

THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

Part 3

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1 Corinthians 13, the later part of this chapter. Verse 8-13. “Love never fails, but where there are prophecies they will cease. Where there are tongues they will be stilled. Where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophecy in part. But when perfection comes the imperfect disappears. When I was a child I talked like a child I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection. Then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part. Then I shall know fully even as I am fully known. Now these three remain, faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

We have looked at 1 Corinthians 13:1-7. The priority of love and the practice of love. These great verses before us today, verses 8-13, the permanence of love.

Sometimes when I come across things, big or small, and get all in a lather about them I say to myself, It won't matter a hundred years from now anyway. For within a hundred years we're either all going to be swept up or swept away. What is happening in your life right now won't matter a hundred years from now.

Ladd in his book The Presence of the Future titled the idea of what the kingdom of God is. The kingdom of God is not only something out there but it is present now. And since it is present now we ought to order our lives in such a way that we are ready to live in the kingdom then. The idea being if we know what's out there a hundred years from now, if we know what matters a hundred years from now, then we can live differently today.

I think Paul is opening the curtain on the future to the Corinthians at the end of this 1 Corinthians 13 and he's saying here's what it's going to be like hundred years from now or a hundred thousand years from now. Here's what's really important. When it's all said and done love is what counts. Love is important. Love will be here tomorrow and it's here today. Knowing that love is the eternal thing that counts most live with love today.

In these verses before us, he talks about the permanence of love and compares the permanence of love with four aspects of the Christian life presently. He compares love to spiritual gifts first of all in verses 8-10. Secondly he compares love to spiritual immaturity, verse 11. Then third he compares love to our present knowledge, verse 12. Then finally he compares love to the other two Christian eternalities – faith and hope – in verse 13. Let's look at each of these.

Compared to spiritual gifts.

Actually we are in a section of Corinthians if we were taking time to develop the whole section of 12-14 we would find of course that 1 Corinthians 13 is the sandwich between the pieces of bread of 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. The sides to the sandwich, 12 and 14 speak of spiritual gifts that are present today in the church of Jesus Christ. But the heart of any spiritual gift is the expression of love. And the Corinthian church obviously had forgotten this. When therefore Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:8 begins to single out three of the most prominent gifts present in the Corinthian church he was not saying by singling those gifts out that these are the most important

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of the gifts. In fact, he could have used any of the gifts to compare to love because of all the gifts listed in 12 and 14 – and there are nine of them – are all temporal in nature. They're all *this world*. Like the gift of healings or the gift of miracles that only occurs *this world* oriented.

I'm always amused that some people say the gift of healing or the gift of miracles disappeared with the apostolic age. Where have people been? Healing isn't over. But in heaven we won't have those spiritual gifts functioning because no body's going to get sick and nobody's going to need a miracle. But we do have the three gifts contrasted in 1 Corinthians 13:8 that were of prominence among the Corinthians. The gifts of prophecy, knowledge, speaking with other tongues. Paul is saying to them in heaven there's going to be no need for those as well.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 he has said that these gifts are worthless without love. Now he's added that added dimension in verse 8-10 by saying that these gifts do not last as long as love. I think that we need to take a moment to attempt to correct some of the misunderstandings that have circulated about what spiritual gifts are and what Paul is saying about them in regards to love. It's important to note that Paul is not setting the spiritual gifts against love. Some seem to take these verses as though he were doing that. That he was saying, that since love is more important just throw the spiritual gifts out. They're incidental, secondary. They're not needed. The church would be better off to function without all these gifts. Let the church love.

I know sometimes it's very inconvenient for a body to function where spiritual gifts – especially vocal gifts of prophecy and tongues – are occurring. Orr said that any time the Holy Spirit begins to do a fresh new sweep and a new revival and the wind begins to blow it's like an old farmhouse that's set empty for a period of time. When the wind begins to blow the first thing that begins to crackle and creek and squeak and make noise are all the loose shutters and hinges. He said it is the same way with the moving of the Spirit of God that when God's breath begins to blow across the people sometimes it is the loose bolts that begin to make the noise first.

What happens in the body of Christ is sometimes people get scared of that and say these gifts are too dangerous to use because they're unpredictable and we have to exercise discipline and order. But Paul is not concerned with that. Let there be, he says, proper order in the house of the Lord. But he's certainly not saying that since we have love we can do away with spiritual gifts. He is saying that spiritual gifts of any kind or talents of any kind are useless in their functioning if they're not originating out of a motivation of love.

Another thing that Paul is not saying is that spiritual gifts cease when the Bible is written and the apostles are all dead. There have been some who have looked at this phrase that says "Where there are tongues they will be stilled" and say what the apostle Paul is saying that tongues in the Christian's life, speaking in a language that that individual has never learned. That was meant to end when the Bible was written because when the perfect came – which in their interpretation is the Bible – the need for this spiritual gift has disappeared.

Of course the great problem with this point of view is tongues here are part of a trinity of values – prophecy and knowledge. Certainly knowledge hasn't passed away. And people haven't stopped proclaiming God's word forcefully which is the meaning of the gift of prophecy.

We also ought to recognize within the context itself that Paul is not talking about the close of the apostolic age or the completion of the writing of the scripture. He's talking about *now* and *then*.

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He is talking about in eternity these things we'll no longer have need of. We'll not have need of somebody to preach to us, which is the idea of prophecy. Or bring to us some special word of God. We will not need the gift of knowledge then for we will be known and we will know even as we are now known. We won't need to speak in other languages then because we will be able to express the infinite with power without being limited by the finiteness of our mother tongue.

Throughout these verses he's comparing *then* and *now*. Now we know in part and we prophecy in part. When will we know fully? When will we prophecy fully? When we're with him. Verse 10 "When perfection comes the imperfect disappears." What is perfection? Perfection is when we're in his presence. Verse 12 "We see now a poor reflection but then we shall see face to face." Verse 13 "Now I know in part. Then I will know fully even as I am known."

So the contrast in verse after verse is not between the present moment he was writing and the close of the writing of scripture. But between the moment he was writing and that time when we stand before God eternally.

One other misunderstanding before we continue to look at 1 Corinthians 13 and what it says about love that needs to be dealt with is Paul is not saying that the spiritual gifts go along with spiritual immaturity. There are some who have taken that position – if you still need to exercise these gifts you haven't found the higher way of love. So we've got Christians in kindergarten that need to speak in tongues and need to prophecy and need to exercise the gift of knowledge but when we become mature we get into a realm we don't need these gifts any more.

Paul's not saying that because he himself confesses that as a mature Christian he prays and sings privately in a tongue that his mind does not understand. As a mature Christian he finds that such an activity builds him up or edifies him. He admonishes the church not to forbid speaking in tongues. He finds that prophecy and knowledge are an important exercise of the spiritual gift. Paul never devalues them. How can we devalue a gift that the Holy Spirit has given? If I gave you a gift and it was the best I had to give I hope you wouldn't say I give cheap, dinky gifts. I'm thinking if God himself gives the church gifts who is anyone to say it's a cheap gift. That it's not really worth much.

All God's gifts that he has for the functioning of the individual Christian life and for the body are important. But Paul is saying that the spiritually immature person is the one who is pushing himself into the way and love out of the way. The immature person is the one who is using spiritual gifts to serve as a badge of their own spirituality. Using the spiritual gifts for their own ends which the Corinthian church was doing. He was not saying to use the spiritual gift is to be immature and when you're mature you only deal with ethical and moral things.

With that clarification out of the way what does Paul say about love? He says love lasts. NIV says love never fails. The literal word employed for "failed" is from the Greek verb, which means literally "to fall." The literal way to translate verse 8 is "love never falls." Love does not collapse. Love does not lose its strength. Love does not leave its place.

J.B Phillips, the first great paraphrase of the scripture that came out in modern language, puts this verse this way, "Love can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen."

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Maybe your own experience contradicts what Paul is saying. And you say, I've found that love doesn't last. I've ministered to people who have found that love did not last. Our society is represented by the fact that there are many broken families and broken situations where love appeared not to last. What can be said about this scripture that says to us that love never falls, love never collapses, love never sets down on the job, love is always there, love never fails. I think this may be said, if another person's love for us has not lasted that does not mean that our love has to come to an end. Christian love never ends.

How does Jesus feel toward the person that you are alienated from? Has he stopped loving such individual? How would Jesus demonstrate his love to such a person? Has any individual used up all his or her chances of being loved by the Lord?

What the apostle is reminding us is not the quality of our love – love never falls or leaves its place. But he is pointing us first of all to a great quality in God's love. God's love never goes to sleep on the job. God's love never leaves its place. God continues loving.

This is the high ground that we're being called to as individual Christians that when another's love for us has ceased or left its place we're being called to the experience of Jesus and go on loving. I know that's easy to say and very difficult to do.

Great changes take place when we love in God's way. Christian love is not romantic love. It does not depend upon attraction. It goes on loving when there is no attraction. Christian love does not depend upon reciprocation. Christian love continues loving even when there is no reciprocation. Christian love also goes on loving even when there is no sense of emotional exhilaration or feeling. Christian love is rooted in the character of God for giving and doing good. That love never fails.

That does not mean that from a human point of view that it always succeeds. It simply means that love never fails. It never comes to an end. It does not diminish. It does not perish. Love does not fall down on the job. The great phrase used of Jesus to the disciples who were getting ready to fail him and betray him and deny him. "Having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end." John 13:1. That's one of my favorite Bible verses. It describes God's love for you and for me.

The Song of Solomon says it this way, "Many waters cannot quench love. Rivers cannot wash it away."

When love therefore is compared to the spiritual gifts we find the spiritual gifts will pass but love never fails.

The second dimension of this text as Paul compares the permanence of love to spiritual immaturity. Verse 11. "When I was a child I talked like child..." There by the way is a difference made in the scripture between being child like and childish. We are encouraged to be child like. But we are discouraged from being childish. To be childlike is to have an attitude of dependence and trust. To be childish is to be self centered. That's the root of an immature personality. As cute as a baby is they are by nature self centered. A baby is not able to do much giving back of love. To be childish is to be self centered and undisciplined.

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Paul says to the Corinthian believers that's the way you are. You're reaching and grabbing. Undisciplined in the exercise of spiritual gifts and self centered in how you relate to one another in the body. What's the difference between immaturity and maturity. Immaturity is to answer yes to "Am I a take-er?" It is to have an attitude toward others that say, "What have you done for me lately?" Maturity is saying, "Am I a giver? What can I do for you?" Paul says when we've grown up in love we'll be mature.

The next thing he compares the permanence of love to is present knowledge. Verse 12. "Now we see but a poor reflection. Then we'll see face to face." What he's talking about is looking into a mirror. A mirror as we know it didn't come until about the 13th century when people would get a clear reflection. The mirrors of Paul's day were actually highly polished metal which at its best give a poor and imperfect reflection. Paul says that's the way things are now when it comes to looking at the things of God and looking at things that are really important in life. So often we do not see as clearly. We do not see as clearly as we will then. Our knowledge of God presently is not inadequate. It's simply incomplete. We know in part.

If anyone knew God and knew Christian doctrine and knew the Christian life it was certainly Paul. He's not saying our knowledge of God is inadequate. The knowledge that we have through Christ is certainly adequate to save us. But he's saying as much as we know it's still only in part to what we will know then. There will be no need of candles when we possess the brightness of the sun.

I think we're a little bit like Paul when he got storm tossed for two weeks on the Mediterranean Sea. He didn't know where the north star was and he'd lost sight of all stars. But incredibly God got through to him in the storm. That suggests to me that we do not always know where we are but God always knows. Paul's saying that there will come a day when I will know as completely where I am and who I am and who God is as God knows me now. One day we will know. Since now, he says, our knowledge is incompletely no matter how good it is. Our knowledge is incomplete. We should therefore be humble and make love our goal.

Then the fourth comparison he makes in these verses. He compares love to the other externalities. He had begun by contrasting love with spiritual gifts, spiritual immaturity, present knowledge. Finally he compares love to faith and hope. I call these the two other externalities because they last as well. Some people say faith and hope will also disappear. But Paul doesn't say that. He says, Now these three abide. They go on lasting. Faith and hope.

Why does faith and hope go on lasting? Someone has said it's because we're not redeemed robots, we're redeemed people. In heaven we will go on trusting God. Therefore we will still be people of faith. And we will go on hoping because hope is an ever renewed expectancy of the good. Faith is depending upon God and hope is expecting yet more to come. But above these is love. Faith and hope are only attributes of love. Love believes all things, therefore faith is an attribute of love. Love hopes all things. Therefore hope is an attribute of love. The scriptures do not tell us God is faith or God is hope. But God is love. Love outlasts everything.

God loved us when we had rebelled against him. God's love for us continued towards us when we were unfaithful to him. God kept loving us in Jesus Christ even to those who were driving the nails in his hands. He was saying forgive them. Christian love never falls down. Christian love, the goal of it, is to say no matter what I will go on loving you. That is Christian love.

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Paul's love is telling us that God's love never falls down on the job. He is using that then as a model to say to us let this be an example for your love. Let it stand. When everything else in your life has fallen, don't let love fall from its place. Don't see love as something you receive. See love as something you give. Don't see love as something somebody else is to do to you. See love as that which you are to give to someone else. This love is permanent. This love never fails and is greater than all things.

Our Lord, we come to you now from our hearts. We ask that you would by the power of your great working in us give each of us a love that takes out after you. A love that goes on giving and caring, forgiving and doing good. A love towards those closest to us and a love towards those alienated from us. A love that seeks the highest and the best. A love that loves that works through anger and rage and tears and hurt a love that though knocked down is not knocked out. A love that simply insists on getting back up again and standing and saying toward another, no matter what I choose to love. Lord, give us that kind of love. A love that is permanent. A love that is more important than anything. It is that kind of love that redeems. It is that love that wins out. That love keeps on giving and growing and living. Give us that love. Thank you that you've already given it to us. Your attitude toward us is firm and fixed today. There may be friends here today that really wonder if you can go on loving them in spite of all the sins and mistakes of life. In spite of the transgressions and the unfaithfulness. Lord, your love never fails. We are won by your love. You could have simple won us by your power. But you choose to win us with your love. We respond to that by saying today too, Lord that we want to return our love to you. Through Christ Jesus our lord. We give thanks. Amen.