

“Love Never Fails”
(1 Corinthians 13:8-13)

Introduction: In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul has shown us how much greater love is than all of the other graces of the Holy Spirit. In verses 1-3, he showed us it is greater than all of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, all of the greatest works of charity, and all of the greatest acts of self-sacrifice, because they are really nothing without love. In verses 4-7, he showed us how love is greater than all the other graces of the Spirit, because it is the root from which all of these other fruits of godly behavior grow. Tonight, Paul will emphasize again that love is greater than all of these things, because it will remain when all of the other gifts and graces of the Spirit will have failed.

Last week, we saw that “love endures all things.” No matter what the world, our flesh, or the devil throws against it, it will never be defeated, because God is the One who upholds it. Paul goes even further now to say that this love will not only endure while we are in this world, but it will continue to last throughout eternity. He tells us in verse 8 that “love never fails,” that is, it will never come to an end. When everything else in this world will have failed, this love will continue to abide forever. This sets it apart from all of the other gifts of the Spirit, such as prophecy, tongues and knowledge. Paul writes, “But if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away,” but, “love never fails.” These three gifts were given to the church only for a time, until the Christian faith was established in the world. But once the purpose for their existence was finished, they were all to pass away. Love, on the other hand, would never pass away. And so what I want us to see in this passage this evening is this,

All of the gifts which the Spirit gives will pass away at some point in history, but the love He gives to His children will never pass away, but remain in their hearts forever.

I. First, let’s look at the fact that all of the other graces of the Spirit were given only for a particular and definite time.

- A. We mustn’t forget that there are other gifts which the Spirit gave besides love.
 - 1. At the beginning of this series, we looked at what are called the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit.
 - a. These were the gifts given by the Spirit to the prophets of the Old Covenant, and to the prophets, apostles, evangelists, ministers and to many of the Christians in the New Covenant.
 - b. These included the gifts of prophecy, tongues, knowledge, and the other gifts which are mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12.
 - c. And, as we also saw, these gifts were given to the unregenerate as well.
 - 2. But there are also the common and ordinary gifts of the Spirit.
 - a. The common gifts of the Spirit are those which are not saving, those which are common to all men, such as conviction of sin.
 - b. The ordinary gifts of the Spirit are those which are reserved only for God’s children, and are given to the church for the building up of itself in holiness.
- B. But, according to our passage, all of these gifts of the Spirit are only for a specific period of time. Some of them have already been done away with, and still others will be done away with in the future.
 - 1. The extraordinary gifts are those which have already passed away.
 - a. Now I know that our Charismatic and Pentecostal brethren would not agree with us on this point, but it is clear from the Scripture that this is the case.
 - b. Our passage this evening tells us that these gifts were only temporary. Paul writes, “If *there are gifts of prophecy*, they will be done away; if *there are* tongues, they will cease; if *there is* knowledge, it will be done away” (v. 8).
 - c. These revelatory gifts were given only until the foundation of the church had been laid. Our *Confession* explains it in this way, “Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation: therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of

the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto His people being now ceased" (WCF 1.1). The reason why the Scriptures are now necessary is that the former way of God's revealing His will has now ceased. If we want to know God's will, we can't go to a prophet any longer. Now we are to go to the Scripture.

- d. Let me explain briefly why Westminster and all of the Reformed Churches believe that this is the case.
- (i) First, there is nothing in the Scripture itself that tells us that we should expect to receive any further revelation from God than what He has already given us. The passage that is usually used by Pentecostals and Charismatics is Acts 2:17-18, where Peter, after the outpouring the Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the subsequent speaking in tongues by those who were there, says, "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even upon my bondslaves; both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit and they shall prophesy'" (vv. 16-18). They believe that this passage, when it was spoken by Peter, was referring to the future, which would be the present for us. But notice that this passage has nothing to do with the future. Peter wasn't quoting Joel in order to show what would happen in the distant future. He was speaking about what was happening then, on the day of Pentecost. The people weren't drunk with wine, as some proposed, but were filled with the Spirit and were fulfilling this prophecy. *Those were the last days.* The author to the Hebrews writes, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His Son*, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Heb. 1:1-2). John makes the point even more clearly when he writes, "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen, from this we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). Those were not only the last days, John tells us they were the last hour.
 - (ii) But second, Paul tells us that we should not expect any further revelation because the foundation for the church was laid by Christ and the New Covenant apostles and prophets. He writes in Ephesians 2:19-20, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*." This is speaking about the revelation given through these gifted men. Once the revelational foundation was laid, there was no longer any need for the revelatory gifts. They have ceased.
 - (iii) Because of this, the Scripture claims to be a complete rule of faith and practice. Nothing else needs to be added. Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Whenever there was any dispute about what the Lord wanted to be believed or to be practiced in His church in subsequent years, the church always went to the testimony of Scripture and didn't look to the revelatory gifts. They saw the Scriptures as complete.
 - (iv) God shows us in the last book of the New Testament canon that His revelation is complete by ending with what is called a canonical curse. This curse calls down His judgment upon anyone who would add to the words of the prophecy of the book. This was very common in the Old Covenant, among the Old Covenant prophets. And it is not insignificant that the book of Revelation ends with the same. John writes, "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book" (Rev. 22:18-19). This curse applies to more than simply tampering with this book. God is not concerned only with the integrity of the book of Revelation, but with all of His Scripture. If it is a terrible sin to add to this book, it is to the rest as well. But this is exactly what a person does who opens his mouth and says, "Thus sayeth the Lord," when the Lord has not spoken.
 - (v) The angel Gabriel, in the book of Daniel, indicates that when the Messiah came, His work would seal up vision and prophecy once and for all. He says, "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your

people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy *place*" (Dan. 9:24). Christ came and fulfilled all prophecy. He also explained what He had done through His apostles. Once this was finished, He sent His judgment upon Israel through the armies of Rome, who put an end to the Temple worship once and for all. At this time, vision and prophecy were sealed up.

- (vi) Along these same lines, the pattern the Bible lays out would lead us not to expect any further revelation until the Lord returns the second time. Revelation follows the history of the working out of God's redemption. It was not something that God gave at all times to His people. For instance, after the closing of the Old Testament canon with the book of Malachi, there was no more revelation given by God until John the Baptist broke the silence 400 years later. But before the canon was closed, the Lord said through Malachi, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will restore the hearts of the fathers to *their* children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (4:5-6). The Lord said that He would break the silence by sending Elijah the prophet, and that is what He did when He sent John the Baptist in the spirit and power of Elijah. But at the completion of the New Testament canon, He did not make any such promise. The next revelatory event that He tells us to expect is not the sending of another prophet, but the Second Coming of Christ.
 - (vii) Paul also tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:21-22 regarding tongues that they too were only given for a specific time and a specific purpose. They were given as a sign to the Jews at that time. He writes, "In the Law it is written, 'By men of strange tongues and by the lips of strangers I will speak to this people, and even so they will not listen to me,' says the Lord. So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe, but to unbelievers." This is what attracted all the attention on the day of Pentecost, when all the believers in the upper room spoke in the different dialects of those who had gathered for the feast. Through this sign, and through the preaching of Peter, many Jews believed, about 3000 people. But once the purpose of this sign was fulfilled, it was done away. These tongues actually ceased of themselves, as Paul told us in verse 8 that they would.
- e. Paul goes further to say that even that which was given through these revelatory gifts will pass away.
- (i) He says in verses 9-10, "For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away."
 - (ii) The best we could know through the prophetic gift and the gift of knowledge was only partial, only a part of what could be known. The Bible that we have is all that the Lord intends to give us here below, but there is more waiting for us in heaven. Therefore, when the perfect comes -- *i.e.*, when we die and go to be with the Lord, or when Christ comes again to take us up to glory --, then our knowledge will be perfected, and the partial will be done away.
 - (iii) When I say that our knowledge will be perfected, I don't mean that we will have perfect knowledge of everything. But we will have full sight of the things we can only see imperfectly down below. The Bible tells us about God and His Christ. We see them only imperfectly here, as Paul says, "In a mirror dimly," only knowing in part. But then we shall see Him "face to face," we shall know fully just as we have also been fully known (v. 12). He says that it is like the maturing of a child into an adult. When we were children, there was only so much we could know, so much we could understand. There were many things going on in the world that we didn't have a clue to as to their importance. But when we grew up, we did understand, we did comprehend. When we pass from this life into the life to come, it will be the same way. We will pass from the reasonings that will seem like those of a child, to those of an adult.
 - (iv) We will no longer have need for the incomplete knowledge we had on earth, because we will have the complete picture in heaven.
2. But not only will the extraordinary gifts pass away, so will also all of the other ordinary fruits of the Spirit's work when the perfect comes.
- a. Faith will pass away.
 - (i) The author to the Hebrews writes, "Now faith is the assurance of *things* hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). But when faith becomes sight, then faith is no longer needed.

(ii) Children, maybe your parents promised you that they would get you a special present you wanted for your birthday, and you believed what they said and counted on that gift. But once your birthday came, and they gave you that present, you no longer needed to believe they were going to give it to you, because it was already yours. In the same way, when what we believe is coming comes, we will no longer need to look forward to it by faith.

b. The same thing is true of hope.

(i) Paul writes, "For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees?" (Rom. 8:24).

(ii) When we are in heaven, everything we have hoped for will be ours. If that is the case, what is there left to hope for?

(iii) This is another reason why Paul writes, "But now abide faith, hope, love, these three, but the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). It's not only because love is the tree from which the fruits of faith and hope grow. It's also because when faith and hope are no longer needed, love will continue.

II. Though all of the other fruits of the Spirit will come to an end, His love will never come to an end, because He will forever live within our hearts.

A. The Spirit was put in our hearts to stay.

1. Jesus told His disciples in John 14:16-17, "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you."
2. He is our everlasting possession because Jesus has purchased Him for us by His perfect and unfailing work.

B. And because He will live in our hearts forever, the love He puts there will also be there forever.

1. This love will continue in the church as long as it is on earth, and it will continue in the church throughout all eternity.
2. Even though when we die we will leave behind all the other gifts of the Spirit with our bodies, this is one thing we will not leave behind, but will receive in perfection in heaven. Paul writes, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).
3. Let us therefore earnestly seek that this blessed fruit of the Spirit may abound in our lives and that His love would be shed abroad in our hearts. Let us nourish and cherish this love, for it is really a taste of heaven on earth, meant to prepare us for that glorious place where we will have it forever in its purest and most perfect form. Amen.