

1 Corinthians 13:8

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Preacher: Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] We shall turn now to 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

And we shall read verse 8. Charity never faileth.

Now last, Lord, we looked briefly at the opening verses of this chapter. And we saw something of Paul's reflections upon the grace of Christian love.

We saw something of what that love meant. As exemplified especially in God's love shown on the cross of Calvary.

God's love for the unworthy. God's love that spared no cost. And that love set before us as the model of our own lives and our own relationship.

[1 : 34] And we saw something too of Paul's emphasis on the supremacy of love. As that without which we were nothing.

We saw that it was far more important to Paul than all the charisma time. More important than any intellectual gift.

And more important even than what we ourselves today call charity or liberality. And I want tonight to try to bring together the remainder of Paul's teaching in this chapter.

It seems an appropriate note upon which to end my ministry in this particular situation. I have so much enjoyed the stimulus of the fellowship here from week to week.

And I now come to the point where I must take my leave. And in doing so wish God's rich blessing upon you.

[2 : 50] And it seems that if I wanted to leave any kind of legacy. Or any kind of influence. That the greatest note upon which one could possibly end.

Is this note of God's love. And God's will for us expressed. In the imperative of his love. As defined for us in this chapter.

It does seem to me more and more. That the church's problems. Are problems not of orthodoxy. Not even problems of inertia or inactivity.

They are so often problems of relationships. They are problems of lovelessness. And the terrible thing is that we are so conscious of the importance of doctrine.

And we are so conscious of the importance of activity. And yet we are so unconscious of the importance of this grace and this quality.

[3 : 55] Without which Paul says. We are nothing. And we mean nothing. And we gain nothing. Because love is the one great indispensable.

Love is the one great thing that endures. Love is the one great thing. Love is the one great thing. Love is the one great thing. The other great thing is that in our society. The other great thing is the greatest. And I want therefore to gather Paul's thought together for a moment around this theme tonight.

Let's notice first of all some of the qualities that Paul attributes to love. from verse 4 downwards.

I want to pick out simply three or four of these. It reminds us, first of all, of the patience of love. It says that love suffers long.

Charity suffereth long. In verse 7, the same thing is brought before us. Love, we are told, bareth all things, and then again, love endureth all things.

[5 : 12] And it is so curious, there is no mention of love simply in its emotional aspect. But there's tremendously practical emphasis that love shows itself in patience.

It is long-suffering in its own personal relationships. Because so often in our own interaction with society, there is so much that is hurtful, and so much which is painful, and so much which is provocative.

And Paul says, if you love men, if you love the world, then you suffer those things.

You bear those insults, you bear those injuries, and you manifest your love in this great quality of endurance.

You don't suspend or end relationships because of some injury. Because of some injury. But you suffer it long.

[6 : 26] Because you are loving, you are going to be patient. And so often, surely, we contradict God's great standard at this point.

We are so ready to end relationships. We are so ready to end talking, to end dialogue, to end interaction because of some pain, because of some offense.

And we find that not only between believers and the world, we find it so often and so painfully within the church of Jesus Christ itself.

It is one of the great problems that so often within the Christian body, there is very often offense given. There is discourtesy, and there is injury, and there is insult.

And we do hurt one another. And it is at that point that we are in such desperate need of this agape, this love, that is not prepared to suspend relationships because of pain or because of offense.

[7 : 45] But it's determined to maintain connections and to maintain friendship and to maintain personal dealing, even in the face of disappointment.

And I would go so far as to say that there is nothing that can possibly emerge in the whole range of providential possibility that can justify one believer in suspending in suspending relations with another believer, in suspending caring, in suspending pity and in suspending concern.

Because our love has to be us enduring and us long-suffering, us the love of God himself. And we see in the Old Testament so gloriously how God's love and Jews in the face of all the infidelity and all the apostasy and all the defiance and all the abominations even of the Old Testament people of God.

And then over it all, God says, how shall I give thee all? It may seem often the natural thing to do.

It may be the instinctive thing to do. It may be what some people in God's church tell us to do. But we have no right before God ever to cut off the love, ever to lay aside our own care, compassion, concern, and ministry.

[9 : 30] Our love for the world is to be long-suffering. Our love for fellow believers is to be long-suffering. But I would also want to apply that same great principle along the line of our relations with God himself.

Because in many ways this agape, this love, is about not only our man-to-man relations, but also about our relations with the living God our Savior.

And there are times when in terms of God himself our love has to be long-suffering. Our love is to endure so much.

Our love is to learn to bear all things. Because there are times when God's dealings are incomprehensible.

And there are times when God's dealings are painful. There are times when God doesn't answer prayer. God doesn't grant us our heart's desire.

[10 : 44] God doesn't give us our ambitions or give us our dreams. God And sometimes God sends pain. God sends bewilderment.

God sends loneliness. God sends isolation. God sends misunderstanding. Sometimes our whole providential universe can fall around our ears.

Sometimes mountains are cast into the depths of the sea. Sometimes there is chaos and sometimes darkness and sometimes there is the most awful bewilderment.

And at those times it's we should hear that voice that says to us curse God and die. And you may think in the abstract well surely God's people God's believing people can never react to God in that way.

And yet there is Job for us as the great and solemn reminder that God can sometimes be difficult to bear with.

[11 : 59] And God's ways can sometimes be difficult to endure. God's providences can sometimes demand of us the most exacting and the most painful degree of long suffering as we cry for patience, as we cry for understanding, as we cry for light, as we ask God for the reasons and ask God what possible end can we have in view in sending providences of this kind.

God. And that's when we need all the resources of our love to bear with God.

We need all of love's patience to endure the way that is dealing with us, to suppress and control our own bitterness and our own bewilderment.

now it may very well be tonight, that you cannot recall any moment in life when you were in such a position and you cannot envisage no such possibility, but it is made so wondrously clear by the word of God that there are times when God's church following the good shepherd finds itself in the valley of the shadow of death, death.

There are times when there is darkness and there is no light. There are times when the pain is blinding and searing.

[13 : 41] And to those times it will require all the resources of Agape to bear with God. That is a great teaching here.

Charity of love suffers long. love for God will endure for God. It will bear all things.

It will endure all things, sustained by the confidence that he does all things well. There is a second quality in love which I want to mention and that is this.

Something very elementary. it is that love always practices courtesy. It's put in the negative in verse 5.

Love or Agape does not behave itself unseemly. It is never indecorous. Now maybe again that's a point that believing people need not to be reminded of.

[14 : 46] But I'm not so sure. Because sometimes in our zeal, in our exuberance, especially in the exuberance of young discipleship, we are inclined to forget the imperative of Christian courtesy.

courtesy. And at one level of course courtesy is simply that we observe the proprieties and practice the etiquette that belongs to a particular situation.

We saw last Lord's Day with Daniel, how he deals with the unbelieving man who was the superior. How he makes us requests so courteously and how he reasoned so courteously that he could not eat non-kosher food.

And this man as we saw was a pagan. This man had no sympathy for Daniel's point of view. This man was a natural man.

He was dead and blind in all the things of the Spirit of God. And yet Daniel practices the most exemplary courtesy because he loved the man.

[16 : 09] And that may be the whole problem that all proper courtesy is a product of love. And it means that we are always conscious of the feelings of other people.

There may be times in fact while we breach etiquette because etiquette itself is not always necessarily loving.

And in other words courtesy is not mechanical but courtesy is that awareness of the other person of his needs of his weaknesses of his sensibilities of his embarrassment of his blushes.

And it is a concern to avoid pain or discomfort to this man or this woman in that particular situation. That is the glory of love.

It is the opposite of self-awareness. It is the awareness of others. I think in fact it is a point at which it becomes an almost radar-like quality in which they believe in the Christian person is always conscious of the other people around him.

[17 : 35] It knows them, knows their needs, their sensibilities, knows their position and is so acutely anxious to avoid any kind of pain, any kind of embarrassment to this person.

Now in a tradition that is major on what people call plain speaking, we have to be tremendously careful in this regard. It's very well to say, oh I speak my mind.

I'm not at all sure that such speaking of one's mind is the correct Christian approach. There is a great passage in Paul in Ephesians 4 where he says, we are to speak the truth in love.

In fact, he says much more directly, we are to truth it in love. It's not enough to truth it, not enough to speak the truth.

There are some truths which quite frankly are better not spoken. truth in the truth. The fact that a thing is voracious, is factually accurate, and precisely true, is not always justification for our saying it either to a person or about a person.

[19 : 02] We have to move into this situation. We do not behave ourselves in an unseemly way. We are never to be indecorous. We are never to be oblivious to the effect of what we say upon the feelings and the prospects and the position of other people.

And quite frankly, for the most part, most of our plain speaking, most of our bluntness is very often singularly unloving. And if we had thought for a moment of the other person, of the other people around us, we wouldn't have said those things at all.

And that is Paul's great requirement. It is not simply that we observe the etiquette or the ground rules, important to those are. It is that we school ourselves in this awareness of other people.

And that we try to think ourselves under their skins. And the probable effect and consequence upon them and for them of what we say and of what we do.

So love is patient and love is courteous. And we see also that love is disinterested and self-effacing.

[20 : 27] We find it in verse 4. It wanteth not itself. It's not puffed up. We find it also where we are told in verse 5 that love does not seek its own.

Now I can't go into that for the moment. But again it's a whole idea of selflessness. That in our actions we are not thinking of what's in it for ourselves.

Love is not going to engage in self-display or an ostentation because love does not think that oneself is worth such projection.

And love is not going to seek one's own benefit because love is immersed in the pursuance of the good and the benefit of others.

Paul of Philippians 2 tells us that we are to mind not our own things but the things of others.

[21 : 40] And yet in the Christian church we have this tremendous preoccupation with our own rights. And we are desperately sensitive to our own rights.

the minister wants his rights. The presenter wants his rights. The elders want their rights. The deacons want their rights.

The women want their rights. And the young people want their rights. Sunday school teachers want their rights. Everybody wants his rights. And you can be absolutely certain that every trouble and quarrel in the church of Christ is the consequence of that particular mentality.

People say that they're not prepared to be doormats and they won't be stood on and they won't be overlooked. They want their rights. They know their place. They know their rights.

Love doesn't. And you may say, well, doesn't that make love dreadfully vulnerable? And I think again the answer must be quite uncompromising.

[22 : 52] It makes love desperately vulnerable. Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Could Christ not have pled his rights? Could Christ not have said, I've never sinned? I've never done anyone any harm?

Could he not have said, I am the son of God, I'm the living God, I want my rights? but he loved. You see, I cannot say to you, Luke, you can be selfless and still safeguard your own position.

Because you can't. You can't be selfless and safeguard your own position. In fact, what I'm saying is that we have to be so selfless that we are completely exposed on every flank and every front to exploitation, to misunderstanding, to being used, to being talked about, to being swept off the face of the earth.

And I think that we have got to get that into our own outlook theologically. We have taken up the cross to follow Christ. We are following a vulnerable Savior who was exposed on every side, who had enemies and misunderstanding on every side.

[24 : 41] And I think that we are so far, and I am so far away from this whole mentality, because we are so concerned with securing your flanks against the possibility of misunderstanding, against the possibility of any kind of attack, verbal, social, or otherwise.

And the whole problem is that all the time we are seeking our own. That was Paul's terrible indictment of his fellow believers towards the end of his life.

All seek their own, not the things which are Christ's. If it is not possible anymore to live as Christians, within cozy denominational confines and enclaves, in which to be a disciple of Christ means prestige, and means accolades, and means influence, and means comfort.

Being a disciple of Christ means, if it means anything, that what happens to me is not important, and what people say about me is not important.

Because we have agape, and it is a terrible problem, that this is no cult of perfection. I'm not laying down our expounding Paul's teaching, as to the way that senior Christians ought to live, or distinguished ones ought to live, or eminent ones ought to live.

[26 : 22] But that grace, without which I am nothing, I am nothing, if my primary concern in life is myself, if I am wanting myself, if I'm attracting men's attention to myself, if I'm trying to safeguard myself, if I'm trying to advance my own career, if those things are my objectives, and my priorities, then I am nothing, and I mean nothing, and I gain nothing, because I don't have agape.

I am not talking of people being civilized, or being cultured, I am talking of people being Christians. The dreadful, and it is dreadful, the dreadful radicalness, of the commitment that we made, when we become children of God.

In that moment, in that commitment, there must take place this revolution, in terms of which the ego, that used to be central to all my planning, is displaced, and that ego no longer matters in the planning.

What becomes of it, and what people think do, what people do, no longer matters. And that, hopefully, is not my vision, but is Paul's vision, and it's Paul's vision of elementary discipleship, of rudimentary Christianity.

humanity. And it is the application of that great grace which alone will lubricate the wheels of the free church, and unleash its energies for the glory of God, and turn our churches into heavens on earth.

[28 : 30] And in the absence of that love, whatever the orthodoxy, whatever the activism, without that love, we shall not be paradises, we shall only be reflections of the world, and sometimes, indeed, only the glottposts of hell.

Love is patient, and love is courteous, and love is selfless. love is the permanence and the permanence and the enduringness of love.

Love, he says, in verse eight, never fails. Love is to be something enduring, it is to be something absolutely eternal.

And it's intriguing to see how Paul contrasts that permanence with other things which are to be impermanent and transient and transitional.

Where there be prophecies, they shall fade. Where there be tongues, they shall cease. Where there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. Those were the things that those Corinthians lived for.

[29 : 53] It was the possession of those qualities and gifts that came by men standing in prestige in the church at Corinth. If you are a prophet, if you spoke in tongues, if you are the gift of knowledge, of supernatural knowledge, then you are a somebody, then you are important.

But Paul says, look, these things are impermanent. These things are going to vanish away. and Paul puts it in terms of two great figures, or two explanations.

He tells us, first of all, those things belong only to the present imperfect order. At the moment, he says, we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part, shall be done away.

For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then shall I know, even as also I am now. Paul is saying to us that the reason why we need all those gifts, all those charisma at the present time, is the imperfectness, the imperfectness of our present situation.

And it's all summed up in this great verse 12. Now we see through a glass darkly. In other words, he's saying, you take the greatest theologian there is with the fullest possible light on the revelation that God has given to us in the Holy Scripture, you take that man and for all the superbleness of his vision and all the clarity and all the perceptiveness of his insight, he's only a man seeing through a glass darkly.

[31 : 57] Now that man is enthralled by what he's seen. He's seen the glory of God in the face of Christ. He's seen the loveliness of the Savior.

He's seen the majesty of the incarnate and the exalted Christ. And he's captivated. And his vision is accurate. And his vision is correct.

And his vision is moving. And his vision is productive. But it is still only through a glass darkly. It is shadowy. It is enigmatic. It is blurred.

It is partial. Let me grasp, let you grasp it, the marvel and the glory of that, that enthralled enthralled as we are by what we at present see.

Yet what we see is so shadowy. And what we see is so imperfect. And what we see is so paradoxical. It is riddle-like.

[33 : 00] There are so many unanswered questions, so many enigmas, so many riddles, so many gray areas. because at the moment we live in this imperfect stage of knowledge.

But one day, he says, I shall see face to face. One day, I shall read my theology, not of the Pauline epistles, not of the great classics of theology and devotion.

But I shall read my doctrines of the face of Jesus Christ. One day, I shall see him as he is.

I shall see him eyeball to my eyeball. One day, I shall look into the face of God. I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand upon the earth, and that in my flesh, from my flesh, I shall see God, whom mine eyes shall behold, and not as a stranger or an alien.

One day, I shall not simply read in the word of God, that Christ is glorious, but I shall see the glory. One day, I shall not only read that grace in his lips doth flow, but I shall hear grace pour forth from his lips.

[34 : 53] One day, I shall not only read that God loves me, but I shall hear God in Christ say to me, I love you, I shall see him face to face, and if possible, he takes us beyond that, I shall know, even as also, I am known.

I shall have a knowledge of God, commensurate with his knowledge of me. God does not read about me in a book, glorious though this book is, but God knows me face to face.

God reads my heart. One day, I shall know God, not out of a book, not even out of God's book, but I shall know him in the same way as he knows me.

Now let me, if I may use the language, let me enflesh it, and let me even carnalize it. Because let us bear in mind that when we see Christ as he is, what we shall see is an embodied savior, not simply a pure spirit, an ethereal spirit, that we shall see the one who became flesh, and the one who rose from the dead, and the one who was a body.

I believe that one day my eyes shall see him, and one day my ears shall hear him, and one day my fingers shall touch him. That's the way it was with John, what we have seen, what we have looked upon, what our hands have handled, of the word of life.

[36 : 56] Now Paul says, when that day comes, we will not need prophesies, or tongue speaking, or God giving teachers to expound this word.

I believe we shall still be taught, and we shall still be learning, and keep on learning endlessly, but the whole learning process will be so different.

We shall be with him, face to face. He will take us to the fountains of the waters of life. He'll take us there, and he'll talk to us, and he'll teach us, and he'll tell us what he thinks of us.

And the first begotten, the only begotten son, he will tell us about his father. We will ask him, what is father right? And he will tell us, what is the Holy Spirit, what is he really like?

And he will tell us, and tell us, and tell us, and tell us, endlessly. We shall know, even as also, we are known. So all those things shall pass, prophesies, tongue speaking, knowledge of the gift of teaching, these things will go, for that which is perfect comes.

[38 : 14] God as he says again, when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, and I had ambitions like a child.

But when I became a man, I put away childish things. And although I can't develop this policy into us here, surely, that prophesying and tongue speaking and teaching and knowledge and preaching, all of those things belong to our childishness.

And when we come to the final maturity, when we are complete in Christ, we shall put away all those childish things. But he says, we'll never put away love.

one day there'll be no more Bible. One day there'll be no more evangelizing. One day there'll be no more teachers and preachers.

But there will always be love. It will endure forever. Now, I can't, without being dishonest, hide from you.

[39 : 38] love. But love isn't the only thing that survives. Now abideth faith, hope, and love.

faith is permanent. Faith is permanent. The way love is permanent.

That is, trust in God. we cannot, for a moment, mention that when we get to heaven, belief will give way to unbelief, or trust to mistrust.

But when we follow the great shepherd, on all those marvelous journeys of exploration through the new heaven and the new earth, concerning which God will say to us, subdued, and replenish it and colonize it, and subjugate it and explore it, and we follow Jesus, we follow the Lamb, and we shall have the most tremendous faith in that shepherd.

We shall follow him personally and questioningly and follow him adoringly. So faith is permanent, and hope is permanent.

[40 : 57] Expectation. Please remember, glory is not a point or a dot, it's a line.

We shall always have tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, always the hope of more, of more rivers, and more mountains, and more heights, and more depths, and more of the aspects of the infinite, ineffable, and unfathomable glory of God.

Never will a day come when God will say to us, look, I have given you all you're going to get, and you can stop expecting more.

There will never, never come such a moment. In this great place where there is no night, there is always expectation.

Because our life eternal is to keep on getting to know thee, the only true God. He will guide us and lead us into all truth.

[42 : 14] Faith abides, and expectation abides, and love abides. But he adds finally this, love is the greatest of these.

Love is greater than charisma. Love is greater than intellect. Love is greater than liberality.

love is greater than prophesy, greater than tongue speaking, greater than knowledge. Love is greater than faith.

Love is greater than hope. Love is the greatest thing. love is greater than hope. Love is greater than hope. Love is greater than hope.

That is the star by which we must steer this ship, this congregation, and this denomination above all. I do not want our bow pulled round and find or set a course dictated simply by purity of worship or by the law of the Sabbath or by Presbyterian principle.

[43 : 40] I do not want in the last analysis our course set even by the poor star of our orthodoxy indispensable of others. I want our course set by the star of Agape.

Love is the greatest of these, greater than all the Christmata and greater than all the graces themselves.

Why should it be so? It is the greatest thing because God himself is love.

He not only has it and he not only practices it, but he is. and if we are to be conformed or transformed to his image, then the love which he is, that love is the model and the pattern and the blueprint, partakers of the divine nature.

I can only say that I find that absolutely devastating. As one makes one's way through ecclesiastical politics, as one listens to the warring of theologians, as one is observant or is involved in inter-denominational discussion.

[45 : 29] That is a great question which constantly emerges. How different from the world is all this?

And how like God is all this? I put it most solemnly. Does the Trinity behave like this?

That is the question we must always ask. Can you imagine God the Father speaking to God the Son the way we sometimes speak to each other?

Or dealing with God the Son the way we sometimes deal with each other? Love is the greatest because God is love.

Love is the greatest because it is the very essence and soul of what is meant by being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

[46 : 42] Whom he did foreknow he did predestinate to be conformed to the image of the Son. I read a great thing in a book this week.

A book I could recommend to no one and yet in a midst of all the dross there was this that what we have in this chapter is a description of Christ.

Christ suffereth long. Christ is kind. Christ envieth not. Christ wanteth not himself.

Christ is not puffed up. Christ does not behave himself unseemly. Christ seeketh not his own.

Christ is not easily provoked. Christ thinks no evil. Christ rejoices not in iniquity but rejoices in equity.

[47 : 52] Christ beareth all things. Christ believeth all things. Christ hopeth all things. Christ endureth all things.

He has left us an example that we should follow in his path. and finally this.

Surely this great passage is the death blow to all her complacency. Which of us tonight can go to God's judgment and God's evaluation and dare say Lord you know that great passage in 1 Corinthians the 13th chapter you know that chapter.

Lord I know that's where you want us to live and Lord I've lived that way. And if you never thought that you needed a saviour if you ever thought you would know sin then I pray you go home and read it.

And because when God opens the assize and begins his exalmination and calls for the proof to be taken this is the statute book that will regulate everything.

[49 : 48] And by this statute book I am most emphatically doubt were it not that the Lamb of God has mourned my lovelessness unanswered to God for my falling short of the glory of the standard.

May God help us soon to live and may God by his grace fill all your deliberations and aspirations and all your activities liberally with this great quality.

and in all the talk about our crisis and about leakage and loss and declension when you seek solutions or evaluate them please believe me it is the defect and the absence of this quality that above all is and will prove to be a nation.

Let's pray. O Lord we thank thee for the wonder of thy love in Christ.

we bless thee O Lord that we see in thy word tonight not only a model and demand to humble us but we find in it also the record of love's achievement of what love did for ourselves and for our salvation.

[51 : 49] We commend Lord this people to be continue to be their shepherd feed them lead them protect them and when thy good providence one is given them to be their teacher and their leader we pray the Lord to bless him and them in the relationship together that it may be one of love deeply fruitful stimulating and creative for the glory of thy name in Christ amen Então just to