Study in 1st Corinthians 13 - Part 9

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[0:00] Seeking the Lord's blessing, then we'll turn to the passage we read, 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

And the well-known words at the end of the chapter, in the last verse. Chapter 13, verse 13. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity.
Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity. And I want this morning to bring to a close our study of 1 Corinthians chapter 13.
I hope we've understood the importance of this chapter to the church in Corinth, first of all. A church wracked by pride, by jealousy and division.
And Paul roots nearly all of their problems in a lack of love. And love is so important because however gifted they were as individuals, receiving even gifts of the Holy Spirit, without love, all these gifts meant nothing.
[1:28] And so Paul then gave them 16 qualities of love from verse 4 through to verse 8. And these 16 qualities help us to understand how love functions.

And it helps us to recognize it in our own lives or to recognize perhaps our need of it in our own lives. And he describes love like that so that they'll pray for a growth in love, for an increase in it, that they might be more like Christ himself, who is perfect love.
And the last of these qualities we have in verse 8 at the beginning, where we're told that charity never faileth.
Love never fails. Or as the word means, love is never set aside as being redundant. And it's never set aside as being redundant because it is the greatest thing of all.
In the last verse, greater even than faith and hope. Now abideth faith, hope, charity. Or faith, hope and love, these three. But the greatest of these is love.
[2:38] And I want to look with you at the greatness of love. Now, love in verse 13, we're told here, is one of the three main Christian graces.

I suppose faith, hope and love, everyone knows to be distinctive Christian graces. Love is one of them. And we're told that they all abide.
Or they all remain. Or they continue. And now continue. Faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.
Now we're told that these three continue. They carry on. They remain. And that's a contrast with something else that actually stops. Something else that ceases.
And the thing that ceases, or the things which cease, are the spiritual spectacular gifts. That Paul has already spoken of in this chapter.
[3:42] Things like speaking in tongues. Or speaking in languages. Or having the gift of special insight given by the Spirit. Or prophecy being able to foretell the future by the Spirit of God.

All these spectacular gifts will cease. They'll come to an end. But these graces of faith, hope and love, they'll continue.
Now he puts that very plainly in verse 8. We're told that charity never faileth. And as I said, that means it's never put to the side. But he says, whether there be prophecies, they shall fail.
Now a failed prophecy doesn't mean a prophecy that doesn't come to pass. That's a failed prophecy in one sense. But that's not what the word fail means here. What the word fail means here is just to cease completely.
That's what the word means. It'll stop. Whether there be prophecies, they shall cease. There shall be a time when there shall be no more prophecies. Whether there be tongues, they shall cease.
[4:53] They shall come to an end. Now the gift of tongues we saw already was just an ability given to people in the early church to speak by the power of the Spirit in many foreign languages.

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To be able to rapidly communicate the gospel. We saw that clearly in Acts chapter 2. But the time comes when there is no need for that kind of gift.
And then again, whether there be knowledge, he says, it shall vanish away. Now, of course, it's impossible to conceive of knowledge completely vanishing away.
Of course, we know things in heaven. If we were entirely ignorant, well, we would be ceasing to exist. What it means here by knowledge is that immediate gift of the Spirit, where the Holy Spirit came down upon a person and granted him a spirit-given insight or intuition into Old Testament prophecies or whatever.
It was a word of knowledge. It's called the word of knowledge elsewhere in the scriptures. That along with prophecy, and it's very related to prophecy and tongues, these special gifts, they shall vanish away.
[6:07] But these other graces, they go on. Love continues. Love goes on. It's never set aside. And neither is faith and neither is hope.

They remain. Now, before I come to love especially, and faith and hope, why are these other things set aside? Why are tongues set aside or prophecies or knowledge?
Why are they set aside? Well, they're set aside because we no longer need them, because the Church no longer needs them. The Church outgrows them.
In other words, just as the Lord's people are progressing on towards heaven, so is the whole Church progressing down throughout history until finally the whole of the Church enters into glory. And that's a progressive state of maturity. And Paul brings before us two examples of that from life. Two very simple illustrations.
[7:10] He says, first of all, we let these things go just as a man lets go the things of his childhood. Now, there's a great difference, of course, between a child and a man.

And Paul puts it simply like this in verse 11. When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I understood like a child. I thought like a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things.
Now, you know yourself the way that a child thinks. And the way that he reasons and speaks. Even when he's right, what the child says is so imperfect and it's so incomplete.
And that's the point that Paul's making. He's not saying that the child is wrong. That's not the point. The point is that the child is just so imperfect in the amount that he knows and in the way that he's able to relate one thing to another.
For example, let's say a child. Let's say he's taking part in a play. If you've got a boy or a girl who's taking part in a play. Well, he might come home and tell his parents the line that he's got to say.
[8:16] And for him, that is the play. That's the whole play. He's taken up with his line and with his own part in it. He's not able to stand back and to view the whole play.

What he says is right. What he knows is right. But it is so imperfect. And the man can see that. The adult looking at the child can see the very imperfection of the child.
And when the child becomes a man, he puts away the childish way of looking at things or the childish way of understanding things. And he looks on it like a man or like an adult.
And he takes another example in verse 12. This is another example of outgrowing a thing. Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.
Now the word glass here, as I'm sure you know, is actually the word mirror. And it's unfortunate that that word is not used. Now we see through a mirror darkly, enigmatically.
[9:20] The Greek word is enigma. We see through a mirror enigmatically or darkly or in a blurred way. That's how we see it. Now Corinth was famous for its mirrors.

Highly polished silver or bronze. Poor people didn't have such a good quality mirror. And when they looked in those mirrors, it was a pretty indistinct outline that they saw.
Now that's what Paul is saying here. He says, at one point you're seeing through a mirror and you see through it obscurely or in a rough form.
You understand what's there. Again, notice, it's not that what you're seeing is wrong. What you're seeing is right, but it's indistinct. It's not as clear as you would like it to be.
And we're seeing, he says, through a glass or through a mirror darkly. Now the picture is this. Suppose you've got something behind you. It's not yourself you're looking at.
[10:23] I think, anyway, for myself that's the only way I can understand this. It's not yourself you're looking at in the mirror. Let's say you're holding up a mirror to see something that is behind you. There's something behind you.

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You wish to see it and you hold up the mirror and there you catch its reflection. Well, Paul says, that's what it's like here below. Especially, it was like that in the Old Testament.
He says, you were looking at something through a glass darkly. You had the knowledge of God and the truth about God, but it was behind you. And the only way you could see it is by means of these prophecies, dreams, and revelations.
When God would speak to Abraham or to Moses or to the prophets, and he would reveal them something of his own glory. And you find the Old Testament saints themselves, even someone like Moses, who the Bible tells us saw more than the rest.
He saw God better than the rest. Even he felt that there was something so lacking. I beseech thee, O Lord, show me thy glory. And God put Moses in the cleft of a rock.
[11:33] And God passed by. And Moses saw what are called the back parts of the Lord. The Lord allowed him to see him, as it were, from behind.

That was the only glory that Moses was allowed to see. In the New Testament, we have so much more. You could say we have a better mirror.
We have the Word of God now. Not given to us in parts, bits, and pieces of prophecy. But we have the whole, beautifully woven together.
So that now we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. We have a better mirror. We have the Scriptures. We can see God more distinctly in the Scriptures, because we can see Christ better. But when we get to glory, the mirror is done away altogether. In glory, God, as it were, comes round to the front, so that we view him absolutely face to face.
[12:37] We shall see him as he is, and we shall be like him. That's what John tells us in his first letter. So there's an advance in what we see, until finally we see him even as he is.

And Paul puts that in this way. Now we see through a glass darkly, through a mirror, in an enigma, but then, he says, we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, But then shall I know, even as also I am known.
What's Paul looking forward to there? Well, again, this is a progressive thing. As God's plan goes on, and as his revelation increases, the Lord's people see more of themselves, they see more of the world, and they see more of God.
Christ himself makes plain that the New Testament age, with the Bible complete, we see more than they saw in the Old Testament. He says the prophets were standing on tiptoe, straining, desiring to see exactly what it was they were prophesying about.
But we have these things. As Christ reminds us, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater in that way than John the Baptist, because we see, we touch, we handle things that he never did.
[14:01] We understand things that he could not possibly understand, simply because we live after the cross. We live after Pentecost. We live after the day of the completed Bible.

We know more. But that in itself is as nothing compared to actually standing in the presence of God. Then he says, we shall know, even as we are known.
Or, as I would think that would mean, we shall know God, even as God knows ourselves. And you would say, well, what does that mean?
Well, surely it means this, that we shall know God perfectly, even as God knows us perfectly. No, perfectly doesn't mean exhaustively.
I'm not saying that we shall know God exhaustively, everything there is to know about him. But what I mean by perfectly is this. For a start, there will be no confusion, no misunderstanding.
[15:03] How often in this life, we misunderstand God's dealings with us. We're confused about his purposes. Perhaps even sometimes, the devil makes us think harshly about him.

We still have this indistinct impression, although we see him so clearly in the scriptures and in the face of Jesus Christ. But still, so much confusion, so much misunderstanding.
How often we have to struggle with our reason and with faith to try and grasp more clearly what God is like, what his love is like, what his compassion is like, what it means for him to be a father. We struggle to get there by looking at what it means for ourselves to be a father or what it meant for our own fathers to be fathers for us. Using these dim and indistinct earthly analogies, we try and get a better and better conception of what God is actually like.
And here sometimes we can view God with a coldness and a detachment. Even when we see him clearly, as it were, without reason, without spiritual sight, yet it's not as warm a sight as we would like.

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[16:21] It's not as an appreciative sight as you would like to have. You know as well as I do what that means. And therefore, when we see God perfectly, it means that these things are done away with.

We see him as he sees us. How does he see us? Without misunderstanding, without confusion. He searches us and knows us. He understands our motives.
He understands the principles of our action. He doesn't have to struggle to discover what we are like. And never is he called or detached in the knowledge that he has of us.
He never looks upon us without loving us. And he never loves us without loving us passionately.
And that is how we shall know him too. We shall know him even as he knows ourselves.
And is that not a marvellous hope to have? You know, one of the greatest struggles that the Christian has in his life is simply trying to love and to appreciate God for what he is.
[17:26] And our faith is struggling to get there. And at our best, it's struggling to get there. And we look forward to what they called in the past the beatific vision where we see his beauty not mediated through the scriptures, not even mediated through the Holy Spirit in a land of pilgrimage, distant and far off, but there, near to God, in his presence, so that we see the Trinity itself.

There we see him as he is and we shall be like him. Then he says, shall I know even as I am known.
And that's what I mean by growing into a maturity. And everything grows like that. Everything grows to maturity. God's given life to everything that lives and it changes state until it becomes complete. the caterpillar comes out of its cocoon. It flies. Man is born a child, thinks and reasons like a child, perfect in its own way, but it must grow to become a man.
And so is every believer and so is the Church of Christ. It struggles through its minority in the Old Testament with visions, symbols, types.
[18:51] And then comes the adoption through the Lord Jesus Christ when the sonship becomes more clear. Then comes Pentecost when gifts, miraculous, are given to the Church to help it to grow and to become established.

Then the Scriptures are written and at all these points some things fall away. Even when the Scriptures come, many of these miraculous gifts fall away as things that aren't needed anymore.
But the day has yet to come when we shall all enter into the presence of God and the whole superstructure falls away. In many ways it's like a building. God's building, his building.
And whenever a beautiful building is built, it's hidden behind scaffolding. God's at work. But as the building is completed, the scaffolding can be removed.
Unnecessary parts are taken away. Until the whole thing is finished. And only when it's finished do you judge it. I think that's important. I mean, you can look at the Church and I can look at it and say, well, what a terrible state.
[19:58] But it's under construction. And don't forget that. And a thing under construction makes you wonder, well, is it going to turn out all right in the end? But there's a workman working there.

And it's not preachers, elders, members, or deacons that I mean by that. It's the Holy Spirit himself.
And you wait till he removes the scaffolding. As we're told in Ephesians 5, he shall present it to himself a glorious church.
Without spot, without wrinkle, and without blemish. God's doing a work. And only when that work is finished will we see it clearly.
So Paul says, things fall away, but three things abide, faith, hope, love. These three, they abide, and the greatest of them is love.
Now, how is love the greatest? Some would say maybe that it's greatest because it alone enters into heaven. Now, I have some sympathy in a sense with that view, and although I would like to go against it, I don't wish at all to dismiss it, but personally, I would rather look at it another way.
[21:14] I don't think those, I don't think only one of those three enter heaven. I think, in the proper sense, that the three remain, that they continue, and that they abide forever.

Other superstructural things can fall away, but these three will always remain. Let's look first at faith. What is faith? Well, faith is to believe and to trust.
How exactly would that cease in heaven? If faith means that we believe in God and that we trust in him, surely that continues in glory surely, in fact, it is made perfect in glory.
Faith and trust was something, belief and trust was something Adam had, something Eve had before they fell. Every day they believed that God would renew his meeting with them, that he

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would walk with them in the garden in the cool of the day.
They believed and trusted in this God whom they worshipped and served, that he would keep them, that he would walk with them, that as long as they walked in covenant obedience, he would bless them with the goodness of the land.
[22:31] They didn't think that God would turn sour on them in any way, that he would destroy the garden of Eden, that he would act maliciously towards them. They believed they had faith until they chose to disbelieve.

And it was sin that broke that link. Sin brought unbelief in. Sin meant that for the first time man doubted God.
Man mistrusted God. And what does Christ do? He restores that link. He restores it so that again we believe and again we trust.
That doesn't stop in heaven. It is rather made perfect in heaven. You can put it this way. The fall broke it. Grace restored it and glory perfects it.
Glory all his promises will never fail. That he will remain true, that he will bless me and that he will bless me forever.
[23:38] In that way surely faith enters into glory. And the same I think we can say of hope. Now I know there's a sense in which we can say that hope comes to an end.

I don't know how to put it that strongly but hope certainly changes in one sense. For example in this life we are hoping for certain things. We are hoping primarily for heaven.
That is the object of our hope. And of course when we enter into heaven then we don't need to hope for heaven anymore. That's right. But that doesn't mean that we don't need to hope for something. There is still a hope that continues.
What is hope? Well hope means to anticipate something good. That's simply what it means. Faith believes in something that's going to happen.
Trusts that it will happen. Hope expects it and looks forward to it. It's related to the future too. You have hopes. Every one of you here have hopes. Some are better grounded than others.
[24:44] What's the Christian's hope? That he'll get home, yes. But he also hopes when he's home that he'll stay home. He also hopes for an increased view of God even in heaven.

He hopes that he will be fed with ever more full revelations of the glory of God in the past and understanding of what God has done in history.
Christ is leading his people to fountains of living waters. That's an ongoing thing. If heaven was a static state, there could be no faith, there could be no hope.
But heaven is not a static state. It's not as being caught in some kind of trance where your mind is still and your soul has ceased to be active.
Your soul is active in heaven. Heaven is not a static, it is a moving state of growth. And if there is growth, there must be faith and hope.
[25:41] Faith in the growth to come, hope in the growth to come. You will never cease to rely and to depend on the one you see and to believe that he'll give you more and that he'll lead you into more.

In that way, hope goes into glory too. Suppose you could even think of the saints in heaven today and they're there. Have they got a hope?
You could say, well, their hope is swallowed up in sight. Well, not absolutely. For example, their bodies are still not there. Their bodies are still here.
Doesn't our catechism tell us that they await the resurrection? They're awaiting it. How can you wait for something without hoping in it and without believing in it?
They're waiting for that. And even when their bodies are raised, still, as I say, they wait and they hope for more. Friends, I think it's a very beneficial thing to remember that heaven is not a static state.
[26:48] It's not a matter of your growth ceasing. No, it's not. God has so much to give. He doesn't give it all when we enter into glory.

There is more yet to come. No matter how much you learn and how much you grow, there is more yet to come. So, I would say that faith, hope, and love enter glory.
Well, then, how is love the greatest of all? Well, I think there are three things briefly that we can say. First of all, love is greater because it is like God himself.

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Is that not true? Love is greater because it is like God. The Bible tells us that God is love. It never tells us that he is hope and neither does it tell us that he is faith.
In fact, you can't speak of God having faith. Neither can you speak of him having love. Sorry, neither can you speak of him having hope.
[27:56] God is himself the ground of everything that is certain. He can't look to anyone beyond himself to have faith in that person. He can't look to anything greater or higher to have hope.

He is the future and he is certainty in himself. God doesn't believe, he knows. God doesn't hope, he is the future, he is all things himself, but he is love.
God is love and that makes love an outstanding thing. It is what he is in himself. He is all of this. He is loving kindness, love personified, and that means that love is greater. And there's this too, faith and hope are almost inward things, whereas love is an outward thing.
Now, what I mean by that is this, the faith that you have today is something that's exercised in your heart, and it has really to do with yourself, it has to do with your belief and what you believe.
[29:07] Hope is the same, it's what you anticipate, it's what you expect. But love, you can't even say the word without immediately going for an object. It goes towards other people in a special kind of way.

It is something that overflows from within you to rest upon someone else. That is why it is so great. God's own love constantly flows out of himself.
We're reminded in the scriptures that it flows from the Father to the Son and the Spirit. It flows from the Son to the Father and the Spirit. It flows from the Spirit to the Father and the Son.
God was always love, even interpersonal love. But he is also love flowing outward to yourself and flowing outward towards me.
That is how God is. And that is how your love is too. It's not something that you can keep within your breast, something that belongs to your soul alone, but by definition it rests upon someone else.
[30:15] And then again there's this, faith and love, faith and hope, are, you could say, means towards love.

Faith and hope are things that stimulate love. Love is the real reason why they're there. We believe so that we love.
We hope in order to love. In other words, love is the reason for everything. Love is the reason for everything. You need a hammer, chisel, saw, all these things in order to build your house.
You need to believe, you need to hope, you need all these things in order to love. Love is the actual reason for everything. That is the great end to which God is calling us.
And in that way we see that although faith, hope and love all continue, faith and hope lie underneath love as the crowning glory of them all.
[31:25] That's what God wants us to be, to be just like himself. And the chief end of you, of your life, is like God to love, to love God and to love men.

And the whole of your Christianity must be subsumed under that. Never forget that faith, hope and love abide forever.
But the greatest of these in every way is love. And everything must be taken to that great touchstone because that's what God is.
That's what God is. And you know that brings before us again a wonderful aspect to the hope that we have in heaven. What you see is love perfected.
Love in God and love in the saints too. You know there are many things to contemplate there and I can only touch on these things and I've acknowledged that especially for the young people some of what I said is maybe quite difficult.
[32:34] But there's a lot to think on. You think of a place where love rules perfectly. For example you and your brethren and your sisters here below.

You have so many misunderstandings, so many confusions, but in glory everything is made perfect. There's nothing in your brother to stop your love going towards him.
Nothing in you to stop his going towards yourself. You're never jealous of the love that two other saints have for each other as you could be perhaps here below.
There can be no such thing as jealousy when love is made perfect. The love that is there means that you rejoice in the love that someone else has for someone else that you love too.
There is a mutual rejoicing constantly in that love. No one is able to come in between the love that you have of God with God and the sight that you have of God's love.

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[33:32] There's nothing there to mar that, nothing there to make you question it, to be unsure of it. Love is there perfectly. Love means that you'll share with all your brothers and with all your sisters in glory.

There'll be no despising, no contempt, no contempt of any vessel that might even be smaller than yourself. You will love them as your own children, as your own brothers, and as your own sisters. That's how God made us to be, first of all. Sin has destroyed that, and how much it has destroyed it. But heaven makes it perfect.
This isn't a vain hope. It's the only hope of which you can be sure. And for you today who aren't in Christ, you don't have a hope.
What you have is a dread or a fear. And that fear is the certainty of a future awfulness. Just as we have the certainty by Christ of future blessing, you have the certainty of terrible awfulness, which is an eternity without Christ.
[34:46] And let me say that a simple definition of hell would be a place where there is no love. And if you try and contemplate what it means to be all love, then try to contemplate what it means for there to be no love.

And that will make it a place to be shunned and to be avoided. well then, may we lay chapter 13 to heart, the importance of love, what it is really like, and its beauty.
It lives forever in glory as the great end to which God made us and how clearly we see it in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Let me just say in conclusion that this love is something in which you are to grow and me with you. and the day we stop thinking that we can't, that we can work at love is a sad day.
Like every grace, it can grow and make sure that we pray to God that we grow in this and that we become more Christ-like.
[35:58] That speaks louder to the world than a thousand sermons. May the Lord bless your meditation on his word. Let us pray. Our gracious God, we pray even in the pages of the scriptures themselves to discern clearly the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and who gave himself for us.

For in him supremely we see the love that denied self and that looked entirely upon others. Help us to follow his example and to hope that one day we shall see him not in the pages of scripture striving by faith to see him but that we shall see his face, that we shall be like him and in that face we shall know him even as he knows ourselves and that we shall see his love and his grace ever more clearly.
Grant, O Lord, that each of us might be saved, that we might have that hope in ourselves. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen.

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