

Text: I Corinthians 13:8-13 (Pew Bible, pg.1137)

Title: “Love Lasts”

INTRODUCTION

Before we turn to our text in I Corinthians today I want to just encourage us as we are moving toward our revival emphasis called “Greater Things,” starting on September 11. It seems that every week we have some grim reminder that we desperately need for God to move in our land. And when He does that He will always start with His people. We can’t bring revival; God does that. But our part is to prepare ourselves and commit ourselves wholly to God and allow Him to bend us. The most important preparation to be done is prayer. Today, and for the weeks to come, you’ll be able to pick up a prayer guide that will keep us all praying together in agreement in prayer. It’s a daily guide that begins on Monday of each week. There are different things that we pray for each Monday, each Tuesday and so on. I invite you to pick up the prayer guide at the kiosks in the foyer and the Welcome Center. Begin using the guide tomorrow and let’s join our hearts in a fervent, united time of seeking God together for the change He will bring in our hearts, in our homes, in our church and in our city.

Of course, during those nine weeks we are altering our regular schedule so we can all be together in one worship service. Starting September 11, we’ll have Sunday School at 9:00 and then one combined worship service at 10:30. I know this is a change for everyone, and you may be thinking, “Why do I have to change?” Let me remind you of what we’re taught in Scripture:

Philippians 2:3 - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.

Philippians 2:4 - Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:5 - Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

The Bible says, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.” This is a challenge in our day because many people attend a particular church with the same mentality of going to theater for a movie. There is no loyalty to a theater, you only go to that particular theater because of what’s showing there at the time, or you like the time that the movie is showing. Now you can even go to certain retro theaters where you can watch the old movies. There are some who say I go to this church or that church because that’s where they play the music I like (old or new). Some go to this church or that one like going to a theater because you like the show times. We cannot look at church that way. A church is not a theater where you go to see the show you like, or to see the show at the time you like. A church is a spiritual body where God places us to grow us up in Christ, to teach us to love and serve and worship and witness alongside people who are different than we are.

Several months ago, when I first started preparing for this series called “The Power of Love” from I Corinthians 13, at the time I had no idea how important it would be in helping us prepare for this time of seeking God for revival. There’s an old hymn called “Revive Us Again.” One of the stanzas

says, “Revive us again; fill each heart with Thy love. May each soul be rekindled with fire from above. Hallelujah, Thine the glory. Hallelujah, amen. Hallelujah, Thine the glory. Revive us again.”

Today we come to the close of this series of messages from I Corinthians 13 entitled “The Power of Love.” Turn to I Corinthians 13:8. Let’s review what we’ve been memorizing together this summer:

1 Corinthians 13:4 - Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

1 Corinthians 13:5 - It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

1 Corinthians 13:6 - Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

1 Corinthians 13:7 - It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Now we come to the last verse we’ll study:

1 Corinthians 13:8 - Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

While we are here, let me just go on and read I Corinthians 13:9-13.

Now the Corinthian church was in trouble. Instead of being salt and light that influenced the city of Corinth for Christ, they had been infected by the pagan culture of their city. Instead of being obedient to Christ and living lives controlled by His Holy Spirit, the church was compromised with materialism, hatred, jealousy, selfishness, sexual immorality and just about every other sin you could imagine. And it could all be traced back to this ... they didn’t love God as they should; and it showed up in their failure to love others as they should.

ILLUSTRATION – Someone sent me a news story about a fight that broke out last week in a church in Alabama. The name of the church is the New Welcome Baptist Church. (Interesting name in light of what happens.) It seems that the pastor called the minister of music in to tell him that his services were no longer needed, and handed him his paycheck. The minister of music disagreed with the amount of his paycheck, and he pulled out a Taser gun that he happened to be carrying and zapped the pastor with it. Then a fight broke out involving some deacons and the mother of the minister of music who was stabbed by one of the deacons. All of this at the New Welcome Baptist Church.

They need a healthy dose of I Corinthians 13 to teach how to love ... about what it means to truly love God and to truly love others.

1 Corinthians 13:8a - Love never fails...

That means it will never cease to have force or authority. The word “fail” is an interesting word. It was used to describe a flower that dropped its petals or of a tree that drops its leaves in certain conditions. We’ve been in a severe drought, and we see trees everywhere that are dropping their leaves.

Now human love often fails. I remind couples when I read this passage in a wedding ceremony that romantic feelings will fail from time to time. Your marriage cannot simply be built upon those feelings. Marriage has to be built on this God-given, God-inspired, God-designed love called agape. It will never fail.

Human love in the church often fails. Sooner or later that love runs down like a dead battery. That’s why our relationships here in the Body of Christ are built on this I Corinthians kind of love ... love does not lose its force or its authority. It never, never fails because it comes from God, who never, never fails.

Now that isn’t true of some of the things that the Corinthians had built up as most important in their church.

1 Corinthians 13:8 - Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Remember that one of the big problems in the church in Corinth is that they were enamored with spiritual gifts and with spiritually gifted people. They saw the gifts not as a way of building up the Body, but as instruments to draw attention to themselves. Some with the spiritual gift of prophecy said, “My gift, my ministry, is more important than yours.” Some with the gift of tongues may have said, “I’m more spiritual than you are. I can speak in a language I don’t even know. I’m great.” Some with the gift of knowledge may have said, “Hey, I know things you don’t know. I have a pipeline to God, and He tells me stuff that He doesn’t tell other people. So you better listen to me.”

So there were the spiritual gifts operating without love. And that’s why Paul says at the beginning of I Corinthians 13...

1 Corinthians 13:1 - If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

1 Corinthians 13:2 - If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

The spiritual gifts, the sermons we preach, studies we teach, songs we sing or play, the service we give is only meaningful if it is flowing out of a heart of love for God and for other people. It’s not about what edifies or satisfies you. It’s all for God and for others.

In fact, all these gifts that they admired so much and that they used to draw attention to themselves are going to disappear. There’s going to come a time when they will cease operating.

1 Corinthians 13:8 - Prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

And it's not only those gifts that will become inoperative, but all of the gifts will no longer function. Imagine that ... a time when spiritual gifts that make the church function like a body today will no longer be necessary.

Now when will this be the case? Down in v.10 we're told that this will happen when "when perfection comes." Do you see that?

Well you may know that this passage makes people who love a good theological argument just drool all over themselves. This is a hotly debated passage. For the sake of time I'm going to have to oversimplify these arguments:

- Some say the spiritual gifts (prophecy, tongues, knowledge, etc.) and the spiritual offices like apostles, prophets, etc. stopped working when the canon of the NT was closed. That is, when the NT was finally written and available to believers in churches. The gifts, particularly the miraculous gifts, ceased because they were no longer necessary to authenticate the message of the apostles.
- Others say that the spiritual gifts will cease to be operative when the church reaches a state of maturity that the gifts will no longer be necessary. I can't imagine a time in this life when that would be the case, but they base their argument on the fact that the word "perfect" sometimes means "mature."
- And there are a couple of other viewpoints that I won't take time to mention today.

Personally, I don't think any of these options are correct. Rather, as you will see as we move down through these verses that the time that Paul is talking about when the spiritual gifts will disappear is the only time when they will be completely unnecessary, and that is in our eternal home in the presence of God in heaven.

Now, what does this have to do with love? These factors that seem so important to the church now someday be unnecessary. But that's not true with love.

When all these things that seem so important to us now, and may even divide us now, pass off the stage, love will forever retain its place, because God is love. It is the sentiment ... the power source ... the atmosphere of heaven. Heaven pulsates with the presence of God who is love.

Now when you and I are saved, we receive the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is our down-payment for heaven. It is the earnest money God gives us today that is the promise that there will be full payment one day.

2 Corinthians 1:21b-22 – He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

2 Corinthians 5:5 - Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

And with the Holy Spirit comes the very real experience of the love of God.

Romans 5:5b - God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 8:15-16 - For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

So do you see that the love poured out into our lives by the Holy Spirit, the love that embraces us now by the witness of the Holy Spirit in us that we are His children, that love is the link to our eternal home?

When we express this love to God and to others ... when we experience this love from God and from others ... we are hearing the distant sounds of the glory of heaven.

So this Spirit-given love is the one link that God gives us to His eternal self, and to our eternal home. Love is the atmosphere of our eternal home in heaven. Actually Paul gives us a peek into our eternal home. And the remaining verses here show us that is a place where...

1. THE INCOMPLETE GIVES WAY TO PERFECTION (vv.9-10)

1 Corinthians 13:9-10 - For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

When it says we know and prophesy “in part” it means we get it “bit by bit.” Now we don’t get bits and pieces of God, but in this life, we’re all learning things bit by bit. I’m still growing and learning and knowing; I hope you are. None of us are fully mature yet. We are to spend our days in this life growing in our knowledge and love of God,

There is no perfect church and there are no perfect believers in the church. We are all incomplete now, though we are growing toward being fully equipped for every good work. But only in heaven will we see perfection.

Heaven is also where...

2. IMMATURITY GIVES WAY TO MATURITY (v.11)

1 Corinthians 13:11 - When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.

Paul uses his own maturing process as an example. He said there was a time when I talked like a child, I thought like a child and I reasoned like a child. (He’s paralleling the gifts of tongues, knowledge and prophecy.) But when I became a man, I put away childish things.

ILLUSTRATION – At our house, we have a playroom for our grandkids. Some of the toys in the playroom are things we’ve bought for them, and some of the toys are toys that our kids played with when they were little. Now our grandkids play with those toys, but not our kids. We’d think it would be a little strange if one our daughters or sons-in-law always came to our house and went to the playroom to play with Baby Beans or whatever.

Now the Corinthians were like children playing with toys that would one day disappear. You expect a child to think, understand, and speak like a child; but you also expect the child to mature and start thinking and speaking like an adult. As we mature we put away childish things. So there is a maturing process for the church as a whole and also for the individual believer. And that process will not be finished until Jesus returns and takes us into our eternal home in heaven. Only in our heavenly home will immaturity gives way to maturity.

Also heaven is where...

3. THE UNCLEAR GIVES WAY TO INTIMACY (v.12)

1 Corinthians 13:12 - Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

The “bit by bit” gives way to the “face to face.”

ILLUSTRATION – The city of Corinth just happened to be famous for its production of bronze mirrors. Now these mirrors are not anything like what we know today. They were polished bronze or brass. But even the most polished mirror would really only give you an unclear image. It’s like trying to look at your reflection in a muddy pool.

That’s the way life here on earth is, compared to heaven. Now we’re not comfortable with this, because we want everything clear here and now. There are things we wish we could understand about God and about His ways that are just so unclear to us.

So now we see a very poor reflection, but one day we shall step into heaven and see God “face to face.” There will be intimacy with God and the knowledge of God and the love of God that we could never imagine in this life.

So for now, we benefit from the spiritual gifts of others. They help us grow in our knowledge of God. For now we benefit from our time in prayer and study of Scripture; they help us grow in our knowledge of God. For now, the ministries that go on through the church, our worship gatherings and our fellowship gatherings help us to know and grow in the love of Christ. But do you understand that when you experience or express that love you are hearing the distant sounds of heaven. You’re hearing the music playing at the party waiting for you. Every time you express your love for God or others ... every time you experience love from God and others you’re hearing the music from home.

1 Corinthians 13:13 - And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.