

10/12/25

The Enduring Quality of Love

1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Cornerstone Introduction...

Read: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Sermon Introduction

What do you want the defining mark of your life to be? When others describe you, what is it that you hope they'll say?

Over the past couple of months, I've had the privilege of studying the book of Ecclesiastes with our youth group on Wednesday nights. It's the divinely inspired record of King Solomon's reflections after pursuing everything the world calls valuable (money, pleasure, possessions, wisdom, skill, and fame).

Yet after pursuing all that, Solomon concludes that none of it ultimately satisfies. None of it truly matters apart from God. At the end of our lives, what will matter most is our standing before our holy God and whether our lives reflected His glory and priorities.

In a similar way, I believe that is what Paul is addressing here in 1 Corinthians 13. The believers at Corinth had become fascinated with spiritual gifts (especially the more public and spectacular ones). But in their preoccupation with these gifts, they began to use them as a measure of spiritual superiority, elevating some and disparaging others.

Paul writes this chapter as a correction. He reminds them that there is something far greater, far more necessary, and far more enduring than any spiritual gift. His heart is that they would see and pursue the "more excellent way" of love.

Main Point: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13 gives three contrasts between the gifts and love so that we might recognize and pursue the enduring quality of love in the Christian life.

Outline:

I. The Gifts Serve a Temporary Purpose (8)

II. The Gifts Give a Partial Picture (9–12)

III. Love Reigns for All Eternity (13)

I. The Gifts Serve a Temporary Purpose (8)

Let's look at that first phrase in verse 8 **"Love never fails."**

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The phrase **“love never fails”** literally means that love “never falls.” The idea being conveyed is that love never comes to an end. It is lasting. It is enduring. It never falls. It will always stand.

This is the only time Paul uses this particular word **“never”** in all his writings. It is an emphatic term, stressing that there will never be a moment when love will cease to exist. The quality of love will never be gone. It will always remain. It will always abide.

This phrase serves as a transition which moves us from describing the actions of love – what is and what it is not (Steven’s sermon last week) – to emphasizing the enduring nature of love. And this enduring quality is now set in contrast to three spiritual gifts, which, unlike love, are temporary.

Verse 8 continues **“but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.”**

The **gift of prophecy** was the immediate, direct revelation of God through a prophet for the edification, encouragement, and comfort of God’s people (1 Corinthians 14:3). The key point to understand is that this was a revelatory gift, used to make God’s will known, both generally and specifically to His people.

However, as Ephesians 2:20 explains, the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (referring to New Testament prophets and the gift of prophecy). This shows that the **gifts of prophecy** served a temporary, foundational purpose in the establishment of the church.

As John Marc shared a few weeks ago while teaching on 1 Corinthians 12, the **gift of tongues** was the Holy Spirit empowered ability for a person to speak in a real, identifiable human language that was previously unknown and unlearned by the speaker. The content of such speech consisted of praise and thanksgiving to God (1 Corinthians 14:13–17), the proclamation of God’s mighty works (Acts 2:11), and praise of His greatness (Acts 10:46).

The gift of **tongues** served several distinct purposes. It confirmed the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the arrival of the New Covenant (Acts 2:14–21). Because it enabled speakers to communicate with those of different languages, it also had an evangelistic function.

When interpreted, **tongues** served a role similar to prophecy by edifying the church (1 Corinthians 14:5). Finally, as Paul explains in the following chapter, it acted as a sign to unbelieving Jews, indicting them for their unbelief (1 Corinthians 14:20–22; cf. Isaiah 28:11).

The **knowledge** referred to here likely points to the spiritual gift of the **“word of knowledge”** mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8. As John Marc noted in his sermon on that passage, the exact nature of this gift is difficult to determine, since the New Testament gives little explanation and no explicit description of its operation.

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Nevertheless, it appears that this was a Holy Spirit–empowered ability to speak **knowledge** and insight concerning the mysteries of Christ and the gospel in a way that strengthened and built up the church (cf. Ephesians 3:3; Colossians 1:26; 2:2).

What is unique about the three gifts Paul mentions is that they are all verbal gifts. These were very public expressions of the Spirit’s power through speech. In turn, these were the kinds of gifts that could easily be flaunted, giving those who had these gifts the appearance of greater spirituality, maturity, or importance.

To be sure, each of these gifts were significant. During that period in the church, they played a vital role in building up believers and advancing the gospel.

We need to see that the contrast in this passage is not between the importance of love and the unimportance of the gifts. Rather, it is between the temporary nature of the gifts and the enduring permanence of love.

The Corinthians needed to understand that these gifts would eventually come to an end. They served a temporary purpose in the life and growth of the early church. Unlike love, which **never fails**, these gifts would one day cease and pass away.

The Corinthians were elevating what was flashy and attention-grabbing. They were esteeming people’s charisma over their character.

As a result, those who possessed certain gifts were given arrogance and boastfulness. They were self-seeking and performance oriented. They were using their gifts to promote themselves rather than to serve others.

Pride and jealousy were present among them, and they were measuring one another’s worth by which gifts they had and how gifted they appeared to be. In all of this they had completely lost sight of what truly mattered.

The truth of this passage is vital for the church in every age. We live in a day where celebrity pastors are often held up as models of faithfulness and success. If a pastor is a gifted communicator, has an entrepreneurial vision, and can author a bestseller, many assume he is a faithful and godly man.

In the early 2000s, one such man (Mark Driscoll) fit this model. He was young, gifted, and driven. He quickly ascended the ladder of evangelical fame. People loved his preaching, he produced a prolific amount of writing and ministry content, and his church grew rapidly, with multiple campuses all live-streaming his teaching.

The problem, however, was that his giftedness far exceeded his Christlikeness. By 2014, it became evident that he struggled with anger, harshness, arrogance, and a domineering,

authoritarian approach to leadership. He was rude, crude, and unloving in both word and action.

He was ultimately forced to resign from ministry and yet, only sixteen months later, he returned to the pulpit, pastoring a church in a neighboring state. His story demonstrates the reality that there will always be opportunities in the church for men like him until we recognize that spiritual giftedness, while valuable, cannot replace the absolutely necessary quality of love.

Jesus said in **John 13:34–35** “**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**”³⁵ “**By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**”

Jesus did not say that people would recognize His disciples by how eloquently they preach, by the languages they speak, by their theological knowledge, or by any other gifts they possess. He His people would be recognized by the love they show to one another.

So understand that gifts are temporary, and no measure of spiritual giftedness can ever outweigh the command to love. God also wants us to appreciate the enduring quality of love by seeing the partial nature of the gifts.

II. The Gifts Give a Partial Picture (9–12)

Let’s look at verse **9–10** “**For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.**”

There is a clear contrast here between what is partial and what is complete. This verse is not suggesting that knowledge or prophecy partial because they were mixed with error. Rather, it is saying that these gifts were not exhaustive. They were not comprehensive.

As amazing and supernatural as those gifts were, they still weren’t the full picture. It’s as if they only gave these fleeting glimpses of truth “**but when the perfect comes,**” these **partial** glimpses would no longer be necessary because then we would have the full picture. The full reality.

The word **perfect** here can also be translated **complete** (cf. Matthew 19:21; Colossians 1:28) or **mature** (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6; 14:20). It conveys the idea of absolute completeness. Of something that is fully developed and fully realized.

Some have argued that **the perfect** in this verse refers either to the completion of the canon or to a specific point in time when the church reaches a certain level of spiritual maturity. However, both of these interpretations fall short of the language and imagery of the illustration in verse 12.

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It seems best to understand **the perfect** here as referring to the completion of God's redemptive purpose in Christ. This will be fulfilled at His return, when all of God's promises are fully realized and actualized in Christ.

At that time, knowledge and prophecy will no longer be necessary, because everything they pointed toward (every insight, every mystery, every revelation) will be fully accomplished, fully received, and fully experienced as our salvation culminates at the return of our risen Lord and Savior!

The gifts are partial in comparison to the glory that awaits us. In verses 11 and 12, there are two illustrations to help us apply this incredible truth.

Look at verse 11 **“When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.”**

There is a clear contrast here between childhood and adulthood, particularly in the areas of speaking, thinking, and reasoning. The point is that as a person grows and matures, there must be a corresponding change in how one speaks, thinks, and acts. There is a natural and necessary progression from immaturity to maturity.

Paul has already addressed this idea earlier in the letter. In **1 Corinthians 3:1–3** **“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, ³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?”**

He gives another similar exhortation in **1 Corinthians 14:20** **“Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.”**

This reminds me of when one of my kids was learning to ride a bike. We started him on one of those little strider bikes, the kind without pedals that help kids learn balance. After a while, he got really fast and confident on it, and it was clear he was ready for a real bike.

But when I bought a real bike with pedals, he wanted nothing to do with it. He was perfectly content zipping around on the strider, thinking he had already arrived. What he didn't realize was that the strider was meant lead him to something greater.

That's exactly what Paul is getting at here. The Corinthians were using the partial gifts in a childish way. They were they exalting these partial gifts, and in doing so, they had lost sight of what mattered most, the essential call to love. They were valuing something that was partial and missing what the partial was pointing to.

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Glance down at verse 12 **“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.”**

Corinth was famous for its finely crafted bronze mirrors. In the ancient world, glass mirrors did not yet exist, so craftsmen would polish and buff bronze surfaces to create as clear a reflection as possible.

Yet no matter how skillfully they worked, the image remained imperfect. The reflection was clouded, dim, and distorted compared to the clarity of modern glass mirrors. This is why Paul says, **“For now we see in a mirror dimly.”**

The most knowledgeable believer in Corinthian could offer only a dim reflection of the glorious realities of the gospel. The greatest prophetic gifts could only provide a clouded image of what is yet to come. Because remarkable as these gifts were, they were incomplete and partial because they were incapable of fully capturing or communicating the splendor and experience of the truths to which they pointed.

Notice what Paul is saying, he is contrasting the partial with the perfect. He is contrasting the partial with the complete. And notice the language, **“but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.”**

The phrases **“face to face,” “know fully,”** and **“fully known”** all speak of friendship and intimate fellowship with God. Paul is pointing us forward to the day, when Christ returns and our salvation is complete, those fleeting glimpses will give way to perfect vision.

In that day, Revelation 22:4 says, **“They will see His face.”** Our eyes will finally be able to look upon the One whom our soul loves. We will see Christ in all of His glory, face to face and we will know Him fully and we will be fully known by Him.

The Corinthians thought the gifts themselves were everything, yet they failed to see who the gifts were meant to point them to. These gifts were never meant to exalt the individual, but to exalt Christ and cultivate in their hearts a deeper longing to know Him.

They were like a child who, when given a gift, becomes more fascinated with the box than what’s inside. They were like a person staring at a beautiful picture frame and admiring it but never looking at the painting. They were like someone reading the table of contents over and over, being satisfied by the chapter headings, but never reading the book itself.

In the same way, the Corinthians were missing the point. The spiritual gifts, though great, are nothing compared to knowing Christ personally and anticipating the day when that knowledge reaches its fullness.

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Augustine reflected on this ultimate hope, writing that the end of all our desires is to see Christ face to face. John Owen said, **“One of the greatest privileges the believer has, both in this world and for eternity, is to behold the glory of Christ.”**

Christ is everything our hearts truly long for. In Him, nothing is lacking. In Him, we find whatever our hearts desire and everything that leads to genuine joy.

Are you ambitious? Christ offers a crown of glory (1 Peter 1:5). Are you covetous? In Christ are unsearchable riches (Ephesians 3:8). Are you lustful? At Christ’s right hand are pleasures without end (Psalm 16:11). Are you hungry? Christ is the bread of life (John 6:35). Are you weary? Christ offers rest in Him (Matthew 11:28). Are you weak? Christ strengthens us to do all things (Philippians 4:13).

Are you doubting? Christ is the sure and steadfast anchor of our soul (Hebrews 6:18–19). Are you sorrowful? Christ gives us fullness of joy (John 15:11). Are you sick? Christ is the great Physician. Are you dying? Christ is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Are you fearful, anxious, or in distress? Christ’s name is a strong tower and the righteous runs into it and is safe (Proverbs 18:10).

The risen, living, breathing, and reigning Lord Jesus Christ is everything we need. He is everything we need and infinitely more. He is our satisfaction, our hope, our joy, and our all.

Jonathan Edwards shares this incredible reality **“After they have enjoyed the pleasure of beholding the face of Christ for [millions of years], it will not become a dull story; the [sweetness] of this delight will be as [rich and satisfying] as ever.”** (“The Pure in Heart Blessed,” *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 2).

These verses make it clear that the spiritual gifts were never intended for us to fixate on the gifts themselves. They were never given to elevate our pride, inflate our sense of importance, or make us the center of attention. Rather, the purpose of these gifts was always Christ. They were meant to point us to Him, to deepen our love for Him and others, and to cultivate a longing to know Him more fully.

III. Love Reigns for All Eternity (13)

Let’s look at verse 13 **“But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.”**

Faith refers to the full response to the saving gospel of Christ crucified. This faith involves the acceptance of forgiveness through the death of Jesus and the judicial verdict of justification. The Christian’s faith is their belief and commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he or she will one day see face to face.

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Hope refers, similarly, to trusting God for the future. It is the confident expectation that God will fulfill His promises, even when circumstances seem uncertain or challenging. This hope is rooted in the character and faithfulness of God, and it looks forward with assurance to what God has promised.

Throughout Scripture, faith, hope, and love are often mentioned together as essential marks of the Christian life (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Colossians 1:4–5). They are qualities that are foundational for the Christian life, they are interconnected to one another, and they reflect the believer's relationship with God and one another.

William Barclay wrote, "Faith without love is cold, and hope without love is grim. Love is the fire which kindles faith and it is the light which turns hope into certainty."

Some have taught that love is the greatest because, in eternity, faith will no longer be needed once we see the realities we have believed (2 Corinthians 5:7). Similarly, they cite Romans 8:24 to suggest that hope will no longer be necessary, since hope is always directed toward what is unseen. In this view, faith and hope will be fully realized when the perfect comes.

While this may be true, I believe Paul's point is deeper. I think Paul wants us to understand that love is the greatest because it is the true indicator that a person belongs to God. God Himself does not possess the attributes of "faith" or "hope," because these are attributes of creatures who are inherently dependent.

But as the Scriptures tell us, God is love, and He pours that love into the hearts of His people through the Holy Spirit. The two great commands (to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves) cannot be fulfilled apart from God's grace at work in our hearts.

That is why Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers in **Ephesians 3:14–19 "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, ¹⁶ that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God."**

It is in knowing and understanding the love of God in Christ for us that we then can extend that love to one another. Do you have someone in your life right now that is difficult to love? Meditate upon who you were before you knew Christ, and who you currently are in Christ. Before we knew Christ, we were sinners through and through. We were dead in sin, enslaved to sin, and in love with our sin. We were consumed with self, pride, and rebellion against the God who made us.

We were liars, gossips, slanderers, cheats, and idolaters. Our hearts were filled with hatred, we were covetousness for what was not ours, and we were ruled by lust. We dishonored and disobeyed our parents and other authorities He placed over us. We were utterly blind to the holiness God requires and we didn't care. In every way, our lives reflected sin and selfishness.

And yet God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to endure the full weight of our sins on that bloody cross. Christ bore the physical agony of crucifixion, the mocking, the scorn, the pain, and even more, He bore the wrath of God that we deserved as our substitute.

He suffered in our place, enduring the punishment for every lie, every act of pride, every sin we committed against God and others. And if that were not enough, consider your life since coming to know Christ.

How often have you failed Him? How much you still fail to love Him with your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. How often have you failed to choose to honor and obey Him over your own sinful selfish desires?

How often have you treated other image-bearers with superiority, irritation, or hate? How many times have you chosen selfish ambition over Christlike humility? And how in all your existence (both before your conversion and after), that not for one millisecond have you been perfectly holy or righteous in God's sight.

And yet, in spite of all this, Christ still looks upon you with mercy. He looks upon you with love, with compassion, and He is committed to you. He reminds you that He died for you, that He is for you, and that He will never leave you or forsake you.

Not because you are worthy, not because you are perfect, but because of His great, unfathomable love. When we meditate on the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ's love (a love that surpasses knowledge) our hearts are overwhelmed. Knowing His love fuels a deeper love for Him and shapes us into people who can truly, biblically love others, reflecting the mercy and grace that have been lavished upon us.

But if you are here this morning and you are not yet a Christian, you need to know that the only way to truly know this incredible love of God is to look to Christ in faith. You must turn from your life of sin and place your full trust in Him for salvation.

Christ offers this amazing love to you. He offers the forgiveness of your sins and the experience of His love for all eternity. Yet you must recognize that His love cannot be earned by your good works, nor do you have the ability to love others like Him apart from His mercy and grace.

So, I invite you to come to the Lord and then come speak to one of our prayer partners that will be here on the steps to pray with you.

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Love is a quality, a characteristic, and a defining feature of those transformed by God's grace. It is the mark of the Christian in this age and will endure forever in the age to come. Love will reign for all eternity.

Paul began this chapter by reminding us that even the most extraordinary gifts are nothing without love. Here, at the chapter's conclusion, he wants us to know that love needs no spiritual gifts to shine brightly for the glory of God.

When believers walk in love, they reflect God's very character and heart, for God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love is the way of life for the believer (2 John 6) and the means by which we imitate our God and Savior (Ephesians 5:1–2).

Let's pray.

Benediction: 2 Thessalonians 3:5 May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.