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GENUINE SPIRITUALITY: A STUDY OF 1 CORINTHIANS

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**A MORE EXCELLENT WAY
 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13
 [PART 1]**

INTRODUCTION

Conflict had arisen in the Corinthian church concerning spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of tongues. Therefore, Paul's aim in responding to the Corinthians' questions about spiritual gifts is twofold: (1) to make them aware of how the Spirit manifests Himself through their diverse gifts and (2) to promote unity and interdependence within the body of Christ. Practically speaking, Paul not only had to inform the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts, he also had to address the underlying issue, their love for one another. Sure they possessed every necessary gift, but they lacked love for each other. Paul's point in chapter 13 is that without love, the gifts are essentially useless. A truly spiritual person is not only gifted, but loving. In fact, verse 13 describes 3 necessary qualities of any Christian: faith, hope and love. In coming weeks, our exposition of this chapter will obviously center on love, but let's not neglect faith and hope.

1. WHAT IS FAITH?

God calls us to a life of faith. In fact, Scripture says *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6)*. Faith can be defined as a believing response to God's Word. God sets faith in motion by first making promises and declaring Himself to be trustworthy. Those words come to us and we must respond. Do we believe what God has said? If we do, we have faith. It's not much more complicated than that, but we must notice certain aspects of saving faith. First of all, we begin with knowledge of what God has said and done. It is impossible to have faith without knowledge; knowledge of God's existence, character and works. Romans 10:14 says, *How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? And Romans 10:17 says, So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.* In order to trust Christ, a person must have some knowledge about Christ.

Saving faith progresses from knowledge to assent. Not only must a sinner have knowledge of Christ's work in history, but he must believe these facts to be true. The Gospel is essentially the message of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. The required response is that we give assent to the truthfulness of these revealed facts.

There is one more progression that is essential to saving faith, trust. We must know the essential facts of the Gospel and we must believe them to be true. Finally, we must intentionally cast ourselves upon Jesus alone for salvation. As John Murray said, *Faith is a receiving and resting upon him.* We repent of trusting in ourselves for salvation and we transfer that trust to Jesus. We trust in His obedience, death and resurrection on our behalf. Saving faith is self-commitment to Jesus alone. John Piper has written, *You don't get justified by believing that Jesus died for sinners and rose*

again. You get justified by banking your hope on the promises that God secured and guaranteed for you through the death and resurrection of his Son. The faith by which God justifies us, forgives all our sins, reckons us righteous, is the experience of being satisfied that God will come through for you according to all his promises.

2. WHAT IS HOPE?

Hope is very much like faith, yet with a future emphasis. We can speak of faith in the past, present and future. We have faith that God has worked in the past, through Jesus, to create the world and to recreate a new, forgiven humanity. We also have faith that God is presently at work, through the Holy Spirit, to sustain the work of Jesus in His Church as He works all things for our good. Finally, we have faith that God will cause us to persevere until we are finally saved. That faith in God's future mercy is called hope. Hope then can be defined as our confident expectation that God will work for our good in the future. It is this hope that is the foundation for passages such as *Roman 8:23-25*, *23And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. 24For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.* Biblical hope is not wishful thinking; it is a more certain expectation of God's future goodness. When we become assured of future mercies, we are more confident and eager to obey Jesus today. *11And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, 12so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:11-12).*

3. WHAT IS THE ENEMY OF FAITH AND HOPE?

Unbelief is the enemy of faith and hope. Unbelief is rooted to present circumstances while faith looks to invisible promises. It's not that these promises have no bearing on our circumstances; they are invisible because they are future. We must learn to believe what God has said when everything in our present circumstances screams that God is a liar.

Unbelief characterizes those who are not Christians. Simply put, they are not believers. *John 3:17-19* says *17"For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18"He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19"This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.*

But all unbelief does not immediately go away once we trust Jesus for salvation. In fact, to one degree or another, unbelief remains in every Christian until we arrive safely in heaven. This is why we pray, *I do believe, help my unbelief (Mark 9:24)*. Jesus once exclaimed to His own disciples, *O unbelieving generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you (Mark 9:19)?* Our new hearts are not perfectly new. God will strategically place us in circumstances which purify and increase our faith, but that is a slow process. He knows when and how to grow us up into maturity because that is the goal.

4. WHAT INCREASES FAITH AND HOPE?

If unbelief is the enemy of both faith and hope, then we must strengthen both. The means for doing so is exposure to God's word. Reading and meditating on what God has done in history is meant to assure you of His future works on our behalf. *32He who did not spare His own Son, but*

delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things (Romans 8:32)? There is no doubt that preaching has a prominent place in increasing our faith and hope. Romans 10:14 says, *How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?* And Romans 10:17 says, *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.* Additionally, the regular observance of the sacraments is designed to increase faith and hope. Calvin and Augustine called the sacraments *the visible word*. What God says in the preached word, He shows in the visible word of the sacrament.

Each of these means of receiving the word increase faith because it is there that we meet Jesus. We meet Him when we read His word in faith. We meet Him when we hear His word in faith. We meet Him when we eat and drink the *visible word* in faith. It is no wonder the Psalmist writes, *1How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,*

Nor stand in the path of sinners,

Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

2But his delight is in the law of the LORD,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

3He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Which yields its fruit in its season

And its leaf does not wither;

And in whatever he does, he prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)

The kind of faith we need is the faith of a farmer who patiently prepares the soil, sows the seed, waters what he has sown and then trusts God for the growth. Sow the seeds of God's promises into your life on a regular basis and faith and hope will grow; assurance will come. This is what God desires for His people.

CONCLUSION

God is the giver of faith and hope. These are gifts that sustain believing sinners and cause us to persevere in faith and hope until the end. Faith is necessarily a gift from God [Ephesians 2:8-10; Philippians 1:28] because as Luther said, *It's very hard for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can't grasp this.* Because our hearts are so thoroughly corrupted by sin, we cannot grasp the Gospel without God's effectual working to awaken us to the reality of the Gospel. When the Spirit has worked effectually, we are enabled to hear the Gospel as trustworthy good news. For example, Acts 16:14, *A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.*

Furthermore, our hope is rooted in God's grace as is our faith. *16Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, 17comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).*

Faith and hope are ours because of what God has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. To put it another way, Jesus purchased faith and hope for us on the cross. His death did not simply make faith and hope a possibility for His chosen people, it made faith and hope a certainty. God has worked for us in history and He continues that work within us this very day.

If we properly understand God's gift of faith and hope, then we cannot help but to understand the doctrine of *the perseverance of the saints*. The Corinthians are immature and in some cases, downright sinful. Yet Paul says things like, *4I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, 6even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, 7so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, 8who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 4:1-8). Paul has no doubt that these sinful, ignorant, immature and combative Corinthians will safely pass through the judgment. How are we to understand this?

What God requires from us for ultimate salvation, He gives to us in the Gospel. What does He require? God requires faith [future faith = hope] that perseveres to the end of our lives.

You will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved. (Matthew 10:22)

But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved. (Matthew 24:13)

But Christ was faithful as a Son over His house--whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. (Hebrews 3:6)

23I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it. 24Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. 25Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:23-27)

Each of these texts teaches us that God requires enduring faith for final salvation. Temporary faith is not from God and it is not saving faith. The good news is that what God requires for ultimate salvation, He gives us through Jesus.

38"They shall be My people, and I will be their God; 39and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. 40"I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. (Jeremiah 32:38-40)

12For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day. (2 Timothy 1:12)

8[God] will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1 Corinthians 1:8-9)

In order to finally be saved, we must continue in faith and God gives us persevering faith. Therefore, no one who truly believes will forfeit his or her faith. Scripture commands us to persevere and warns us about not persevering. But even these passages serve God's purpose in causing us to persevere. So like Paul, we discipline ourselves and we fight the good fight of faith. But we do not do any of this without faith in God's present mercies that sustain our faith and we

do not dare neglect His promises for future mercy that will safely lead us home. This is what we learn from Jesus, *35* Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst. *36*" But I said to you that you have seen Me, and yet do not believe. *37*" All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. *38*" For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. *39*" This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. *40*" For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."