

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

Hymns: #20 O Love That Would Not Let Me Go

#224 Come Down O Love Divine

Reading: 1 Corinthians 13

Maria Dyer was born in 1837 on the mission field in China where her parents were pioneer missionaries. Both her parents died when Maria was a little girl, and she was sent back to England to be raised by an uncle. The loss of her parents, however, did not deter her young heart from the importance of sharing the gospel. At age sixteen she, along with her sister, returned to China to work in a girl's school as a missionary herself. Five years later, she married Hudson Taylor, a man well-known today for his life of ministry, faith, and sacrifice.

Hudson and Maria's work was often criticized—even by other Christians. At one point Maria wrote, “As to the harsh judgments of the world, or the more painful misunderstandings of Christian brethren, I generally feel that the best plan is to go on with our work and leave God to vindicate our cause.” Of their nine children, only four survived to adulthood. Maria herself died of cholera when she was just forty-three. But she believed the cause was worthy of the sacrifice. On her grave marker these words were inscribed: “For her to live, was Christ, and to die was gain.”¹

In a day when many are self-absorbed and care more about what they can get rather than what they can give, we need a renewal of this kind of sacrificial love. It was God's love for us that sent Jesus into the world to die for our sins, and it is that kind of self-giving love that the Apostle Paul is urging the Corinthians towards in this thirteenth chapter which we come to today. The Corinthians, like many believers today, had plenty gifts of the Spirit, but sadly they were lacking in the Spirit of the gifts: namely Love. When we begin to use our gifts in that Spirit of love for God and each other as we should, our self-interests fade, we magnify Him and we find ourselves in harmony with John the Baptist who proclaimed: “He must increase; I must decrease.”

But note, this is a sacrificial love and not the emotional, sappy kind of love of which this thirteenth chapter is often referred to for support. As we have pointed out many times in the past, it is important for us to recognize that every passage of Scripture has a historical context, a prophetic context, and a personal context. We tend to miss the big picture or the point entirely when we simply grab hold of the “personal application” context and ignore the historic and prophetic. So it is this morning. As we will observe all three aspects in this chapter, I trust we will be drawn to an enlarged vision that fires the sacrificial kind of love that Hudson and Maria Taylor so beautifully modelled for us all.

1. LOVE'S PERSONAL/ PRESENT CONTEXT V. 1-3 *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

For this chapter to make sense we have to go back and pick up the last verse of chapter twelve where Paul said, “...eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” This chapter is about the most excellent way. What is the “most excellent way”? Or perhaps we should ask WHO the most excellent way is? Is it not our Lord Jesus Himself who said of Himself, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one come to the father except through me.” (John 14:6) Paul

¹ Marshall Broomhall; *The Jubilee Story of the China Inland Mission*

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

shows in this chapter that the most excellent way of using our gifts is the way of love, which is saying the same thing as the way of Jesus. For Jesus is God in the flesh and 1 John 4:4 and 16 tells us God is love. The bible also tells us that the fruit of the Holy Spirit is Love (Gal. 5:22-23). So, in summary, the most excellent way to eagerly desire the greater gifts and function in the gifts of the Spirit is by a current, living and abiding intimacy with the Trinity; the Triune God of grace; in Love.

Paul describes our personal experience of this Spirit of the gifts in v.1-3, by giving us the negative results of trying to live and function without the current, living and abiding intimacy with the Trinity; the Spirit of Love. He says without this you are simply a fading noise; a gong or a cymbal that crashes with an electrifying and loud noise but immediately dissipates; it doesn't last. It fades away as quickly as it crashed in on you; you're just a flash in the pan. But Jesus said He has chosen us to produce fruit; fruit that will LAST (John 15). Without the spirit of the gifts; without using your gifts in living and abiding intimacy with the Trinity, you cannot bear LASTING fruit, only noisy and quickly dissipating fruit.

He says in v. 2 that gift utilization without spiritual intimacy makes you and I “nothing”. The bible goes on to say in Gal. 6:3 “If anyone thinks he is something when he is **nothing**, he deceives himself.” Oh how many people are “self-deceived-somethings” when in fact they are “nothings”, because, though they may have extraordinary gifts of the Spirit they are not using them in the Spirit of gifts. These are the “puffed up ones” of chapter 8:1 where Paul said to the Corinthians that “Knowledge puffs up but love builds up.” To indiscriminately use your gifts without love and apart from the Spirit is to be self-deceived into thinking you are “building others up” when in fact you are really only “puffing yourself up”. It's “nothing”. To avoid this we must get a firm grip of the reality that we can only love to the degree that we ourselves are experiencing and receiving love, and this cannot be found apart from a living and abiding intimacy in the Triune God of grace. John says “We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19) and in v. 10 John said “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Are you experiencing God's love for you? Are you receiving and experiencing God's sacrificial and sin atoning love for you? This alone is the well into which we must cast our spiritual gift bucket and draw it up full of the Spirit. Only from that fullness can we then be “something” rather than “nothing” when we use our gifts.

The third negative result in verse 3 is that “I gain nothing”. What a warning this is. There is no present or future reward for carnal and Spiritless activity, even if that involves giving away everything you own to the poor or even surrendering to a martyr's death. Paul says to do this “but have not love”, meaning not knowing and experiencing the love of God in you first, is to gain nothing. There is not a crown for loveless sacrifice. Oh, what a sobering realization this was to me twenty two years ago in the Niger Desert. To give all I had to the ministry of the Wodaabe or give my body to the mission field, while increasingly becoming like the elder the brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son, was gaining me nothing. God wants your heart; he wants YOU and he wants you knowing HIM and knowing your Sonship. Heart estranged service and gift use gains you nothing.

Each of the gifts Paul lists in these first three verses are like six big zeros; zero plus zero plus zero is still zero without love. But when you put a 1 in front of all those zeros, the 1 of love, you have a million potential rewards.

2. LOVE'S HISTORICAL/ PAST CONTEXT V. 4-8A “4Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” 8Love never fails.

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

I think many of us have heard these verses quoted at weddings and while they are beautiful words to speak at a wedding, we must see these words in their historical and past tense context primarily. I'm in agreement with Wiersbe who said "Few chapters in the Bible have suffered more misinterpretation and misapplication than 1 Cor. 13. Divorced from its context, it becomes a "hymn to love" or a sentimental sermon on Christian brotherhood. Many people fail to see that Paul was still dealing with the Corinthian's problems when he wrote these words."²

For example, we see here fourteen descriptors, seven positive and seven negative, which can all be traced back to the boasting baby believers' experience...or lack thereof; namely the lack of love which Paul described as being:

- Patient, meaning the capacity to be wronged and not retaliate. Think of their lawsuits and the agape feasts that humiliated the poor and did more harm than good.
- Kindness would be the Spirit's response of love to these wrongs.
- Envy and boasting were seen in their division over men in chapter one and in both the disdain for their gifts by some and their detachment of their gifts from the wider Body of Christ by others as in chapter eleven.
- Pride- the Greek verb for pride –“physioo” occurs only seven times in the NT, but six of those seven occur in this letter to the Corinthians.
- Rudeness was seen in the problem of women in uncovered worship, the disgraceful Agape feasts and the general chaos of their worship services which we'll see in the next chapter.
- Self-seeking was seen in their selfish eating of food sacrifice to idols and stumbling their weaker brothers.
- Easily angered is visible in their lawsuits that were being brought before pagan courts in chapter six.
- No record of wrongs- the Corinthians had ample opportunity to do this.
- Not delight in evil- as they were doing over the incestuous man in chapter 5, but rather rejoices in the truth.
- Always protects- by the mature yielding of rights for the benefit of weak-conscienced believers in chapter 8.
- Trusts, hopes and perseveres – is seen in Paul modelling the “Four R's” in chapter 9.

This is the primary context of these verses.

It is tempting to take this passage out of its historical context. It is also tempting to do an individual word study on each of the Greek words used here and then hold them up before us as a list of principles to be remembered and employed or as a definition of what love is. But, I am not going to do this for several reasons:

- First, because context matters, as we have just seen.
- Second, because I think the English words themselves convey enough meaning for us and don't need to be complicated or overly adorned. Paul says “Let us live up to what we have already attained.” (Phil. 3:16) and surely our current understanding of this description in the English language is a big enough bite for most of us to chew on for a while.
- Third, we cannot “principlize” Love. As John Eldridge has said, “It is impossible to memorize enough principles to navigate the human experience. Instead, you have God; intimacy with God; life with God.”³ We are to be led by the Spirit, not principles; we are to keep in step

² Warren Wiersbe; *Be Wise- 1 Corinthians*; Victor Books; 1983; p. 130

³ John Eldridge; *Consecrating Empathy- Part 2*; Podcast; *Ransomed Heart Ministries*; Mar 2018

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

with the Spirit; not principles; we are to continually be filled with the Spirit, not principles. So you see gifts of the Spirit are meant to be utilized in the Spirit of the Gifts, not in principles; not that principles are bad or have no place. They're good and valuable. It's just that there is an eternal difference between principles and the Life-Love of the Holy Spirit of God. He is to be primary, principles are to be secondary. I touched on this last week when I pointed out that we are not commissioned to the indiscriminate use of our gifts and that there is danger in doing so by potentially setting things in motion that God simply is not doing at that moment.

- My last reason is because I believe there is danger in making these fourteen descriptors into a definition. They cannot be a “definition” of love, for a definition implies boundaries and limits. And since God is love (1 John 4:8; 16), then love is limitless and beyond a full and final definition as God is. Rather, we should think of these descriptors as a particular vantage point from which to view some of what love is. For example, when I was teenager I made many trips to hike in the Grand Canyon in Arizona. One of the most spectacular views is from Bright Angel Point where you can see an enormous and beautifully breathtaking view of the Canyon. There is probably no better vantage point with which to take in the vastness of the canyon, but you still can't see it all from there. So it is with God and Love. These verses give us a spectacular vantage point to see what the Spirit of Love looks like in action, but we cannot say we have seen it all here. I think we are better served to see this passage as Paul describing the “fruit of the Spirit” of Love, for we can find each expression in the Gal. 5:22 passage where we see Love is joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

I believe the historical context in v. 4-8, and what Paul was hoping the Corinthians would come to see is like what happened among some of the Brethren believers after WW II.

“During World War II, Hitler commanded all religious groups to unite so that he could control them. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order had a much easier time. Those who did not, faced harsh persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp. When the war was over, feelings of bitterness ran deep between the groups and there was much tension. Finally they decided that the situation had to be healed. Leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining his own heart in the light of Christ's commands. Then they came together. Francis Schaeffer, who told of the incident, asked a friend who was there, "What did you do then?" "We were just one," he replied. As they confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them. Love filled their hearts and dissolved their hatred. When love prevails among believers, especially in times of strong disagreement, it presents to the world an indisputable mark of a true follower of Jesus Christ.”⁴

This is a perfect illustration of the Love...that is the Holy Spirit...who NEVER fails us if we abide in Him and are led by Him. Love NEVER fails...for God NEVER fails.

3. LOVE'S PROPHETIC/FUTURE CONTEXT V. 8B- 13 *“But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. 11When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. 12Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror;*

⁴ *Our Daily Bread; October 4, 1992*

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 13And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

We now turn our attention to see the prophetic and future aspect of this passage where Paul makes three things very clear. First, the gifts of the Spirit and their purpose in this current dispensation of the Church Age will one day cease. Second, Paul describes when they will cease. And thirdly what will replace them in the next dispensation. Let’s look at each these in turn.

In V. 8 we see that prophecies, tongues and knowledge WILL cease. I don’t think Paul is teaching that just these three gifts will cease, but rather these are representative of the gifts referenced in chapter 12 which are given for this dispensation, and that the day will come when they will pass away. Why should they pass away? Simply because they will no longer be needed. As we saw briefly last week in Eph. 4:13, the charismatic grace endowment gifts are given for the express purpose of equipping God’s people for works of service, building up the Body of Christ UNTIL (mexri) we become unified and mature. Once this has been achieved, these gifts will have served their purpose and will no long be required.

In V. 9-11 we see WHEN the gifts of the Spirit will cease. Paul says in v. 9 that as great as the gifts are there is a partialness to our capacity to fully receive in this age all that they are given for, but when perfection comes, these gifts and our imperfect ability to embrace them will disappear. So when will the gifts cease? When perfection comes. The question now is, “What is the “perfection?”

Over the years there has been much debate and division amongst believers as to how to answer this question. For some, they say the perfection that Paul had in mind here was the canonization of the Scriptures and that once the perfection of the Bible came, the gifts cease to operate. They say the apostolic and the prophetic gifts were purely foundational as in Eph. 2:20, and that once the Church was founded these gifts ceased. This group also go on to say that many other gifts such as tongues, wisdom, knowledge, discernment, prophecy, interpretation, faith , healing and miracles were all simply “sign gifts” confirming the Gospel message in the early church days and are no longer operative today.

Other believers disagree and hold that all the gifts are still in operation today and that the perfection Paul had in mind is the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth.

But I believe the Bible is clear that the perfection Paul has in mind here is our maturity as believers. The Greek word Paul uses here in v. 10 for “perfection” is τὸ τέλειον, which is the exact same word Paul uses in Eph. 4:13 for “mature”. In Ephesians 4 it is clear that the gifts are given to bring the church from a state of infancy to adulthood, maturity, τέλειον. So, here our first clue is given if we allow scripture to interpret scripture.

But there is a second clue that is given to us when we maintain our discipline of “context, context, and context”. Here 1 Cor. 13:11 Paul actually employs a metaphor of a child growing from infancy to adulthood, saying “*When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.*” And notice that the metaphor symbols align perfectly with the representative gifts he said would cease; talked with tongues; thought with knowledge; and reasoned with prophecy; becoming a man aligns with maturity and putting childish ways behind aligns perfectly with the gifts passing away.

So when will the gifts cease? When we have all matured. And when is that going to happen? Not until he snatches his Church up in the Rapture. The Bible teaches us in 1 John 3:2 that “... now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that **WHEN HE**

“Spirit of the Gifts”

1 Corinthians 13

APPEARS, (THEN-added for emphasis) we shall be LIKE HIM, for we shall SEE HIM AS HE IS. This verse perfectly describes not only when the gifts will cease but what they will be replaced with which we see in V. 12.

When Paul says *“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror;”* he would have had in mind one of the highly polished bronze mirrors for which Corinth was so famous. A bronze mirror is not like a mirror you and I think of today. When we look in the modern mirror we get an almost exact reflection. But a bronze mirror was not as sharp. It was good, but it was nowhere near what we have and it was nowhere near what the gifts were going to be replaced with; namely the *“face to face”* vision and clarity of seeing Jesus Christ as He is and seeing ourselves clearly for the first time. Paul said *“then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known”*. The Gifts of the Spirit are one day going to be replaced with Giver of The Spirit Himself.

What a day that is going to be. In that day faith will become sight. In that day hope will be fulfilled. And Love will remain unchanged and thus greater than faith and hope, for Love is not so much a gift as the Giver of gifts Himself.

This, in my mind at least, should forever put to rest the argument that the gifts disappeared with the coming of the Bible. The perfection is not in seeing *“face to page”* but the perfection is in seeing Him *“face to face”*.

As we come to the end of this chapter, let us reflect upon and ask ourselves how we are using our gifts.

- Are we using them in the Spirit who IS Love or are we self-deceived; flashes in the pan that are gaining nothing for we are not using them in love and out of intimacy with the Triune God of Grace?
- Are we using our gifts based on principles or are we using them by the Spirit’s never failing guidance?
- Are we using our gifts in both the humility of our current seeing *“through a glass darkly”* but also in the imminent hope of seeing Jesus *“face to face”* when he calls us home?

Our God and Father, these are deeply penetrating questions and convicting ones to be sure. We confess that many times we have all failed to use our gifts properly and according to your word which we have seen this morning. We ask for your forgiveness and cleansing through the Blood of Jesus and ask you to please fill us afresh with your Holy Spirit that we may ever serve your and each other for the common good, the building up and maturing of the Body of Christ until we hear your trumpet voice say to us *“Come up here.”* We ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.