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Sermon Notes

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All Gifts Are Temporary, But Love is Eternal

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

The human heart is designed to evaluate everything it knows in the world... we are wired to be attracted to what is excellent, to esteem it highly and proportionately for its excellence. When we are toddlers or little children, we have very little sense of the worth and value of things – the law of supply and demand means nothing to us. We would rather have a popsicle than a diamond; we would rather watch a cartoon than see the Grand Canyon; we would certainly rather go to an amusement park than sit on a pew in church.

But as we mature, we develop more and more of a taste for what is truly excellent. When it comes to worldly tastes, the more educated we are on the history of art, the more willing we would be to stand in line outside a museum to be able to catch even a glimpse at a Rembrandt painting like the “Night Watch” on display at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The more educated we are on the history of music, the more fascinated we would be to actually hold in our hands the original manuscript for Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The more developed our sense of worth and value, the more amazed we would be to gaze at the sparkle of the crown jewel in Queen Elizabeth’s scepter – the Cullinan diamond, at 530 carats, the largest cut white diamond in the world... truly an EXCELLENT gemstone

This world is filled with many people – 7.8 billion of them; innumerable possessions; countless human skills and attributes; measureless achievements; soaring accolades and honors; countless artifacts...

But standing over everything in the human experience is one thing, the greatest thing, the most excellent thing... LOVE

1 Corinthians 12:31 And now I will show you the most excellent way.

The “most excellent way” ... the Greek word “way” refers to a road, a pathway, a direction... it implies a journey, as Jesus himself said:

John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

So Paul points to the MOST EXCELLENT WAY of life... absolutely tied to the most excellent man that ever lived, Jesus Christ

The WAY of LOVE is the most excellent way of life there can ever be, for love is the distillation of the Christian religion... love is both the journey along the way and the destination at the end of the way

1 Corinthians 13 is a single chapter – 13 verses – dedicated to this one proposition, that love is the most excellent way, the most excellent human attribute

The whole chapter breaks into three main arguments for why love is the most excellent way:

First, All Spiritual Gifts are Worthless Without It

Second, All the Excellent Aspects of Christianity Arise From It

Third, Love is Eternal, But None of the Spiritual Gifts Are

I. Three Arguments for the Excellence of Love

A. All Spiritual Gifts are Worthless Without It

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all

knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love must truly be excellent if it is the absolutely indispensable ingredient to all proper exercise of the spiritual gifts, even to the most extreme display of those gifts in the history of the world!

B. All Truly Excellent Aspects of Christianity Arise From It

1. The most excellent demeanors and attitudes in the Christian life come from love
2. The most excellent works in the Christian life also come from love
3. So Paul lists both positively and negatively what Christian love is like and not like:

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Anyone who is living this kind of life is living the perfect Christian life when it comes to other people... they are long-suffering toward other sinners; they actively do good toward them with a glad and gentle heart; they have complete delight in the blessings given to others and are truly delighted that they have them; they see their own blessings as given by God by which they can bless other people; they are truly humble toward others, considering other people better than themselves and other people's needs as more important than their own; they are polished in manners and conduct toward others, both in their speech and minute actions; they expand their own heart to include others and find their own pleasure in the blessing of others; they do not give in to sinful, selfish anger but have a long fuse toward others; they are very quick to forgive and hold no grudges at all, knowing that they themselves have been forgiven by God; they have no delight in evil concerning other people, but only yearn for the truth of God's

Word to be active in others and in the world. They bear all offences without complaining, always believe the best about other people; they believe that God's grace can transform any sinner and fit them for heaven; so they endure whatever sins that person may dish out before God's grace finally wins the day.

WHAT A MAN this would be! WHAT A WOMAN! A truly perfect person...

Only one man in all human history has lived this out perfectly, and that is Jesus Christ.

C. Love Is Eternal, But the None of the Spiritual Gifts Are

1. This is the final step in Paul's unfolding of the pure EXCELLENCE of Christian love
2. All the gifts of the Holy Spirit that the Corinthians were so proud of, and boasted so much of, and thought about all the time... the gifts of tongues and prophecy and knowledge and all the others as well—miracles, healings, giving, leadership... all the spiritual gifts and the roles that are connected with them are TEMPORARY and indeed a means to an end; but love is eternal; it extends throughout the rest of every Christian's life; it extends throughout every era of church history; and indeed it extends beyond the end of this world and into eternity... that is how excellent love is

II. Love Never Fails, But All the Gifts Will Cease

A. Paul's Simple Assertion in the Text

1 Corinthians 13:8 Love never fails.

1 Corinthians 13:13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1. BUT the spiritual gifts will cease

1 Corinthians 13:8 As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

Therefore, these (and actually ALL the spiritual gifts) are temporary...
but love is the most excellent way because love is eternal; it is permanent; it never passes away

Now here, I do not want to take the off-ramp that two of my greatest mentors – John MacArthur and Jonathan Edwards took – into a long discussion of “cessationism” ... that the special, miraculous ‘sign gifts’ ceased with the formation of the New Testament canon

B. December: A Sermon on Cessationism

1. My mentor: John MacArthur’s sermon on cessationism... that the sign gifts (tongues, prophecy, knowledge... plus miracles, healings, etc.) most certainly ceased at the end of the apostolic age, with the completion of the New Testament canon
2. Jonathan Edwards’s sermon: arguing along the exact same lines
3. Paul’s point soars far beyond cessationism... it extends beyond anything to do with the rest of the church age or even the rest of our lives here on earth
4. 1 Corinthians 13 ends with our future in heaven... where NONE of the spiritual gifts will be needed or even exist... but love will still be there and be flourishing
5. Indeed (as we will discuss over the next few weeks) “Heaven is a world of love” but not of spiritual gifts

C. How Love is Permanent... actually Eternal

1. Divine love enters the soul at the moment of conversion AND NEVER LEAVES!!!
 - a. Regeneration is an ATTRACTION of the heart toward the glory of God in Christ

2 Corinthians 4:6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

- b. This is the essence of the transformed heart; first and foremost—LOVE FOR GOD
 - c. But then, flowing from that vertical is the horizontal... love for other people
2. If there is no love, there is no life... no conversion... no Christianity

1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

3. Divine love continues throughout the Christian life
- a. The “fruit of the Spirit” is love...
 - b. As long as the Spirit lives within us, love will NEVER FAIL
4. And eternally!!!... love will be perfected in heaven
- a. Our love for both God and other Christians will not cease at the end of our lives
 - b. Paul at the end of this chapter lifts our minds up into the heavenly future that we will all enjoy

1 Corinthians 13:9-10 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

- c. The perfection Paul has in mind is nothing less than heavenly perfection, when at last we will see God face to face

1 Corinthians 13:12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

D. Love Will Outlast Both Faith and Hope

1. Paul ends with the three greatest attributes of the Christian soul

1 Corinthians 13:13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love

2. The spiritual gifts will all pass away when this world ends

3. Some spiritual gifts may well pass away before Christ returns (this is the cessationist assertion); but whether they do or not, spiritual gifts are not as important or lasting as faith, hope and love
4. A Christian may cease the ability to perform his or her spiritual gift—a pastor may have a stroke and be unable to preach or even speak ever again; a woman with the gift of hospitality may lose her home in a fire and be (at least for a while) unable to host any guests at all; circumstances in this world may well cut off the use or expression of any spiritual gifts at all
5. Yet, while we live in this world, faith, hope and love will remain every single moment of our Christian lives... sustained moment by moment by the grace of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit
6. But Paul ends up saying “the greatest of these is love”; WHY is love greater than both faith and hope???
 - a. **Faith** is the eyesight of the soul by which we see the glory of God in the face of Christ... **but** it produces LOVE in the heart toward God and toward Christ
 - b. **Hope** is the strong assurance in the heart that the future is bright based on the promises of God... **but** it is a sense that the future is bright with the LOVE OF GOD; for we will find out that heaven is a world of love, an ocean of love in which we will experience perfectly God’s love for us and we will ourselves love God perfectly; and we will experience perfectly the love of other Christians—again, both our own love for them and their love for us... so hope is lesser than love; actually hope is all about love
7. AND love alone will come with us into eternity
 - a. When you breathe your last breath on earth, you will close your eyes and your soul will leave your body
 - b. At that moment, you will leave both faith and hope behind
 - c. Your faith will no longer be needed because you will be absent from the body and PRESENT WITH THE LORD; and in

eternity, you will see him FACE TO FACE; someone seeing Christ face to face does not need faith ever again

d. And your hope will no longer be needed either

Romans 8:24 Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?

When the New Heavens and New Earth come, and you are in your resurrection body, all that God has promised us will have come true, and hope will forever be left behind... fulfilled by the power of God!!!

e. So, faith and hope will not come with us into heaven... but love will really just be beginning there! We will have a whole eternity of love ahead of us... love for God and love for the other redeemed

III. All Graces of the Spirit Are Temporary Means to an End: Love

A. The Holy Spirit Ministers Grace to Us in a Wide Variety of Ways

1. To all Christians he has worked deeply and effectively...

- a. A deep conviction of sin as a violation of the pure law of God and as offensive to God personally
- b. A true illumination of the truth of Christ as the Son of God, perfect man, perfect in obedience to the Law; who did astonishing miracles and who died on the cross under the wrath of God specifically for MY SIN
- c. A true sense of love for God in all of this... that God's love is displayed in the cross and that love for God is worked in us by the Holy Spirit
- d. These three things continue to a greater or less degree in all Christians throughout our lives
 - i) Ever deeper conviction for indwelling sin
 - ii) Ever deeper insight into the truths of God's Word, the Bible
 - iii) Ever deeper love for God and for others

2. The Holy Spirit also has used spiritual gifts as a means of grace within the church
 - a. The spiritual gift of prophecy delivered the Word of God to be written down in the Bible
 - b. The spiritual gift of apostleship built the structure of the New Testament church doctrinally
 - c. The spiritual gift of evangelism brought the gospel to the unconverted elect
 - d. The spiritual gift of tongues enabled Christians to speak the word to people in other tongues, confirming the supernatural nature of the message
 - e. The spiritual gift of pastor/teacher/preachers developed the knowledge of the Word of God in the people who listened
 - f. The spiritual gift of healings put God's mercy on display in the lives of the sick and injured
 - g. The spiritual gift of leadership organized the local church to best minister to the spiritual needs of all the people
 - h. The spiritual gift of giving paid for ministries to be able to be done
 - i. The spiritual gift of hospitality, service, mercy, helps... all these and others helped develop the church to full maturity

B. All the "Means of Grace" are Temporary... None of them Needed in Heaven

Ephesians 4:13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ

This perfection only happens in heaven... and the word "UNTIL" points to the temporary nature of all the spiritual gifts

Edwards: “It is like the fruits of the field (in a farm or orchard) which need tilling, rain, and sunshine till they are ripe and gathered into the barn at harvest time, and then they need them no more.”

NO SPIRITUAL GIFTS AT ALL IN HEAVEN!!

C. All of the Means of Grace have one final end in mind: LOVE

1. What God is doing in our salvation ultimately is working LOVE in us
2. Edwards says the reason that the gifts cease and love doesn't is that the gifts are a means to an end, and love is the end itself
3. Love is the point of it all... and the gifts are merely the means the Holy Spirit uses to produce that end

IV. All Earthly Knowledge of God is Limited, Imperfect, and Immature

1 Corinthians 13:8-12 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. ¹² Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

A. The Gifts Paul Chooses Focus on Knowledge

1. Prophecies will pass away... tongues will be silenced... knowledge will pass away... delivery systems of partial, imperfect truth
2. Prophecies are a source of knowledge about God and other people
 - a. Scripture is built on the prophetic gift... “Thus says the Lord”
 - b. Moses wrote down what God told him to write... so have all the other authors of Scripture

- c. When the Holy Spirit moved in the writer, he would write exactly the words the Spirit wanted him to write... perfect words containing perfect truth
 - d. These words conveyed a completely accurate set of precepts, truths that will continue until heaven and earth pass away
 - e. Scripture is FLAWLESS, as it all true prophecy
3. So also the knowledge that the prophecies deliver, and the systematic work of organizing the prophetic messages into systems of theological truth is right...
- a. Scholars take the writings of Paul... like the Book of Romans or even this epistle 1 Corinthians... and seek to rightly divide it and mine out the timeless perfect truths in the Word of God
 - b. Theologians weave these truths into coherent systems of truth addressing every topic the Bible covers—the doctrine of God, of man, of sin, of Christ, of the church, of angels and demons, of the future, of the ordinances, of time and money and government and every topic addressed in the Bible... all of it based on sound reasoning and principles of exegesis from text after text of Scripture
4. So, when Paul says “When there is knowledge, it will pass away” he doesn’t mean that the truths found in Scripture will ultimately be false, or no longer true...

Matthew 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

- a. When we get to heaven, we’re not going to find out suddenly that there are many gods... or that Jesus Christ is not the only begotten Son of God... or that God isn’t holy
 - b. The Bible is PERFECT TRUTH and the Holy Spirit’s illumination of the truths found in Scripture was accurate
5. BUT the “Gift of Knowledge” and the skills of sound exegesis and the work of the systematic theologian will become instantly obsolete when we see Christ face to face

6. It will be superseded by a much more effective delivery system, and what is much more... our MINDS and HEARTS will be perfected and ready to UNDERSTAND and DELIGHT IN the truths God teaches us at an infinitely higher level than anything we ever experienced on earth

B. All Christian Knowledge in this World is Limited, Imperfect, and Immature

1. Limited: ***“we know in part and we prophesy in part”***... there is a limit to what God is willing to tell us in this world

John 16:12 "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear."

2. Imperfect: ***“when the perfect comes, the imperfect passes away”***

- a. Not FAULTY knowledge, not FALSE doctrine...

Psalm 12:6 And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times.

- b. Just imperfect in the sense of incomplete and immature; vastly lower than what it will be... it will be much better to see Christ face to face and hear him speak than it will be to read the Bible or hear a sermon

- c. Again, Paul is speaking of our HEAVENLY experience; not the experience of the church when the New Testament canon was completed... that is not “seeing Christ face to face!”

3. Immature: ***“When I was a child, I thought like a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child... when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.”***

- a. It’s as though Paul is saying that receiving the knowledge of God as mediated through prophecy, tongues and the word of knowledge... including all faithful scriptural ministry—writing, reading, preaching and explaining scripture... it’s all WORD-BASED and essentially like BABY TALK compared to what it will be like in heaven

- b. Recently one friend was telling me that his child is convinced that we can build a rocket ship big enough to take us to heaven
- c. Other kids have this conception of God like a huge giant who literally holds the world in his big hand
- d. Children have childish conceptions of God
- e. BUT Paul is effectively saying SO DO WE... our thinking of God's omnipotence is childish compared to what we will think in heaven; so is our conception of God's wisdom... we can't even begin to fathom how wise God is and how deep is the wisdom of God

Romans 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

C. Seeing Through a Glass Darkly

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1. The mirror in Paul's day was a piece of polished brass, polished as perfectly as possible, but still far short of the present silver-backed glass that was invented in 1835 by the German chemist Justus von Liebig
2. The most expensive perfect mirrors in human history went into the Hubble Space Telescope... polished to 3 one millionths of an inch; a flaw in the grinding of the original Hubble mirror amounted to 1/50th of the breadth of a human hair... caused significant distortion
3. So the most perfect mirror in human history gave a slightly distorted picture of the distant starlight
4. Paul says our understanding of God comes from looking in a mirror and it is DIM (literally "in an enigma"... in a mystery... indistinctly)... like a fuzzy picture that needs resolution

5. The decisive completion of our salvation is to see God perfectly clearly and know him with a perfect heavenly knowledge

John 17:3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

V. Heavenly Knowledge Will be Limitless, Perfect, and Mature [next week]

VI. Applications

A. Come to Christ!

1. The tragic events of this year have shown us both the brevity of life and the sinfulness of the hearts of people
2. We should be more and more aware of how much we need a Savior, and how Jesus Christ is that Savior
3. While there is time, flee to Christ and to his cross
4. His bloody death on the cross was to pay the penalty we loveless sinners deserved for being so loveless, so wicked, so rebellious
5. His mighty resurrection from the dead was to give all who believe in him ETERNAL LIFE beyond the grave
6. Our works cannot pay for our sins or raise our dead corpses from the grave
7. God in his grace is calling on all sinners to repent of their sins and to trust in Christ alone
8. Do it today... we don't have much more time

B. See the Permanence and Excellence of Love

1. See how faith, hope, and love are greater than all the spiritual gifts
2. See how the spiritual gifts all exist as a means to an end—to build faith, hope, and love
3. But that even faith and hope are temporary... love is eternal, and will glow and be forever perfected in heaven

4. Set your heart on the love described in this chapter
 5. Look at each phrase and say “God work this in me!”
 - a. God, make me patient, make me kind!
 - b. God, free me from covetousness
 - c. God, open my heart to others and make me generous to them
 - d. God, free me from selfishness and from bitter unforgiveness
 - e. God, free me from my quick anger and my bitter unforgiveness
 - f. God, help me to delight only in the truth
 - g. Make me the kind of person who bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things
- C. Set Your Heart on Heaven!! [More over the next two weeks!]