

But, The Greatest of These Is Love 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

**Pastor Zordel
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Our text for today is 1 Corinthians 13:8-13.

⁸Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹When 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. ¹²For 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.

¹³So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The Apostle Paul gives two reasons for writing 1 Corinthians 13, the “love chapter.” The first is to demonstrate why agape love is the “greatest” of all the Spirit’s works. Secondly, it is the greatest of “these.” He proves love is the greatest work of the Spirit by comparing Spiritual love with two other categories of His works mentioned in verse 13. Those categories are the Spirit’s gifts to the Church and the Fruit of the Spirit.

In verse 8, Paul declares that agape love never fails; that is, it never ends; time has no ability to slow it or stop it. Nothing has an effect upon it. Its permanence makes it the greatest of personal pursuits (1 Corinthians 14:1). When compared to other works the Spirit provides, it stands above them and apart from them. Agape love, alone, is to be the supreme pursuit for the believer. We treasure all the Spirit’s works in our age, but the greatest gift, His greatest grace, is love.

What does Paul mean by “these” (verse 13) in the phrase, “the greatest of these?” There are two categories to which he compares love. The first list are representations of the varied Spiritual gifts He has given and to local churches (verse 8). The second list represents the whole of the fruit of the Spirit. The first list names three gifts (prophecy, tongues, and knowledge) were a list of gifts to local churches for its function and mission (verse 13). This second list has three Christian virtues which are evidences of the Spirit’s presence and control. They are the fruit of the Spirit’s filling. The Spirit’s works will abide for an extended time, but unlike love, they will drop away. Faith, hope and love will continue throughout the time the church remains on earth. But when we step into heaven, the only fruit of the Spirit we will use will be agape love. Both lists are the sum of the Spirit’s work in local churches, but not of believers in heaven.

Agape love is greatest and therefore, superior to Spiritual gifts and even to the fruit and filling of the Spirit. Love is the greatest because it will never drop away, like the other works of the Spirit. Love is permanent. It never stops. Love never ends. It will be God's available gift for believers for all time. Believers will use it in this life and on into eternity. Love alone continues. Those who ask for it will always find it available. God will give it without any rebuke. The gifts of the Spirit are temporary, because the needs of local churches change. The Spirit of God uses some gifts here but not there, at this time, but not at that time.

The fruit of the Spirit is temporary, because the Spirit stops this work at death. Each and all of the Spirit's works will end. But love continues beyond death. These works will progressively drop away during some time of the life of the church, but agape love will always persevere. Agape love does not disappear; it never quits. There will never be a time in the life of believers throughout the life and history of the church (even with its existence of over 2000 years) that the Spirit has not and will not provide love for His born again ones.

Agape love is like bailing out a boat with a hole in it -- the more water you throw out, the more there is; it just keeps coming all the time. That is the thought behind, "love never fails, it never stops coming on." The Spirit will give agape love from the first day of the church until the last day--and even longer. Believers will practice it throughout eternity, no gift or fruit of the Spirit will last that long. Agape love will never fail.

Paul's intention was to motivate every believer to continue to pursue agape love (1 Corinthians 14:1) because it is the greatest of the works of the Spirit. It is greatest because it endures and will never drop away, or become inoperative. Does that whet your appetite; does his teaching motivate you to put on your running shoes so you can pursue agape love? The Spirit's other gifts are wonderful, but now are you motivated to pursue the greatest of all the Spirit's works?

BACKGROUND OF THE PASSAGE:

This love is not marital affection. Other passages teach the great value of marital love. But agape love is different from it. It is God's love, which He practices in heaven. He practices it in His dealings with people and particularly with His beloved Son. It is His, but He makes it available to every believer.

What kind of love is agape love? It is God's possession. Only He has it to give. It is in His treasure house and nowhere else. One can get it nowhere, other than from God who gives all good gifts to believers. It comes down from Him, and cannot be created within human relationships or learned by experience. It is never given to those without Christ.

Agape, or God's love is defined as "a deliberate choice to act for the best interests of another person-- to put another's need and another's fulfillment ahead of one's own, then to act deliberately to help fulfill another's need."

What are the components of agape love? First, the Spirit produces a mental attitude, an ability “to see” one’s own attitude, that each one has some experience with love, but not this kind of love. One sees one’s own self-centered motives, which should lead to acknowledging one’s sin and producing a confession of its lack and then repentance. A decision to choose to act according to another’s needs, but deny one’s own self-interest will follow. Agape love is not possessed through practice. It is God’s gift. It becomes behavior through intention and conviction. It is the result of a purposeful decision to esteem another’s value above one’s own. It produces a disposition to choose the needs of another person, and to deny one’s own good.

It is not natural, but supernatural. It is God given. The unsaved cannot practice this kind of love. The danger is the believer can choose to live by self-interest, as an unsaved person lives. One can grieve and quench the Spirit by living in self-interest. The Spirit is able to create supernatural affection for the unlovable, because love is patient, kind, and truthful (1 Corinthians 13:4).

Stephen Olford was for many years the pastor of the large Calvary Baptist Church in Manhattan. He was an Englishman, raised in the mission field in Africa, the son of missionary parents. After his father died in Africa, his mother took him back to England on a long 'tramp' steamer ride that took nearly two weeks to reach London. They had been out of port only for a few days when one of the seamen was injured. His wound began to fester and to smell very badly, and the other crewmembers refused to have him in the cabin with them. They lacked adequate medicine to treat this man, and it looked like he was going to die. He was in great pain, but the other men took him up on the deck and dumped him, exposing him to the weather. They refused to let him come below deck at all. They used a long pole to pass food to him. No one would touch him.

Stephen Olford's mother was a godly, Christian woman, and, after witnessing this treatment for about a day, she took pity on this wounded man and went up to him. No one else would draw near him because the stench was so terrible. She took a basin of warm water, knelt down beside him, and washed away the pus and debris that had collected around his wound. He cursed her, as he had cursed everybody who had come near him, but she patiently kept to her task and never said a word. She brought him his food that day, again in the evening, and again washed his wounds and took care of him. This went on for the duration of the voyage. When the ship and passengers arrived in London, the wounded man was much improved and was able to hobble off the ship. As you can well imagine, her display of God-like love broke through this man's bitter defenses. He became a believer and a lifelong servant of Stephen Olford's mother.

Denying one’s self interest for the needs of another is to be the believer’s common practice. So pursue love. Of all the Spirit does for the believer, love alone is permanent (1 Corinthians 14:1).

- Seek it! Practice it! Keep hot your pursuit of it, Keep your need of it in your prayer focus! You want it, pray for it, and exercise it. Impact the world about you.

- God loved (agape) the world. Love the unsaved world.
- Love (agape) one another. So love one another.
- Love will never drop off...Other works of the Spirit, even faith and hope will be left behind...but love never stops.