

Title: Love is the Greatest – Forever!

Text: 1 Corinthians 13.13

Theme: Love is forever

Series: 1 Corinthians #76

Prop Stmt. We love now as taste of what life with Christ is going to be.

Read Text:

Normally, my sermons have an outline that is printed for you, so you can follow the flow of the passage and the argument of the message. Today, our text is the final verse of this chapter and I am attempting to summarize what we have been studying thus far and then answer the question – why? Why is love greater than faith and love? Think of a funnel, we are starting wide, but at the end we will get right down to that question.

What is the worst thing about a “know-it-all?” They don’t know it all, but they won’t admit it, so you cannot have an honest conversation or relationship with them. At work, you can expect there to be a few “know-it-alls”. They are never wrong, they have nothing to learn, and if you don’t do things their way, you are an idiot. At school, you can expect there to be a few “know-it-alls” who know more than the teachers, more than the people who write the text books, more than the coaches, more than the administrators, etc. But, there are no “know-it-alls” in church. A know-it-all in church is a contradiction in terms.

When I speak of the church, I am not speaking of the building, but I am referring to the actual body, family of believers who have truly put their faith and hope in Christ. In order to come to faith in Christ, I have to admit that I cannot trust in myself. I have to admit that I have a problem that I cannot solve. I have to be willing to humble myself and confess to God that I am a sinner who needs a Savior. Last week you witnessed 8 people getting baptized. What was that? Some church ritual? No! Authentic NT baptism is an act of obedience whereby the follower of Christ is publicly identifying himself as one who has come to faith in Christ. He/she has admitted that I need Christ. I am not a know-it-all.

If you know-it-all, you don’t need a church. In fact, if you know-it-all, you don’t need God. If you really know it all, then we ought to be worshiping you. But, we aren’t going to do that because there is only one who really knows it all. Ok, we know that – don’t we? We know, on the one hand that we really don’t know everything, but it is so easy to act like it. In fact, in the church at Corinth, there were a group of people who claimed to have the inside track on the secrets of the spiritual life. They acted as if they were the know-it-alls and no one could ever make it to their level. At the very beginning of this letter, Paul identifies this. Notice in 1.2 he calls believers sanctified, but in 1.8 he says you **will be** blameless. In 1.9 he says that you are called into fellowship with Christ, but in 1.7 you eagerly wait for Christ to be revealed.

We call this the “Already, but Not Yet” tension. **(Chart 1)** If you have come to faith in Christ then, already you are in Christ, but not yet have you experienced all of the benefits

of it. Already you have a new position, a new identity in Christ. But not yet have your habits, attitudes and thoughts completely caught up with it. Already you have been declared righteous, but not yet do you live perfectly righteous. Already you are guaranteed an inheritance with Christ, but not yet are you living with that inheritance.

One of the huge problems in Corinth and with some contemporary views of the Christian life is the fact that some believers overemphasize the “Already” part of their salvation and forget about the “Not yet.” In Corinth they were convincing themselves that they had some spiritual secrets, gifts or powers that were enabling them to live on a higher spiritual plane than the others. They were claiming that the future promises were already their’s. They had already arrived. That same view is prominent today. This view takes the Not Yet part and claims that it is for today and they end up creating a 1st class and coach version of Christians and church. **(Chart 2)** When you embrace and promote this version of Christianity, you have a problem because you have to try to prop up a system that doesn’t work. The result is a plastic Christianity where people cannot admit or acknowledge that they have problems because if you were truly spiritual, then you wouldn’t be living below the water line. If you had the upgraded version of Christianity then you would have eliminated all of the bugs and viruses of life. They were the “know-it-alls.” In Corinth the know-it-alls claimed that speaking in tongues was the ultimate gift, while the rest were for the lesser people.

This view of Christianity is not only wrong, but it helps create an atmosphere that cultivates an “us vs. them” mentality. The truth is, when we come to faith in Christ, we are called to be part of a body of believers where we need others and they need us. That is the big idea of this entire section of 1 Corinthians (12-14).

Review:

1. When a person comes to faith in Christ, that person becomes part of the family of God. (1 Cor. 12.13)
2. God designed believers to need each other.
 - a. Each believer has a gift(s).
 - b. Each believer is different. (have you ever been in a church where there is an unwritten rule that everyone has to look alike, dress alike, act alike, etc?)
 - c. We each have different gifts, gift-mixes and different amounts of the gifts.
 - d. We need each other to complete the body.
 - e. Some gifts are seen more than others.
 - f. While gifts are necessary, they are an occasion for pride.
3. Gifts are necessary now for the health of the body, but must be used in love.
4. Specific gifts are not necessary for spiritual growth, love is. (13.1-3)

It does not matter how gifted, talented, amazing and impressive you are. God is not impressed with any of that, even though people may be, God’s standard is love. Gifts are wonderful and can be very helpful, but be careful that you do not fall in love with the gifts and ignore the Giver, or ignore the purpose of the gifts. You

5. Christ-centered, Christ-driven love is the ultimate barometer of spiritual maturity. Tongues is not a sign that you have arrived, love is. But no one but Christ loves perfectly – yet.
 - a. Love that is patient
 - b. Love that is kind
 - c. Love that is not self-centered (envy, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, quick-tempered, record-keeping, delighting in the faults and failures of others)
 - d. Love that rejoices with the truth
 - e. Love that protects
 - f. Love that trusts
 - g. Love that hopes
 - h. Love that always perseveres.

Love is so important that it will be around forever, long after most of the other gifts have passed away. When we are with Christ, face to face, mature, knowing even as we are known, we will no longer have any need for prophecy, knowledge or tongues.

Think of it! How many jobs will be eliminated by heaven?

Education?

Banking?

Health Care?

Transportation?

Ministry? When I am with Christ, I will retire as a pastor, shepherd and teacher. I will not be needed in that capacity. I am working on, working myself out of a job. As important as preaching/teaching is, love is what is going to last forever.

In chapter 13 Paul shows us the priority of love, the properties of love and now the permanence of love. His entire point is that many of the aspects of our lives as believers that we experience NOW, will not be part of our eternal lives THEN. But, love is part of both. **(Chart 3)** So, instead of becoming pre-occupied and worked up about who has what gift, focus your life on what really matters – LOVE!

For example, the gift of prophecy is great now. In fact, it is so great, that Paul argues in chapter 14, that if you are going to pursue any gift, don't pursue the gift of tongues which has a very limited value, but pursue prophecy because it is helpful to all. However, even though this gift is so great, when perfection comes, when the THEN becomes the now, there will be no need for prophecy.

Speaking in tongues is not a sign of perfection. It is part of the imperfect now. The gifts are temporal. They are for now and they are not perfect. Now we see through a mirror. Now we have indirect knowledge. Some day we will know face-to-face. The gifts now, are great, but limited. The day will come when they will no longer be needed. The day will come when we will be mature, fully-functioning humans as our Creator originally designed us to be. We will love perfectly, and accept love perfectly.

Now look at v.13. “And now, these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Our understanding of this verse rests to a great measure upon the word “now.” In this last section we have seen a contrast between now and then. In that way, the word “now” is being used in a temporal sense. If that is the case then Paul is saying that out of all the gifts that are given that faith, hope and love are the only ones that are going to remain until Christ returns, but in the mean time, the greatest of these is love because it alone will last after the return of Christ. Initially, you can see why this makes some sense. We will not need faith anymore when we are with Christ since our faith will be made sight. We will not need to hope anymore when we are with Christ, because no one hopes for what he already has. (Romans 8.24b) But, if faith and hope cease before the return of Christ, then the other gifts have to stop sometime before that because Paul is saying, “now, these three remain.” If now, these are the only three that remain, then his explanation of the importance and place of preaching and teaching (chapter 14) does not make any sense since they would no longer be remaining?

I think that Paul, however, is not using the word “now” in a temporal sense, but in a logical sense. Instead of saying now in contrast to then, he is saying now as a result or now as a fact. In other words, the idea of v.13 is, “After all this, now you can see how incredibly high of a priority that love is, that even though faith and hope and love remain forever, the greatest of these is love. If that is the case, as I believe it is, then how can faith and hope continue in eternity if our faith is made sight and everything that we hoped for is now realized? I believe that while faith and hope will also be a wonderful ongoing part of our eternal life with Christ, faith and hope will be a little different. Our faith will have been made into sight and our hope will no longer be a patient, waiting and longing of soul in the midst of a darkness.

Yes, we hope now, and yes, what we hope for will be fulfilled, but that does not mean that our future life with Christ will not have any elements of hope to them. There are other aspects to hope. 1 Corinthians 15.19 says, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.” While he is arguing about the importance of the resurrection of Christ, he makes it clear that hope will be part of our eternal lives. There is a very real sense in which hope will continue into eternity. We will forever have hope in Christ. We will forever hope in God. D.A. Carson asks, “Will we stop looking forward in anticipation to what is ahead once we begin to enjoy the new heaven and the new earth?” Everything that we hope for now, will be ours – then. But, that does not mean that hope itself will stop. We will continue to look forward with an expectation of joy. In fact, we will look forward without any fear of what the future will be. Our hope will not be tempered by any what ifs.

What about faith? Will faith be rendered obsolete when we are with Christ? True enough, our faith now, will be fulfilled by our sight and experience. But faith is more than just believing in a promise that is yet to be completely fulfilled. Fundamentally, faith is belief. Faith is trust and dependency. And all of life, forever and forever will be characterized by our deep dependence and loving, affirming trust in God. Faith, hope and love will continue into the eternity, but the greatest of these three is love.

Why is love the greatest?

1. You can have faith without love, but you cannot have love without faith. (v.2, 7)
2. If you love, you will hope. (v.7)
3. God is LOVE. If you are going to live as your Creator designed you to live, then your life will be growing in a 1 Cor. 13 type of love.

If we are going to have an honest discussion and understanding about the place of spiritual gifts in the church today, we have to get first things first. This study has to take place in the context of love. I do not believe that based on 1 Cor. 13 you can rule out the gift of tongues or the gift of prophecy from the church. On the other hand, I am not convinced that the gift of tongues and prophecy as they are popularly understood are a normal part of church life either. We will unpack this in the following chapter. I simply want all of us to be completely honest with the text, and if we are, we must embrace and cultivate a gracious, loving, humble, careful, and honest relationship with each other.

Last weekend, NASCAR driver Jeff Gordon won the race at Talladega, breaking a record of wins held by former driver, Dale Earnhardt, Sr. As Jeff drove around the track, some of the fans who do not like Jeff Gordon threw beer cans at Jeff's car as he received the checkered flag. To people who really follow NASCAR, they can tell you why this sort of thing happens. To casual observers on the outside, these people look like complete and total idiots.

I thought, that is what church looks like sometimes. We can have disagreements about things, and will. But, when we start throwing beer cans at each other (so to speak) then we simply look like a bunch of idiots to the world. Learning to work through problems in an atmosphere of love and trust will amaze even the hardest of skeptics.