

THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

I Corinthians 13:6-13

This thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians clearly sets forth the pre-eminence of love, the properties of love and the permanence of love. As planets move in their orbits around the sun, obeying its attraction, receiving its warmth and reflecting its light, so around love seven gifts revolve, brightened with its brightness and energized by its energy. These noble endowments are eloquence, prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, charity and martyrdom. Thus we see that love is pre-eminent. The middle portion of this chapter contains a list of the properties of love. From it we have learned that love is not impatient, is not envious, is not boastful, is not rude, is not selfish, is not easily provoked, is not vindictive, does not rejoice in evil, rejoices in the truth, bears all things, believes, is hopeful and endures.

The heart of this sublime chapter is the statement in verse eight, "Love never faileth." The preceding context leads up to this, and the context which follows flows out from it. Here the climax is reached. The greatest thing that can be said about love is that it lasts.

Love is not an emotional experience that exhilarates for the moment and is gone forever. It is not something to be felt and forgotten. It leaves behind it a strength and beauty of character that all of us need. Love is indispensable. It is needed to tone and temper all of the other qualities of life. Love is not a passing emotion.

Love never fails. This means that love never falls to the ground, as do the petals of a faded and shattered flower, because there are no elements of decay in love. This means that love never loses its strength, as does a weary traveler who gives up the journey. This means that love never leaves its place, as do the falling stars. This means that love never drops out of line, as do the exhausted soldiers on the march. All of the comrades of love may fail and fall, but she marches on patiently and with determination. Love's perfect pattern is in Christ Jesus the Lord, who "having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end." These disciples of Christ to whom this verse refers misunderstood Him, tried His patience and grieved Him, but He just kept on loving them. He loved them when death was passed. He loved them to the end. Love never loses its place. Love is immortal.

The Corinthians made much of the gift of prophecy, of tongues and of knowledge. They were proud and puffed up if they possessed either of the three. They set little or no store by love. They were jealous and envious of one another. Quite naturally they were divided into opposing factions, which was so unfortunate. This condition was dishonoring to them, discrediting to the cause and displeasing to the Lord.

There are some things which do lose their place. One of these gifts is prophecy. "But whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away."

Prophecy was a gift which Paul valued highly, because it contributed to the edification of others. Prophecy was the power to interpret and communicate spiritual truth. The prophets spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They brought messages from God for the enlightenment and enrichment of the people. Prophecy was a great and precious gift, and yet it was nothing compared to love. "Whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away." This verb "done away" literally means reduced to inactivity. There will come a time when prophecies will be done away, be put out of action and cease to function. It is quite obvious that prophecies in the sense of foretellings will be done away when they are fulfilled. The prophetic gift was rendered useless by the written Word of God.

"Whether there be tongues, they shall cease." The gift of tongues was the language of ecstasy. Speaking with tongues meant the talking in an unknown language. The Corinthians were inordinately proud of this particular gift. They rated it above prophecy, because it was more startling. Therefore, it attracted more attention, and perhaps brought its possessor more glory. Carried away by this speaking in tongues, the Corinthians were neglecting the nobler grace of love.

Paul did not rate the gift of tongues very highly for the simple reason that the speech was unintelligible to the ordinary Christian, and therefore did not minister to his education. In his own blunt way he stated that he would rather speak five words so as to instruct others than to speak ten thousand words in a tongue that nobody could understand.

How long the gift of tongues lingered we do not know. Valuable as that gift was in the apostolic days, it quickly vanished. Its work was completed, and it was cast aside as a tool that was no longer required.

The gift of tongues was about the first one to be discontinued. All attempts to re-introduce it are the outcome of deception or they are fraudulent. They are contrary to the Scripture and are void of the actual operation of the Spirit of God. Nobody today has the ability to preach intelligently in languages which they have not learned.

"Whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away." Each stage of knowledge shall be superseded by another. Knowledge is progressive. There is no such thing as a stock of knowledge, fixed, definite and complete, so that when once a man mastered it he could feel that he knew all there was to be known. Knowledge is a growing, expanding, developing thing. That is why a learned man of one day may be completely behind the times the next.

In the case of Paul there was no disparagement of prophecy, tongues and knowledge. They were good things in themselves. Their shortcoming was that they were temporary. They did not last. Yet, upon these things the Corinthians were priding themselves. It is strange how people pride themselves on transient and temporary things still. Prophecy, tongues and knowledge have been absorbed in something better Paul taught.

The greatest apologetic for Christianity in our day is not one who has the gift of prophecy, tongues or knowledge, but one who loves.

Paul wrote, "We know in part." That is true of every kind of our knowledge. It is partial and fragmentary, and certainly far from complete. There are some people who are mere babes in Christ, and there are others who are full-grown men and women. The same person begins by being a babe fed with milk, but develops into a man in Christ who can be fed with meat.

Verse eleven says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." This comparison is not concerned with the physical and mental, however. It is the spiritual childhood that is emphasized. In that childhood one thinks and acts in terms of immaturity. His thoughts are limited. In every normal life there is a transition period. During this time the outstanding thing is the awakening of love. Intellectually, emotionally and organically the life is prepared for the ability to love. Love becomes the controlling and dominating factor of life. The activities and desires become entirely different. When this kind of spiritual maturity comes to a Christian, love very definitely pegs the level of our spiritual experience. When love prevails it lifts life to the level of a greatness and a goodness we never dreamed possible.

The condition of Christ's people here is one of broken vision and partial knowledge. The ancient mirror was, of course, not glass but brass. While it was brightly burnished, it would give but a dim reflection. These ancient mirrors, the best of which were manufactured at Corinth, were so small that only a part of a large object could be seen in them. Naturally these metal mirrors did not reflect every line and feature truly as our modern mirrors do. There must of necessity be much guessing and uncertainty about the things seen in such mirrors, but they served their purpose, for the reflections they gave, though dim, were clear enough to give a fair idea of how the objects looked. In a brass mirror a lady could see well enough to know whether her hat was on straight, but she could not see what her complexion was like.

The Corinthians readily understood this comparison because their local art had developed a means of polishing metal to a fair degree of reflection. Their homes and buildings were equipped with mirrors, but none of them had silvered backs. Looking into them a person saw himself "darkly." So it was with the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge. They were imperfect reflections.

Paul said that Christians are just like folk looking at themselves in a brass mirror. They do not see anything as they shall see it by-and-by. In our present state of existence our knowledge is only partial. Now we know through the revelation that God has given in His Word, and we are grateful for that! But there are still many things concerning which we shall receive full and complete information when we go home to be with the Lord. Part of the blessedness of heaven will be to see and know.

It is encouraging to know that some things are permanent. Faith abides because it is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Hope abides because it anticipates the fulfillment of what faith expects. As long as there is true faith there will be real hope. Love abides because it is the very nature of the new life. It is the last and greatest of the three things that survive time, disaster and death.