

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 June 2016

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 0 0] Well, happy Father's Day.

Am I on? Hello? Happy Father's Day. I wore this this morning because I got it yesterday for my kids. I hope you don't mind. It was my Father's Day present, so what can I say?

It's what I got. You know, when I was a kid growing up, I discovered somewhere along the way that I was one of those hopeless romantics at times.

This will date me terribly, but I listened to Air Supply and Chicago and a little later Celine Dion a little bit.

And I watched movies like Say Anything and Sleepless in Seattle. And I wish Pastor Nick were here to translate that for all of you who are under 35.

[1 : 1 6] But there's a lure out there, a vision in our popular culture that there is a love that is everlasting, a love that will lift us up where we belong.

There is a love that will capture our hearts and transport us forever into some eternal bliss. And there's something that we long for in that that is right and good.

And yet, if you've lived a little bit longer than my 15 years when I was captured by all these things, you realize that love is not always that easy, is it?

I think I've told this story before, but it's worth telling again. You may know it. Robertson McQuilkin was the president of Columbia International University, a strong Christian university that sent missionaries all over the world.

And it became clear that she was descending into Alzheimer's disease and the effects of it.

[2 : 4 1] As she slowly lost her ability to think, to plan, to recognize people. It was his presence that brought her the most peace.

She desired so much to be with him, in fact, that she would at times walk from their house, which was a mile away from campus, up to 10 times a day simply to physically be present with him.

Because that was where she found peace and hope. And so, after 22 years, he stepped down from his position and wrote a moving letter and a powerful testimony of what he did.

He said, I know that she's happier when I'm with her than when I'm not. It's not that my work is done. There are many plans still on the board, ready to be accomplished.

There are many dreams that will be laid aside for this. But she has served me for 40 years. And if I served her for 40 years from this day, I would still be in her debt.

[3 : 5 3] And he stepped away from that position to serve her for the next 10 years. When she didn't know who he was, when she lost her ability to speak, when he spent day in, day out with this woman who, in terms of their daily interactions, was no longer who she used to be.

Love can be hard, can't it? Love can be hard, can't it?

Love can be hard, can't it?

It's hard because it costs us, our very self, our preferences, our desires, our time, our energy, our agendas, our hopes and dreams, may be laid aside in order to love the people that God has put into our lives.

And it's exhausting. It's exhausting to keep dying to self. It's exhausting to do that through the seasons of marriage.

[5 : 54] It's exhausting to do that as you raise your child from infancy to adulthood. It's exhausting to love your church when they're imperfect and when they've disappointed and hurt you.

It's exhausting to love your friend when life circumstances change and what used to be very close is now more distant.

When they get married and you think, what happens now to our friendship? In so many different ways, love is hard to endure in, isn't it?

The Corinthian church struggled with this. They wanted love to be something that gave them return.

They wanted their service that they would say would be done in love to result in something for them where they could see a tangible result in a short period of time.

[6 : 59] I wonder if we do that too. And so it leaves us with the question, how is it that we can endure in love, to persevere in love, to keep loving for the rest of our life?

Well, this leads us to our passage this morning. We're continuing in our service, in our series in 1 Corinthians 13. 1 Corinthians 13. Well, we're going through the whole book and we're in 1 Corinthians 13.

It's page 960 in your pew Bible. If you want to look there with me, we're going to read it in just a second. As we close this chapter up, this great chapter on the nature, the necessity, and today the permanence of love.

We're going to look today at verses 8 through 13. So let's look at that together.

Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away.

[8 : 18] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. 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. Please pray with me. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that in it you have spoken to us.

You have spoken with clarity and with timeless truth. Lord, I pray today that you administer to our hearts. That, Lord, we would be ready to receive with soft hearts what you have to say to us this morning.

[9 : 25] We pray, Lord, that you administer to our minds. That we would know and understand and think rightly about you. Who you are and what it is that you have called us to in Christ.

God, I pray that as we look into this passage this morning, that you would enable me to speak your words. Lord, that we all would be taught by you and by your spirit this morning.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. The fundamental idea that I want you to go away with this morning, the principle that Paul is presenting in this passage is this.

That we can endure in love because God has made love eternal. We, that sounds really cheesy, doesn't it? It kind of sounds like a Hallmark card.

But it's, I hope we will see by the end that it's much more significant than that. That we can persevere in love. Because God himself has made love an eternal thing.

[10 : 31] So we're going to look at this passage. We're just going to walk through it. The principle is introduced in verses 8 through 10. The principle is illustrated in verses 11 and 12.

And then the principle is brought home in verses 12 and 13. So that's what we're going to do. If you're following along with notes, there's your outline. First of all, the principle.

God has made love forever introduced in verses 8 through 10. Look again with me at the passage. And as we look at it, remember that the Corinthian, in this letter, Paul has been talking in this section in 1 Corinthians 12 through 14.

He's talking about how do we gather together. What does it look like for Christians to gather together for worship? And specifically, how is it that spiritual gifting, that is particular ways that God by his spirit works through us to bless one another.

How is it that those things are meant to exhibit themselves in a godly fashion in our context? And at the center of it, as we've said before, is this chapter on love.

[11 : 40] That love is the context. Love is the engine. And love is the thing that determines the goal of how it is that we exercise these spiritual gifts.

How it is that we are to treat one another. And he's contrasting it, seemingly, with the way the Corinthian church grabbed onto gifts and exalted themselves because they said, well, I have this, so I'm important.

Or you don't have that. What's wrong with you? This sort of divisive character of their community. Paul says, no.

Love is at the center of how you ought to do these things. And we've seen that in verses 1 through 3. It said, it doesn't matter what you do. If you don't have love, there is no benefit for you in it.

There is nothing to puff yourself up in it. And then in verses 4 through 7, as I said earlier, we saw the nature of love. That love as a self-giving for the good of another is tender and is truthful and is tenacious.

[12 : 49] And Paul starts here again by beginning to transition out of what seems like an almost esoteric discussion of love back to his topic of gifts.

So we see in 8 through 10 a contrast, don't we? He says, love never ends. But, and then he begins to talk about the gifts.

And he says, do you see what he does? He says, there are three gifts he picks on. He says, as for prophecy, it will pass away. Right? And prophecy, as we'll see in chapter 14, is the thing that Paul's going to say may be the most beneficial for the gathered congregation.

In terms of spiritual gifting. He's going to say, this is the one I really want you to do well. He says, but you know what? It's going to pass away. And then he says, and you know what else is going to pass away?

Tongues will cease. Knowledge will pass away. These spiritual gifts that are word-based gifts that are meant to help the gathered congregation increase in their knowledge of God and their understanding of God.

[13 : 58] And Paul says, none of these things will last forever. Love will. The gifts will not. Why is that? Look with me at verse 10.

Nope, 9. Verse 9. For we know in part. And we prophesy in part. But when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.

Now, what does he mean by in part by this? I think what he means is that there is this growing. It actually could be translated part by part or bit by bit is how we would say it today.

For we know bit by bit, a little more. He's not saying we don't know anything or we're destined to ignorance. But what he does say is that these things, we may have incremental growth in our knowledge of God through the exercise of these gifts.

And yet it will always be insufficient. It will never reach to the fullness or the perfection or the completeness of what they're destined to do.

[15 : 13] Which is that we would know God fully. He says, but there will be a day when that will come. There will be a day when the perfect will come.

And when it will, these imperfect means, these partial means that are not bad in and of themselves. Paul is not denigrating them. He's simply saying they're not going to last forever because they're pointing to something else.

They will become obsolete. As one commentator put it, at the coming of Christ, the final purpose of God's saving work in Christ will have been reached.

At that point, those gifts now necessary for the building up of the church in the present age will disappear. Because the complete will have come.

To cite Bart's marvelous imagery. Because the sun rises, all other lights are extinguished. Isn't that a beautiful picture?

[16 : 16] Your flashlights and your candles that you're holding out in the darkness of this partial knowledge. When the sun arises, will suddenly be no longer necessary.

Because all the light that you ever could have wanted is abundantly yours. And when Christ comes and finishes his work, when he establishes fully his kingdom, and we'll see later more about what this means, these gifts are no longer necessary.

They simply become overcome. They're overcome by what God will do. Now, let me address for just a minute, and I want to do this with all humility and gentleness.

There are some who have read these passages through particular lenses. They have thought that the perfection that is to come is not the future coming of Christ and the full establishment of his kingdom.

But at some point, they saw that Paul was looking ahead to something different. To the perfection of the church as it established itself ecclesiologically and organizationally.

[17 : 29] Or some see it as the perfect is the coming of the scriptures and the writing of the scriptures such that when those things came, then suddenly these gifts would pass away and would no longer be necessary.

This is an argument that would say that these gifts of prophecy and tongues and knowledge are no longer valid in the church today. Let me just say humbly that I think that it misses the flow of thought to say it that strongly.

I believe that this passage and what we have seen already in chapter 12 and what we will see in chapter 14 is arguing that these gifts are meant to be a part of church life today.

And Paul is going to give very specific instructions on how they can be good and profitable. And let me acknowledge that there are many ways in which under the name of these gifts, people have done all sorts of really crazy things that have very little to do with the gospel or the kingdom.

And especially because they've often lacked the love that Paul is emphasizing here. But I think it's a mistake to read these verses to suggest that these gifts have ceased.

[18 : 51] I think that they properly expressed are meant to be an ongoing part of the partial bit by bit growth of the church in their knowledge of God in this present age while we yet await that future age.

which as we'll see later will bring a place where we will know fully just as we are fully known. So Paul says, these gifts are like signposts.

They are pointing to a knowledge that is yet to come. And he's contrasting it with love because the love that he's expounding upon and commending to us, that love is not a signpost to something else.

It is a foretaste. It is in continuity with what will happen in the future. So that's what he's, that's the explanation that he's trying to give.

Love is permanent and these sign things, these things that you are taking hold of and making so important, they are ultimately temporary and not eternal.

[20 : 02] And then he goes on in the next couple of verses and he gives some great illustrations. Some pictures. Look with me again at verses 11 and 12. Let's read this together.

Woo! Here we go. Got to get my spectacles back on. 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.

I love it when Paul gives us these really clear analogies. But it always raises the question, what is he actually talking about? Some people have read this and particularly in light of, if you go back to 1 Corinthians 3, Paul uses the picture of infancy as a sign of spiritual immaturity.

And so he picks that. Back then he says, to be like an infant or to be like a child is to be immature. And in a derogatory, or in a negative sense, to lack the maturity that you ought to have.

Some people have read that into this and think that Paul is talking about the immaturity of the Corinthian church, but that the maturity would be a different kind of exercise that they could do in this age.

[21 : 14] But again, I think that's missing the point. I think what Paul is saying is, when I was a child, I did the things that children do. There's nothing wrong with that. Because that's what they do. That's what it means to be a child.

But then I grew up and I became an adult. And I didn't continue in the childish ways because that's no longer the season that I'm in. And what Paul is saying is similarly for the church.

You now have these gifts because of the partial nature of what you have. And that's appropriate for now. It's a good thing. But recognize that what maturity, what adulthood, what the next age, the next season, the next stage for you will be, what eternity will look like, it's not going to have these things anymore.

You're going to be in a different place and you're going to have different things that characterize you. And so, he uses this analogy of the difference between childhood and adult to talk about this difference between the present age and the age to come.

And it's okay to have these gifts now, but recognize, again, don't exalt them to this eternal state or to this ultimate value in your life. Because when you become an adult, they will no longer be here.

[22 : 35] When Jesus comes and establishes his kingdom, you will no longer need it. He then goes on and uses an imagery, an image of a mirror. Verse 12.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now, I will admit that this one's a little harder for a number of reasons.

One is, when you look in a mirror, who do you see? Yourself, right? That's what you use a mirror for in our culture and in our world. That is not the point of this analogy.

It's not about looking at ourselves and thinking about what do I know about myself and whether my mirror gives a good reflection of that or not. And I will say this too, the translation of dimly is a really tricky word to translate.

If you look at other, maybe you have other Bibles here and you look at it and say, it might mean that other translations would be a reflection as in a mirror, a reflection of something where you're maybe seeing like around a corner because you're looking in a mirror.

[23 : 41] Or another translation is through a glass darkly. So you're not looking at yourself, but you're looking through something, but there's an opaqueness to it or a lack of clarity.

In fact, the word could be translated a vision or a riddle. For now we know in a vision or in a riddle, which is kind of an odd phrase.

But I think that what he, at the core of what Paul is saying with this is that now we see in a mediated sense something.

That is, there is something between us and the thing that we want to see and want to look at. Right? And so, so we see that indistinctly because there's something in between that we have to have.

So if I'm looking around a corner, I have to look at the mirror to get the reflection around the corner. Or, it's possible that Paul is actually meaning, so, what you're getting is things and visions and riddles that are words that are trying to speak truth to you, but you're not going to get it clearly right now.

[24 : 58] So it's indistinct or indirect is what this image is pointing to of what we have now. And part of the reason why I say that is because it's so clear with the contrast.

What is the contrast with? Right? Now, we see indistinctly or indirectly. Then, how will we see it? We will see it face to face.

The difference between knowing about someone by reading a bio and knowing them in person. The difference between an online chat and a coffee date.

The difference between a photograph and being on the south rim of the Grand Canyon. What we have now is all mediated.

But friends, one day, one day we will see face to face. One day we will actually be in an unmediated way, able to see the things that we most long for and most want.

[26 : 02] and in that we will have both the personal knowledge and the complete knowledge, the experiential knowledge of that which we long most to have, which is God himself.

And Paul then takes this and he brings the principal home. The end of verse 12 and in 13, he says, then I will know fully just as I am fully known.

Friends, do you see what this verse is saying? He's saying, one day we will know everything about God that we need and want to know, that we are capable of knowing.

We will know everything about God. And you know what it's like? It's like how God knows us. It's like how the God who knows, who created the world and everything in it, who knows our frame, who knit together the atoms and the molecules and who breathed life into us, who knows every hair in our head, who knows every thought and intention of the heart.

God knows us that well. Now. And he says, one day we will know God to the full extent of our capacity to do so.

[27 : 25] We will know God because we will see him face to face. There will no longer be an indistinction. There will no longer be a mediation. But we will actually see him.

And this is why these gifts are temporary. This is why these gifts are only for now and not for eternal. This is why the gifts are not worth building our identity and exalting and puffing ourselves up over.

Because one day they will pass away and we will see our God face to face. And this, friends, is why he turns at the end of the chapter to this verse that is so well known.

faith, hope, and love. These three abide or these three remain. But the greatest of these is love. You know, it's funny when we were talking about this last week with the pastors.

I said, well, yeah, clearly because faith doesn't last. Right? Because, as we see in Hebrews 1, faith is seeing things that we don't yet see and hoping for things that we have not, that have not yet come about.

[28 : 42] Right? And so faith and hope are inherently things of this age just like the gifts and they're not for the future. And that's what I thought. And there's some validity to it in some sense because Hebrews 1, Hebrews 11, 1 does say that or Romans 8, 24 does talk about the way that hope that is seen is not hope at all.

It's knowledge. It's something else. But as I read through this passage again and as I thought about it, that's not actually Paul's point in saying these three remain.

What he's going to is he's reminding the Corinthians of the very foundation of their faith. Faith, hope, and love is almost shorthand for Paul to the very core of what it is to be a Christian.

It is to believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and to entrust our eternal salvation to that. It is to hope that because of that we who have been forgiven of our sin will be raised to new and eternal life with Jesus and that this life is not all there is and we are not abandoned to the grave but that Jesus will raise us with him.

Faith, hope, and love and love which is the beginning and the end of this work of salvation. God who has loved us and God who has called us in love to love the world.

[30 : 08] This is the very core and he's saying these things remain. Right? The gifts, they pass away. These things will remain. If faith means a trusting in God, even in eternity, we will do this.

If hope means that the future has a certainty of God's goodness, we will continue to believe that in heaven. So he says, these things remain but the greatest of these is love.

Think about it, friends, how wonderful this is. What is the greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength.

And the second one is like it. To love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the very shape of our Christian life. Love is at the very center of our salvation.

Romans 5.8 God demonstrated his love for us in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Friends, we can fight hard against the mushiness and the sentimentality and the emptiness of air supply and the craziness of our culture in terms of what love really means.

[31 : 42] But let us not forsake the centrality of love in the kingdom of God. God so loved the world that he gave his only son.

That whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. The work that God has done has been done in love.

It is an overflow of his fatherly care for his creation. It is the overflow of his kingly care for his people.

He has shown his love by sending his son Jesus to die on that cross and to rise from the dead so that we who were dead in our sins who are alienated and outside of love can be brought in.

He has shown love that is giving and love that is costly and love that is enduring to us in our salvation. The very things that we struggle to do he has done for us in our salvation.

[32 : 57] But friends the greatest of these is love not only because it is the shape of the Christian life not only because it is the very engine of our salvation but because God himself is love.

Have you ever thought about this? God is not faith. He is faithful but God himself is not faith. Nor is God hope though he is trustworthy and dependable and sovereign and good.

But the Bible says the Bible actually says that God is spirit God is light and God is love. Those are three things that says God is essentially. because God is love his steadfast love endures forever.

Because God is love everything that he has done from the nature of his relationship within the Trinity before the creation of the world to the very act of creation to his patience with a fallen world that has rebelled and rejected him to his act of salvation to reaching into it to his patient kindness and not bringing justice and ending this world but continuing to endure and loving as he showed in the book of Hosea this love for a wayward people in a wayward world he has endured in his kindness so that he might save more so that he might do more good in this world and in his love he will come and make all things right one day and he will make all things new and it will be beautiful and it will be as it was meant to be from the very beginning and in that day we will see him face to face and we will be changed we will see him face to face and we will no longer need the mediated gifts that God has given us now as we in part strive to know him more because we will be in his presence and we will see him and know him as the God of love and our hearts having been redeemed by Christ will respond in heartfelt overflowing loving devotion and worship to him this is how we can endure in loving others because this is the kind of God that we know because he has shown us what it looks like and because he has given us his love with which to love one another there is nothing that you can do that will have greater purpose and significance than pursuing a life of loving others for the sake of Christ there is no gifting that you can exercise there is no success or achievement you will accomplish there is no version of perfection that you think you will bring about in this life there is no duty that you can perform there is no romantic high to chase or chest heaving moment to grasp for that will have any weight compared to pursuing a life of loving for the sake of Jesus Christ friends this is what he calls us to and you know in light of the events of the past week and the media there are some who say well gosh the church doesn't look very loving friends let us live such good lives such lives of love among the Gentiles that though they may hate what we believe and what we stand for they will see the love in our hearts and they will glorify

Jesus on that last day friends let us outdo one another in love let us think about how we can be tender and how we can be truthful and how we can be patiently enduring tenacious in our love let us do that as we gather together today think about who is it that you need to persevere in love this morning who has hurt you who is hard for you to love who have you given up on in love writer john puts it this way beloved let us love one another for love is of god and whoever loves has been born of god and knows god anyone who does not love does not know god because god is love in this love of god was made manifest among us that god sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him in this is love not that we have loved god but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins beloved if god so loved us we also ought to love one another no one has seen has ever seen god if we love one another god abides in us and his love is perfected in us first john chapter 4 verses 7 through 12 let's pray lord as we listen to this text we are convicted of how unstable how wavering how inconstant our love can be though we may rise to occasions in heroic action lord how hard it is for us to love over and over and over again how hard it is for us to die to self and to all the things that come to our ego and to our self understanding or to die to those things so that we might truly love others for your sake to seek their good as you define it lord we confess as well that there are times when we are confused uncertain as to how to do that lord we praise you that you are the god of love who will help us in those moments oh lord have mercy on us and lord minister to us a knowledge of your love so that we may in turn be people of love because love is forever we pray this in jesus name amen