THINGS FALL APART

1 Corinthians 13:8-12

By

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I read a short novel a while back set in Nigeria around the 1890s. It is the story of a man named Okonkwo. He was a great warrior and leader in his tribe. Unlike his lazy, manipulative father, Okonkwo worked hard to gain wealth for himself. He lived by the rules and traditions of his tribe and was a well respected man. His story turned into a tragedy, though. He was forced to live in exile from his tribe for seven years because he accidentally killed a young boy, and he lost most of his status and honor in the tribe despite efforts to regain it. Deep changes were taking place in his tribe as they began interacting with the British Empire. The message of Christianity was bringing changes within the tribe, while the presence of the British military brought changes in how the tribe interacted with outside forces. Okonkwo’s quick temper and rashness were no longer so highly esteemed within the tribe nor effective diplomatically outside the tribe. All that he had built his life and his reputation on were falling apart. In a moment of panic and rage, after having been humiliated by British officials, after realizing that his tribe would not vow with him to seek out revenge, he took his machete and killed a uniformed British official, then went off and took his own life. Things had fallen apart. That is the name of the book by the way, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe.

We sometimes feel that way about our lives. Perhaps, not in such an intense way, but at times we may get that sinking feeling that our life, all that we’ve worked for, all that we’ve tried to accomplish, is falling apart. We feel like Moses at the end of his life who, after all he had done, still cried out to God, “…establish the work of our hands!” (Psalm 90:17)

I would like to challenge you to be, in a certain way, ok with that. Some things fall apart! We live and, as Christians, are called to serve in a transitory world where people are constantly climbing and clamoring to grab hold of crumbling ledges before the next guy does. The Holy Spirit has given us spiritual gifts to use in building up the Church and in working to see God’s Kingdom advance in this world. At times, though, this transitory world exerts too much influence over us and we turn Christianity into a competition. We don’t use our spiritual gifts to build each other up. Instead, we try to use our spiritual gifts to be more popular, more spiritual, and more right than anyone else.
The Corinthian church had all sorts of problems along these lines, problems the Apostle Paul was dealing with in his letter to them. In the middle of his instructions on spiritual gifts and their proper uses, he wrote chapter 13, his famous chapter on love. One of the reasons this chapter stands out so powerfully is because of the chapters before and after it. The Corinthians were divisive, arrogant, immature, and unnecessarily controversial in how they worshipped together, so Paul introduced them to a more excellent way of life, a way that does not fall apart.

I hesitated to preach from this passage because it touches on that sticky topic of speaking in tongues. Does it teach that some spiritual gifts (including tongues) ceased shortly after the birth of the church or that they will continue throughout the church age? A few weeks ago I had set aside some time to study this passage and really look in depth at that question. During that time, Kaci asked me what I was learning and if I had figured anything out. I paused. It was like my brain had a vague notion of some distant memory, “Oh yeah, that.” As I had studied this chapter, that question, in my opinion, wasn’t too difficult to answer, and the spotlight had shifted in my mind to the more exciting themes of this passage – love and its implications in our lives. As D.A. Carson points out, “…the powerful thrust of Paul’s argument is sometimes lost under detailed debates as to when the charismata [gifts] cease.”¹ I don’t want that to happen to us. My conclusion, by the way, is that you can’t establish from this passage that any spiritual gifts have already ceased.

We are going to work our way through this passage by looking at three things. First, we will look at our current state of existence as Christians. Second, we will look at our future state of existence as Christians, which is sharply contrasted with our current state. Third, we will look at the constancy of love over our entire existence and how it should affect our relationships and lives in this world where things fall apart. All this needs to be understood in the broader context of the proper use of spiritual gifts.

**Spiritual gifts, which are partial and temporary, must be exercised in love because it is complete and eternal.**

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1. Our current state of existence as Christians

This passage does not compare the eternality of love with the transitory nature of wealth or power or any of the pleasures of this world. Instead, it highlights the superiority and steadfastness of love by comparing it with God-given spiritual gifts. Even within Christianity, there are some things that will not last, things that will fall apart. That isn’t to say that God’s Word, God’s Kingdom, God himself, or the fruits of our service for God will fall apart. They will last, but as we use our spiritual gifts we have to be aware that the gifts themselves and the contexts in which we use them are passing away.

a. We know and prophesy in part

It seems that the Apostle Paul chose those three specific gifts, knowledge, prophecy, and tongues, because they were particularly problematic for the Corinthian church. We know from verses such as 1 Cor. 8:2, “If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know;” that they were infatuated with knowledge as a status symbol and from 1 Cor. 14 that their uses of prophecy and tongues were divisive and disruptive. However, what this passage has to say about those three gifts is applicable to all spiritual gifts.

God has gifted some within the body of Christ with knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8). Some people have vast knowledge of the Bible, of the world, of issues that we struggle with. A common refrain in 1 Corinthians is the phrase, “Do you not know…” The Apostle Paul had knowledge that they did not have. He was sharing it with them, so they could be built up and strengthened. We have people in our lives today that do that for us. Many of them have written books. But none of us, not even the Apostle Paul, knows everything. We only have partial knowledge, and even the knowledge we do have, we acquire in a part by part, piecemeal way. Have you ever learned anything absolutely life changing and then forgot it? Sometimes when I re-read a paper I wrote or notes from a lesson I taught, I’ll come across something and think, “Wow, that’s interesting.” Even if you were to compile all the knowledge of all the world’s thinkers and could somehow remember it all, we still only know in part.

Prophecy in the Bible is a vast topic. In general terms, when someone is exercising the gift of prophecy they are given the ability to say what God would say in a certain situation, to proclaim His Word and His purposes.
to others, but we can only do that in part. We don’t know everything God would say. Think of all that has been said by the church. Think of all the different ways that the people of God have proclaimed to the world God’s truth and God’s perspective on things. Yet it is still only done in part.

It is the same with all the gifts. Some people have the gift of faith, but even the greatest expression of faith is still only done in part. Those who have the gift of service, however great their service is, still only serve in part. In this world there will always be more that could have been taught, more encouragement that could have been given, or more mercy that could have been shown. These gifts are temporary and incomplete. They are going to pass away. That doesn’t mean, though, that they are useless or that God won’t fully accomplish his will in this world through them. When it is dark, a flashlight serves a very useful purpose.

b. We speak, think, and reason like children.

This passage also gives us two different analogies to help us better understand our current state of existence as compared with our future state of existence. The first is a comparison of a child and an adult. Some commentators would say that this analogy isn’t a comparison between our current and future states, but that it is being used in a similar way as 1 Cor. 14:20, “Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.” It is being used to tell them to grow up right now in their understanding of love and how they are treating each other. I would definitely agree that this whole section of 1 Corinthians is a challenge to us to grow up in our thinking on these issues, but I would still hold that in this passage it is a comparison between our current and future states. Our current knowledge and understanding, compared with what it will be, is childish. That should lead us to humility, but not despair. It doesn’t mean that we don’t need powerful, prophetic preaching and in-depth theology today. We do. We need it desperately.

c. We see in a mirror dimly.

Our current state of existence is also likened to seeing things dimly in a mirror. Because of our partial knowledge and partial understanding, because of our limitations in these lowly bodies we dwell in, we don’t see God, we don’t see ourselves, and we don’t see reality perfectly clear. It
isn’t saying that we can’t see anything at all. It’s saying by way of analogy, by way of comparison, that we cannot yet perceive God clearly and fully. If you were to look at a murky reflection of a landscape in a puddle, you would be able to truly perceive that there is a tree or a field or a hill. The reflection wouldn’t be inaccurate. It’s like we are looking at a dim reflection of God instead of looking directly at him, but that will one day change.

d. We have already been fully known.

One final thing to notice about our current state of existence at the end of verse 12 is that we have already been fully known. I wanted to point that out to you because we can find great comfort in this truth. Steve spoke about this last week, about the foreknowledge of God. Although in our present life we experience things in partial and fragmented ways, we have already been fully known, and therefore fully loved by God.

2. Our future state of existence as Christians

Usually the Bible tells us good things about being a Christian, the blessings we have, so it seems a little strange that this passage would be pointing out things that are partial, incomplete, temporary, and childish about the Christian life, but it is because the Corinthian Christians, like us at times, were building their identities and the basis of their relationships with each other, not on the love of God, but on the conversation topics and activities they did or did not participate in. That led to the inevitable result of life being turned into a competition. We end up either feeling jealous because we aren’t like someone else or prideful because other people aren’t like us.

Our spiritual gifts and lives as children of God serve a very important function, as I said, like a flashlight on a dark night. But it won’t be like this forever. The perfect is coming, when Jesus returns and consummates his eternal kingdom. Then all things that are partial will be done away with.

a. Spiritual gifts will be abolished.

Three different verbs are used in verse 8. The NASB translates them as ‘fails’, ‘done away’, and ‘cease’. The word for ‘fail’ doesn’t mean fail like when you fail a class. It means ‘fail’ more like when a bridge or a tower fails, when something falls down or falls apart or falls to pieces. Jesus
used the same word in Matt. 7:27, describing what happened to that house, the one where the rain fell, and the floods came, and the wind blew and slammed against that house. It fell (or failed), and great was its fall, but that is not what love is like. Love will never fail.

In contrast to love, prophecy and knowledge will be done away. There will come a time when they will be made obsolete or rendered ineffective. The third word, ‘cease’, is used in reference to tongues. Sometimes someone ceases doing something on their own. “When he had finished speaking…” Luke 5:4. Other times, though, someone ceases doing something not just from their own choice but because of a command or presence of an authority. Some people were beating Paul, but because they saw a Roman commander coming, they stopped themselves (Acts 21:32). The waves and the wind were beating against the disciples’ fishing boat, but because Jesus rebuked them, they ceased (Luke 8:24). Spiritual gifts won’t just fade away of their own volition. They will be done away with by the hand of God. He powerfully poured out His Spirit to give us these gifts at the birth of the church, and in a no less decisive act, He will abolish them when the perfect comes.

Our gifts and knowledge and ministries are vitally important in this present world, but when Jesus returns we will need spiritual gifts like you need a flashlight in the noonday sun, like you need a match when a bonfire is burning, like you need a fan in a hurricane or a sprinkler in a rainstorm. It’s pointless. It’s like a fireplace in Phoenix or a hospital in heaven.

b. We will become like grown-ups who put away childish things.

Our speech, our reasoning, and our thinking at this time are childish compared with what they will be when we see God face to face. In the Resurrection, the most powerful and eloquent prophetic preaching will sound like a toddler babbling. The most sophisticated and in-depth systems of theology will look like kindergarten art projects. If Jesus comes back while some of you are watching that theology video series with Dr. Grudem this evening, no one will say to Jesus, “I’ll be out in a few minutes. This video is fascinating!” No! We would have to say, “Sorry Dr. Grudem. As wonderful as your lectures are, the Son of God just appeared in glory, and all this, quite frankly, seems suddenly childish to me.”
c. We will see face to face.

The word translated as ‘to’ in the phrase ‘face to face’ is a preposition that indicates the relationship between two things as being towards each other or in the direction of each other. The preposition is used in John 1:1, when it says that the Word was with God. Jesus, the Word was with God the Father, and in some way we will no longer be looking through a mirror dimly. In Christ, we will be together with God, face to face with our Maker. He will position himself towards us and we will be positioned towards him with nothing between us to distract or distort.

d. We will know fully.

1 Cor. 13:8 says that knowledge will be done away. Verse 12 tells us that we will one day fully know. Knowledge, as a partial and temporary spiritual gift will be done away with, and in its place we will know fully just as we have been fully known. This doesn’t mean that we will become omniscient like God. It means that just as we have been fully known by God in a relational way, we will one day fully know him. Again, that doesn’t mean that we will know everything about God. I suppose if I knew everything, I would know what this means exactly, but I think it is best understood, not as a promise, that we will know every piece of information in the universe, but as a description of our future life in the Resurrection when we will see God face to face and fully know him, heart to heart, on a relational level.

When the perfect comes, prophecy and knowledge, along with all the other gifts, will have the plug pulled on them. They will be shut down, never to be started up again. Right now, we need to be doing the work of an evangelist. Right now, we need theologians who will labor over the Word of God to bring us the knowledge and understanding that it contains. We need prophets who will proclaim God’s truth with boldness. We need Christians who are loving others, feeding the poor, and fighting for justice and righteousness. But we need to remember not to turn our service for God or our knowledge of God into a god. One day Jesus will return and say, “Thanks, I’ll take it from here.” Then all the churches that have been planted, all the missions agencies that have been formed, all the ministries that have been founded, from vast worldwide organizations to the smallest little group, all those things, which are good things, things built up in order for the body of Christ to exercise its spiritual gifts, will fall apart.
3. **The constancy of love over our entire existence**

   a. The cross defines love.

   This passage compares love with spiritual gifts. The problem, though, is that it only gives love the first 3 words, “Love never fails…” There is really only one simple, yet incredibly important point, made about love. It won’t ever fall apart, but what does that mean? Is love a feeling that will stay with you forever? Is love an abstract idea, like one of Plato’s forms, that is elusive yet somehow eternal?

   When the Bible defines love it doesn’t give us an abstract definition or a description of emotions. Usually the Bible doesn’t define love as much as it shows love. We are given something to look and told, “There, that’s what love is.”

   What is love? You are dead in your sins. You are alienated from God. You are so blind that you don’t know you are blind. You are under judgment for your sins. But God sent his Son to pay your penalty. Look at Jesus hanging on the cross with blood flowing down. Listen to the agony in his voice as he cries out to his Father, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Look at how Jesus became one who was despised and rejected. See how the Father turned his face away from his Son so that you could see him face to face. He who knew no sin became sin on our behalf. Do you see his lifeless body? He endured your punishment so that you might live. That’s what love is.

b. We need to pursue love and spiritual gifts. One can’t be sacrificed for the other.

   We need to use our spiritual gifts to build each other up, but we also need the love of God. One can’t be sacrificed for the other. 1 Cor. 12:31 and 14:1, the bookends of this chapter on love help us keep spiritual gifts and love in the correct balance during our time on earth. “But earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I show you a still more excellent way,” (1 Cor. 12:31). “Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy,” (1 Cor. 14:1). We basically need to chase after both of them. We need to exercise our spiritual gifts in love. They aren’t status symbols or indicators of our ranking before God. The cross, where Jesus stood before God in your place, is the indicator of your ranking before God outside of his mercy. You didn’t
earn your spiritual gifts. They are gifts! They are weapons for a battle and we’re all on the same side.

Without love we become a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. It doesn’t profit us (or anyone else) anything. We become harsh and abrasive. God does not give us spiritual gifts so we can gather fame for ourselves, so others will be jealous of us, or so we can have some publicity. He gives us our gifts and the opportunities to use them, very clearly according to 1 Cor. 12:7, to build up the body of Christ. Don’t share the gospel with someone to be right. Do it out of a desire to see them come into a relationship with God. Don’t teach in order to show others how smart you are. Teach because others need to clearly understand the truth of God’s Word. You should exercise your spiritual gifts for the good of the other person. Doesn’t that sound like what love is - putting the needs of the other person ahead of your own?

c. Exercising spiritual gifts with love is of great benefit to you and to others.

If we can do that, there are many wonderful blessings that will result.

• communion with the Trinity

Love is a foundational characteristic of the relationship between the Father and the Son as Jesus’ prayer in John 17 shows and also with the Holy Spirit as some other texts allude to (Rom 5:5, 15:30). If we will use our spiritual gifts in love, to serve others, then we will be in line with the Trinity. It will provide us with deep communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as our attitudes and way of life are at peace with God. Then when the things that do fall apart start falling apart, it won’t shake us.

• deeper fellowship with other Christians

Another result, as we stop competing with each other, as we stop the games and stop posturing ourselves against each other, is that we will have deeper fellowship with each other. I hang out on occasion with some of the other youth pastors in town and things go so much better when I approach them as my brothers in Christ whom I should love and serve instead of as the competition.

• greater effectiveness in our ministries
Finally, we will just be more effective in our ministries to others. God knows our hearts and there are no shortcuts here. You can’t just pretend to have love so that God will bless your ministry and then you’ll win the game.

4. **Application:**

   a. Stop playing the game. Christianity is not a competition.

   We have to stop playing the game. We have to figure out how to stop Christianity from being a competition among us. Sometimes we boast in our freedom. Sometimes we boast in our restraint from using our freedom. Sometimes we gloat because we know the right way to do things. We find a million different ways to compare ourselves with each other and to try and lift ourselves up above others around us. But that’s not love. That’s not what Jesus was doing on the cross, so stop it!

   b. Grow up in your understanding of the variety and duration of ministries within the Church.

   Instead of fighting with each other, we need to grow up. Spiritual gifts are temporary and the opportunities God gives us to exercise them are also temporary. We can’t build our identities on specific situations because the circumstances of this life are constantly changing. We get married and have children. We grow old. We move. Other people move. God has given the church a variety of gifts to be used in a variety of ever changing situations. The gifts will end. The situations are always changing. So don’t build a monument on top of a particular set of circumstances. Oh, there are so many in our own culture we could pick on right now, but we won’t.

   c. Pursue love.

   Things fall apart, but love will never fall apart. So pursue love. Foster the love between you and God, your love for fellow members of the body, and your love for the lost, so you can serve in the ways that God has called you to serve, not as a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, but in order to build others up in a beautiful expression of the eternal love of God.