

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 9/29/96 PM
1 Corinthians 13:8-13 "The Permanence of Love"

Charlie Shedd shares in one of his books about honesty and the value of writing down what you feel. He says that one time he came home after he and his wife had had a big fight, and there was a note on the kitchen counter. The note said, "Dear Charlie, I hate you. Love, Martha."

This evening we want to see what God has to say about the permanence of true love. Biblical love does not flicker on and off like a florescent light with a bad ballast. Love is constant and steady.

In what sense is love permanent? We'll find the answer by returning to 1 Corinthians 13 and pondering the message of the final section of the chapter.

But first, allow me to retrace our steps and rehearse what we have already seen. The Corinthian church had a problem in their understanding of spirituality. They used the wrong ruler to measure the successful Christian life. What would you say is the mark of a truly spiritual person? How do you measure spirituality? The Corinthian Christians wrongly asserted that the possession and demonstration of spiritual gifts was the standard for being spiritual. They promoted and prized spiritual gifts, and had begun to miss the mark for spirituality. To correct this, Paul taught them the true purpose of spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14. And right in the middle, he identified what God considers to be the true standard for spirituality.

What is the standard? The standard, according to 1 Corinthians 13, is love.

1 Corinthians 13 can be divided into three sections. In the first (1-3), we are confronted with the necessity of biblical love. That is, I can possess and use spiritual gifts, and I can be busy for God, but if I am not living a life of love, I am nothing and I profit nothing.

In the second section (4-7), the apostle gives us a vivid description of biblical love. We learn what love is, what love is not, and what love does. Let's take another look at the inspired picture of love. Allow me to personalize it by inserting our name in place of the noun love to see whether we resemble the picture. Beginning in verse 4:

"Wheelersburg Baptist Church is patient, WBC is kind. The members of WBC do not envy, they do not boast, they are not proud. WBC is not rude, its members are not self-seeking, they are not easily angered, they keep no record of wrongs. WBC does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. The people of WBC always protect, always trust, always hope for the best with one another, and always persevere even when they feel like throwing in the towel."

It's a high standard, isn't it? It's a standard we can't achieve on our own strength, but by the grace of God, can exhibit in increasing measure. Now, the final section.

III. The Permanence of Love (8-13).

Let's listen to verses 8-13, "Love never fails; but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I

became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror darkly; but then, face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known. And now abides faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

Here we see the perpetuity of love. The apostle concludes the chapter by underscoring love's permanence in three ways.

A. Paul identifies the difference between love and spiritual gifts (8-10).

Remember, this was a point of contention for the Corinthians. Spiritual gifts were seen as proof of spirituality. To fix this folly, Paul spells out the difference between love and gifts.

1. *Love never fails.* Verse 8 again, "Love never fails." The Greek term for "fail" (*piptei*) literally means "falls" or "collapses." Love never folds under even the most severe and intense pressure. It never throws in the towel. It perseveres to the point of death and into eternity. In the beautiful verse of The Song of Solomon 8:7, "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it."

A question of exegesis is, does this phrase, "Love never fails," go with the section that precedes or follows it? That is, is the apostle giving us another descriptive phrase in his picture of love, indeed, a climax? "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and to sum it up, love never fails!"

Or does the phrase initiate the contrast that follows in verses 8-10 between love and gifts? That is, love never fails. It is permanent unlike spiritual gifts which serve a temporary purpose.

Indeed, the apostle may have had both thoughts in mind. Love never *fails*. That means it's consistent. It does the God-pleasing thing *all* the time. And love *never* fails. It shall endure forever and ever. The people of God will exhibit and experience love throughout eternity.

In the first three verses, Paul draws a contrast between love and the *charismata* (spiritual gifts). Now again, in verses 8-13, he picks up the same contrast but with a new wrinkle (Carson, 66). In contrast to love which never fails, spiritual gifts will cease. Why is that? For this reason.

2. *Spiritual gifts have a temporal purpose.* "But where there are prophecies, they will cease." The gift of prophecy was a special endowment Jesus gave by the Holy Spirit to the Church. In the early church, there were not Bibles in the pew racks. The New Testament wasn't completed until John penned The Revelation at the end of the first century. The person with the gift of prophecy apparently received direct revelation from the Spirit of God which he in turn passed on to the congregation for their edification.

The next two gifts mentioned were favorites of the Corinthians: tongues and knowledge (Fee, 643). The gift of tongues was the Spirit-given enablement possessed by some to be able to speak in languages unknown to them. And the gift of knowledge seems to identify a special insight which some received from the Holy Spirit for discernment in the church.

Concerning these gifts Paul says (8), "Whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." And he continues the thought in verses 9-10, "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away."

Paul is not downplaying the importance of spiritual gifts here. This isn't a condemnation of the gifts. He's not saying that the gifts of prophecy, or tongues, or knowledge are bad. It's just that, in contrast to love which is eternal, the gifts are temporal. There will be no spiritual gifts in heaven. There will be no need for them.

We need to underscore this in Baptist circles. There's nothing wrong with spiritual gifts. The Spirit gave them so they are good. They're just limited. They serve a particular purpose in God's redemptive plan.

I realize that 1 Corinthians 13 is often used as a proof-text to support the conviction that speaking in tongues is not for today (a conviction which I share, but not from this text). The reasoning goes like this. Paul said tongues would cease when that which is perfect is come. What is that which is perfect? It is, they say, the completed canon of Scripture. So when the Bible was finished, the gift of tongues ceased.

The issue is certainly a complex one which cannot be remedied by turning to one definitive passage. I do believe the gift of tongues isn't operative for our day, that it achieved its Spirit-given purpose in the first century. However, I don't agree that it's wise to defend this conviction based on such reasoning from 1 Corinthians 13. Contextually, "when that which is perfect is come," does not refer (in my opinion) to the completion of the canon, but to the eternal state (when we are "face to face" with God, verse 12; MacArthur, 231).

I agree with the following assessment by John MacArthur (*Charismatic Chaos*, pp. 230-1): "The passage does not say *when* tongues were to cease... The language of the passage puts tongues in a category apart from prophecy and knowledge. Verse 8 says prophesy and knowledge will be 'done away,' but tongues 'will cease.'"

The verb for "cease" (*pauro*) means "to cease permanently." It implies that when tongues ceased, they would never start up again. History suggests that tongues ceased shortly after Paul wrote this epistle (MacArthur).

But we mustn't miss the obvious as we ponder the not-so obvious. Paul's point in 1 Corinthians 13 is that spiritual gifts don't belong to the future. But love does.

Warren Wiersbe offers this timely word of caution (611), "Unfortunately, some of the emphasis today on the Holy Spirit has not been *holy* (because it has ignored Scripture) and has not been *spiritual* (because it has appealed to the carnal nature). We must not tell other believers what gifts they should have or how they can obtain them. This matter is in the sovereign will of God. We must not minimize gifts, but neither should we neglect the *graces* of the Spirit. In my itinerant ministry, I have run across too many local church problems created by people who were zealous for the gifts, but careless of the graces."

Textual Sidelight: In the KJV of v 8, the word "fail" appears twice, but actually the second usage comes from a different Greek word (*katargeo*). Then, at the end of the verse, this second term appears ago, but this time *katargeo* is translated "vanish away." Commentator Leon Morris observes (186-7), "AV in this verse is somewhat confusing, translating two different Greek words by the one English word 'fail,' and translating the same Greek word by two different English words. Reasonable variation in translation is, of course, not only permissible, but necessary...But the reader of the AV must exercise care here if he is to grasp Paul's precise meaning."

Now we come to the second way in which Paul underscored love's permanence. The first was identifying the difference between love and spiritual gifts.

B. Paul illustrates the difference between love and spiritual gifts (11-12). He calls us to consider two illustrations in verses 11-12.

1. *Consider a child.* Verse 11, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." Do you remember when you were a child, I mean, a *small* child? Paul reflects on his childhood here and tells us about those days. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child." It's fun to listen to a toddler talk--only the parent can decipher lots of the sounds!

Paul continues, "I understood and thought as a child." I remember when one of our girls was about two years old, and she asked for permission to do something. Our answer was "no" and that didn't sit too well with her. So she got down on her hands and knees and started banging her head against the hard floor, as if to say, "If you won't let me, I'll show you!" I don't know if she thought the pain in her head transferred to us, or what, but she certainly was reasoning in a way that seemed illogical to me as an adult!

Warren Wiersbe makes this observation (611), "The Corinthians were like children playing with toys that would one day disappear. You expect a child to think, understand, and speak like a child; but you also expect the child to mature and start thinking and speaking like an adult. The day comes when we must 'put away childish things' (1 Cor. 13:11)."

To sum up the first illustration, Paul's not saying that childhood is bad. It's just limited--limited talk, limited thinking, limited reasoning. When we reach adulthood, we put away childish things. I haven't seen too many 25 year olds playing with matchbox cars in the pews, or sucking on pacifiers! It's just not appropriate for an adult to act like a child.

What's the point of the illustration? It's not to devalue childhood. It is to contrast the present and the future. His analogy says to us that certain behavior in one period of a person's life is not appropriate in another. So it will be in the eternal state.

Spiritual gifts are fine for now. They are needed in the present life of the church. On the other hand, in eternity the gifts will be unnecessary, and even appropriate. Why is that? For this reason. Why would we need the gift of knowledge when, as Paul says in verse 12, in the eternal state we shall know even as we are known? Why would we need the gift of prophecy or tongues to communicate when we are face to face with Jesus?

The gifts are not forever. They are to edify the Body *now*, when edification is needed. They won't be needed *then*. But love will.

2. *Consider a mirror.* Verse 12, "For now we see in a mirror darkly; but then, face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known."

This illustration would have caught the Corinthians' attention more readily than it does ours. Corinth was famous for its manufacture of mirrors (Barclay). The modern mirror, as we know it, did not come into use until the thirteenth century. The Corinthian mirror was made of highly polished metal and, even at its best, gave an imperfect reflection.

Another factor is that in those days windows were made such that all one could see through them was a dim and shadowy outline. The Rabbis had a saying that it was through such a window that Moses saw God (Barclay).

Here's the twofold contrast Paul makes. Life now is like looking into the poor reflection of a bronze mirror; life then will be like a face to face encounter. Living now,

we know in part; living then, we shall know fully, just as we're known fully. He's not saying we will become omniscient--God alone is that--but that in that day we shall have direct, unhindered access to the presence of God.

John put it this way (1 John 3:2), "Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when He shall appear, we shall be like Him; for we shall see Him as He is."

Don't misunderstand what the Bible is saying. It is *not* saying that the relationship we have now with God in Christ is deficient. It's just that, as great as it is, it's nothing when compared to the real thing that is yet to be!

Men, if you were called to war, and were sent overseas for two years, which would mean more to you--seeing a photograph of your wife or seeing her in person? No question. Is the reason because the picture is bad? No, it's just that as good as a picture is, it's simply not the real thing (Fee, 648).

That's the difference between spiritual gifts and love. In the age to come, when our knowledge of God is direct and full, we won't need gifts like prophecy and knowledge and tongues or the others. They'll be gone. But guess what? Love will be there.

To wrap up the section, the apostle underscores the permanence of love a third way. After identifying and illustrating the difference between love and spiritual gifts...

C. Paul insists on the enduring value of love (13). The familiar verse 13 states, "And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." We have come to the punchline for Paul.

We've already learned what won't last for eternity. The gift of prophecy won't. The gift of tongues won't. The gift of knowledge won't. In the words of verse 8, what will happen to them? They will "cease" and "vanish away." They won't remain.

What does remain? What does abide? What does really matter in the light of our eternal relationship with God? Three things which sum up the essence of the Christian life. We have "faith" in God, "hope" for the future, and "love" for one another. "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love."

You ask, "Why does Paul conclude by saying that love is *greater* than faith and hope?" In what sense is love greater? In this. Will there be a need for faith in the eternal state? No, because faith is the evidence of things not seen (Heb 11:1) and in that day we'll be with God! Will there be a need for hope in heaven? Obviously not, for we'll no longer be on our way home--we'll be there! What about love? Will it, too, pass? No. In fact, it will characterize our relationships with God and God's people throughout eternity. For countless ages, in the new heavens and new earth, we will love God and love one another.

Two centuries ago, Jonathan Edwards considered the question as to what makes the church like heaven (*Charity and Its Fruits*, in Carson, 75-6). His answer: it is love. "One day all the charismatics who know the Lord and all the non-charismatics who know the Lord will have nothing to fight over; for the so-called charismatic gifts will have forever passed."

Key Lesson: If love is permanent, it ought to be important to us. The fact that spiritual gifts will pass, and love will endure says something powerful to us. We'd better take love seriously *now*. Do you?

Are you a loving person? If your life is full of Christian activity, but void of love, please take note. God is not pleased. He commends love. He calls us to be a people of love.

Response:

Love never fails. Let that sink in. Love is permanent and will continue through eternity. Do you know what that means practically? Some of us are going to spend eternity with people we are struggling to love right now. There are certain people we refuse to be around, we avoid, we ignore. My brethren, this ought not to be. And this *won't* be in heaven. We need to choose to love one another now.

If we are to learn to love as God loves, we need to have a close relationship with the Lord so that His love can flow through us. Do you love the Lord? Do you hunger and thirst for Him? Let's sing a song which expresses this desire.

Hymn of Response: #401 "Psalm 42"

Let's take time to reflect on how 1 Corinthians applies to us. Paul wrote this letter to a church that over-emphasized (or at least mis-emphasized) the work of the Holy Spirit. If He wrote a letter to our church, I wonder if He would not address a different problem. Many of us have under-emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. Are you living a Spirit-filled life? Are you walking in the Spirit? Or have you been quenching the Spirit?

How do we do that? By ignoring His Word, which is how He speaks to us. And by tolerating sin in our lives, which grieves Him. Do you desire a fresh start tonight in your Christian life? Then tell the Lord. Call out to Him and surrender to His Spirit's control.

Another area. Do you need to become a more loving person? Do you desire to turn over a new leaf tonight? Then confess to God your lack of love for Him and for others. Call your indifference what He calls it--sin. Accept His forgiveness through Christ. Ask His Spirit to help you exhibit real love.

Time for Reflection and Prayer

To conclude our service, and our study in 1 Corinthians 13, let's sing again our theme song...

Closing Hymn: #284 "They'll Know We Are Christians"