

Everlasting Love

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[0 : 00] I just want to say a word to the young folk, any who are here tonight or who are watching us online. I don't know about you, but I like to garden. We have a deal in our house. Catherine, my wife, deals with gardening for things which look nice, flowers, and I deal with gardening for things you can eat. We have a clear division of labor there. So I grow the vegetables and the fruit. Catherine does all the nice flowers that make the garden look attractive. There's one particular thing that I like, and that's trees, fruit trees. I love fruit trees. In my garden at home, I have three apple trees, and they all produce apples, and we like the apples that come from them.

But one thing that I wanted was a plum tree. In our old house, we had a plum tree in the garden, and I wanted a plum tree. Not least because my wife makes really nice plum and chili jelly. You can't make that without plums. So I wanted a plum tree. So I bought a plum tree. And I put the plum tree into the garden. It was one of these ones you're supposed to be able to grow in a pot, so I put it in a nice big pot, and I waited to see if I would get any plums from it. And do you know what? Very first year, nothing. You need to be patient with these things. You can't rush them, right? A tree is a long-term investment. So I waited a little bit longer, and the next year, covered in leaves, beautiful leaves, and no fruit.

So year three came along, and I fed it, and I watered it, and no fruit.

Now, I don't know about you, but for me, what makes a plum tree a plum tree is plums. Without plums, a plum tree is just a tree. So I wasn't very impressed with this. So what do you think I did?

[1 : 59] I mean, the obvious solution is, if it's plums that make a plum tree a plum tree, maybe I should buy some plums and stick them on. That would make it a healthy tree, wouldn't it?

Well, obviously not. That would make about as much sense as saying, I have all these apple trees, and I want a plum tree. I'm going to pull the apples off and stick plums on the tree instead. That is not going to work.

And our lives are a bit like that, because we are told that the things we do, the good actions that we do, are fruit that our lives produce. And you can judge what kind of life someone is living by the fruit they produce, in the same way that a plum tree is a plum tree because it produces plums.

Somebody living a good life, you can judge that they are living a good life because they produce good fruit. But you can't make that by sticking good deeds onto yourself.

If you want to lead a good life, a changed life, a godly life, you can't do that by making yourself do good things.

[3 : 13] You might look much the same to start with, but those good things, if they're just stuck on, they will wither and die. And if you've nailed them on or stapled them on, you're not going to do the tree any favours either.

So what did I do with this plum tree? Well, I took it out from where it was, and I dug a big hole in the garden, and I cleared away all the rocks and the roots and the rubbish that was in that hole, and I put in good soil, I put in good compost, and I put in loads and loads of feed and fertiliser, and I prepared a spot for it, and then I put the tree in it.

And I made sure it was fed well, and in good soil. And do you know what? This summer, we got our first crop of plums.

There was loads of plums on the tree when we came away. I'm hoping there are still some there when we get back, because I'm really looking forward to enjoying those first plums. And what made the difference was not adding fruit to the tree, it was what the tree feeds on.

And that's what we're like. If we want to see good fruit in our lives, then we have to feed on the right things. We have to feed on God's word.

[4 : 37] We have to ask the Holy Spirit to water that word so that it nurtures us and helps us to grow. That's where the change comes from. The change comes from where your roots are, not from the bits that are sticking up that everyone can see.

And from a distance, some people might look okay. They might be covered in leaves. But up close, if there's no fruit, well, a plum tree with no plums is just a tree.

And sooner or later, if this hadn't worked, I was going to get rid of it. Because I don't want just a tree taking up soil. So if you want your lives to be good lives, to be lives which are productive, to be lives which produce fruit for the benefit of those around you, if you want to be serving the purpose for which you were made, you need to make sure your roots are in the right soil.

Your roots are drawing the right feed from the right places. And the only place that you will find that is in God's word. Root your lives in him.

Root your lives in the Bible and just watch how fruitful they will become. So the next time you see a tree with fruit on it, you remember that.

[5 : 52] And if you want to be a fruitful tree, trust in the Lord and turn to his word. We're going to say the Lord's prayer together now.

And we're going to come to him and join together in this prayer. Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen. I ask you now to turn for our scripture reading to 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

1 Corinthians chapter 13. One last time we'll read this whole chapter together. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

[7 : 18] And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give away all I have and if I deliver up my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind.

Love does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

[8 : 21] But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 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. 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. So now, faith, hope, and love abide.

These three. But the greatest of these is love.

And I just want to read the last few verses there again. That's what we'll focus on tonight. From verse 8. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away.

As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. And on to the end of the chapter. So. We've come to my final Sunday with you.

[9 : 27] And to the last part of our study on 1 Corinthians 13. It's funny how quickly time goes, isn't it? As we find ourselves at the end.

All things come to an end. Or do they? Because as we look at these closing verses of this chapter. We will see that while Paul says. Things come to an end. They definitely end. There is one which definitely does not.

So previously, we've looked at the context of this chapter. We've looked at the fact that it was a response to a church. Which spent all their energy striving to get one over on each other.

Chasing what they considered to be the superior spiritual gifts. So that they could be number one. We looked at how Paul taught them and us. That without love.

[10 : 29] All our spiritual gifts. All the things which we think are important and spiritual. All the things we value so much. And consider so important to church life.

Are in fact nothing. Then last week we looked at how Paul's description of love is very, very different. From the way that the world describes love.

Paul understands love as being sacrificial and coming at a personal cost. We also recognize the fact that what Paul was describing in verses 4-7 is actually a person. Jesus Christ. The living embodiment of the love that he lays out in this chapter. So today we come to the final section of the chapter.

Where Paul will contrast the fleeting nature of the spiritual gifts with the eternal nature of love in verses 8-13. And I want to consider these verses under three headings.

[11 : 32] The first is when the perfect comes. Secondly, I want to look at these things pass. And finally, I want to ask.

What's left? When the perfect comes. These things pass. What's left? And midway through this block of text in verse 10.

Paul speaks of a time when the perfect comes. A time of change. A time of passing from one thing to another. What does he mean by this?

The word we have translated here is the Greek word telion. Which means fully mature. The achievement of a sort of end state.

What you've been working towards. It speaks of completion. There's been a lot of debate about what Paul means here. But I think there are plenty of clues in the passage to guide us.

[12 : 36] Because Paul is talking here about something which is sometimes called the not yet. That's to distinguish it from the now. Now we are in Jesus more than we were before.

But we are not yet what we will be. Now, sin is defeated and Jesus' victory is won. But we do not yet see the full realization of that victory.

We are still, as it were, a work in progress. James was speaking this morning about we live in the now.

But we look to the future. To the not yet. To that which is still to come. So what Paul describes as the perfection is the coming of this not yet.

This state of completion which we look forward to when Jesus returns. And establishes his kingdom fully. When the work that he began on the cross comes to a full realization at last.

[13 : 45] When the earth is made new. And so are we. And Paul tells us that at this time we will see face to face.

Well, right now we see everything as if in a mirror dimly. Now today's mirrors are, they're quite good.

You see quite a clear image. But it is just an image. It's not the real thing. It's a picture of a three-dimensional object in two dimensions.

And in Paul's day, mirrors were really just pieces of polished bronze. In fact, that was one of the big industries in Corinth.

So the people he was writing to would have been very familiar with this. And the image in one of these would have been dull. And it would have been distorted. And it would not have been clear at all. So what a difference it would be between that.

[14 : 50] And seeing something for real. That would be an impressive difference. But you know what's even more impressive? Is what he's talking about here.

What it is that you would be seeing. God. Face to face. Now this was something that even Moses. If you read Exodus chapter 33. Even Moses couldn't do this and live. Look on the face of God.

Revelation chapter 22 verse 4.

Tells us it will be one of the great privileges of believers. When Jesus returns. To see God face to face. To see Jesus in his glory.

So this is what Paul is talking about. When Jesus' work is complete. And we are in his presence forever. Forever. That's what Paul means by the perfect.

[15 : 48] That's something we should all be looking forward to. And focused on. Are you? Am I?

Am I? This time of completion. When we are finally as we should be. And seeing Jesus in his divinity.

Face to face. Are you ready for that? Even now. In Jesus.

We have so much. And have come so far. We are not what we once were. But we are also. Not yet. What we will be.

So much. Has already been given to us. In the now. But it pales. In comparison. To what awaits us. In the not yet. The things to come.

[16:46] Which we have been promised. And when the perfect comes. Paul tells us. Well then. The partial.

The imperfect. Will pass away. So let's look at that for a bit. These things pass.

Our second point. In verse 8. We see Paul looking at the three big spiritual giftings. Which he's been addressing in this letter.

Prophecy. Tongues. And knowledge. Now these are the same gifts. Which he mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Telling us that they were worthless.

Without love. And now. He expands on why that is. By telling us. That for all they were.

[17:43] And are. Valued by the church. Or considered impressive. For all that they have their place. They are. Impermanent.

Think about that from the Corinthians. Point of view for a moment. How this would have sounded to the eight years. Church. These were the things that they all saw. That they considered the marks of a successful church.

The pinnacle of Christian life. They had written this. This letter from Paul. Was a response probably. To one written by them to him. Asking him to rank these gifts in order. So they would know who was most important.

And what does Paul tell them in these verses? Tells in prophecy. God speaking through men and women. His inspired word. Communicated to the church.

That will pass away. It will be abolished. Destroyed. Nullified. Pride. Pride. The same goes for deep knowledge and understanding.

[18:49] Also greatly prized today. All that study. All that wisdom. All that clever teaching. Wiped away. And as for tongues.

The Corinthians. Favorite gift. The one they thought was the supremo. Well they will cease. Silenced.

Forever. I wonder. How many of you. Have ever built a sandcastle on the beach.

We've been doing a bit of that while we're here. We like a good sandcastle. We've built some impressive ones. Multiple walls. Two or three moats. Gatehouses.

You name it. We throw it in. We've had compliments on our sandcastles. But what do you think happens to them when the tide comes in? Same thing that happens to all sandcastles when the tide comes in.

[19:57] All the things the Corinthian church put front and centre. Building themselves up with. Paul says. Building on sand. Because all of this will be taken away one day.

These things can never be primary. They can never be superior. Because while they are good in their place. They come with an expiry date.

And there's a lesson there for us. We need to be sure that we are not placing too high a value on things which are not permanent. Making our success markers things which will be swept away.

Without love these things are nothing. And viewed from the standpoint of eternity. That's what they'll all become. Now this is not to say that they are not from God or they aren't important.

Paul himself reiterated their value and importance as gifts for the church back in chapter 12. Gifts to build one another up and build the church.

[21:11] It's just a reminder that on their own they are not enough. Because one day they'll be gone. Why? Why?

Why would God give these gifts, these wonderful gifts and say they're all going to go away? Well. When Duncan was very young.

He had some toys. Which were designed to help him pull himself up. Get up right. And kind of toddle along with them. Supporting himself on them. He doesn't have them anymore.

Why? Because he doesn't need them. He's faster than I am. Now I have trouble keeping up with him when he's moving. They've served their purpose.

They've done their job. And they're no longer needed. That's what Paul says about these gifts in verses 9 to 12. We have them now because they serve a purpose.

[22:24] But that will not always be the case. Because even now, even at their best, these things are incomplete. Look at verse 9. Verse 9 says, For now we know in part and we prophesy in part.

These things are like the play sets that we give to our kids. Which are to help them learn about things which they will have when they're grown up.

But which are not the things themselves. They are not without value. And they are not forever. And they do not give us the complete picture.

Not by a long way. They are fragments. They point to and prepare us for something beyond them. They point us to Jesus and they prepare us for the perfect.

Which is to come in the not yet. These gifts and those like them are for the now. They exist for a purpose.

[23 : 26] And when the time of the not yet, when the perfect comes, they will not be needed anymore. So they will be done away with. They will give way.

Back in chapter 12, Paul told us that the purpose of these gifts was to build up the church. In love. The purpose of prophecy in whatever form, including preaching, sharing a word, even perhaps the Bible itself.

Their purpose is to teach us. To help us grow. To bring others under the word. And into the body of Christ. And to encourage and strengthen them within it.

The purpose of the spiritual gift of knowledge, of understanding, of deep learning, was to allow those who have it to teach the church.

To share their understanding and help the church to grow and flourish in love. They are about bringing foretastes of the not yet into the now.

[24 : 38] Or helping us today to look for the things to come. To build us up and to infuse us about sharing the word with each other and with those outside the church.

Now when the perfect comes, when the not yet becomes the now, when we see the glory of God in the new heavens and the new earth, we will no longer need these things.

When Christ, the living word of God, is in our midst and we can hear God's word directly, we won't need prophecy anymore. Why would we need God's word through an intermediary?

We can stand in his presence and see him face to face. And so prophecy gives way.

When the perfect comes, when we are raised in our new incorruptible bodies, perfected in Christ, then we will have all the knowledge we need.

[25 : 53] What need will we have then of the gift of understanding knowledge? As Paul says in verse 12, now our knowledge is fragmentary.

It's partial. It's just bits. It's incomplete. It's like an image seen in a primitive mirror. But then, then we will know fully, even as God knows us fully.

It's not so much knowledge itself that will be swept away. We will still know. But this spiritual gift of deep knowledge and understanding will be brushed aside.

And the purpose of tongues, tongues was never really about communicating through tongues. It was about being a sign of God's power. Think about the first time we read about this gift being bestowed.

Acts, chapter 2, verses 1 to 9. The gift of tongues came to the apostles who began to speak. And the people who heard them were amazed because this multitude from around the empire, each of them heard the apostles as if they were speaking in their own language.

[27 : 06] Now that is pretty amazing. And it's easy to think that this was about being able to communicate with a diverse group of people so the word could be taken around the world. But think about it.

All these people, regardless of their nationality or their ethnicity or where they had come from, were Jews. Which means they would all have had some command of Aramaic.

They were all part of the Roman Empire. which means they would all have had some use of street Greek, a common tongue. So this gift wasn't just some sort of spiritual universal translator.

No, this gift, in common with the miracles that Jesus performed and the miracles his disciples would later perform, was about far more than just the surface results. Because we read that the people who witnessed this were amazed.

They were astonished and perplexed. The gift of tongues isn't and wasn't about enabling communication. Though that may well be a secondary effect, it was intended as a sign.

[28 : 18] It's about showing God's power so that people can be amazed by it. Along with all the other miracles, the healing miracles, the miracles of command over nature and death, all of these things, what it does, ultimately, is it points to God's glory.

Well, do you know what? When we can see Jesus Christ face to face, when we stand in the presence of that glory, there will be no need for signs.

Not anymore. Who needs a sign to the glory when you have the glory with you? And so this, too, will cease.

Paul uses the example of his own growth from infancy to maturity as an illustration. And we see that around us every day, don't we? But by calling these gifts childish and even infantile, the language suggests, he isn't disparaging them.

Because no matter how we have matured as Christians in our lives, we are infants compared to what we will become when the perfect, when the not yet arrives.

[29 : 40] And it is right for infants to have infantile things. But we should be aware that that is what they are.

And that one day it will be time to put our toys aside. By making these gifts their main goal, their purpose, the Corinthian church were like grown adults who refused to give up their baby toys in exchange for the real thing.

But if all of these things will be swept away, if the perfect will drive them all away, if they will be silenced and swept aside, what's left?

Which is, of course, our third and our final point. What's left? Well, if you've been with us for the rest of this series, or even if you've just read the passage or the title for tonight's sermon, then the answer should come as no surprise.

You see, Paul has been pointing out the impermanence of these things to contrast them with the permanence of love. Look at verse 8.

[31 : 05] Love never ends. Some translations prefer love never fails. And in fact, the word that we have here in Greek means falls or collapses.

So love does not buckle. It doesn't collapse. Where the gifts of the Spirit will be swept away, love will not.

In this way, Paul is basically continuing the argument that he began in verse 31 of chapter 12, that love is more excellent than all the spiritual gifts the Corinthian church craved.

Here, he is showing its superiority and its durability. When the good gifts from God have been rendered obsolete and give way to what comes, love remains.

when we have matured enough to no longer need the toys, the childish things that God has given us to learn through, still, we will need love.

[32 : 20] When we graduate from the nursery, love will continue with us. Now, poets and pop stars like to talk about love as being everlasting and ongoing.

but in strictly human terms, love does fail all the time. If nothing else, it's subject to mortality.

But not this love. This love that comes from God and binds the church together in unity. It will outlast this world and go on with us into eternity.

God's love is, like him, everlasting, unstoppable. This perfect love, exemplified and epitomized in Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, our risen Savior who died for us, never gives way, never collapses, never falls.

Three things remain, Paul tells us in verse 13. Faith, hope, and love.

[33 : 47] Faith and hope are both gifts from God which help us to focus on him and which we will see realized in full when the perfect comes.

We will still have faith even though we now see the object of our faith. We will know our hope realized and fulfilled. But love is greater even than these because God is love.

Faith and hope are ours. love. They are human, given to us by God. But love is an intrinsic characteristic of the Godhead, the Trinity from eternity, from before he created us.

God existed as love and in love. It's something that he chooses to lavish on his creation, on us. and he delights in seeing us showing this love towards others.

And it is in the person of Jesus Christ, God the Son, God made flesh, that we meet with it most clearly.

[35 : 14] so, let me ask you, as we come to the end of our short series, our brief glance at this chapter, because for a short chapter there is so much more we could have said.

Let me ask you, are you resting in that love? Are you resting in that love?

Are you resting in that love made manifest in Jesus? Are you secure in it?

Are you reveling in it? Are you making it your watchword as you seek to live your life infused by it and showing it to those around you?

if you're not, the good news, and I do mean the good news, is that it is not too late. Call on Jesus now and start living for the not yet, the coming perfection.

[36 : 34] Enjoy this life to the full as you look towards the completion to come. rest in the love of Jesus, that love which never falls, never fails, never stumbles, and never gives way.

Because everything else, everything else will pass away. but love, this love, never ends.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Oh, Lord God, we ask that you would make this love real in our hearts, that you would fill us with this love.

We pray, Lord, that you would help us to rest in it, to live in it, and to live it out. Help us to be known as a people who love one another, those around us, and most of all, you.

We thank you that in your love, in your amazing love, you created us so that you could lavish that love on us, not because you needed to, but because you wanted to, because that's how loving you are.

[38 : 12] Oh, God, that's so amazing, and we just pray that you would never let us lose sight of that. We pray for those listening to this who are still looking for that, who still don't know that, and Lord, we pray that right now, as they consider this, you would speak straight into their hearts, love, that you would make them come alive in a way they have never known before, as they really know that love, the love which passes all understanding and never ends.

Lord, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. I'm going to close now by singing in Psalm 121, Psalm 121, the Scottish Psalter version.

You'll find this on page 416. I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whence doth come mine aid, my safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made.

And here we read how the love which does not stumble, the love which does not fall, will not allow us to stumble or fall either, as he holds us up, as he prevents us from slipping or sliding, as he keeps us safe, even as we are going out and in forever, he keeps us.

So let's sing this Psalm to his praise. Let's lift our voices as we worship him in these words, I to the hills will lift mine eyes. I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from west of my name.

[40 : 17] Writeègears zdj■ din I have made.

Thy good deal of less light or well is somewhere that be keyed.

Behold thee that keeps Israel is submerged not nor see.

The Lord be kept the Lord thy shape on thy right hand stay.

The moon by night he shall not smile nor yet the sun by day.

[41 : 42] The Lord shall keep thy soul he shall please bear thee from all ill hence forth thy going out and in God keep forever will our will just a reminder and information for those who are visiting with us that the folk downstairs will be guided to leave through these doors upstairs through the main door so just please wait patiently and you'll be allowed to leave Lord God we thank you for your grace and your goodness and we pray that as we go now here that you would be watching over our going out and our coming in that we would know your grace your peace and your unending love now and forever amen to