

The Victory of Love (#36)

1 Corinthians 13: 9-13

In our last study we looked at the great statement that "Love never faileth." And then in chapter 14:1 Paul says, "Follow after love." In between the declaration that "Love never faileth" and this injunction to "Follow after love," Paul puts before us a *contrast* and a *comparison*. **Love is contrasted with gifts, and love is compared with other virtues.** Then his great argument is brought to a triumphant note of victory, "The greatest of these is love."

The Corinthian church, you remember; was very proud of its gifts. The word "talents," which is quite popular today in some circles, would certainly have been popular with the church at Corinth. They were a very talented people; they had many gifts and much in which to take pride. **But Paul is attempting to deflate their pride and put everything into right perspective.**

He takes three of their most cherished gifts, prophecies, tongues, and knowledge, and contrasts them with love. He has already begun this chapter by pointing out that if you have all these gifts, and have not love, you are **nothing**. Now he considers them again, these things of which we are so ready to boast, "But whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away" (vs.8).

In passing, please note an important distinction in verses 9-10, "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part," says Paul, "But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away." **They will not cease, but they will be transformed. Tongues, on the other hand, will cease altogether.** Verse 12 tells us that *prophecy* and *knowledge* will be replaced by perfection, "Then shall I know even as also I am known."

Tongues are ecstatic utterances, which in some circles are regarded as a mark of spiritual maturity, but which, in fact, may be an evidence of immaturity. For ecstatic utterances may be an indication that the soul has not settled down to abide in God. Tongues, therefore, shall cease, but knowledge and prophecy shall be perfected.

We need to be very careful before we boast of our knowledge. Knowledge is only in part now, but one day it is going to give way to perfection. Surely when Paul speaks about "when that which is perfect is come," he can only mean, "when Jesus is come." **The marks of imperfection are upon**

everything in this life except love. That goes on forever, and has the hallmark of eternity. Everything else is passing and transitory.

Paul uses a personal illustration in verse 11, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." **An individual, who is a man in years, but a child in mind, has some real problems.** It is wonderful to listen to the chatter of a little child, but if you hear a man chattering like that, it is tragic. Every man, however, is still in essence a child; he has taken all the elements of childhood into manhood, but they have been developed and transformed; he has put away childish ways of speaking and habits of life and thought. **So all spiritual gifts belong to childhood, and no one will go through into glory with them. At best, the greatest of mature Christians is but a child this side of eternity.** But when Jesus comes and our maturity is reached, these gifts will become unnecessary.

As childhood is based on growing into manhood, so spiritual life here is based upon spiritual life in eternity. We begin our eternal life the moment we are saved. When we are first born, we are babies (physically as well as spiritual). **When I partially know something I partially attain, but as I grow, I am moving toward the goal of that spiritual life which has its fullness and perfection in glory.** Therefore, it is the will of God for believers not just to make heaven our goal, but also to make spiritual maturity our aim. We are to make Christ our object, but we need to be very careful how we boast of our attainments. **As childhood is absorbed into manhood, so one day our incomplete understanding of the things of God will be absorbed into perfect knowledge.**

It is going to be wonderful to get to heaven! It will as completely transcend our deepest experience of Jesus Christ in this life as the midday sun transcends dawn. **Now everything is only a dim reflection.** I like Moffatt's translation of verse 12, "At present we only see the baffling reflections in a mirror, but then it will be face to face."

We have sometimes been baffled by the reflections we have seen. Nature reflects the glory of God, but we cannot understand the earthquakes and volcanoes that destroy so many lives. And history reflects the government of God. As we trace its course, we know that all through the ages God has been ruling in the affairs of men, but sometimes we cannot understand war and suffering and the horrors of strife between nations, and we never will unless we take into account the fall of man, which is something the world does not understand.

The Bible reflects the grace of God. And yet, circumstances come into our lives, which we cannot understand, and we ask God why things happen to us as they do.

These things are just baffling reflections in a mirror, but then there will be no dullness of understanding, no more bewilderment. Then we shall look back upon a hundred and one circumstances that we have fought against, prayed against, complained about, and we will find all things, after all, have worked together in a pattern for good - though we did not really believe it. Then there will be no sin to cloud our vision; there will be no interruption in our communion with God.

Everything here is imperfect, except love. It is love alone that is going to last, while all the talents, the gifts, the knowledge, the prophecy, the preaching about which we have been so proud, will all be done away. But the Bible says, "Love never fails;" it goes on forever, in contrast with gifts, which pass away.

But I want to hurry on to the lovelier pastures in this chapter, because we find *love* compared with *virtues*, as seen verse 13, "And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

How often these three words, "faith," "hope," and "love," are found together in the New Testament. For example, Romans 5:1-5 says, "Being justified by faith...we rejoice in hope...because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts." Then in the opening verses of Colossians: "we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which you have to all the saints, For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven" (Colossians 1:4-5). And again in 1 Thessalonians 1:3, "your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope." **These three virtues are put alongside each other and compared; you cannot magnify love by minimizing faith and hope.**

What is faith? Faith is trust that rest upon evidence and leads to action. That is the only kind of saving faith I find in the Bible. **The whole fabric of life, social, commercial, and political, is based upon this principle. Our civilization could not exist without a measure of faith.** But in terms of spiritual things, it is the foundation of our relationship with God. Only by faith do we become His children, as seen in John 1:12, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God." Unless I have faith, I am not His child, as seen in Hebrews 11:6, "for he that cometh to God *MUST* believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

What is hope? Hope is confidence in the future. I am amazed at the attitude of some people's hope in themselves and in the world. Their attitude is, "Well, somehow it's going to work out all right in the end." From one tragedy and disappointment and heartbreak after another they pick themselves up and go on hoping, because they know if they stop, life will crash and everything will become dust and ashes, because their hope does not reach beyond the grave. The child of God, however, has a hope laid up for him in heaven, as seen in Romans 8:25, "But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." Christian hope is not a vague guess, but an absolute, confident assurance.

But faith and hope are related to love. You cannot separate them. Faith possesses the past by laying hold on Calvary and making it real in my life. Hope claims the future, and looks' beyond into glory. Love dominates my life right now - this, is Christian living. Faith says Jesus Christ came to save me; hope says He is coming again to take me to be with Him; love says He abides in my heart today.

What is faith without hope and love? Just a cold, intellectual conviction with no saving power at all. What is hope without faith and love? Just a dream, a bubble that will burst one day. What is love without faith and hope? Just passion, just feeling, just emotion, without any principle or any foundation.

These three virtues are linked together, says Paul, and they abide. What is the meaning of the words "Now abideth"? Verse 12 gives us this insight, "Now abideth faith, hope, and love..." The construction of the Greek here progression.

Therefore, the suggestion here is that life here and life in heaven are progressive. In other words, faith goes on possessing God more fully, and hope never ceases to catch new glimpses of His glory in the wonder of eternity. It is a mistake to think that eternity is synonymous with finality. In heaven there is perfection, but there are degrees of attainment just as one star differs from another star in glory. Each of will have all the blessings we can contain, but we will have varying capacities and be progressing from stage to stage. Jesus said, "In my Father's house are many mansions..." As we make our eternal dwelling in heaven, we will not just settle down to enjoy the scenery. On the contrary, we will proceed onward on our journey to new and greater discoveries.

The Bible says, "And we shall see Him as he is..." **Every glimpse of Jesus here prepares us for a greater view in time and eternity ahead.** Then we shall see Him "face to face." **But do you really think that the first sight I have of Him, five seconds after I have left earth and gone to heaven, is all that I am going to have? Can a mortal being, brought out of the battle and conflict of life into the presence of God, at that moment grasp and comprehend all the glory of God and heaven? No, I believe that in the Bible eternity is presented to us as a continual communication of God whose beauty and glory and majesty is inexhaustible.** The resurrected body, united with a redeemed spirit, is brought to live in the very presence of God with a progressive, increasing capacity to receive more and more of His glory. **Every new height of glory scaled will reveal more wonderful heights beyond. Faith, hope, and love – these three remain.**

Our possessions and gifts we leave behind us, and only Christian character abides. At the gates of death we will lay down forever the various weapons which God, in His grace, has put into our hands that we might fight life's battles. With those weapons, we will also lay down all our gifts and talents. **But we will carry through the gates of splendor the moral and spiritual character, which the Holy Spirit has developed in us as we have been conformed to the image of Christ. The three great elements of Christian character are faith, hope, and love.**

Paul says the greatest of these is love. He does not say it is more durable, or that it lasts longer, but that it is "greater." It is not only greater than those things which will pass, but greater than any of these things which also remain. **Why? Because love is the home port - faith and hope means to the end, but love is the goal.** You cannot rest in faith and hope, but you can rest in love, as does God, as seen in Zephaniah 3:17, "He shall rest in his love; he shall rejoice over thee with singing."

Love is the greatest, also, because it is sacrificial. Faith and hope develop our own Christian character and strengthen us, but love is what we give to others. Love is greatest of all, because God is love. **God does not believe, because He knows everything; God does not hope, because He possesses everything. But God loves because He "is" love.** You will never know the message of God to your own heart until you see, supreme above everything, His love revealed at Calvary.

Love is contrasted with gifts and love is compared with virtues, but most important of all, love is enjoined upon us, as seen in chapter 14:1, "Follow after

love." **That means to practice it in daily life, to take every opportunity to encourage one another in the Lord.** When we are confronted with the opportunity to say something critical and hard, we must ask ourselves such questions, "It is true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? Will it help?" **If not, then love is silent!**

Therefore, follow after love, for God is love.