

1 Corinthians 13

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most loved passages in the entire Bible. It is often quoted at marriages and is often the subject of sermons. Yet, its full context and meaning are sometimes overlooked. Chapter 12 is about spiritual gifts and chapter 14 is about spiritual gifts and so we must recognize that as Paul wrote chapter 13 it had a connection with spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 even closes with the words, “And now I will show you the most excellent way.”

The Christians in Corinth had been giving their spiritual gifts too much importance. They had become proud about them and even were jealous and rude with each other. Paul wants to point them to something better—and the something better is love. So now in chapter 13 he is going to contrast love with spiritual gifts in three ways.

In verses 1 to 3, Paul shows that love is more important than spiritual gifts. He teaches that since love without spiritual gifts is highly useful but spiritual gifts without love are nothing, then love is more important than spiritual gifts. He mentions specifically tongues, prophecy, and knowledge as being nothing without love. He also says that even a faith strong enough to move mountains, great generosity to the poor, and becoming a martyr would all be nothing without love. So—love is more important than spiritual gifts.

In verses 4 through 7, Paul shares another way in which love is greater than spiritual gifts—Love is more beneficial than spiritual gifts. Love is patient, kind, not envious, not proud or rude, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth, protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. The Corinthians, on the other hand, had let spiritual gifts make them impatient, unkind, envious, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, keeping a record of wrongs, delighting in evil and not rejoicing with the truth, un-protective, untrusting, not hopeful, and not persevering. Paul paints a highly contrasting picture of how beneficial love is in making one like Christ and how the Corinthians had let spiritual gifts drag them into a lifestyle that was the opposite of Christ. So, he says, love is more beneficial than spiritual gifts.

Now we come to verses 8 through 13 where Paul gives us the final contrast—love is more lasting than spiritual gifts. Especially he here mentions three spiritual gifts that will be passing away. He starts by saying “Love never fails.” Thus, love never comes to an end. It outlasts. Then he mentions three spiritual gifts that will soon come to an end—prophecies will cease, tongues will be stilled, and (supernatural) knowledge will pass away. Prophecies will cease to be spoken. He does not, of course, mean that

prophecies already spoken and written down will stop being useful. He means that the Holy Spirit will stop using people to prophesy. Also the spiritual gift of tongues, by which people had provided the message of God, will stop being spoken. And the supernatural knowledge which some had possessed as a spiritual gift. All three of these gifts are listed in chapter 12:7-10 where Paul lists the spiritual gifts which Corinthians had. Paul here focuses on these three because these were the means by which the Holy Spirit empowered Christians to speak and to write messages and some of these messages were recorded to go into the written word.

Then Paul adds that as any individual shared information from his gift of knowledge or any individual spoke through his gift of prophecy, these revelations were “in part.” That is, no one person revealed all that God wanted people to know and so each individual revelation was only a part of what God wanted revealed. So, each individual revelation was “imperfect” or incomplete.

Now comes a very key expression in Paul’s comments. “When that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away.” The word perfect here is the Greek word “teleios” which has the basic meaning of “complete” or “bringing to an end.” It is not a word that means perfect in the sense of “without sin.”

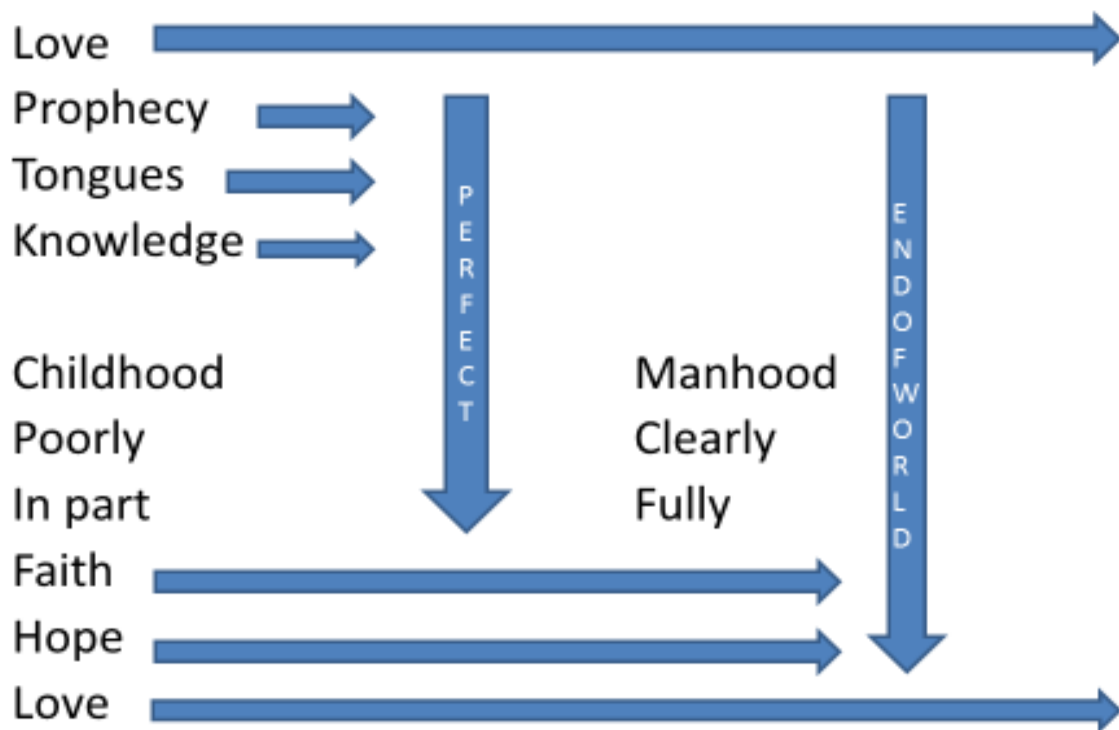
How, then, should we connect this verse about “that which is perfect” with the preceding verses? Prophecy, tongues, and knowledge revealed pieces. But when all of those pieces were put together, they would make something “perfect” or complete. Paul is speaking here of how those inspired by God put their messages in writing and when those individual writings (pieces) are collected, they will make the complete. Thus Paul here has in mind the completed revelation of God or what we call the New Testament. It is “that which is perfect” in that it is the complete collection of the pieces made available as the Holy Spirit led people in prophecy, tongues, and knowledge.

Then Paul adds this very important next statement. “When perfection comes, then the imperfect disappears.” When the revelation is complete, then those means by which the pieces of the revelation were given will no longer be needed and, therefore, will disappear. The Holy Spirit will no longer need or use prophecy, tongues, and knowledge because their purpose has been fulfilled.

In verses 11 and 12, Paul uses “before and after” to contrast what it is like before the perfect comes and after the “perfect” or completed text of scripture comes. So he contrasts childhood, before the completed text, with manhood, after the completed text. He contrasts seeing in a mirror which would give an imperfect reflection with seeing more perfectly “face to face” when the perfect or completed text came. And he says that

while the individual revelations are in the process of being made, he is seeing “in part,” but when the pieces are all in place, then he will know “fully.”

In verse 13, Paul caps off this section about how long things last by saying that there are three great virtues—faith, hope, and love and the greatest of these is love. But why is love greater than faith or hope? They are all necessary as part of one’s Christian life. All are strongly encouraged in scripture. In the context of a passage about how long things last, however, Paul is really saying that love is greater than faith and hope because it will last longer. In heaven we shall still love, but in heaven we will not have hope anymore because we already will have what we hope for. And in heaven we will not have faith because faith will have become reality. Thus, faith and hope only last until Jesus returns, and we go to heaven. Love, however, continues past that time. Faith, hope, and love do “abide” while prophecies, tongues, and knowledge are said to “cease,” be “stilled” or “pass away.” So these abiding things will outlast the ceasing things. Thus the things Paul mentions in this section of 1 Corinthians 13 have three different lengths to last—things that are ceasing, things that are abiding, and things that never end. The chart below shows that the ceasing things stop when the “perfect” or complete arrives, the abiding ones last past that until the end of time, and the never failing (love) lasts forever.



Verse 8 says love never stops and so the top arrow shows love continuing forever. Then come prophecies, tongues, and knowledge which will cease when the “perfect” or complete comes. These three gifts contribute to bringing the perfect to come but when their work has been completed, they will cease. Then Paul tells that there is a childhood stage and manhood stage. The difference is that when the complete revelation has come and then the childish era (incomplete revelation) will pass into manhood (completed revelation). Also in this period of incomplete revelation, Paul sees dimly, but with the revelation complete, he will see clearly. Then Paul says he sees “in part” during the time of incomplete revelation, but when the complete comes, then he will see “fully.” On the chart next are faith and hope, which are “abiding” qualities. Thus, these outlast the “ceasing” prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, and continue until the end of time. Finally, Paul again says that love outlasts them all, because it goes on into eternity.

One of the keys to understanding scripture is to put a passage into its context. To understand 1 Corinthians 13, then, we must put it into the context of the chapters before and after—both of which discuss spiritual gifts. So chapter 13 is not just telling us about love, here he contrasts love with spiritual gifts. If he can get the Corinthian church to see the importance of love, he hopes that will stop their quarrelling over spiritual gifts.

As we see his explanation of love, we note that he first shows that love is more important than spiritual gifts because even miraculous gifts without love are nothing. Then he explains that love is more beneficial than gifts because with love we live a more Christ-like life. Finally, he says that love is more lasting than gifts as he contrasts the duration of spiritual gifts with love. The gifts will soon cease because their mission will be accomplished when the total or complete revelation has been made. The New Testament story shows, indeed, how the revelation was gradually revealed. Bringing in the Gentiles, for example, was not preached until Peter went to see Cornelius, nearly ten years after Pentecost. And we do not hear about elders until Paul starts on his journeys a few years later. Over a period of about seventy years, from about 30 AD to about 100 AD, apostles and others with special gifts were revealing what God wanted people to know and these things were recorded in written form. Scribes made copies of these documents to share with people all over the brotherhood so they would know about different pieces of the revelation. Finally, when all was revealed, the means by which the Holy Spirit was revealing were no longer needed and so, Paul says, they will cease.

This great chapter of 1 Corinthians 13, then, is not only a great chapter about love. It is also a great chapter on spiritual gifts and that when their work is done, they will cease while faith, hope and love, and then love will outlast them all.