaks about the time when we will know fully, even as we are fully known. When, as the text calls it, “perfection” comes. But for some the heart beat of this text has often been overlooked and its central message lost due to the debate that has gone on regarding the absence or presence of miraculous gifts in the church today.

It is almost impossible to read the Bible without reading into it your own experience, preference and bias. If you are from a more cessationist position, you are going to be tempted to read this text with that slant. What is a cessationist? A cessationist is one who holds to cessationism. (That was a big help – wasn't it?) Let me give this a shot. Some people divide up the spiritual gifts into two categories: Miraculous Gifts and Non-miraculous Gifts. A categorization of the gifts would then look something like this:

Miracle Gifts

Message of Wisdom
Message of Knowledge
Prophecy (fore-telling)
Tongues
Interpretation of Tongues
Working of miracles
Healings

Non-Miracle Gifts

Teaching
Distinguishing between spirits
Prophecy (forth-telling)
Faith
Administration
Helps

A cessationist typically claims that miracles were associated with the time of the apostles as a way of authenticating their message and ministry. But, when the time of the apostles passed on, so did the need for and the time of miracles. Therefore, we are now living in a time when miracles do not take place. Cessationism is the view that the time of miracles is over. So, how would a cessationist read this text?

“Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease. There it is right on the page. I don’t know why these charismatics get all wound up about prophesying this or that, when the Bible makes it very clear, that prophecies will cease. And historically, we all know that around 100 AD, they did just that. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. I don’t get it, I just don’t get it. Why would anyone go around and preach that the real evidence of being filled with the Spirit is speaking in tongues, when the Bible says that tongues will be stilled and they were. Same thing with that gift of knowledge deal – which, the gift of knowledge thing sort of freaks me out anyway, but Paul says it again, knowledge will pass away. Besides, those prophecies, tongues and knowledge are all called the imperfect. And the imperfect is replaced by the perfect, which we all know is the Bible. The objective Bible is far superior to subjective experiences. Why can’t these people just trust the Bible? Why do they have to go around always looking for another experience or jolt from God as evidence that they are okay in the eyes of God? They just need to read it!”

Now, how does a non-cessationist read this text? “Ok, ok, ok, I grant you the point. The text says, that prophecies will cease, that tongues will be stilled and that knowledge will pass away, but, hold the phone, for a second, it does not say that they have stopped now. It only says that they will. And you don’t think I read the Bible, while you are trying to tell me that when the perfect comes is a reference to the completion of the Bible being written? How on earth did you come up with that? If you would actually read your Bible that you claim we ignore you would read where Paul says at the end of chapter 14 “do not forbid speaking in tongues” and he does not say, but only for the next 35 years until the NT gets done.”

1 Corinthians 12 – 14 have been used and argued by both sides of the debate. Those who want to prove that miraculous gifts are for today and those who want to argue that they are not, both appeal to these verses. As a result, these chapters have become, for some, nothing more than piles of proof-texts to be hurled at the opposing view, while the original purpose for their writing is lost. I will address the particulars of these doctrinal and practical concerns. I will speak to the issue of the gift of prophecy and tongues and related issues, because chapter 14 deals with all of that. But, what I am most anxious about is for you to see and embrace the main argument of the text itself. What is the big idea of this text? Love is the Greatest – Forever!! Love, as it is defined here in the Bible is far and away superior to the other gifts. Notice the book-ends of this paragraph. (v.8 and v.13) So, if you are sitting here, loaded for bear, waiting for me to validate or challenge your position on these matters, hold on and do not miss the big idea of the text.

There is another related matter of interpretation that affects our understanding of this text, and that has to do with the identification of “perfection” (v.10). What is that? When the perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. It is obvious from the text that Paul is referring to the gift of prophecy, tongues and knowledge as being “imperfect.” So, when perfection comes, these gifts will no longer be needed. What is the identification of “perfection”? There are three main views:

- 1) The perfection is referring to the maturity of the church, when Jews and Gentiles have become unified in Christ.
- 2) The perfection refers to the completion of the writing of the New Testament. This view appears to be driven more by a desire to protect the Scriptures from competing visions and “prophecies” than it is by the careful and consistent interpretation of these verses. The argument goes like this: If the gift of prophecy is God speaking His Word through people, then this gift (gift of prophecy and the gift of tongues, if that is also considered to be a revelatory gift) would be rendered obsolete once the NT was completed, otherwise Christians would have competing sources of authority. If the gift of prophecy is still in operation, then why aren’t these contemporary prophets putting their prophecies into print like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc? That is a legitimate concern. If God is still giving authoritative revelation today that is on par with the Bible, then why are we studying some letter written to the Corinthians over 1,950 years ago, when we could hear a fresh word from the Lord? Now, did you notice how I just framed the issue? Let me ask it again. If God is still giving authoritative revelation today that is on par with the Bible, then why are we studying some letter written to the Corinthians over 1,950 years ago, when we could hear a fresh word from the Lord? What is the assumption behind my wording? A fresh word (new revelation) has more value than the old Bible. Do you see a problem with that? You should see a problem with that! Additional revelation (as I am presenting it) means that the Bible remains open-ended and the Bible is therefore NOT all that I need for life and godliness, and is not adequate to thoroughly equip me or you for every good work. Do you see the tension with this? I appreciate the concern that people have to protect the integrity and authority of the Bible. But, we cannot allow a concern, even as great as that one is, to be superimposed over a text and change an obvious meaning.

The question remains: When Paul wrote that when perfection comes, the imperfect will disappear, what did he have in mind?

- 3) The third position is that perfection refers to the return of Christ. This is an important matter because if the time of “perfection” occurred somewhere around 100 AD, then all of these gifts are no longer valid. If, the perfection is referring to the return of Christ, then the operation of these gifts is still possible. So, let’s summarize what Paul is saying here. When the perfect comes, the gift of prophecy will be over.

What does the text say? Look at it this way.

Now	Then
Imperfection (v.10)	Perfection (v.10)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partial Knowledge - Partial Prophecy 	
Child - immaturity (v.11)	Adult - maturity (v.11)
Poor Reflection (v.12a)	Face to Face (v.12a)
Partial Knowledge (v.12b)	Full Knowledge (v.12b)

While there are several arguments to support the view that this is referring to the return of Christ, the most compelling one is the phrase, “face to face.” The perfection is referring to the time when we are all with Christ and we see him face to face. That phrase is used in Genesis 32.30; Judges 6.22; Deut. 5.4; 34.10; Ezekiel 20.35 and always refers to seeing God in person. Of course we cannot see Him – fully or exhaustively and completely, but we can see him personally. Then, in Rev. 22.4 we read referring to us (his servants) “They will see his face!” Over and over, that phrase is used to refer to standing in the very presence of God.

You don’t play flashlight tag in broad daylight. The point of 1 Cor. 13.10 is that when you are standing before the sun, all other lights are useless. When Christ returns, the need for prophesy, tongues, gift of knowledge (and in fact all of the other gifts for that matter are rendered obsolete). The perfection refers to the return of Christ. That is the only view that makes sense in this context. However, does this position open up some other questions, such as the ones I raised earlier about the place and use of the gift of prophecy and tongues and how that might compete with the authority of Scripture? I am not going to address all of that today, but I will as we plow through chapter 14, which means you have to come back.

But think about one other aspect before we get back to verse 8. Many of the Corinthian believers were arrogant show-offs. They paraded their gifts in front of each other as a means to prove the fact that they had arrived. They began to look at themselves as God’s gift to the church, instead of the gifts as being God’s gift to them. They thought that they were living with the secrets of the Christian life, and of course we have seen over and over how blind they were to their own failures. That is how this chapter begins! You think you have arrived? You think you are so great? You think your gifts make you something special? It doesn’t matter how many gifts you have, how talented or polished or professional, or sacrificial you are, if you do not have love, it is all one colossal waste! Fact is, while you are getting all worked up about who has what gift, you have lost sight of what the whole thing is about anyway. What really matters to God, is not how gifted you are, but what is your motive? What is driving you? Gifts don’t last, love does! Love that is patient, kind, not mixed with envy or boasting, or rude and proud words; love that is not seeking its own advancement, and not keeping records of wrongs, and

does not rejoice in the failures of another, but instead rejoices in the truth; love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love like this is superior to any of these gifts because:

1. **The Gifts are Limited in Duration** (8)

A. Prophecies will cease

They will be brought to an end because when we are face to face with God there will no longer be any need for any gift of prophecy to be in operation. There is nothing left to be said.

B. Tongues will be stilled

Same point is given here. Their cause is over, they are done. By the way, and I am going to deal with this in a few weeks as well, but if tongues are, as some argue, the language of angels or heaven, or some private means of a deeper level of communication with God, then when we are face to face with God, it would not make sense for them to disappear – would it? Please do not lose sight of the argument here. Love is permanent, prophecy and tongues are temporary. Not only that, but so is knowledge.

C. Knowledge will pass away

This is not a statement about knowledge in general, but Paul is referring to the gift of knowledge that he mentioned in 12.8.

Here in Corinth, the church was full of competition. Which gift was the greatest? And which person who possessed the greatest gift exercised it in the greatest way? The day will come when someone will be able to do what you do better than you. You are needed, you are wanted, but you are replaceable. Frankly, that is very good to remember, because it protects us from taking ourselves too seriously. If you have the gift of prophecy or whatever gift you have, that is not all that important. What is important is that which will outlive and outlast all of those gifts; and that is your love.

Don't waste your life being jealous of those who have different gifts or who have more of a gift than you. Don't waste your life being proud of your gift or feeling smug over it – no matter what it is. Your gift won't last, but love does!

Point: Love is timeless and forever valuable! You will never go wrong if you love.

Love is superior to the rest of the gifts because:

2. **The Gifts are Limited in their Effectiveness** (9-11)

A. Present Knowledge and Prophecy are Partial and Incomplete

Right now on this side of glory, we only know bits and pieces. Our present knowledge is fragmentary. We get parts of the puzzle, but we don't get to see the whole thing. We know that there is an entire puzzle, but we don't fully know how everything fits together. The gift of prophecy and the gift of knowledge are themselves partial and incomplete. On this side of eternity, we don't see it all.

In Acts 12, James, the brother of John was executed by king Herod and Peter was arrested in order to be executed, but later in the same chapter, Peter was miraculously delivered from prison and spared an early death. What did James' wife think when Peter's wife gave praise to God for rescuing her husband? Why does one family face tragedy and another triumph? Even if you had the gift of knowledge and/or the gift of prophecy, your knowledge and insight would still be incomplete.

B. Present Perception and Understanding are Indirect and Imperfect (11)

Paul illustrates the point from an obvious example of life. A child thinks and reasons like a child. But, when a child becomes an adult, part of the evidence is seen in the way they process information. As a parent, you spend the first years of your life working up the energy to laugh at knock-knock jokes. Then, just when your kid gets really, really funny, they go away to college or out into life. Paul's point is that right now, we are in the childish part of life. We do not understand everything now, like we will when we are mature and complete in Christ in His kingdom.

The gifts of prophecy, knowledge and tongues are all part of the incomplete, imperfect, part of the journey. Love will never be outdated or unnecessary.

Now, we are almost done, but I want you to stop and put that last thought in your spiritual pipe and smoke it for a minute. Or, better yet, bench-press this; love is always necessary, always needed and eternally applicable. The reason for that is that our eternal condition with Christ and each other will be perfectly personable and perfectly relational. The greatest longings of our hearts have to do with relationships. Even the person who thinks that he loves money is only kidding himself. The love of money, is not so much the money as what the money represents or the power it can supposedly wield over others. Some very empty and shallow people try to buy or sell affection and attention. It is a sad substitute for authentic relationship. In the kingdom, in eternity, our relationships will be perfect. We will know and be known. We will love and be loved. It is this point that I want to expand on for next week as we conclude 1 Cor. 13.

Conclusion: "Where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same You wanna be where everybody knows Your name." There is a problem with that. Some people know too much about you, then what? Then you wanna be where no one knows you. You need a relationship where you are known fully known, and yet infinitely loved. Only Christ can do that. And we are called to do that and give people a taste now of what life and relationship like that will be.