And The Greatest of These Is Love

I Corinthians 13:1-13 (NKJV)

Please turn with me in your Bibles to I Corinthians chapter thirteen. And for right now I would like for us to just read the thirteenth verse.

I Corinthians 13:13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION

Newspaper columnist and minister GEORGE CRANE tells the true story about a wife who came to his office one day full of hatred toward her husband. She told Dr. Crane, “I do not only want to get rid of my husband, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has hurt me.”

So Dr. Crane came up with an ingenious plan: He said, “Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind and considerate and generous as possible. Make him believe that you love him! And after you have convinced him of your undying love and that you can’t live without him, “drop the bomb!” Tell him you want a divorce. That will really hurt him!

The wife left Dr. Crane’s office that day eager to carry out his ingenious plan. For the next two months, the woman showed love and kindness and showered her husband with praise.
When she came back to see Dr. Crane the next time, Dr. Crane asked, “Well are you ready to go through with your divorce?” The woman said, “Divorce! Never! I discovered that truly do love him. Her actions had completely changed her ill-feelings towards her husband.

The scripture we are looking at this evening is commonly known as “The Love Chapter of The Bible.” That is a very appropriate name for it because in this chapter we find a portrait of true “agape love.”

**WHAT IS AGAPE LOVE?**

*Agape* love is the kind of love *GOD* has for you and me. And the kind of love every true *Christian* is to demonstrate toward others; not just to our family and friends, but to strangers, and even to our enemies.

*Agape* love is unconditional love that is shown toward others regardless of their physical attractiveness, their performance, or their worthiness to be loved.

*Agape* love is not based on feelings or emotions, but rather it is evidence of the in-dwelling of *GOD’S HOLY SPIRIT* in us.

*Agape* love seeks the highest good of others. *Agape* is a “sacrificial” love that knows no limits or boundaries.

As we go back and study this 13th Chapter of I Corinthians, I would like for you to consider these three key thoughts.

First, we will consider **THE PRE-EMINENCE OF LOVE**
Secondly, we will consider **THE PRACTICE OF LOVE**
And thirdly, we will consider **THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE**
First, let’s consider........

I. The **PRE-EMINENCE of LOVE vs. 1-3**

**I CORINTHIANS 13:1-3 (NKJV)**

1. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

2. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

1. Love is **pre-eminent** over everything else we do in the Christian life. By **pre-eminent**, I mean that love is “superior to” or “greater than” everything else.

2. In **VERSES 1-3**, Paul tells us three things LOVE is pre-eminent over.

   **(A) LOVE is pre-eminent over any SPIRITUAL SPEECH. (v.1)**

   1. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

   What Paul is saying to the Corinthians is, “If I could speak in every foreign language known to man or even speak with the eloquence of a heavenly angel, BUT DIDN’T HAVE LOVE, I would just be making a lot of noise. LOVE IS PRE-EMINENT OVER ANY SPIRITUAL SPEECH.
(B) LOVE is also pre-eminent over any SPIRITUAL GIFT. (v.2)

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

Paul is saying, “If I were the greatest preacher on earth and knew everything there is to know about the Bible and have faith that God can do the impossible, BUT I DON’T HAVE LOVE, I am nothing!

LOVE is pre-eminent over any SPIRITUAL SPEECH.
LOVE is pre-eminent over any SPIRITUAL GIFT.

(C) And next, LOVE is pre-eminent over any SPIRITUAL SACRIFICE. (v.3)

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Paul is saying, “If I give away every dime I have and every possession I own” to the poor, that’s a good thing, but if my motive for doing it is anything but LOVE, then there is nothing to be gained, there is NO REWARD, in giving away everything I have.

“And even if I am willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for the cause of Christ by giving up my life, that is a good thing! BUT IF MY SACRIFICE IS NOT MOTIVATED BY LOVE, my death will have been in vain.

LOVE IS PRE-EMINENT OVER ANY SPIRITUAL SPEECH.
LOVE IS PRE-EMINENT OVER ANY SPIRITUAL GIFT
AND LOVE IS PRE-EMINENT OVER ANY SPIRITUAL SACRIFICE.

Anything we do, anything we accomplish in the Christian life has NO MEANING and NO REWARD if it is not motivated by THE LOVE OF GOD.
Secondly, let's consider.........

II. The **PRACTICE** of **LOVE** (vs. 4-7)

1. What does godly love look like? In **verses 4-7**, Paul lists a number of ways THE LOVE OF GOD shows itself in your life and mine. Let’s look at these characteristics.

   **v. 4 LOVE SUFFERS LONG** (long-suffering)

   That means, LOVE IS PATIENT. It means LOVE doesn’t have a “short-fuse.” It means LOVE doesn’t lose its temper! LOVE restrains itself when provoked. **LOVE SUFFERS LONG.**

   **v. 4 LOVE is KIND**

   What does that mean? It means I will treat people RIGHT even when they treat me wrong. I will turn the other cheek. It means when others treat me with UNKINDNESS I will reciprocate with KINDNESS in return. **LOVE IS KIND!**

   **v. 4 LOVE does not ENVY.**

   LOVE is totally incompatible with ENVY, because LOVE seeks the good and well-being of another, while ENVY or JEALOUSY seeks one’s own selfish good.

   ENVY puts self first. LOVE puts others first. ENVY wants to prosper at the expense of others, while love is willing to sacrifice for the good of others. **LOVE DOES NOT ENVY!**

   **v. 4 LOVE does not PARADE itself nor is it “PUFFED UP.” (“boast”)**

   The Greek word for “puffed up” is the same as our English word for “wind bag.” LOVE means I don’t go around bragging about my good deeds…..or “tooting my own horn” …..or “patting myself on the back.” If I am always “boasting” about what I do for others, it reveals that my motives are WRONG; that the good I am doing is NOT motivated by LOVE, but rather by self-righteousness and pride! **LOVE DOES NOT BOAST!**
v. 5 LOVE is not RUDE.

What does that mean? It means I’m not stubborn, bull-headed, obstinate, obnoxious, boisterous or self-serving. It means I treat people with respect and honor, even if I don’t agree with them. LOVE IS NOT RUDE!

v. 5 LOVE is not SELF-SEEKING.

That means I don’t insist on always being right or always getting my way on everything or always having the last word. It means I stop focusing on “what's best for me” and consider “what is best for others.” This is vitally important in our family relationships as well as our Church relationships. LOVE IS NOT SELF-SEEKING.

v. 5 LOVE is not PROVOKED. (NIV “easily angered”)

This means I don’t let the petty annoyances of others get under my skin. I don’t “lose my cool” with people who don’t know how to drive. I don’t “blow up” at people who crunch ice or smack their lips when they eat. It means I don’t go off the deep end when the restaurant gets my order wrong or doesn’t cook my food to perfection.

LOVE IS NOT EASILY ANGERED.

v. 5 LOVE thinks no EVIL. (NIV- “keeps no RECORDS of WRONGS.”)

This means I don’t keep MENTAL or WRITTEN records of every wrong someone has done to me so I can use it against them.

It means I don’t make “mental notes” of who comes to see me and who doesn’t when I’m sick……or….. who sends me cards or gifts for Christmasses and birthdays and who doesn’t.

It means I don’t keep “score cards” on my mate to gain an advantage or win an argument.

LOVE KEEPS NO RECORDS OF WRONGS.
v. 6 LOVE does not rejoice in INIQUITY but rejoices in the TRUTH.

That means I never take delight in hearing about the demise or moral failure of any brother or sister-in-Christ or even a non-Christian.

It means I don’t take delight in hearing news about the break-up of someone’s marriage or someone’s adulterous relationship or the failure of someone else’s child or someone’s addiction to alcohol or drugs.

LOVE DOES NOT REJOICE IN INIQUITY BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH.

v. 7 LOVE BEARS all things. (NIV -"always PROTECTS. “)

That means I refuse to pass along “juicy gossip” about others that could in any way damage their good name or reputation, regardless of whether the information is true or untrue.

It means I will not be quick to believe everything I hear and will seek to give others the benefit of the doubt.

LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS.

v.7 LOVE BELIEVES all things. (NIV -"always TRUSTS.”)

That means I don’t treat everyone with suspicion as though they out to do me in or get one over on me. It means I believe the best in people, not the worst.

LOVE ALWAYS TRUSTS.

v. 7 LOVE always HOPES.

That means I don’t give up on people even when they give me every reason to give up on them. It means no matter how many times someone has failed, no matter how many mistakes someone has made, I have hope that Christ will one day bring about a change in their life.

LOVE ALWAYS HOPES!
v. 7 LOVE ENDURES all things. (NIV- “always PERSEVERES.”)

That word “ENDURES” is a military term that means to “hold one’s position.” Picture a soldier lying beside a fellow wounded soldier in a foxhole refusing to leave his side under any circumstance.

That’s the way godly love behaves. Through thick and thin, through good times and bad, through success and failure, through victory and defeat, we will stand by our loved ones and our brothers and sisters-in-Christ.

**LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES**

If you are like me, going through this list of characteristics of true godly love revealed some areas where I am strong and a lot of areas where I need to grow. Growth in these areas of weakness isn’t a matter of self-effort or trying to do better, it is a matter of surrendering these weak areas to the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well we have looked at THE PRE-EMINENCE OF LOVE. And we have looked at THE PRACTICE OF LOVE.

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Thirdly, let’s consider..........

**III. The PERMANENCE of LOVE (vs. 8-13)**

**I CORINTHIANS 13:8-13 (NKJV)**

8 Love never fails. But whether *there are* prophecies, they will fail; whether *there are* tongues, they will cease; whether *there is* knowledge, it will vanish away.

9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.
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.

12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

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

1. Notice in VERSE 8 how Paul contrasts the temporary nature of spiritual gifts with the permanent nature of *agape love*.

   He starts out by saying, "**LOVE NEVER FAILS!**"

   - Where there are PROPHECIES, they will cease! But LOVE will never fail!

   - Where there are TONGUES, they will be stilled! But LOVE will never fail!

   - Where there is KNOWLEDGE, it will pass away! But LOVE will never fail!

2. In verses 9-10 Paul reminds us that right now we cannot UNDERSTAND COMPLETELY.

   9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part.

   10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Once the Bible was completed, once that which was perfect had been given, the need for prophetic revelations, special divine knowledge and speaking in unknown tongues was no longer necessary.

And while God’s completed word tells us everything God wants us to know for right now, it still doesn’t tell us everything we would like to know.
3. And in verses 11, 12 Paul reminds us that right now we cannot SEE CLEARLY.

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.

12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

The life we have now could be compared to childhood. Right now our speech, our understanding and our thoughts are very limited. But in heaven, it will be as though we are adults, knowing and understanding things we never knew before.

The life we have right now could also be compared to looking into a fogged up mirror right after getting out of a hot shower. Our vision is now very limited. But being in heaven will be like looking into a crystal clear mirror that has been wiped clean.

4. PROPHECIES are temporary....TONQUES are temporary KNOWLEDGE is temporary....LIFE ON EARTH is temporary.

BUT THERE IS ONE THING THAT IS PERMANENT, AND THAT IS LOVE!

5. Paul ends this discourse on LOVE with that beautiful 13th verse.

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

6. Do you know why LOVE is greater than FAITH and HOPE?

-Because one day FAITH is going to come to an end. Right now we walk by FAITH, not by sight. But the day is coming when we will walk by SIGHT and no longer have to walk by FAITH.
-The same is true of **HOPE**. Right now we **HOPE**. But there is coming a day when there will no longer be any need for **HOPE** because everything we now **HOPE** for will become a reality.

7. Right now **FAITH** and **HOPE** remain important virtues in this life, but neither of them are permanent.

**BUT LOVE IS! LOVE SHALL ALWAYS REMAIN!**
**LOVE WILL A PERMANENT PART OF OUR**
**NATURE FOR ALL ETERNITY!**

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**C O N C L U S I O N**

During the 17th century, Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, sentenced a soldier to be shot for his crimes. The execution was to take place at the ringing of the evening curfew bell. However, the bell did not sound. The soldier's fiancé had climbed into the belfry and clung to the great clapper of the bell to prevent it from striking. When she was summoned by Cromwell to account for her actions, she wept as she showed him her bruised and bleeding hands. Cromwell's heart was touched and he said, "Your lover shall live because of your sacrifice. Curfew shall not ring tonight!"

*Our Daily Bread.*

*And now these three remain: faith....hope....and love. But the greatest of these is love.*