

The greatest of these is love

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[0 : 00] We shall turn again to the chapter right a moment ago in 1 Corinthians chapter 13 and verse 13. So now faith, hope and love abide these three but the greatest of these is love. The greatest of these is love. These last few days we have alluded more than once to the love of God. We saw that love was the source of all our spiritual blessings, God's eternal sovereign electing love choosing us to salvation. And we saw too God's love exemplified on the cross of Calvary in the gift of a son to be our saviour. And we know that in those and many other ways we're reminded of both the primacy and the ultimacy of love. God is love indeed in the beginning was love. And God never became love because in God there was always the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and each loved the other God did not exist in eternal solitude. God was always this great fellowship of love.

Well I want for a moment tonight to change the focus, not this time so much God's love for us as the love that God asks and expects of ourselves.

And Paul here gives us this incomparable the exposition of the meaning of the love that God requires of us.

It reminds us first of all that love is a more excellent way. If I may quote the last verse there of chapter 12 I will show you a more excellent way.

Of course in that previous chapter Paul is talking about spiritual gifts and to the Corinthians love was not necessarily a more excellent way because they were very taken with those spiritual gifts.

[2 : 50] And they admired those who spoke in tongues and those who prophesied and they admired those great super apostles who had such charisma and such presence and such lovely voices and such tremendous powers of rhetoric.

And those young believers when they dreamed of being men and women of that kind who would speak in tongues and prophesy and command huge audiences and have vast followings.

And so for them those gifts were the more excellent way. And of course Paul here is not disparaging gifts because gifts are important and they're important still for the Church of Christ.

And the Church of Christ, not least in this congregation, is and must be a charismatic Church. Because we exist independent upon the gifts that God's Spirit gives us.

And without those gifts we exist. And without those gifts we could not exist. When your ministers preach they exercise God-given gifts.

[4 : 17] When your presenters lead the praise they exercise a God-given gift. When people pray in the prayer meeting they exercise a God-given gift.

When the elders visit and counsel they exercise a God-given gift. When people pray in private and intercede for the Church they exercise a God-given gift.

When people lead or work in administration or whatever or organise, lead young people's groups and so on. Now these are all spiritual gifts.

And every one of those makes us very dependent upon the Spirit of God. And beyond that too there's a wide range of other gifts.

There are artistic gifts and literary gifts and technical gifts and all sorts of gifts. Which are important for our civilisation.

[5 : 18] And all of these come of course from God. From God's special grace or from God's common grace. But the gifts are always important.

And those who follow my calling know always just how fragile we are. That we never have a sermon under control.

But that it all depends on the Spirit's presence in the moment of delivery. And those who pray and those who sing and those who lead Sunday school. They know too how dependent they are in all of

those activities on the presence and power of the Spirit of God.

So Paul is not here setting love over and against gifts. But he's saying this to us. That while the gifts are important, yet without love the gifts are nothing.

Those gifts are gifts we need. But as we exercise those gifts that must be suffused with love.

[6 : 27] And directed by love we must use all our gifts lovingly for the good of those dependent upon us.

And that is Paul's great challenge. And he says, without that love the greatest gifts are utterly and absolutely useless.

Tongue speaking, prophesying, gifts, some miracles, even martyrdoms. Way back to your bodies to be burned, Paul says.

And yet without love none of that is of any consequence. And what a challenge that is to us. And to those in our formative years particularly.

Because he's asking us what are our ambitions. There's so much talk today of personal development. How do we want to develop? What do we want to be?

[7 : 27] And Paul is saying to us that no matter how we progress or develop, without love we are nothing.

We could have the most charismatic, magnetic personalities and the greatest gifts and influence. And yet without love Paul is saying to us we are nothing.

And he's saying to us implicitly make that love your priority. And so to move on from that let's ask for a moment what is this love and how does this love express itself.

And Paul goes on to analyse it for us in terms of certain memorable phrases in this great passage. Of course he uses here a very unusual word for love. A word which of course many of you know the word agape. And it's not the common word for love in the Greek language.

[8 : 37] In fact it was seldom used. There were other loves and other words for love. And the New Testament perhaps uses this unusual word to remind us that there is a difference between Christian love or spiritual love and those other loves.

One of those loves for example one of those words speaks to us of the love of natural attraction. Between the sexes where someone sees someone handsome or someone beautiful.

And there is a love that's natural because it's a love that is a response to beauty. There is some lovely person. There are some lovely people.

And so we are drawn towards those people because there is in them this quality of nature. It may be physical, it may be temperamental, but there is a chemistry.

They are beautiful people. But that's not what's here. Because sometimes the love that God calls us to exercise may be directed not towards those who are attractive or towards those who are beautiful.

[9 : 58] But towards those perhaps for various reasons are repugnant and yet have a great claim upon us. And there is another word that refers to our love for our friends.

Sometimes there is a drawing between human beings and a chemistry. We get on so well together and we love being with our friends.

But then what is the demand that we love our enemy? And so this love isn't a love for our friends. It must also encompass our enemies.

And there is a love too. That's a love for members of our own families. It's based on kinship and blood relationship. But what about those who are outsiders?

Who don't belong to our families or our communities or our cultures who still have a claim upon us. In other words, the pagans, they have their own ideas of love.

[11 : 07] But for them it is always a love in response to some lovable quality or some personal claim. Beauty of appearance, attractive personality, blood relationship, close friendship.

One loved within all of those parameters. But this Christian love has to go beyond those boundaries. Towards what is not lovely.

And what is not kinship. And what is not friendship. To love what may not be attractive. What may not be part of our own circle.

That with which we may have no kinship. That is where Paul is starting. And Paul is down here a series of great negatives.

How this love is shown by what it is not and what it does not do. Love for example does not envy.

[12:13] It is easily said. But if we set out to be the best. And then find that someone else is the best. Then we can find that sometimes very hard to bear.

And perhaps we find it painful to hear compliments paid to others.

And love to hear of their falling on their faces. Because there is envy there. Love, Paul says, does not end.

Love is not rude. In other words, love is not discourteous. And I want to pause all this for a moment. Because it is easy for us who are Christians sometimes. To feel spiritually superior to others. And on that basis to justify discourtesy, rudeness, lack of sensitivity.

[13:25] And I say to the young in particular. But maybe you have unconverted moms or dads. Or brothers or sisters.

Or friends. You must treat them with scrupulous courtesy. Utterly aware of their situations and their feelings.

When you go to school. You are teachers. Some may not be believers. You owe them the same meticulous courtesy.

You must never make your spiritual status. Or the claims of discipleship. Or the demands of the church a pretext.

For showing any kind of sloveliness. Or commitment to your work. Or discourtesy of any kind. Love is being aware of others.

[14:29] Being conscious of and sensitive to. Where everybody else in the circle is. What's going to hurt them. What word may hurt.

What action may hurt. Love is not rude. Love is courteous. And he says too. Love is not irritable or resentful.

Or as the older version had it. Love is not easily provoked. It has been said that anger is the vice of the virtuous.

Because you know those people who are virtuous. They find it difficult to cope with other people's failings. And other people's shortcomings.

Those who do something well and know how it should be done to be done well. They find it hard to cope with the thing that's not done well.

[15:32] And so they become angry. But where there is love. Love is not easily provoked. So love does not envy.

Love is not rude. Love is not easily provoked. All these negatives the apostle highlights here. When he walked into the dereliction and be forsaken by God.

And yet when the sick came. And the demon possessed came. And the demon possessed came.

And the ignorant came. Then the Lord was there for them.

So available and so accessible. There is nothing in his life that I find such a rebuke. That's the way that he never said.

Can't you see I am busy. Because that is the easiest of all excuses. But not for him. This love was long suffering. And this love was kind.

[16:38] And he says too this love bears all things. There is some dispute among scholars what this word bears means.

But many believe that in fact it means that love covers all things. And are predisposed to accepting that translation that love bears all things.

And you know it was a much feature of the spiritual life of this island in its early decades.

And indeed I hope it still is. That this virtue was not only practiced but also bigotry.

It was drummed into the young by the old. That you covered it. You buried it. You heard something about somebody else.

[17:40] You didn't rush away and tell that you hear about so and so. But you covered it. They were saying in Gaelic, Put it under your feet.

Or they would say, Put a sod on it. Bury it. That was the thing. And that's what love does. Love may feel something about someone it loves.

It may go to him or her and have a word with him or her about it. But otherwise it's going to cover all things. And love is going to endure all things.

And how lovely that is. Love worked it up for things even from love itself. And perhaps love will always assume that there's a reason why the hurt is being caused.

Or there is some misunderstanding. Love makes us so vulnerable. We give our heart, our all, wrap our lives around.

[18 : 48] That makes us so, so vulnerable. But love is to endure all things. It will take what God gives and it will keep on going.

We referred in the morning yesterday to George MacDonald's great hymn, And the love that will not let me go. That's the divine love.

And oh how we provoke it. And how much God has to be dealt with from his own children. Will our love, our friendships, our spiritual friendships.

And I say this too to you. The church itself. How much we put up for sometimes there. And how easy it seems to be today for people to give up.

For the love. Not to endure. The church has hurt me. And so I go. Or I go to another. Love endures all things.

[19 : 56] I would love all the young folk in this church tonight to resolve. But whatever the church does to them.

They will never, never, never, never give up on it. Or walk out on it.

Love endures all things. The Lord's never walked out on us. We have no right to walk out on each other.

Or to walk out on the church of Christ. And so all these positives. Love is long suffering. Love is kind.

And goes about doing good. Love covers everything over. And love endures.

[20 : 58] It keeps on going. And then Paul says to us, love never ends. And then in a way begins to soar again.

Away from perhaps what may seem almost commonplace practicalities. And once again he's up there in the heavenlies.

As he thinks of the love that never ends. And he thinks of the way that all those other things are going to end.

Those things that seem so valuable and so precious by our human standards. And he says, one day he says, all that's imperfect and all that's childish is going to pass away.

And so much that belongs to our lives here is imperfect and is childish. And includes among those things the gifts of tongues and prophesying and the gifts of knowledge and so on.

[22 : 16] One day he says, all of these things are going to pass away. Because a day will come, he says, when we see no longer through a glass darkly.

But we shall see a face to a face. And when that day comes, all those other ways by which God made known his will.

Through prophesying and so on. And the gift of knowledge given to some people. All these gifts will be superseded. They'll no longer be necessary.

When we come to the age when we know as we are known. And we see God face to face. A day will come.

One is a mind's brilliant and perceptive and profound. In analysis and synthesis. In imagination and formulation.

[23 : 20] Far beyond anything we can conceive at the moment. Where our vision is so dark. And where we see only through a glass darkly.

Where it's all so unclear and all so enigmatic. But one day God will give us 20, 20 spiritual vision. If we are there today, our hearts couldn't bear it. But a day will come when we have such intuition and such perception.

And such insight and such comprehension and such understanding. When our minds are glorified in the miracle of God's transfiguration of his own people.

And a day will come when this creation, which still proclaims the glory of God.

[24 : 25] And the majesty and power and wisdom of its maker. Yet lies under the curse. And bears that witness only in a limited way.

A day will come when there will be a new heaven. And a new earth. Luminous with the glory of God. Radiant with the light of God. Free from the collisions. Is that the glory of God.

That no matter man's relationship with nature. When no earthquake. And no flood. And no thunderstorm.

And no volcano. Shall ever threaten our human well being. Or mar the benevolence of our loving Heavenly Father.

[25 : 25] Father when as I said that world will be luminous with the glory of God. A day of glorified minds, a day of a luminous creation, and a day of an imaginable closeness to the very font of being, to the throne of God and the Lamb, to the fountains of the water of life, when we shall see Him as He is, and we shall see Him face to face, and we shall look into the eyes of our Saviour so close and so approximate the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. This all here on earth we beheld His glory, John says, and yet that glory veiled beyond, behind the human ordinariness and the humiliation. But then in that glory to come all the veils withdraw and we shall see Him as He is. Then when that day comes we shall know as we are known, how marvelous that is, know as we are known. The language such as no preacher would ever dare to use, we shall know God as God knows us. And if you press me on it for sake, I will say no, we shall not know God as exhaustively as God knows us. Because God is an infinitude and we should never know Him comprehensively or exhaustively, though He knows us both comprehensively and exhaustively. And we shall know perhaps in the way that He knows us, not by inference but by perception and by intuition. There is an immediacy here that I can only denote and cannot describe. We shall know that our act is an immediacy that is far beyond our current existence. And when that comes, Paul is saying, all that childish is going to pass away.

There will be no more gifts, no more prophesying, no more need for the special gift of knowledge. There will be no preachers, there will be no scriptures, there will be no churches, there will be no sacraments, because they will no longer be needed. We saw last evening that the new heaven and the earth, the new Jerusalem is a perfect tomb, the Holy of Holies. And I saw no temple there. Will I miss my theological books? Will I miss my college, my students, my colleagues? We shall have better than books, better than college. We shall have even better and more holy colleagues.

All these childish things. Isn't it not amazing when you think of the Gospel of John, the Epistle to the Ephesians, Hebrews, Revelation, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Genesis?

They're all childish things. That's God talking, baby talk to us. Baby talk, coming right down to a level.

[29 : 39] The day will come when we're no longer children. When I become a man, I'll put away childish things. All these childish things will go. All these things will go. Ah, but he says, three things will remain. Faith, and hope, and love. And isn't that beautiful?

Faith, and faith. Faith, I know that we will no longer need faith to believe that God is.

Because Christ will be there visually before our very eyes, we shall see with our eyes. faith in the sense of faith. Faith in the sense of trust. You know, in Revelation 7, we're told that the Lamb in the center of the throne shall feed them, lead them.

And they will follow him, and we will follow them. And perhaps we will say to him, where are you taking us today? Which part of the throne of God are going to explore? And he will tell us, and maybe we'll gasp.

You don't mean you taking us there into that profundity, into that glory. And we will follow them. Because we trust him, trust him implicitly.

[31 : 09] No way are we going to have less trust or no trust compared to the way things are today. Faith in the sense of confidence in the Lamb or Shepherd. Trust in the Lord our Savior.

That faith is eternal, and that faith is permanent. And hope. Ah, you say hope, looking towards the future, but there is no future in heaven, no future in eternity.

I really can't begin to understand where that idea came from. There is space in heaven, our bodies in heaven, where there is space, there is time.

You know, tonight the Lord Jesus is exercising hope. He's in heaven, he's in glory. But he is still longing for the day when he goes back to this world in glory.

And all the saints in glory are longing for that moment too. Because they long for that day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[32 : 24] In heaven in glory, we shall have such a future. We shall have such confidence that this blessedness, this bliss, this great marriage supper of the Lamb, this paradise, it's never, never going to end.

It's only going to get better and better and better and better and better and better. That is the hope. And one of the great things about joy is hope.

There is certainty that it has a future. If you know it's not going to last or get better, then that modifies and minimizes your joy.

But it says, no, we have faith and we have hope. And these will never cease. All those other things, those childish things, they will pass away.

But not faith and not hope and not love. Love will go. And all the knowledge we have.

[33 : 33] You mentioned today all your own professions. How out of date the knowledge of 20 years ago, out of date that is.

But this love, it never ends. It's part of us. It's there throughout eternity. This love for God.

For each person of the Godhood. This love for our fellow believers. This love even for this great new world in which God has placed us.

This new heaven that grew up, this new Jerusalem. This love we have for it. Love never, never ends. Never falls. Never, never, never is exhausted.

And so it says, love is the more excellent way. And this is love's nature. And those negatives and those positives we saw.

[34 : 31] And this love, it never ends. But above all it says this. The greatest of these is love. Love is not only greater than all the gifts.

But greater than faith. And greater than hope. And you may ask, you're bound to ask, some of you at least, well, how can love, in what sense is love the greatest?

And I don't know all the answers to that. But I'll venture two things. And the first of them is this. It is that love does not seek its own.

We see that, I think, there around verse 4 or verse 5. It does not insist in its own way. The old version, it doesn't seek its own, which I would still prefer.

Love does not seek its own. And why do I take that point up? I take it up because of this. It takes me back to Philippians 2. To that point where Jesus Christ did not look on his own things, but looked on the things of others.

[35 : 43] And where in that monumental act of self-denial, he made himself nothing. And Paul says, let this mind be in you, which was also in Jesus.

Think the way Jesus thinks. Why is love so great? Because it thinks the way Jesus thought. It has the mind of Christ. It does not look on its own things, its own glory.

It is absorbed in the glory of the one it loves. The good, the happiness, the well-being of the one it loves. It wants the loved one to be happy.

That is what love wants. And sometimes that may involve pain, withdrawal, self-denial. I don't know. But love is the greatest. Because it corresponds to the mind of the Christ, who made himself nothing for the sake of his own people.

Love is the greatest because it does not seek its own. It is not into me, my, and my own. Love does not seek its own.

[36 : 54] And it is the greatest because God is love. The outcome of God's electing love, God's predestination, God's foreordination of grace, is to conform us once again to his own image.

And that image is the image of love. Because God is love. This love is much less God-like and divine.

Love is the greatest because it reflects the mind of Christ. It is the greatest because it is a conformity to the heartbeat of God himself.

That's why it is the greatest. And as I close, I want to come back to this challenge again. And I speak above all to those on the threshold of their own lives and discipleship.

What do we want to be? What sort of people? What sort of Christians?

[38 : 20] What kind of dreams? What kind of dreams? As we look into the future, do we mention ourselves in mansions?

Do we mention our ears ringing to the chorus of human applause? Do we mention thousands influenced by our thought and by our opinions?

To imagine a summed earthly paradise? Well, let me say that I hope your cross may be a light one and your race not too arduous and the obstacles not too many and the cost of your discipleship not too great.

but cross there will be and obstacles there will be and cost there will be but you form tonight this ambition that whatever life does to you we shall aim at love at being by the grace of God the most loving person that you can be.
Thank you. Thank you.