

Love Never Fails

Text:

I Corinthians 13

Introduction:

This will conclude our series of studies on I Corinthians 13. Let us begin by summarizing some of the important things that this chapter teaches us. First, we must remember that the love of which it speaks is divine love. It is love that is given to us, not love that is natural to us. This love is the kind of love that God has, and that he demonstrated to us in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the chapter teaches us that without this love all that we might do, even in the name of Christ, is meaningless. Love is the “more excellent way”, the way we must always seek. Finally, we have been emphasizing that love manifests itself in a certain kind of action; there are things that it always does, and things that it never does. So far we have considered its two primary characteristics, it is patient and kind; seven things that it doesn’t do, and what makes love happy –“It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.” We will conclude our study by examining verses 7-13. These verses contain both the end of love’s portrait and the third and final paragraph which establishes love’s permanence. The statement that forms the bridge between the two paragraphs is our text. It is the beginning of verse 8, where Paul states “love never fails.”

This is a big statement. We all know the expression: “never say never”. While some things are surer than others, experience teaches us that all things are limited and eventually reach their limits. Although they don’t show it on the commercial, even the Eveready Bunny eventually stops. So what does Paul mean when he says: “love never fails”? Let us begin to answer that question by pointing out that in the last part of the portrait of love he establishes that love never fails in the present, and that in the last paragraph he demonstrates that love will never fail in eternity.

I. Love does not Fail in the Present

The last line of the portrait of love, verse seven, reads: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” The first thing that we need to do to grasp the meaning of this verse is to say a word about its translation. If we were to translate this verse as literally as

possible, it would read: “(love) bears all, believes all, hopes all, endures all”. In English when we use the inclusive word “all” we usually qualify it and state specifically what we are making inclusive by using words or expressions like “always”, “everyone”, and “all things”. In Greek this is not so much the case. It is common to just say “all” and let the reader understand from the context whether we are talking about time, things, people, or something else. Now some translators have taken all of these “alls” as speaking of things, and others have taken them to refer more to time or situations. We can best understand the difference by taking the second, “believes” as an example. If we understand it as “believes all things”, we could understand by that that love never questions what others say, that they accept everything at face value. This would be tantamount to saying that “love is gullible”. This is not what Paul meant. The believing of which he is speaking here is not our believing other people, but our trust in God. For this reason it would be better to translate it “love always believes”, or even “love never loses faith”. What we have just said about “believing”, could equally be said about “hoping”. The hope that love never loses is its hope in God. People may let us down and disappoint us, but God remains sure.

Now that we have seen that the faith and hope which love keep from failing are our faith and hope in God, we can now consider the four things together. At one end of the list we have “love bears all things”, and at the other “love endures all things”. Both of these words speak of perseverance. Life is a long distance race that requires spiritual stamina and perseverance. This is a reality that is often expressed in the New Testament. We see it in verses like the following:

Heb 12:1-2, Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Rom 8:24-25, For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

In the present life it is God’s love that enables us to maintain faith and hope in the midst of trials so that we can joyfully endure. Paul explains this best in Romans 5 where he describes our new life in Christ in the following words:

Rom 5:1-5 Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than

that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Notice how he describes our life in Christ in this passage as a double rejoicing. First, in verse 2 he says that once we have been justified by faith and we are at peace with God we rejoice "in the hope of the glory of God", but this is not all. In the following verse he says that we also "rejoice in our sufferings". We do this because we understand that they are normal in the present life, and because they are preparing us for something better. Verse five is an essential part of this life of joy in the midst of tribulation. It tells us that all this is possible because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We can keep on believing and hoping, because we have experienced the reality of God's love, not in full measure, but sufficiently to give us the assurance that we can never be separated from God and his love. This is what Paul affirms later in chapter 8 of this same letter to the Romans when he writes:

Rom 8:35-39, Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

II. Love will not Fail in the Future

In everything we have seen so far you have noticed the relationship between faith, hope and love. God's love given to us by the Holy Spirit enables us to maintain faith and hope in the midst of the trials of the present life. In the last paragraph of this chapter, Paul will establish that these three things are the three essential things; the things which will endure not only in this life, but in the life to come.

The first thing to be observed in this paragraph is that he returns to his primary subject, spiritual gifts. He tells them that these gifts, however important that may seem to them at the present belong not to the eternal, but to the temporal. They are presently serving a purpose, but in eternity they will seem childish. It appears from this passage and other things that we can read between the lines of this letter that the Corinthians had developed a false spirituality. They believed that in their exercise of spiritual gifts, especially speaking in tongues, they were

experiencing the realities of heaven. Paul says that nothing could be further from the truth. These things, he says, can only be considered child's play in comparison to what is to come. Our knowledge of God and heavenly realities, for the present, is very partial. We live in hope of something much greater. Even our prophecies, he says, are partial. Five minutes in the presence of Christ, seeing face to face, will produce more genuine understanding than the exercise of spiritual gifts can ever produce. Therefore, while the gifts have importance for the present, they belong to the realm of the present and will vanish in eternity.

While the gifts do not link us to eternity, and belong to the realm of the things that will be left behind, there are, says Paul, three things that will remain: faith, hope, and love. So at the end of the text we come back to the beginning of the text. Two questions remain to be answered. Do all three of these graces endure in eternity or only love? Why is love the greatest?

Many interpreters following Calvin have said that faith and hope also belong to the temporal and will vanish in eternity. Others maintain that while they will be transformed, they will still remain. It is the second group, I believe, that is right. Inasmuch as we will always remain dependent creatures, we will always believe and hope in God. Our faith and hope will be perfect, but always present. Faith and hope are, in the end, what establish our relationship to God and throughout eternity we will maintain an unshakable faith and hope in him.

This being true, why does Paul say that love is the greatest of the three? Those who maintain that faith and hope will no longer exist say that love is superior because it is the one thing that will continue to exist in eternity. There is, however, a more profound reason. Love is the one part of God's own being that he communicates to us. Remember the summary that we gave from I John 3 in the first study: God is love, He has manifested his love in Jesus Christ, and he is perfecting his love in us. Faith and hope establish a relationship with God, but love is the very nature of God communicated to us. In this life we experience that love by the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is the closest we get to eternity in time. But even our deepest experiences of divine love in the present are only slight shadows of the profound reality of heaven where we shall see "face to face" and "know as we are known", when we shall experience the divine love that is the heart of God in a way so direct that if we were to experience it now in our frail and limited human form of existence it would destroy us. This is what Paul means when he says: "we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."