

Chapter 14: A Still More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13:1–13

With good reason, 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most well known and beloved passages in all the Bible. Here, Paul writes a soaring, semi-poetic ode to love, the greatest of the gospel graces (1 Cor. 13:13). In spite of our familiarity with this passage—or, perhaps, because of it—we do not always read this passage in context with the rest of 1 Corinthians. Here, Paul is not only extolling the virtues and value of love. Much more, he is critiquing the Corinthians' *lack* of love. First, Paul points out the foolishness of pursuing giftedness apart from love (1 Cor. 13:1–3). Then, Paul contrasts the character, conduct, and confidence of love against the behavior of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:4–7). Finally, Paul explains why the Corinthians should pursue love more than giftedness (1 Cor. 13:8–13). In this passage, Paul insists that *everything is nothing without love*.

If I Have Not Love... (1 Cor. 13:1–3)

In the first section of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul opens his great chapter on love with a series of contrasts. The contrasts are not so much between gifts on the one hand and love on the other, as though the two were antagonistic to one another. Instead, Paul either means to condemn “doing the right thing for the wrong reason” (lacking love as the motivation for service) or living hypocritically (exercising powerful gifts in one area, but lacking love in another area).¹ Probably, Paul writes in such a way as to condemn either kind of failure of love. We cannot exercise God’s gifts correctly unless we do so according to God’s love.² This *love* is more than a mere feeling, and more than “charity,” as the older translations have it.³ Without explicitly stating it, Paul is clearly pointing us to the love of God himself, displayed for us in giving over his own Son for our salvation.⁴

To make this series of contrasts, then, Paul uses hyperbole to illustrate the shortfall of gifts apart from love, even if those gifts were exercised to the greatest imaginable degree. He begins with a hypothetical, hyperbolic exercise of the gift of tongues: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels....” (1 Cor. 13:1). Now, Paul *did* speak in tongues more than all the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:18), and he *did* hear things in the third heaven that he may not utter (2 Cor. 12:2–4; cf. Dan. 12:8; Rev. 22:8). Nevertheless, there is no indication that even Paul had command of *all* the languages of men and of angels.⁵ Indeed, if Paul *did* have the gift of speaking every language, whether human or heavenly, then he would undercut the point he is making. Paul’s use of hyperbole illustrates that, apart from love, even the greatest imaginable exercise of tongues (an exercise beyond what Paul himself experienced) would be nothing more than chaotic cacophony. This use of hyperbole should also caution us from reading too much into Paul’s reference of speaking the language of angels. As Thomas Schreiner observes, “Whether Paul believed some believers actually spoke in the languages of angels cannot be determined from this verse.”⁶ Paul is writing about love, not about the mechanics of speaking in tongues.

In v. 2, Paul uses hyperbole again, but this time in relation to the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and miracle-working faith. Along with the gifts of tongues in v. 1, and the gift of helping generosity in v. 3, we should notice that Paul is interacting with the gifts that he named in the previous chapter (cf. 1 Cor. 12:8–10, 28). By prophecy (ESV: “prophetic powers”), Paul refers to receiving revelation from God to understand to God’s *mysteries*—insights that cannot be known unless and until God himself reveals them.⁷ So, “*All mysteries*, therefore, here means, *all the secret purposes of God* relating to redemption.”⁸ Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, “but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory” (1 Cor. 2:7 NASB).⁹ In the previous chapter, Paul listed the gift of prophecy as different from the gift of knowledge, just he wrote that the prophet holds a different office from the teacher (1 Cor. 12:8, 28). So, while prophecy may refer to receiving revelations of God’s mysteries, knowledge must refer to “the intellectual apprehension or cognition of revealed truth. It was the prerogative of the prophet to reveal, of the teacher to know and to instruct.”¹⁰ Beyond these gifts for revealing and teaching the mystery of God’s plan for redemption in the person and work of Christ, Paul adds the gift of faith. This is not the gift of saving faith, which God gives to all believers as a gift (Eph. 2:8–9), but the spiritual gift of faith capable of performing miraculous works (e.g., “to remove mountains”; cf. Matt. 21:21; 1 Cor. 12:9–10).

Three times in v. 2, Paul uses the word “all”: “all mysteries...all knowledge...all faith.”¹¹ We should remember that Paul even began this letter by praising the Corinthians for the fact that they had “all knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:5).¹² Nevertheless, Paul repeats the word “all” to make his conclusion more devastating: “[if I] have not love, I am *nothing*” (1 Cor. 13:2). Without love, *all* the gifts would amount to *nothing*.¹³ We should recall that God did not reveal arguably the clearest prophecy of the Messiah in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) through the righteous prophet Moses, but through the wicked prophet Balaam (Num. 24:17; cf. 2 Pet. 2:15; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14). Furthermore, we should note that while Judas had the *spiritual gift* of faith to work miracles, he never had the *saving gift* of faith to trust for salvation in Christ (e.g., Matt. 10:5–15; Luke 9:10; 10:17).¹⁴ Therefore, this spiritual gift of faith is a gift that may strengthen other believers, although it may not necessarily save the one who exercises the gift.¹⁵ Clearly, then, 1 Corinthians 13:2 is another example of hyperbole, since no prophet other than Jesus has ever possessed all mysteries, all knowledge, and all faith.¹⁶ Paul’s point is not to document a particular case of someone who possesses all these gifts, but to illustrate their worthlessness apart from love.

In v. 3, Paul gives the most hyperbolic example possible for the gift of “helping” (1 Cor. 12:28). This is someone who not only helps the poor in measured ways, but who gives absolutely everything to their aid. First, Paul lists the distribution of all one’s property. Now, someone who gives away all his possessions *may* be motivated by love.¹⁷ Certainly, the rich man who *refused* to give away his possessions would have done so if he loved God and his neighbor more than he loved his wealth (Matt. 19:16–30; Mark 10:17–31; Luke 18:18–30). Nevertheless, giving away possession is not *always* motivated by love. On this point, Charles Hodge wisely writes that a man may give away everything, but gain nothing: “He may do all this from vanity, or from the fear of perdition, or to purchase heaven, and only increase his condemnation. Religion is no such easy thing. Men would gladly compound by external acts of beneficence, or by penances, for a change of heart; but the thing is impossible. Thousands indeed are deluded on this point, and think that they can substitute what is outward for what is inward, but God requires the heart, and without holiness the most liberal giver or the most suffering ascetic can never see God.”¹⁸

Paul continues, insisting that even giving up our bodies to be burned gains us nothing, apart from love.¹⁹ This may be the closest that Paul comes to pointing explicitly to the great act of *God's* love for us at Jesus' cross, since Paul speaks of "delivering up" his body. This was the same language that Paul used to describe Christ's being "delivered up/betrayed" on the night when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23). To imitate Christ's actions, without sharing Christ's love, is worthless. So, as the hyperbolic gifts of languages were said to be mere noise in v. 1, and as the hyperbolic gifts of *all* mysteries, *all* knowledge, and *all* faith were "nothing" in v. 2, notice the result Paul gives here in v. 3. The one who *gives away* his possession in his life will "*gain* nothing." David Garland writes, "Persons with the attributes listed in these verses may seem on the surface to be invaluable to the church, but God, who inspects beneath the surface, sees the lovelessness, which makes all these glorious endowments worthless."²⁰

Love Is... (1 Cor. 13:4–7)

In the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul insisted that the greatest gifts and achievements are nothing without love. After warning about the absence of love, Paul now gives a rich description (rather than a simple definition) to describe the presence of love.²¹ In the four verses of 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, Paul personifies love, using fifteen verbs that allow us to see the multifaceted nature of love.²² First, Paul uses two verbs to capture the passive and the active nature of love (1 Cor. 13:4a). Second, Paul uses eight verbs to tell us what love is *not*, with a ninth verb to give the positive statement of the eighth negation (1 Cor. 13:4b–6). Third, Paul closes with four verbs that describe how love interacts with "all things" in this life and the next (1 Cor. 13:7).²³ In this passage, Paul does not choose at random the specific aspects of love that he highlights here. Instead, it is clear that Paul has two points of comparison throughout these verses. First, Paul clearly chooses phrases that contrast the failures of the Corinthian church.²⁴ Second, Paul describes love in terms of *God's* saving, redeeming, sacrificial love toward us in Jesus Christ.²⁵

The Character of Love (1 Cor. 13:4a)

Paul begins by writing, "Love is patient and kind" (1 Cor. 13:4a). The word "patient" captures the idea of someone who remains patient in the face of much suffering, i.e., "long-suffering": "It patiently bears with provocation, and is not quick to assert its rights or resent an injury."²⁶ This idea of patient, long-suffering love is at the heart of *God's* revelation of himself: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger..." (Ex. 34:6; cf. Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 11:22).²⁷ We may think of this as the passive nature of love: the exercise of patience in the face of provocations.

Paul pairs the passive idea of patience with the more active quality that "Love is...kind."²⁸ Here again, Paul gives us an attribute of love that we see reflected in *God's* own character: "...abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands..." (Ex. 34:6–7; cf. Rom. 2:4; 11:22; Tit. 3:4).²⁹ We perhaps see this the kindness of *God* most clearly portrayed in the kindness (e.g., usefulness, helpfulness, friendliness) of Christ to the humble and needy he encountered during his earthly ministry.³⁰ Together, these two initial descriptions of love give a broad description of love's character: "Love is not quick to resent evil, but is disposed to do good."³¹

The Conduct of Love (1 Cor. 13:4b–6)

After this initial, broad-brush stroke portrait of love, Paul refines his definition by telling us what love is *not*. In part, these descriptions continue to reflect the character of God. R. C. H. Lenski convincingly argues that this list of negatives portrays a “natural sequence in the psychology of lovelessness,” contrary to those who have argued that this list of verbs has no definite shape or logical order.³² It is in this connection that we see Paul’s most serious critiques of the Corinthians.³³ That is, this is not merely a generic portrait of lovelessness in action; this is a strong critique of the Corinthians, written in a thoroughly diplomatic and pastoral way.³⁴

In the first phrase, “love does not envy” (1 Cor. 13:4b), Paul uses a word (*zēloi*) that he leveled against the Corinthians earlier in this letter: “For while there is *jealousy* [*zēlos*] and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (1 Cor. 3:3).³⁵ True, Paul also acknowledges that there is a good place for a Christian to “earnestly desire [*zēloute*] the higher gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31).³⁶ In that verse, though, Paul was urging the Corinthians to seek to be as useful as possible to build up the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 14:5). Here, Paul is rather describing the envy of a foot longing to be a hand, or an ear longing to be an eye (1 Cor. 12:15–16). Love desires to serve others; love does not envy their gifts.

Second, Paul insists that “love does not boast” (1 Cor. 13:4c). Once again, Paul is clearly critiquing the Corinthians, who are characterized by their boastfulness (1 Cor. 1:29–31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6).³⁷ In those contexts, though, Paul uses a different word for “boast” than he does now. Here in 1 Corinthians 13:4, Paul uses a vivid word which means “wind-bag.”³⁸ We should observe that Paul closely linked envy with boastfulness in 1 Corinthians 12. After exposing the envy of feet wanting to be hands and ears wanting to be eyes, Paul next rebuked the boastfulness of the eye who did not believe it needed the hand, and the head who did not believe that it needed the foot (1 Cor. 12:21).

Third, Paul writes that love is “not arrogant” (1 Cor. 13:4d). The boastfulness of the previous phrase is directly connected to arrogance, as the fruit is connected to the root: “Behind boastful bragging there lies conceit, an overestimation of one’s own importance, abilities, or achievements.”³⁹ The specific word here, though, is one that we have seen five times already in this letter, translated often as “puffed up” (1 Cor. 4:6, 18–19; 5:2; 8:1).⁴⁰ Of those references, perhaps the most significant was when Paul warned that “‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8:1), which seems to echo Paul’s warning only a few verses earlier: “And if I have...all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2).

Fourth, Paul states that love “is not rude” (1 Cor. 13:5a). Very literally, this word means “contrary to the...form, fashion, or manner that is proper.”⁴¹ The English translation “rude” does not capture the full force of Paul’s use of this word elsewhere. Earlier in this letter, Paul used this word to speak of improper behavior of a man toward his virgin (1 Cor. 7:36), and elsewhere Paul uses this word even to describe male homosexual intercourse (Rom. 1:27).⁴² In this light, Paul almost certainly means for us to think of the unseemly, unfitting, improper behavior of the man who has his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5:1) as well as the disgraceful, dishonoring behavior of the men who are praying and prophesying with covered heads in corporate worship, or the women who are doing so with uncovered heads (1 Cor. 11:2–16).⁴³ Positively, the fact that love is “not rude” means that love behaves in a becoming, fitting, and proper way.⁴⁴ Love forgets self, but thoughtfully extends respect, honor, and consideration to others.⁴⁵

Fifth, Paul says that love “does not insist on [or, “seek”] its own way [*ou zētei ta heautēs*]” (1 Cor. 13:5b). Once again, this is language that Paul had used to rebuke the Corinthians earlier in this letter, when he wrote in regard to eating meat sacrificed to idols: “Let no one *seek his own good* [*mēdeis to heautou zēteitō*], but the good of his neighbor” (1 Cor. 10:24).⁴⁶ Then, a bit later, Paul commended his own example in this regard: “Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, *not seeking my own advantage* [*mē zētōn to emautou*], but that of many that they may be saved” (1 Cor. 10:32–33).⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Paul says that looking out for the interests of others is not only the duty of Christians, but also the example of the Lord Jesus (Phil. 2:4).⁴⁸

Sixth, Paul teaches that love “is not irritable” (1 Cor. 13:5c). That is, love “is not quick tempered; or, does not suffer itself to be roused to resentment.”⁴⁹ R. C. H. Lenski writes, “While love treats others with kindness, consideration, unselfishness it, in turn, receives much of the opposite.”⁵⁰ Irritability arises when we insist on our own way, but struggle to gain what we want. If in humility, instead, we consider others to be more significant than ourselves, we will not be irritated when our own interests are thwarted (cf. Phil. 2:3).

Seventh, Paul says that love is not “resentful” (1 Cor. 13:5d). Literally, this is “does not count the evil [*ou logizetai to kakon*].” This language is very similar to the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament’s) rendering of Zechariah 8:17, so that some translations (e.g., KJV) render this as love’s inability to “devise evil against someone else.”⁵¹ This rendering, though, misses the article, “think *the* evil,” which points not to evil committed *by* the one thinking, but evil committed *against* the one who thinks about it—i.e., ruminates, stewes, and bitterly rehearses it.⁵² Instead, this is accounting terminology, where the thinker keeps careful records of the debts owed with the goal of exacting payment in full through revenge.⁵³ In contrast to this, love keeps no record of wrong. The gospel, of course, is greatest example of this grace-based accounting system system. Through Christ, God is no longer “counting [our] trespasses against us [*mē logizomenos autos ta paraptōmata autōn*]” (2 Cor. 5:19).⁵⁴ Instead of counting our sins against us, in the gospel God counts Christ’s righteousness *for* us (Rom. 4:6–11, 22–25).⁵⁵

Eighth, Paul offers a contrast. On the one hand, love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing”; instead, love “rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). Cutting against the way *love* is used in our culture, true love does not operate independent of righteousness and truth. On the contrary, “love does not sympathize with evil, but with good.”⁵⁶ It is a misunderstanding of love to believe that love is purely a powerful emotion, and as such, it carries us away into unrighteousness and falsehood. In his classic work, *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards wrote, “From a vigorous, affectionate, and fervent love to God will necessarily arise other religious affections; hence will arise an intense hatred and abhorrence of sin, fear of sin, and a dread of god’s displeasure, gratitude to God for his goodness, complacency and joy in God when God is graciously and sensibly present, and grief when He is absent, and a joyful hope when a future enjoyment of God is expected, and fervent zeal for the glory of God.”⁵⁷ Love does not carry us away into error; real love despises error, but rejoices in the truth.

The Confidence of Love (1 Cor. 13:7)

In the last verse in this section, Paul stops characterizing love according to what it “is not.” Instead, Paul offers four final characterizations of what love is. The first and fourth phrases describe how love interacts with the present circumstances of suffering in this life, while the second and third

phrases describe how love looks toward the future promises of the gospel.⁵⁸ By addressing how love interacts with both the present and the future, Paul not only brings this section to a proper close. Additionally, Paul transitions into the next section, where he addresses how love bridges the gap between the tensions of today and our hope for the future.

First, Paul says that “love *bears* [stegei] all things” (1 Cor. 13:7a). Earlier, Paul used this word when he spoke of his refusal to make use of his right for compensation, so that “we *endure* [stegomen] anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12). Elsewhere, Paul used this word to inform the church at Thessalonica that he sent to them to learn about their progress in the faith after a long silence, “when we could bear/endure it” no longer (1 Thess. 3:1, 5). Thus, the idea of *bearing all things* has to do with bearing “in silence all annoyances and troubles.”⁵⁹ Paul will offer a similar, but complementary, statement in his fourth statement, “love endures all things.”

Second, Paul explains that love “believes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7b). Certainly, Paul could never mean by this that love is willing to be deceived, especially after he has just stated that love “does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth” (1 Cor. 13:6).⁶⁰ Instead, this has to do with thinking charitably about others, as Lenski points out: “The flesh is ready to believe all things about a brother and a fellow man in an evil sense. Love does the opposite, it is confident to the last.”⁶¹ To *believe all things* means avoiding suspicions about others.⁶²

Third, Paul states that love “hopes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7c). When paired with the previous statement, it is clear that these two statements describe the way that love looks to the future promises of the gospel with faith and hope. Love both acknowledges the necessity of bearing and enduring under the difficulties of this present hour *and* of believing and hoping in what God will do in the future. This is not naive, foolish optimism. Instead, this describes the basic attitude of Christian faith: “love does not give way to cynicism and despair, for it believes in the God who gives life to the dead (Rom. 4:17). Love believes and hopes for the best, since it looks to God who can forgive sins and grant a new beginning to those dead in trespasses and sins (cf. Eph. 2:1–7).”⁶³

Fourth, Paul, writes that love “endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:7d). Although love looks forward in faith toward the future, where our hope is anchored, love also bears and endures all things associated with the sufferings of this present world. The word for “endures” comes from the language of warfare, describing the ability to endure an enemy assault.⁶⁴ Love endures these assaults through “brave perseverance.”⁶⁵ The difference between the first and fourth clause of this verse is the difference between *bearing* “annoyances and troubles” and *enduring* “suffering and persecutions.”⁶⁶ Love persists through pain, and perseveres through persecution.

Partial Gospel Gifts; Perfect Gospel Graces (1 Cor. 13:8–13)

The final paragraph of 1 Corinthians 13 is extraordinary, not only for its breath-taking hope for the future of the people of God, but also for its literary quality. The entirety of 1 Corinthians 13 is written beautifully, and Paul ends this chapter on a high note. Paul writes this passage as a *chiasm*, a literary structure where the outline looks as though the author traced down the left side of the Greek letter *chi* (X). So, the first elements correspond with the last elements, and the middle elements correspond with each other. Here is how the chiasm looks in 1 Corinthians 13:8–13:

- A) Love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8a)
- B) Prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8b)
- C) Partial knowledge/prophesy now vs. the perfect then (1 Cor. 13:9–10)
- D) Ways of a child vs. ways of a man (1 Cor. 13:11)
- D') Indirect vision now vs. face-to-face vision then (1 Cor. 13:12a)
- C') Partial knowledge now vs. full knowledge then (1 Cor. 13:12b)
- B') Faith, hope, and love abide (1 Cor. 13:13a)
- A') The greatest is love (1 Cor. 13:13b)

At the beginning and the end (A), Paul bookends this section with statements about the enduring value of love: Love never ends, and the greatest of the virtues is love. Next, in the first interior section (B), Paul contrasts the temporary value of the *gifts* (prophecies, tongues, and knowledge) against the enduring value of the three *graces* (faith, hope, and love). This point will become important when we try to understand how faith and hope are both similar to and different from love. Then, in the third interior section (C), Paul contrasts the partial with the perfect, especially in the area of knowledge. Finally, in the fourth interior section (D), Paul illustrates this contrast between the partial and the perfect, first by comparing a child with a man, and second by comparing indirect sight in a mirror with face to face sight. As a whole, this structure enhances Paul's stark contrast between the temporary significance of spiritual gifts and the eternal, enduring value of love.

Gospel Gifts Will Pass Away (1 Cor. 13:8)

Our translation has, “Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13:8a); however, the word “ends” is a word that most often means “falls.” We might bring out Paul's imagery better by translating this, “Love never collapses.”⁶⁷ This is foundational idea on which the whole passage rests. In contrast to the enduring character of love, Paul states that the extraordinary gifts of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge “will pass away” (1 Cor. 13:8b). Certainly, God's truth will endure forever, as it has been revealed by the gifts of prophecy and tongues, and understood by the gift of knowledge.⁶⁸ The exercise of these gifts, however, must pass away: “In contrast to love, the spiritual gifts have a built-in obsolescence. They are not permanent and do not get perfected. Prophecy and knowledge will be brought to an end. These gifts are only partial and must give way to something beyond themselves.”⁶⁹

The word translated here as “pass away” is particularly important in Paul's theology of redemptive history. Paul regularly uses this word to describe the way that God abolishes/does away with/brings to nothing/causes to pass away *both* the enemies that oppose him (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:28) as well as his own, righteous works whose temporary purpose has come to an end.⁷⁰ Here, Paul is not at all suggesting that the spiritual gifts are bad (the former category), but only that they are temporary and must eventually come to an end (the latter category). One important parallel passage is 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul uses this word four times to contrast the *passing away* glory of Moses's ministry (2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13, 14) against the *permanent/abiding* new covenant ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:11; cf. 1 Cor. 13:13: “So now faith, hope, and love *abide*...”). For now, the spiritual gifts and the officers who exercise those gifts are necessary to build us up in Christ; however, when Christ returns, we will have no need for such helps, for we will have Christ fully and directly forever.⁷¹

Jonathan Edwards is almost certainly correct when he observes a twofold meaning to these passing-away of the gifts, both in the short term and the long term:

There is a twofold failing or ceasing of those miraculous and other common gifts of the Spirit, both of which the apostle has doubtless respect to: one is their failing at the end of the present state of probation, or the present imperfect state of God's people in time, with respect to particular persons that have common gifts, at death, and with respect to the church of God collectively considered, at the end of the world; and the other is the failing of miraculous gifts in the church of Christ, even while yet remaining in its temporary and militant state, as they failed at or about the end of the apostolic age, that first and more imperfect, and less settled and established state of the Christian church, before it was wholly brought out from under the Mosaic dispensation, wherein it was under tutors and governors, and before the canon of the Scripture was fully completed, and all parts of it thoroughly collected and established. Miraculous, and other common gifts of the Spirit, cease at the end of the imperfect state of the church: wherein the church knows in part, and is in a state of childhood in comparison of the more perfect state that follows.⁷²

Many good commentators react with surprising hostility to the idea that the cessation of prophecies, tongues, and knowledge refers to the finalization of the New Testament canon.⁷³ Nevertheless, these commentators seem to be evaluating this position as though we must choose *either* the cessation of sign gifts at the close of the apostolic age *or* the complete cessation of spiritual gifts at the return of Christ. Edwards gives a more nuanced answer by recognizing that the question is not *either/or*, but *both/and*.

Gospel Gifts are Partial, Not Perfect (1 Cor. 13:9–12)

Following the chiasmic pattern, the next layer has to do with what we have *in part* now, in contrast to the *perfect* in the future. Paul states in v. 9–10 that we know in part and prophesy in part as we await the coming of the perfect, and then he returns to the same language in v. 12: “for now I know in part; then I shall know fully....” In v. 9–10, Paul teaches that we only have partial knowledge of the things of God, so that even the prophets themselves only glimpse some, not all, of the truth.⁷⁴ As confirmation of this point, we might perhaps think about our need for four witnesses to the life of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Why should we need four Gospels, rather than one? Each Gospel gives a *true* glimpse of Jesus, but each Gospel only gives only a *partial* glimpse of him. Each examines Jesus from a different angle, making a unique contribution to our knowledge of him. Nevertheless, as John admits, even these four Gospels together give us only a partial glimpse of him: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). For now, the prophets prophesy only in part, and we know only in part.

By contrast, we await the day when we will know Christ fully, completely, and perfectly (v. 10). When that day comes, the partial will pass away as no longer necessary. The point is not that the partial is wrong or bad, but simply incomplete. Charles Hodge gives a helpful analogy to explain Paul's meaning here: “A skillful teacher may by diagrams and models give us some knowledge of the mechanism of the universe; but if the eye be strengthened to take in the whole at a glance, what need men of a planetarium or of a teacher?”⁷⁵ When the sun rises, we extinguish the lamps that we depended upon through the night.⁷⁶

In the center of this chiasmic structure, Paul gives two illustrations that confirm his point. First, Paul contrasts the ways of a child against the ways of a man (v. 11). According to the terms of this illustration, we are like children now, as we await the day when we will become adults. Paul does not denigrate the ways of children here, but only means in this illustration to point out the various stages of development. The speech, thinking, and reasoning of children are appropriate for children, and they reflect true experiences of children, according to their stage of development.⁷⁷ While we understand and respect the behavior of children as children, we recognize that adults must move past the status of children.

Earlier, we observed that Paul uses the same language here for the *passing away* nature of the spiritual gifts, as compared with the *abiding* nature of the new covenant graces, that he does elsewhere to contrast the *passing away* glory of the old covenant, as compared with the *permanent/abiding* glory of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:11). Once again, we should note that Paul elsewhere uses the imagery of childhood development and the growth toward maturity to contrast the old covenant and the new covenant (Gal. 4:1–5). There, Paul explained that old covenant Israelites were like children who were put under the guardianship of the law until the fullness of time, when Christ came. Paul clearly sees the development from the old covenant to the new covenant, with the shadowy veil of the law giving way to the full glory of the person and work of Christ, in the same terms as he sees our partial knowledge of Christ now, by faith, giving way eventually to the full knowledge of Christ when he returns.

The second illustration expresses this idea particularly well. Now, we see Christ in a mirror, “dimly,” but then, “face to face.” The phrase translated as “dimly” (*en ainigmati*) means “in a riddle,” or “indirectly.” Paul is almost certainly alluding to Numbers 12:8, where the Lord described the unique relationship he had with Moses: “With [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles [LXX: *di’ ainigmatōn*], but he beholds the form of the LORD” (Num. 12:8). Even so, while the Bible says that Moses spoke with the Lord “face to face” (Ex. 33:11), the Bible also tells us that this “face to face” vision of God was not perfect, for not even Moses was permitted to see the face of the Lord (Ex. 33:20, 23).

Indeed, Paul elsewhere says that *we* see the Lord face to face through the ministry of God’s word in the gospel (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4, 6); however, here Paul reminds us that our face-to-face vision of the Lord is partial and indirect, as though we were looking at him in a mirror. Gordon Fee gives a helpful analogy to modern culture: “In our own culture the comparable metaphor would be the difference between looking at a photograph and seeing someone in person. As good, and often as helpful, as a photograph is, it is simply not the real thing—one may indeed kiss the picture of a spouse, but only in the hopes of the reality.”⁷⁸ When Christ returns, the portraits we have of him in the Scripture will no longer be needed, since we shall behold him face to face forever (1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:3–4).

Paul closes this section by making the meaning of his illustrations explicit: “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12b). We relate to God in a true way, although it is partial. When Christ returns, we will no longer know him only in part, but fully. Because God is infinite, knowing him fully will stretch through all eternity; however, we will no longer know him under the limitations and constraints that we experience now. God will graciously give us as full of a knowledge of himself as he knows of us.

Gospel Graces are Permanent (1 Cor. 13:13)

Once again, we must remember the context of 1 Corinthians 13. Paul writes 1 Corinthians 13 in the middle of his conversation about the nature of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12; 14). Paul's point, then, is to contrast the limitations and temporary nature of gospel gifts against the permanent, enduring nature of gospel graces. In the chiasmic structure of this passage, the temporary nature of the gifts (1 Cor. 13:8b) are contrasted directly against the permanence of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13a). Thus, the interpretation of love as the *greatest* of the three gospel graces (1 Cor. 13:13b) that sees love as enduring, while faith and hope are temporary, is probably incorrect. Certainly, faith and hope will not have the same function in eternity as they do now, when we know God only partially.⁷⁹ Paul's point, though, is that these are the virtues that we will cultivate forever, and therefore these graces are what we should most prize and pursue. The gifts, while valuable, are only temporary, and should be treated as such.

Discussion Questions

1. How eloquently do you “talk the talk” of Christianity (1 Cor. 13:3)? How much intellectual certainty (prophesy, knowledge) or practical certainty (faith) do you have in Christianity (1 Cor. 13:2)? How much confidence do you gain from your works (1 Cor. 13:3)? Do you impress others by your giftedness? Do you find your Christian confidence in your giftedness? What does Paul warn us about giftedness without love (1 Cor. 13:1–3)?

2. How does Paul contrast the conduct of love with the conduct of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:4–7)? How does our study so far of these many other passages that Paul echoes here help us to understand Paul's point about love? Of the many words Paul uses, which word(s) do you find the most convicting? How does Paul compare the conduct of love to God's kindness toward us in Christ? Which of these word(s) do you find most reminiscent of the gospel?

1. Why must the gospel gifts pass away (1 Cor. 13:8)? What is the difference between the *partial* and the *perfect* (1 Cor. 13:9–10, 12b)? What is the difference between the *partial* and the *perfect*? What does Paul mean when he compares the ways of children with the ways of adults (1 Cor. 13:11)? What does Paul mean when he contrasts seeing in a mirror indirectly with seeing face to face (1 Cor. 13:12a)? How do these illustrations help us to understand the contrast between *partial* and *perfect*?

3. Why is it so significant to know that faith, hope, and love will abide forever (1 Cor. 13:13)? What role will faith and hope play in the future, once we walk by sight (2 Cor. 5:7)? How ought we to relate to those gospel graces differently from the gospel gifts? How do you think that the gospel graces are related to the gospel gifts? Why is love superior to faith and hope? What role will love play throughout eternity to come? With our future in mind, how should we cultivate love today?

Notes

1. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 222–23.
2. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 272–73.
3. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 265–66.
4. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 221–22.
5. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 545–46.
6. “In a long discussion in chapter 14 prophecy is exalted over tongues since it edifies the church (14:1–25). In verse 1 Paul envisions a situation in which one speaks in the languages of human beings or even of angels. Some see a parallel to the *Testament of Job* where people speak in the languages of angels (48:3; 49:2; 50:1–2; 52:7). It is also suggested that the reference to the languages of angels indicates that some of the Corinthians believed they occupied an exalted spiritual place. The reference to the languages of angels should not be pressed, for what we have here is hyperbole. We see a clear example of hyperbole in the discussion of prophecy in verse 2 (see below), and the same is probably the case here. Context, rather than the *Testament of Job*, is the most important consideration; thus it seems likely that we should not read out of this that some of the Corinthians spoke in the languages of angels. Whether Paul believed some believers actually spoke in the languages of angels cannot be determined from this verse. The main point of the verse is easy to grasp: even if believers speak in the most exalted languages imaginable, if they do not have love they are like instruments that make an annoying and irritating sound.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 273.)
7. See G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).
8. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 267–68.
9. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 419–20. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xx.i.html>>
10. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 267–68.
11. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 701.
12. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 550.
13. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 701.
14. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 420. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xx.i.html>>
15. Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 241.
16. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 549–50.
17. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 301.
18. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 268.
19. Some texts have “to boast” rather than “to be burned.” It is difficult to know which is the original text, and I will not enter into the discussion here, but simply follow the ESV’s translation. Ultimately, the difference is not one of substantial meaning, but shade of nuance. For arguments that come to different conclusions about which text is most likely to be original, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 497–98, and Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 274–74.
20. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 616.
21. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 554.
22. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 616.
23. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 705.
24. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 269.

25. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 617.
26. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 269.
27. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 617.
28. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 555.
29. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 617.
30. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 555.
31. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 269.
32. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 556–57. Pace Hodge, e.g., “The apostle personifies love, and places her before them and enumerates her graces, not in logical order, but as they occurred to him in contrast to the deformities of character which they exhibited.” (Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 269.)
33. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 226–27.
34. Barnett, *1 Corinthians: Holiness and Hope of a Rescued People*, 245.
35. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 226.
36. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 303.
37. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 226.
38. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 177.
39. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 556.
40. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 226.
41. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 557.
42. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 226.
43. *Ibid.*, 226–27.
44. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 270.
45. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 557.
46. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 227.
47. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 270.
48. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 227.
49. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 270.
50. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 558.
51. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 708.
52. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 270.
53. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 558.
54. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 708.
55. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 557–59.
56. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 270.
57. Jonathan Edwards, *The Religious Affections* (First published 1746; Reprint: Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 36–37.
58. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 709.
59. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 271.
60. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, 425. Available online: <<https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom39/calcom39.xx.ii.html>>
61. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 560.
62. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 271.
63. Schreiner, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 278.
64. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 271.
65. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 560.

66. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 271.

67. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 179.

68. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 562.

69. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 621.

70. “On the other hand, prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will all be brought to nothing eschatologically. The verb that Paul uses in verse 8 of prophecy and knowledge (*katargein*) is a favorite word of his; it consistently refers to God’s nullification or abolition of everything that is ephemeral or—in some cases—opposed to him. For example, in 1:28 Paul declares that God has chosen lowly and despised nonentities ‘to reduce to nothing [*katargēsē*] things that are’ (cf. 2:6; 6:13; 15:24–26; Rom. 6:6). In verse 8, to be sure, the gifts listed are not allied with powers hostile to God; rather, they will be abolished simply because they will no longer be necessary when the Lord returns and the fullness of his kingdom is present. These gifts of revelation are suited to the time between the times, when the church must walk by faith; prophecy and *gnōsis* [knowledge] are only ‘partial’ (v. 9), giving believers a real but imperfect glimpse of God’s future truth. When that which is complete comes, however, these partial instruments of knowledge will no longer have any purpose, and so they will be discarded by God (v. 10).” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 228–29.)

71. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 271–72.

72. Jonathan Edwards, “Notes on the Bible,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2 (First published 1834; Reprint: Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 800. Available online: <<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.xiv.xxii.html>>

73. E.g., Richard Hays, “This interpretation is simply nonsense.” (Hays, *First Corinthians*, 229.) Even Thomas Schreiner, a cessationist, evaluates interpretations of 1 Corinthians 13 related to the close of the New Testament canon as “unconvincing.” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 279–80.)

74. Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 180.

75. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 272.

76. This imagery has been attributed various to John Calvin (Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit*, *Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald Bray [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press], 228) and to Karl Barth (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 705. Citing Karl Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* [ET, London, 1933], 86.)

77. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 716–17.

78. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 718.

79. Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians*, 275–76.