

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Greatest of These is Love

Life, the Jesus Way

(1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Study #3

Introduction: Loving as Jesus loved...

When well-meaning disciples tried to shield Jesus from some snotty-nosed kids, the Lord shoved the apostles aside and embraced the children, instead. He loved them.

When rules-keeping legalists were offended that Jesus sat down to eat with notorious sinners, the Lord didn't retreat. Instead, He doubled-down and told the Pharisees that He loved self-admitted, desperate, down-and-out sinners.

When He was approached by a demon-crazed madman who had been tormented by Satan's legions for years, Jesus' love for the man drove Him to go to war with the enemy - and the Lord set the man free.

When those suffering from "the living death" cried out to Jesus for cleansing, He frequently did what no one ever did. He lovingly touched the unclean leper and made him whole.

When those who had come to mourn the death of Lazarus saw Jesus' genuine, emotional response to His good friend's passing - He wept - the mourners said, **[John 11:36]... "See how He loved him!"**

And when John reflected on Jesus' time with him and the other apostles just before they ate their last meal together, he remarked about Jesus that, **[John 13:1]...having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.**

You and I look through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and we see lots of things about Jesus. We see His moral courage and His servant's heart, His holiness and His prayerfulness and His purity.

But the most obvious thing about Jesus, the one thing it is impossible to miss, the one thing that has drawn people like us to Him, was His love.

Love was the center from which Jesus' miracles and His teaching flowed. Love defined Him. He loved His Father - with heart, soul, mind, and strength - and He loved His neighbor.

And when Jesus calls us, today, **"Follow Me!"** He certainly means that we follow Him into servanthood and purity, prayer and courage. But above all else, following Jesus means that we love.

Review and preview...

For the last two weeks we have considered together the excellencies of love as Paul described them in 1 Corinthians 13.

And, just as love defined Jesus, so love provides the standard by which we can measure the quality of our life's meaning and our church's ministry.

Paul says that love is more central to walking with Jesus than all of the eloquent speech, mountain-moving faith, encyclopedic knowledge and acts of benevolence we could string together.

Last Sunday, we listened as Paul told us that love means gladly sacrificing ourselves to bless others, being patient and kind, refusing to compare - up or down, pursuing holiness, and committing to forgive.

And now we come to the end of our three week look at love. Here at the end of the most famous passage on love in the Bible, Paul's main theme is crystal clear. Love!

However, while the message is clear, I will tell you honestly that understanding some of the particulars of the passage before us today is pretty challenging.

So here's my pledge to you. We'll drill down to figure out the "gist" of what Paul is saying, we'll cut through the fog, and we'll find, together, life-changing insight into what it means to walk with Jesus into a life of love.

After last's week's consideration of love, we are not surprised to hear Paul's first words, **[8] Love never fails**. But what does he mean by those words?

Love's Endurance (vv. 8-10)

Love Always "Fits" (v. 8a)

[8] Love never fails¹

Well, he might be saying one of a couple of things here. I'll mention the *less* likely first, and the *more* likely thought second. First, Paul likely did NOT mean to say, "*Love always works.*"

The way of love DOESN'T always "work"

Practicing love is not like rubbing Aladdin's lamp. It is not that whenever the lamp is rubbed just so, whenever we love in just the right way, the "love genie" makes sure that we get the results we seek.

I can think of times in my own life, and I know of times in the lives of others, and we read of some in the Bible whose loving actions did not result in things working out the way they were "supposed to."

Faithful and loving witnesses to Christ get martyred; loving wives sometimes get ignored and taken for granted. Loving employees may be unfairly passed over for promotion.

No. Love doesn't guarantee that things will turn out the way we want them to.

But...love does withstand all assaults. Love is not crushed by the shortcomings of friends and it's not overthrown by the violence of enemies.

You might offer someone love that they don't want to receive. They might reject it and they might reject you. But, the love that you have offered has not failed.

Love stands firm and unshaken. Love is never finally defeated. It keeps giving and ticking even when it is rebuffed.

So if, in the face of hardship, I waver in my commitment to love, then I need to grow in love more than I need relief from hardship. Love doesn't falter or fail.

Love "keeps-on-keeping-on" whatever the difficulty. For Exhibits A and B, look at Jesus and look at Paul.

The Apostle Paul endured beatings and stonings, deprivations and imprisonments, rejections and persecutions - and he kept on lovingly spreading the gospel throughout the known Roman world.

Jesus kept loving - caring for His mother, forgiving His tormentors - even as the nails held Him to the cross and His life slipped away.

Love creatively, perseveringly continues no matter what. If it's love, it never fails.

But, I believe Paul meant to say something else by "**love never fails**", something that may be just what you and I need to hear today.

In God's eyes, love is always in season, is always in style, is always exactly what is called for.

The way of love IS always what is needed

There is never a time and there will never be a situation when you will say, "*Love doesn't fit here.*"

¹ In the New Testament, this verb (*πιπτειν*) is almost always used in a literal, rather than as a figurative sense. But, see Luke 16:17.

Of course, at different times “LOVE” will look tender or tough, based on the need of the hour.

But there will never be a time when you can rightly conclude, “*I should be impatient and unkind*” or “*I should act unbecomingly here*” or “*I should now seek my own best interests at the expense of someone else*” or “*I should rejoice in unrighteousness today.*”

NO! Love is always just what is needed. It never fails. So, love is to be the organizing principle of our lives.

But in Corinth, some of the members of the church had adopted another organizing principle for life. It wasn’t a sinful organizing principle, but it was possible to follow this plan without love - and THAT was a big problem.

Instead of leaning their life ladders against the wall of love, the Corinthians had leaned their ladders against the wall of spiritual gifts and wonder-working power and engaging ministries.

Now, lest I be misunderstood, let me make clear that in no way is Paul or am I condemning spiritual gifts or great ministries.

Paul’s not condemning or even devaluing them.² But, he is giving them a relative value in the life of the church.

The Corinthians thought that a good show of spiritual gifts was evidence of spirituality. Paul said, “*Nope*” and then proceeded to make clear that no matter which gifts you may have in mind, they don’t hold a candle to the grace of love.

He first mentions a gift that he includes in his personal list of **[12:31a] greater gifts.**³

Spiritual Gifts are Temporary (v. 8b)

Prophecy is temporary

[8] but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away

The prophet is the one who speaks to people on behalf of God. That’s a very important function, whether that is a biblical prophet thundering “***Thus saith the Lord***” (as, for instance, Isaiah did) or a present-day pastor preaching the Word.

One day, of course, this kind of intervening speech won’t be necessary. One day, everyone, not just prophets, will hear God. One day, there will be no more need for prophesying and the prophet will be put out of business.

But Paul knew how important prophesy was to the proper functioning of the church NOW. And yet he casually said about this, his personal favorite gift, “*If there are gifts of prophecy, there won’t be forever.*”

Then he mentions the Corinthians’ favorite gift - the gift of speaking in tongues.

Tongues are a fad

[8] if there are tongues, they will cease

In contrast to prophecy (which was people addressing others for God), tongues were a certain way of addressing God. In Corinth, tongues-speaking was rapturous speech. It was ecstatic utterance.⁴

The church at Corinth put great emphasis on tongues-speaking. Paul said it was a passing fad. Tongues-speaking will cease.⁵

⁴ What is often referred to by the term *glossolalia*.

⁵ There is a curious shift in the Greek grammar in describing the eventual cessation of prophecy and knowledge vs. the eventual cessation of tongues. Some have seen the shift (from the passive voice to the middle voice for tongues) as indicating that tongues will cease sooner than prophecy, and “of themselves.” (so Toussaint; against Gordon Fee) I don’t find this grammatical argument terribly convincing. However, on other grounds, I am of a mind that tongues-speaking (seen as a

² We could never say he is condemning the gifts. He devotes all of chapters 12 and 14 to discussing their proper exercise in the life of the church.

³ Look at 1 Corinthians 14 for more on this.

Another gift that both Paul and the Corinthians valued was knowledge. You and I care a lot about knowledge, too.

Listen to what Paul says about that gift.

Knowledge is “for now”

[8] if there is knowledge, it will be done away.

In view of the fact that Paul is talking about spiritual gifts here, I think he’s probably not talking about the painfully acquired learning of information. He’s not thinking of academics, but the spiritual gift of receiving what is sometimes referred to as “a word of knowledge,” a revelation from God.

It is my understanding that in the early church, such revelation was given to churches to establish them in the truths of the gospel, to explain truth about God, and to clarify the mysteries of the Kingdom.⁶

Paul could foresee the day when such “words of knowledge” would no longer be needed.

Of course, the point of these comments is that there will come a time when spiritual gifts will be over and done with. They will pass off the scene. And I suspect that this would have been a bitter pill for the Christians at Corinth to swallow.

They might have had a hard time imagining a worship service without tongues-speaking or without a special revelation. They enjoyed these gifts and they were good gifts of God.

giftedness to speak a known, earthly language without having learned it through regular means) is not *normally* (not NEVER - God is certainly free to do whatever He sovereignly chooses to do!) given today for the reason that it was given at first as a sign to unbelieving (mainly) Jews. Paul argued that, in any case, tongues-speaking was not very important for the church. (1 Cor. 14)

⁶ In the early church, evidently those gifted to “discern spirits” in the congregation would either validate or repudiate the message of the one who spoke “a word of knowledge.” With the coming together of the canon of Scripture, such revelation (and likewise the gift of discerning spirits, not the always important evidence of maturity of *wisdom*) was made unnecessary, confirming Paul’s comment here that ***“[the gift of] knowledge will pass away.”***

They may have thought that such gifts were permanent things, that they would always be around - maybe even in heaven.

Paul says that these gifts (and by extension, all gifts) are temporary. Gifts will fade and gifts will fail. But not love. Love is permanent. ***[8] Love never fails.***

He continues, and taking two of the gifts he has just mentioned,⁷ says that even though they are the gifts of God, they are not only temporary, they are partial and incomplete.

Love is Eternal (vv. 9-10)

Our knowledge is partial; our prophecies are fragmentary (v. 9)

[9] For we know in part, and we prophesy in part

Certainly, the gifts themselves are perfect, since they are given by the perfect Spirit of God. But, whenever anyone speaks a word of knowledge to clarify God’s truth, they are only clarifying a portion of that truth.

When I - or when others - stand in front of you to present God’s truth, the teaching is never complete. It can’t be. There isn’t time or ability on my part to speak completely.

Complete knowledge of even a part of anything is impossible, because knowledge of one thing is always dependent on another, and that other is dependent on learning yet another branch of knowledge.

If you ask anyone enough detailed questions - even about their area of expertise - you’ll eventually get a blank stare and *“I don’t know.”*

All of our knowledge is partial.

The same thing was and is true with prophecy.

⁷ Knowledge and prophesy - perhaps significantly, he doesn’t mention tongues again anywhere in the chapter.

In the early church the prophecies were the gift of God. And, on a morning like this, we take the Scriptures (the gift of God) and expound them - we speak from God to man.

But, in either case, the messages are partial.

The prophet and the preacher give a fragmentary (not an incorrect) glimpse of truth. Paul says that one day, the need for such glimpses will pass because we will be in God's unmediated presence.

We will KNOW then because the partial gives way to the perfect.⁸

The "perfect" replaces the partial (v. 10)

[10] but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.

Bible scholars have exhausted themselves trying to figure out exactly what Paul is referring to here when he mentions the coming of ***"the perfect."*** I recommend that we not exhaust ourselves with this.

He is simply carrying on the thought that there will come a time when spiritual gifts will be unnecessary. This will happen when we are finally with the Lord - if not before.

Then, there will be no use for the partial.

So, it makes great sense to use lamps when it's dark. But there's no point of turning on a lamp when the sun is shining.

Knowledge and prophesy are useful lamps today in 2016, when there is so much confusion and partial understanding. But they'll be pointless in the future when we see God face to face.

⁸ Suggestions as to the identification of "the perfect" include: (a). The completion of the canon of Scripture, which occurred by the end of the first century, when John completed his Gospel and the book of Revelation; (b). The second coming of Christ; (c). Our arrival in heaven. I am more drawn to (b) or (c).

So, gifts are important now, but temporary and partial. Love is central now, and permanent. Knowing that, you and I take steps toward Christian maturity when we wholeheartedly, single-mindedly, pursue a life marked by love.

Love's Superiority (vv. 11-13)

Growing Up in Jesus = Growing in Love (v. 11)

[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.

Children are so immature!

Paul wants us to think about children. Children speak and think and reason. But they do so immaturely.

A child's speech is simple. He uses short sentences. The passive voice is not used by a child. Kids don't use the pluperfect verb tense or the optative mood.

Children think and they reason. But their thinking isn't nuanced. Their reasoning powers are undeveloped. They get "cause and effect" ("*If you run out into the street, you'll be punished!*"), but they couldn't follow a complicated categorical syllogism.

An adult does all the things that a child does - speaks, thinks, reasons - but an adult does so maturely. There is art to how a grown up speaks and thinks and reasons.

A mature adult's speech is clear and concise. Their thought is well-reasoned; their logic is airtight. They are no longer childish.

Nobody begrudges a child for being immature. My grandkids are 7, 5, 2, and ten months. They are all at varying levels of childish - and that's OK.

But if they are childish at twenty, that won't be OK. With the passing of time, they'll grow in maturity. Their living will become a work of art.

Adults embrace loving maturity

As far as we know, to his dying day, Paul continued to refer to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ. To be an “apostle” was a piece of his gifting. He exercised all of his ample spiritual gifts. He exhorted other Christians to use their spiritual gifts.

He never walked away from his giftedness. But, the exercise of those spiritual gifts evolved to a point of artfulness as he matured.

Somebody who had known the newly converted Paul in Damascus or in Jerusalem would have known a certain kind of Christian - a gifted, but somewhat childish Christian.

If that person met the same Paul fifteen to twenty years later, they would have met a different Paul.

They might have asked, *“Paul, is this you? You have changed. I remember you as brash, arrogant and severe. You were short with people. It was intimidating and almost scary to be around you. Now you seem...different. What happened?”*

I think Paul would say, *“Oh, it’s still me, and I’m still an apostle. It just took a while for me to get over myself. I had to learn to forgive and to live in grace. It took a while for me to see the importance of patience and kindness - and I’m still learning. The Lord had to convince me that all the gifts He had given me - and He gave me great gifts! - are only powerful if I love. God convinced me of the primacy of love. And love has made all the difference.”*

As Paul grew older, he matured - and that doesn’t always happen. Childishness doesn’t necessarily pass with the passing of time. We all know how easy it is to “feel like 40, look like 50, act like 6.”

Paul determined he would not be a Peter Pan. He would grow up. So, he cooperated with God’s Spirit and moved toward maturity.

And that meant he would pay attention to kindness and patience, not fight for his own way, be willing to be hurt and disappointed by others, let go of envy and jealousy, be gracious.

Here, Paul is simply and clearly laying out what it means to be mature and what it means to be spiritual.

The church at Corinth believed that spiritual maturity was defined by a powerful exercise of gifts. Paul says that spiritual maturity is measured on the scale of love.

How did Paul get there? Easy.

Jesus said that the greatest command in the Old Testament was the command to love God. He said that the second greatest command was to love people. Jesus’ own “new commandment” was that we, His people, would love each other as He has loved us.

He got it all from Jesus.

Thus, the greatest possible obedience to God is to love and the greatest rebellion against God is a failure to love.

This is Paul at his most passionate and at his most practical. He wants us to re-think our Christianity. He wants to make sure that we’ve leaned our ladder against the right wall when it comes to leading a God-honoring life.

So imagine leaning your ladder against the wall of love. As you climb up that ladder you become more loving, softer, stronger for others, more gracious and kinder, more forgiving. You grow more powerful for Jesus.

People you see after some absence ask you, *“What happened? You’ve changed.”* And you tell them that it all started back in 2016 when you realized that your life’s ladder was leaning against the wall of wealth/talent/success/etc...

You tell how you climbed down that ladder, re-oriented your ladder to the wall of love. And then you tell them that love has made all the difference.

Paul says that the clearest marker of spirituality is love. The most mature person you know is the one who loves best.

That's what Paul knew to be true. He was certain of it. And in this life, certainty is tough to come by.

As our years increase, we increasingly realize that lots of things we thought we knew are iffy. Scientific certainties turn out to be less so every generation or so. During some seasons - like this one - nothing seems certain, politically.

I've held opinions that I now don't hold because what I formerly thought no longer squares with other stuff that I now think I know.

Yes, some things are more rock solid than they ever have been. I'm more confident of Jesus' promise of eternal life to all who believe, more convinced that the Bible is God's Word, that the Holy Spirit is a very present Help, and that the Father's love is deep and eternal. And some things that used to seem rock solid, aren't so much anymore.

Here's how Paul expressed the reality of uncertainty in this life.

Then vs. Now (v. 12)

[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.

The ancient world's mirrors were not the silver backed glass marvels we know today. They were polished metal and they gave an imperfect, distorted reflection.

People would look at themselves in a mirror and still not know much of what they actually looked like.

But certainty is coming. On the other side, we'll know what's what. It'll all be clear as a bell then and there, but not here and now.

We hold lots of our opinions loosely. Things aren't as nailed down as we wish they were.

But, despite all of life's iffy-ness and the unfocused fuzziness and the uncertainty of so much, Paul knows one thing.

The Everlasting Graces (v. 13)

[13] But now faith, hope, love abide these three...

These three virtues, these three graces are forever. They outlast eloquent and inspiring speech, mountain-moving faith, and charity. Our spiritual gifts and our ministries are temporary, but faith, hope, and love abide.

And because these are forever, we should be diligent to cultivate them more than we cultivate our gifts and ministries. Character is more important than competence.

Faith

So we give ourselves to cultivating the crucial commodity of faith.

Here, "faith" is not miracle-working faith or the gift of faith. This is simply the posture of trust we assume toward our God. This is you and I, trusting God as He reveals Himself to be, relying on Him daily, counting on Him to provide for us as He knows is best.

This faith will mark our relationship with God into eternity. We will always be in a trusting, dependent relationship with God.

Hope

Then there is hope.

People don't thrive without hope. As long as we live here and for all eternity we will thrive by placing our hopes for the future in God.

Love

And love, too, is eternal.⁹ We just read that the other two eternal graces spring out of the root of love. Love ***[7] love believes all things, hopes all things.***

⁹ See Romans 5:2-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Gal. 5:5,6; Col. 1:4,5; Heb. 6:10-12; 1 Peter 1:21f.

Love adds texture and depth and color to life. It is essential for now and will be an essential element of life in glory.

So, you can be a radical disciple of Jesus without tongues or prophesy or great stores of knowledge. You can't be a radical disciple of Jesus without faith, hope, and love.

But Paul hasn't just listed the eternal graces. He has ranked them. And he ranks love above faith and hope.¹⁰

Conclusion:

[13] But now faith, hope, love abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.¹¹

Love is somehow superior to faith and hope. How so? Well...

FAITH is critical if we would walk with Jesus. There is not now, and there will never be a time when we will not need to exercise a trusting reliance on the goodness of God to sustain us.

But, while God is faithful, He doesn't entrust Himself to anyone. He is self-sufficient. If He needed to trust someone, He wouldn't be God.

HOPE is also eternal and it is crucial if we would live as God-honoring Christians. Hope in God's work on our behalf in the future gives testimony to our confidence in His goodness and sovereignty. Hope sustains us in the present. Hope will sustain us even in Heaven.

But God doesn't hang His hopes on whatever anyone else might or might not do. God doesn't hope for anything. He simply does. If He merely hoped, He would be less than God.

And LOVE is vital for an authentic Christian life...and if God did not love He would not be God. Love is the defining mark of all of God's works. So, when we love we are doing what God does. For that reason, love is the chief of all the graces.

Learning to love - to love God and to love those around us - is the radical disciple's highest aspiration. Love makes a man or a woman a man or a woman of God.

Against which wall are you, am I, leaning the ladders of our lives? There is only one reliable direction to lean that ladder.

We can be responsible Christians, confident leaders, generous in support of the Lord's work, knowledgeable in the Bible - all commendable stuff. But nothing holds a candle to the importance of love

Love is the call of Jesus to you and me this morning and for the rest of our lives. Will you answer the call?

***The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with you all.
[2 Corinthians 13:14]***

¹⁰ Galatians 5 mentions love as the first (and some would say, the defining trait) of the fruit of the Spirit.

¹¹ Significantly, love (*agape*) is the last word in this chapter.