

## Faith, Hope, Love

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

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<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

This is our third week on this chapter. It is one of the most rhetorically beautiful and compelling passages in the Bible. Our theme has been love. Our goal in these studies has been to grow in our love to God and neighbor, and to grow in our knowledge of God's love for us. Our prayer, then, can echo Paul's prayer of Ephesians 3: *I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God* (Eph. 3:17-19).

In our first week of study on this chapter we saw the *essential* nature of love (vv. 1-3). Paul says in v. 2 that without love we are nothing. In our second week of study we considered the *character* of love (vv. 4-7). Love is patient. It suffers long. It is kind, without envy or boasting. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This week we consider the *abiding* nature of love (vv. 8-13). As Paul says in v. 8, "Love never ends."

We could summarize Paul's teaching in this entire chapter by simply saying, "Love is a very, very big deal." God's own love for us is breathtaking in its scope. God has loved us from before the foundation of the world. He has loved us by giving his only begotten Son. He loves us now by saving, sustaining, and sanctifying us. God's love for us is a very big deal.

And, our love to God is a very big deal. The Corinthian church thought that the spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, were the most important thing. That's what they boasted in. That's what they desired. But Paul shows them here that they had it all backwards. Spiritual gifts will pass away. They will cease to exist. But love will remain. Love will abide forever. Love will never end. Therefore, love is a very big deal.

In vv. 8-13, Paul performs an exercise in comparison and contrast. He holds love up with one hand, and he parades other things before love to see how they might measure up. He starts with "prophecies, tongues, and knowledge" in v. 8. As we've seen throughout this book, these were all things that were very important, precious even, to the Corinthians. These were, after all, gifts from God, so they are rightly valued. The Church is built on the foundation of the prophets, so prophecy is important. Tongues were a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy from Joel 2:28-29. Tongues was a kind of

reversal of Babel, showing us how God is to gather back together a diverse people for himself. Knowledge also was a big deal. Knowledge brings insight into the mysteries of the gospel. Knowledge shows us who God is. It grounds us in truth. It prevents us from falling prey to the destructive powers of false doctrine.

But here's the thing - as Paul parades these very important things before love, he shows us that even these wonderful gifts of God don't ultimately measure up to love in one very significant way. They won't last, but love will. Love never ends. Prophecies? They will pass away. Tongues? They will cease. Knowledge? It will pass away. But in the age to come, love will remain.

We see the contrast Paul draws in vv. 9-10, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away." Paul's point is very simple. Many of the gifts that God has given to his people in this age won't be necessary in the next. For now, knowledge and prophecy are important. Knowledge of the Bible is important. Today it is crucial to study God's Word. Our knowledge is incomplete, so we must always seek to be growing in knowledge. But in the age to come our knowledge will be complete. It will be perfected. We will see and know God fully.

In heaven we won't need God's Word like we need it today, not because God's Word is unimportant, but because its promises will have been fulfilled and our knowledge of God will be complete. In heaven we won't struggle to memorize Scripture. We'll know God's promises perfectly. In heaven there will be no need for prophecies or tongues. In short, there aren't going to be any Bible studies in heaven because our knowledge will be complete. The gifts that are necessary now will no longer be needed then. As one theologian once said, "Because the sun rises all lights are extinguished."

But there will be love in heaven. Love never ends. Paul is telling the Corinthians to get their priorities straight. Give love more weight than everything else. He offers two illustrations to prove his point.

In v. 11, he says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways." Here Paul is not making a point about Christian maturity, he's making a point about Christian eschatology. It is good for a little girl to play with a doll, but when she grows up it is not good. Likewise, it is good for us to pursue prophecy and knowledge, it is good to have Bible studies for now, but when we "grow up" and go to heaven, the need for such things will be gone. If you try and have a Bible study in heaven you will look foolish, because there all will have matured fully in the knowledge of God.

In v. 12, Paul says, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known." Here he illustrates the same idea. It is one thing to look in a mirror, especially those ancient mirrors which were merely polished metal, offering only a dim reflection. It's a whole other thing to see face to face. Here and now we see God only partially through his Word, but then we will see him face to face.

So, prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away. From an eternal perspective, they don't measure up to love. So, what's that leave us with?

Paul writes in v. 13, "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three...." Even in eternity our faith, our confidence in God and in his promises will remain. Even in eternity our hope in God will remain steady and steadfast. But Paul says the greatest of these three is love.

Let's consider three simple points of application.

First, give love the weight it is due. Love is not whiffleball Christianity, it is big-league Christianity. Too often we bat the idea of love around lightly. We say, "God is love" flippantly, as if it is the lightest and most trivial of all Christian doctrines, when in fact it is among the weightiest.

Of all the Christian virtues, we tend to think that love is the one we've mastered. We can be pretty quick to admit that we struggle with envy, jealousy, gossip, lust, pride, impatience, or anxiety. But there are few Christians who say, "I'm struggling to love as I ought." Why is that? I think it is because we don't give love the weight it requires. I never struggled to hit a home run in whiffleball, but I imagine I wouldn't fair very well in the big leagues. Likewise, when we treat love lightly, we seem to think we exceed. But when love carries weight, we begin to see just how challenging the call to love truly is.

Do you remember the story in Luke 10:25ff when the lawyer asked Jesus the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered with a question of his own, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responded with a summary of the law, reciting the command to love both God and neighbor. Jesus replied by essentially saying, "You're right. Do this and you will live." That's it. Love God, love neighbor, and you are good to go. It sounds simple. The lawyer thought it was simple. He was heartened by Jesus' answer. He was obviously thinking to himself, "That's it? Love God and neighbor? Do this and I will live? I've got that!"

In fact, he was so confident in his ability to actually carry out these commandments that Luke tells us he sought to "justify himself" by asking another question, "Who is my neighbor?" And that is when Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan, effectively crushing this lawyer's illusion that he was somehow a loving person. He thought he was loving his neighbor until Jesus challenged him to think of who his neighbor actually was. The lawyer was playing whiffleball Christianity. Jesus was playing hardball.

We need to give love all of the practical and theological weight that it is due. We need to think long and hard about how we can grow in love. We need to examine our own lives and pray for strength to love better. We need to study God's Word with this very great goal in mind, to strengthen our love to God and to neighbor.

Second, in light of the abiding nature of love, we need to take care to love God and neighbor more than the temporal gifts God gives to build up his church. This is where the Corinthians had erred so greatly as a church. They loved the spiritual gifts. They did not love one another.

Here at Calvin, I want you to love the sacraments. I want you to love the fact that each week we come to the Lord's table and taste and see that the Lord is good. I want you to love our Bible studies and the numerous other ministries we have. I want you to love the pursuit of growth in knowledge. I want you to love the spiritual gifts he has blessed us with. But I also want us to have our priorities straight, so we need to see that those things will all pass away, but love will never end.

Recall what Paul said back in 7:31, "The present form of this world is passing away." Remember how we talked then of how Paul lives his life with one foot in eternity and one foot in the present age. He lives with both worlds in view, but he's leaning hard toward eternity. If we live after Paul in the same way, if we long for heaven as he does, then we need to make love to God and love to neighbor our utmost priority here and now.

So for now, dig in deep with love. Remain steadfast and unmovable in your love to God and neighbor. Suffer long with others. Be kind. Forsake all arrogance and boasting. And remember that love endures to the end.

Finally, above all, we need to remember God's very great love for us. The reason that love never ends is not because our own love is so great that it is eternal, but because God's love is so great it is eternal. The reason we will love for eternity is because God has first loved us. In closing, consider how God's love is spoken of in Scripture:

- **Exodus 34:6-7** The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."
- **Numbers 14:18-20** 'The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.' <sup>19</sup> Please pardon the iniquity of this people, according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have forgiven this people, from Egypt until now." <sup>20</sup> Then the LORD said, "I have pardoned, according to your word."
- **Deuteronomy 7:9** Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations...
- **1Kings 10:9** Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! Because the LORD loved Israel forever, he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness.
- **1Chronicles 16:34** Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!
- **Psa 6:4** Save me for the sake of your steadfast love.
- **Psa 31:21** Blessed be the LORD, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me...
- **Psa 36:5** Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens...
- **Jer 31:3** The LORD appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
- **Eze 16:8** "When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine.
- **Hos 14:4** I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.
- **Zep 3:17** The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.
- **Rom 5:8** But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

- **Eph 5:25** Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...
- **1Jo 3:1** See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Perhaps the most powerful statement of God's love for us comes from Romans 8:38-39 where Paul says, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angles nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." This is the never-ending nature of God's love for us. Nothing in all of creation will ever separate us from it.