

Love Fulfills the Law

Lesson for November 12, 2023

Unit III: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Adult Topic: The Greatest Gift

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Romans 13:8-10

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13; Romans 13:8-10

Key verse: *“The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,”¹ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Romans 13:9, NIV)

The Greek word agape (love) seems to have been virtually a Christian invention -- a new word for a new thing (apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is almost non-existent before the New Testament). Agape draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike -- Matt. 5:44-48). It is the basic element in Christlikeness.

In reading 1 Corinthians 13, the background for this week’s lesson, note what these verses have to say about the primacy (vv. 1-3) and permanence (vv. 8-13) of love; also note the profile of love (vv. 4-7) which they give.

James Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

Key Terms

1. **Fulfillment** (Romans 13:10) – To accomplish; to perform; to complete; to answer in execution or event what has been foretold or promised; as, to fulfill a prophecy or prediction; to fulfill a promise.
2. **Love** (1 Corinthians 13:8) – There are three different words for love in Greek, and each word means something different in scripture. Eros is based on feelings and is me-oriented. Philia is based on shared interest and is we-oriented. Agape is Christ-centered and others-oriented. True love fosters a connection that goes beyond the superficial. It's a bond that often involves understanding each other's core values, beliefs, and life goals. This connection creates a sense of companionship, where both partners feel they're on the same team, working towards common dreams. More than anything, the Bible makes it clear that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). He isn't just loving, but he is the very definition of love. He loves us because he created us. His affection is unconditional. He both generates and demonstrates love — and that love endures forever (Psalm 100:5).

- 3. Tongues** (1 Corinthians 13:8) – The specific organ of speech. There are four uses of word tongues in the Bible – tongues as an actual foreign language (Acts 2:4); tongues as a prayer language (Romans 8:26; 1 Corinthians 14:14-15); tongues as a form of praise (1 Corinthians 14:15-16); tongues with interpretation (1 Corinthians 14:27-28).

Lesson Background

This week's lesson contains Paul's letters to two different churches – the church at Corinth and the Roman church. Each had its own issues. Paul's first letter to the church of Corinth was to challenge believers to examine their lives against the image of Christ. He especially placed a lot of focus on love — Christ's love. His mission was to unify the church and bring them together in fellowship.

At the time, the church gatherings were a little chaotic and disorganized. While their mission was to share the good news, they were focused more on being heard and becoming prideful rather than delivering and dispensing their knowledge in love.

So, it is not by accident that this chapter on love is perfectly sandwiched between two passages on spiritual gifts. The Corinthian fellowship (*koinonia*, 1 Corinthians 1:9) transgressed conventional social boundaries of ethnicity, gender, age, rank, status, and life situation. There are married and unmarried men and women as well as widows and children among them (1 Corinthians 7:8, 14, 32-40). While most of its members are converted Gentiles (1 Corinthians 12:2), this body also includes Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23-24). In fact, some of these Jewish members were rather powerful figures who served as former synagogue leaders, like Crispus (1 Corinthians 1:14; cf. Acts 18:8) and Sosthenes (1 Corinthians 1:1; Acts 18:17).

Most of its members were from the lower classes (1 Corinthians 1:26), but some sat on the opposite side in rank and resources. Erastus, for example, was the city treasurer of Corinth and Gaius had enough resources to support Paul and the whole church (1 Corinthians 1:14; Romans 16:23). There are slaves and free people in the community (1 Corinthians 12:13) as well as people with different skill sets and gifts (1 Corinthians 12:28-30).

The diversity within the church of Corinth generated both benefits and challenges common for any social group. Unfortunately, the diversity among the Corinthians dissolved into discord (1 Corinthians 1:10) and rivalry (1 Corinthians 3:4, 21-23). Members divided into contentious groups. They took sides with some saying they are of one teacher or another (1 Corinthians 1:12; 11:18-19). This was a community fragmented, rather than enriched, by difference.

Yet, Paul remains firm that this diversity is nonnegotiable. God has called this community to be diverse and to get along within it. Paul's "poetic ode to love" was not written to celebrate the unifying love already accomplished in the community. It was a call to action. It was not a tribute to what is. It was an intervention to instruct on what had not yet come to pass.

In his tribute to love, Paul starts out by naming human achievement as temporal and limited (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 8-12).² Up until this point in the letter, much of Paul's discussion about speaking in tongues, prophesy, knowledge, and insight has affirmed these as ingredients of Christian worship and life. Paul spills an enormous amount of ink describing these achievements and stations as necessary and desirable (1 Corinthians 12:27).

In his love poem, Paul makes a decisive shift, diminishing the allure of spiritual gifts and functions. Tongues, prophesy, knowledge, miracles, servanthood to the point of death are important, but they still do not qualify as the "more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31). Love is the key.

Romans 13 continues the theme of Romans 12. How do those in Christ live, now that we have received God's great mercy for us? Paul began Romans 12 by declaring that the only reasonable response is to become living sacrifices in service to God. Romans 13 continues to describe what that Christlike sacrifice looks like. This includes some specific applications.

Paul's instructions take a surprising turn in the first half of the chapter. Those in Christ must be "submissive" or "subject to" human authorities in the government. In other words, one's place in God's kingdom does not allow us to ignore those in charge of whatever earthly kingdom we occupy. This is not just about keeping the peace. Christians are to submit to earthly authorities because God put them there. In fact, Paul says that every position of government authority on earth was, ultimately, filled by God Himself for His purposes. To improperly resist authority, then, is to resist God (Romans 13:1-2).

That rejection of authority brings painful judgment. God's intention for authorities in human governments, in part, is to use them to bring judgment on people who do bad things. If you're doing good things, Paul writes, you should have nothing to fear from those in authority. If you're doing bad things, though, you should be afraid. Governments, broadly speaking, are there to rein in and punish evildoers on God's behalf. The punishment a criminal receives from the government is also from God (Romans 13:3-4).

We should not submit to our human government only out of fear, though, but also because it's the right thing to do. For that same reason, Christians must pay their taxes as a way of supporting the structure God has set up to accomplish His will on earth. In fact, in addition to taxes, we also owe to our human governments respect and honor (Romans 13:5-7).

Paul transitioned to the idea that Jesus-followers should pay all their debts. The only debt that will never be fully repaid is the obligation to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. When that command is obeyed, it fulfills the entire law, Paul writes. After all, love itself never harms anyone, making all the other relationship commands unnecessary (Romans 13:8-10).
(Bibleref.com)

Lesson in Depth

I. Love Never Fails (1 Corinthians 13:8-10)

Love never fails: Paul addresses the over-emphasis the Corinthian Christians had on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He shows they should emphasize love more than the gifts, because the gifts are temporary “containers” of God’s work; love is the work itself.

b. Therefore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are appropriate for the present time, but they are not permanent. They are imperfect gifts for an imperfect time.

That which is perfect: Paul says when **that which is perfect has come**, then the gifts will be “discontinued.” But what is **that which is perfect**? Though some that believe the miraculous gifts ceased with the apostles say it refers to the completion of the New Testament, they are wrong. Virtually all commentators agree **that which is perfect** is fulfilled when we are in the eternal presence of the Perfect One, when we are with the Lord forever, either through the return of Christ or graduation to the eternal.

The ancient Greek word for **perfect** is *telos*. Considering the way the New Testament uses *telos* in other passages, it certainly seems to speak about the coming of Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:8, 15:24, James 5:11, Revelation 20:5, 20:7, 21:6, and 22:13).

Whether there are tongues, they will cease: Many who believe the miraculous gifts ended with the apostles (such as John MacArthur) claim since the verb **will cease** is not in the passive, but in the middle voice, it could be translated, *tongues will stop by themselves*. Their analysis sounds scholarly, but is disregarded by virtually all scholars of ancient Greek.

Even if this translation is correct, it does *nothing* to suggest *when* tongues will cease. John MacArthur claims, “tongues ceased in the apostolic age and that when they stopped, they stopped for good.” But this passage *doesn’t* tell us “tongues will stop by themselves,” and it tells us tongues **will cease** only when **that which is perfect has come**.

John Calvin thought the **will cease** spoke of the eternal state. “But when will that perfection come? It begins, indeed, at death, because then we put off many weaknesses along with the body.” (Calvin)

Whether there are tongues, they will cease: In his use of **will fail** and **will cease** and **will vanish away**, Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is not trying to say that **prophecies, tongues, and knowledge** have different fates. He is simply writing well, saying the same thing in three different ways. They will end, but **love never fails**. (Guzik)

“There is virtually no distinction between the two Greek verbs that describe the termination of both prophecies and tongues. True, the verb with prophecies is in the passive voice (believers are the implied agents), while the verb with tongues is interpreted as the active voice. The difference is only a stylistic change and nothing more.” (Kistemaker in Guzik)

We prophesy in part: This is airtight evidence prophecy is not the exact same thing as preaching, or even “inspired” preaching. “Preaching is essentially a merging of the gifts of teaching and exhortation, prophecy has the primary elements of prediction and revelation.” (Farnell, cited in Kistemaker)

II. Love is Eternal (1 Corinthians 13:11-13)

When I was a child: Childish things *are* appropriate for children, and the gifts *are* appropriate for our present time. But the gifts of the Holy Spirit will not be appropriate forever. Paul is not trying to say that if we are spiritually mature, we will not need spiritual gifts. But he does say that if we are spiritually mature, we will not over-emphasize spiritual gifts, especially at the expense of love.

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face: When we can fully see Jesus (not as in a poorly reflected image), the need for the gifts will have vanished, and so the gifts will pass away. The gifts of the Holy Spirit will be overshadowed by the immediate presence of Jesus. When the sun rises, we turn off the lesser lights.

Face to face: Paul uses this term to describe complete, unhindered fellowship with God. 1 John 3:2 tells us when we get to heaven, *we shall see Him as He is*. There will be no more barriers to our relationship with God.

In Exodus 33:11, it says *the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend*. In Exodus 33, *face to face* is a figurative expression, meaning free and open fellowship. Moses had not – and could not – see the actual face of God the Father in His glory. This is the sense in which John says *No one has seen God at any time* (1 John 4:12). In the spiritual sense which Moses had a **face to face** relationship with God, we can have a free and open relationship with God. But in the ultimate sense, it will wait until **then**, when we are united with Jesus in glory.

In a passage like Numbers 12:8, where the Lord says of Moses, *I speak with him face to face*, the phrase *face to face* is a figure of speech, telling of great and unhindered intimacy. Moses’ face was not literally beholding the literal face of God, but he did enjoy direct, intimate, conversation with the Lord. But the **face to face** Paul speaks of here is the “real” **face to face**.

For now we see in a mirror: This speaks again to the perfect fellowship with God we will have one day. Today, when we look in a good mirror, the image is clear. But in the ancient world, mirrors were made out of polished metal, and the image was always unclear and somewhat distorted. We see Jesus now only in a dim, unclear way, but one day we will see Him with perfect clarity. We will **know just as I also am known**.

The city of Corinth was famous for producing some of the best bronze mirrors in antiquity, but at their best, they couldn’t give a really clear vision. When we get to heaven, we will have a really clear vision of the Lord.

We couldn't handle this greater knowledge on this side of eternity. "If we knew more of our own sinfulness, we might be driven to despair; if we knew more of God's glory, we might die of terror; if we had more understanding, unless we had equivalent capacity to employ it, we might be filled with conceit and tormented with ambition. But up there we shall have our minds and our systems strengthened to receive more, without the damage that would come to us here from overleaping the boundaries of order, supremely appointed and divinely regulated." (Spurgeon)

Then I shall know just as I also am known: God knows everything about me; this is how **I also am known**. But in heaven, I will know God as perfectly as I can; I **will know just as I also am known**. It doesn't mean I will be all knowing as God is, but it means I will know Him as perfectly as I can.

Now I know in part: The gifts of the Holy Spirit are necessary and appropriate for this present age, when we are not yet fully mature, and we only **know in part**. There will come a day when the gifts are unnecessary, but that day has not come yet.

Clearly, the time of fulfillment Paul refers to with **then face to face** and **then I shall know just as I also am known** speaks of being in the glory of heaven with Jesus. Certainly, that is the **that which is perfect** spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13:10 as well. According to the context, it can't be anything else.

And now abide faith, hope, love, these three: The three great pursuits of the Christian life are not "miracles, power, and gifts"; they are **faith, hope, and love**. Though the gifts are precious, and given by the Holy Spirit today, they were never meant to be the focus or goal of our Christian lives. Instead, we pursue **faith, hope, and love**.

What is your Christian life focused on? What do you really want more of? It should all come back to **faith, hope, and love**. If it doesn't, we need to receive God's sense of priorities, and put our focus where it belongs.

Because **faith, hope, and love** are so important, they are emphasized throughout the New Testament. And we do:

*Remembering without ceasing your work of **faith**, labor of **love**, and patience of **hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father. (1 Thessalonians 1:3)*

*But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of **faith** and **love**, and as a helmet the **hope** of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:8)*

*For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the **hope** of righteousness by **faith**. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **faith** working through **love**. (Galatians 5:5-6)*

*Who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your **faith** and **hope** are in God. Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere **love** of the brethren, **love** one another fervently with a pure heart. (1 Peter 1:21-22)*

*Since we heard of your **faith** in Christ Jesus and of your **love** for all the saints; because of the **hope** which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel. (Colossians 1:4-5)*

*For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him **until that Day**. Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in **faith** and **love** which are in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:12-13)*

But the greatest of these is love: Love is greatest because it will continue, even grow, in the eternal state. When we are in heaven, **faith** and **hope** will have fulfilled their purpose. We won't need **faith** when we see God face to face. We won't need to **hope** in the coming of Jesus once He comes. But we will always **love** the Lord and each other, and grow in that **love** through eternity.

Love is also the greatest because it is an attribute of God (1 John 4:8), and faith and hope are not part of God's character and personality. God does not have **faith** in the way we have **faith**, because He never has to "trust" outside of Himself. God does not have **hope** the way we have **hope**, because He knows all things and is in complete control. But God is love, and will always be love.

Fortunately, we don't need to choose between **faith**, **hope**, and **love**. Paul isn't trying to make us choose, but he wants to emphasize the point to the Corinthian Christians: without **love** as the motive and goal, the gifts are meaningless distractions. If you lose love, you lose everything.

III. **Love: The debt We Owe** (Romans 13:8-10)

Owe no one anything except to love one another: On a personal level, the only "debt" we are to carry is the "debt" to love one another – this is a perpetual obligation we carry both before God and each other.

Some take this as a command to never borrow, but Jesus permitted borrowing in passages like Matthew 5:42. That isn't the sense of what Paul is saying here, though the Scriptures do remind us of the danger and obligations of borrowing (Proverbs 22:7).

"We may pay our taxes and be quiet. We may give respect and honor where they are due and have no further obligation. But we can never say, 'I have done all the loving I need to do.' Love then is a permanent obligation, a debt impossible to discharge." (Morris)

You shall love your neighbor as yourself: Paul echoes Jesus' words as recorded in Matthew 22:36-40. This is one of the two commands upon which *hang all the Law and the Prophets*.

Love your neighbor means to love the people you actually meet with and deal with every day. It is easy for us to love in the theoretical and the abstract, but God demands that we love *real* people.

"No man can compass the ends of life by drawing a little line around himself upon the ground. No man can fulfill his calling as a Christian by seeking the welfare of his wife and family only, for these are only a sort of greater self." (Spurgeon)

Love is the fulfillment of the law: It is easy to do all the right religious “things” but to neglect love. Our love is the true measure of our obedience to God.

Lesson Summary

The Corinthian Church was not a homogenous body. Its members were not all of the same kind and ilk. This was not a comfortable gathering where people fell into step with each other because they shared fundamentally similar lives, values, and experiences. Quite the contrary.

The underlying meaning of 1 Corinthians 13 is that as followers, we are to imitate the love of Jesus by using our gifts while serving and loving others just as He did!

So, how do we do that? That is where the well-known and beloved verse of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 comes in. If we are called to share the love of Christ, we must first understand how He loved.

Love is not one of the most important things to God, it is THE most important thing!

God is love, and without love, it is impossible to please Him. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

“If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

When we are acting with love, people can tell, and they see the love of God dwelling in us.

Conversely, if we notice ourselves being unkind, impatient, holding a grudge, etc., we need to pause and refocus ourselves on the priorities that God wants us to have.

This is true in good times and in times of adversity.

A renewed focus on love results in personal growth.

When we understand the importance of love and apply it to our lives, we will behave differently, as Paul wrote about in his first letter to the Corinthians:

“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.” – (1 Corinthians 13:11)

While the Corinthians were pursuing spiritual gifts, Paul says what ought to occupy their attention are faith, hope, and above all, love.

- **Faith** is trust in and reliance on God right now.
- **Hope** is faith applied to the future, that just as God can be relied on now, so He will be tomorrow.
- **Love** is what it’s all about. It’s what faith & hope make way for – a relationship with God that gives purpose and meaning to our lives.

Paul continues in Romans 13 by saying that Christians are obligated to love their neighbors as they love themselves. To do this is to fulfill the law of Moses, because love itself never hurts anyone. Paul continues by urging:

- Cast off works of darkness (Romans 13:8-13)
- Walk as if it were daytime. Time when the day of Christ's return is near.
- Set ourselves aside for God's use.

Sources

www.Bible.org

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+13&version=NIV>

<https://www.bibleref.com/Romans/13/Romans-chapter-13.html>

Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/>

Calvin's Commentaries Complete. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/commentaries.i.html>

www.Christianity.com

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/faith-hope-and-love/commentary-on-1-corinthians-13-1-13>