

GIVING UP CHILDISH THINGS

SERIES: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE



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1 Corinthians 13:8-11
4th Message
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We are working our way with care through a great chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. In the last message (Discovery Paper 070218) we came to the apostle Paul's remarkable assertion: "Love never fails." The supply of love is never exhausted. It does not fail to accomplish its goal. This is a stirring idea in a passage known for its poetry and inspiration. But how can it possibly be true?

There are voices that not only deny the assertion "Love never fails," but claim that its exact opposite is the case. Many insist that sacrificial love is no match for skillfully pursued self-interest, that anyone who puts others first will be stepped on. Everywhere we find advice on promoting, defending, preferring, and pampering ourselves, rather than loving others. Sacrificial love, advocated in any practical terms, is a loser in the marketplace of ideas.

If the voices of others don't make the case, very often our own experience chimes in: How can it possibly be true that love never fails? The problem for many of us is that we have wrongly understood the statement. We have imagined that it's saying, "Love never suffers. Love is never frustrated. Love is never confused. Love is never lonely." But of course, the text doesn't say that. That could never stand up under scrutiny. Love often suffers. Those who attempt love are frequently lonely, confused, and uncertain. The promise, though, is that love never fails, not that love never hurts.

In fact, we can assert with confidence that love never fails because we know what the future holds. Though we remain in a battle, and will for the rest of our earthly lives, in which the evidence of good outcomes is not visible, we are certain of a final victory. Guilt and shame will be banished forever. Death will be done away. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5 NRSV).

Writing at the end of his life, the apostle Paul was in a dungeon, alone, cold, and largely abandoned by his friends. He was facing death and he knew it. He wrote these words to his young friend Timothy: "In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which

the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day ..." (2 Timothy 4:8). He had poured himself out for love's sake, for the churches he had founded, for those who didn't believe, and for any who would listen, because of his love for his Savior. And, he was sure that he'd made the right choice, because he knew the end of the story. He knew what was true, though it had not yet occurred.

Let's consider some of the instruction that is given to us about the future.

1 Corinthians 13:8-11:

⁸Love never fails; 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. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

His first observation is summed up in the words "They will be done away" and "They will cease."

Over before they've begun

The context of this statement is religious enterprise—prophesying, tongues, Bible knowledge, church meetings in Corinth, and Christian endeavors of various kinds.

But the statement "They will cease" applies to everything, doesn't it? Physical things, ideas, art, politics, historical events—everything we can think of that human beings touch has an expiration date. In our part of the world an obvious example is technology, much of which is obsolete as soon as it is marketed. Everything will come to an end, except love. Rivalries, awards, wealth, and all other self-promotion will fade. But love never fails.

As I noted, Paul uses the language "They will be done away" and "They will cease" about religious things—

prophesying, tongues, and knowledge. Remember, the church in Corinth was filled with young Christians basking in the glory of God's favor, having received spiritual gifts, the great texts of the Old Testament, and the benefits of God's promised blessings. They found themselves puffed up with a sense of their own importance, wanting others to notice all the new and glorious things that had happened to them, and competing with one another for status.

Paul's words suggest what was taking place. Some group would say, "Tonight we're going to have a healing meeting. We're going to gather a large group and invite God's Spirit to be present. Dramatic and miraculous events will occur. Broken bodies will be healed, and God will be glorified. Come to our meeting!"

Another group would say, "We are going to have a meeting to study the texts of Scripture in great depth. We'll learn the deep things of God together, taught by the Spirit. Come to our meeting instead!"

Some other group would say, "We are planning a concert. We're going to get the hottest young talent to do the best possible music! Join us, not them, for an experience of vital worship and praise of God."

Paul observes these people in their self-orientation. "Every one of your meetings will one day be forgotten. We will not know who came, we will not know what was said, and there will be no memory anywhere of these events that you're arguing about in Corinth. Prophesying will come to an end, tongues will cease," [most likely, tongues represents the whole realm of the miraculous in Paul's thinking here], "and knowledge will come to an end."

Christian folks compete with one another in other ways: "We're going to build a great worship center."
"We're going to found an institution."
"We're going to start a school."

But even the longer-lasting things like buildings and monuments have an expiration date. Everything eventually comes to an end, except for faith, hope, and love. These last forever, and the greatest of these is love.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a study of obsolescence, the repeated cycles of meaningless beginnings and endings. All effort is expended to make our accomplishments last, but they don't last. Yet despair cannot quite have the final word. The Preacher can't dismiss the hope that it might be

different ... God has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). This life is not all there is. Love, received from God and given away to others, lasts forever. Love never fails.

Paul's second observation is that when the 'complete' comes, the 'partial' will come to an end (v. 10).

The partial and the complete

This observation is very much related to the statement that everything is ultimately going to become obsolete. But there's an important difference. The announcement that all our accomplishments will expire can easily lead to indifference and withdrawal from life, yet we are called to serve Christ sacrificially. If we engage faithfully in following the Spirit into ministry, what we're doing will be partial in its accomplishment, but it will someday be gathered up in the day of completion.

Everything will not work out the way we think it should. All our ideas will not be good ideas. Some things that we pour ourselves into may seem a short time later to no longer matter. Nevertheless, we "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called [us] heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14, NIV). What is partial now will one day be seen as a beautiful contribution to the world to come.

Paul casts his third observation in the metaphor of human maturation.

The thoughts of a child

1 Corinthians 13:11:

"When I was a child I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things."

I believe the point he's making here is that the church is in its childhood, and that it will not be mature until the Lord returns. Neither churches nor individuals grow up in a moment. It's okay to be a child when you are a child. He's not arguing that immaturity equals failure. But growing up means putting away childish things. Someday we'll look back on matters that seemed to be of critical concern and realize they weren't significant at all.

When children learn their ABC's, if they have any tendency to show off, they'll sing the ABC's to you at a

moment's notice. "Watch me, I can sing the ABC's." But a thirty-year-old doesn't sing the ABC's. Children learning T-ball might feel proud of figuring out that you run the bases counterclockwise. But when years and years have gone by, they realize that was just rudimentary.

Paul is recognizing that so much of what we brag about now, we will one day realize was preparatory or appropriate in its time, but not nearly as great as the songs we'll be singing in the presence of the Savior when we see Him face to face. The future that lies before us is so grand; we should consider how to live now in view of what is to come.

Hebrews 11 is a recounting of some of the great saints of the Old Testament, from the patriarchs to the judges to the prophets. Each lived a fully engaged life in their time and place and their contemporaries were not worthy of them (v. 38). Confident by faith, they were certain of future triumph.

"All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11:13-16.)

It is certainty about 'what has not yet occurred, but that will occur' that gives us the passion, the ability, and the willingness to act in love. "The gentle ... shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5) is a joke for most people, and yet Jesus meant it when He said it. It's because we know what is still in the future, that we say that love will not fail.

A medical team of our folks is about to depart for India. When they leave India, HIV will not have been eradicated. A year from now many of their patients will have died. But God is at work, and one day the partial will be made beautiful in what is complete; and faithful participation in the world to come, delighting God now,

will be honored forever.

Every now and then I realize I have been preaching in this church for a long time. We've changed the paint and the windows, we've changed the times we meet, and we've added new projection capability, and wrestled with what elements enhance worship among us. Sometimes it has been difficult to make decisions in these emotionally charged matters, yet looking back, those discussions have faded in significance. But, expressions of love for Christ and one another, risks taken for the sake of honesty and care of others—these have grown more beautiful and more worthy of praise.

Love never fails. This text calls upon us to make choices to spend ourselves on what is worth living for.

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