

THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8-13

In the movie, *Toy Story 2*, Woody, the charismatic cowboy doll who absolutely adores his owner, Andy, and who is Andy's favorite toy, is confronted with a dilemma. Through a series of bizarre circumstances in which he is kidnapped and, in the process, discovers that he is a rare and valuable collector's item, Woody is forced to make a choice. It's a choice between returning to Andy, on the one hand, who is growing up and, as a result, *may* eventually lose interest in him—perhaps even discard him; *and* being the centerpiece of an exhibit at a toy museum, where he would be preserved in a box and admired behind a glass case by spectators. It's a choice between Andy's intense, personal love—which may be temporary, and the admiration of toy buffs who can neither touch him or know him or really love him.

Stinky Pete, the old Prospector, who is to be another item in the exhibit if, and only if, Woody chooses the museum, vehemently tries to convince Woody that he should forget about Andy, because, he says, Andy is soon going to forget about him. He says, "C'mon, Woody, do you really think Andy's going to take you to college? Will he take you on his honeymoon? Andy's growing up and there's nothing you can do about it. It's your choice. You can go back where you will be ruined, forgotten, and spend eternity rotting in some landfill, or you can stay with *us* and last forever."

Woody, much to the Prospector's displeasure, chooses Andy. And in the closing scene he makes a wonderful statement which is the enduring message of the story. His space toy friend, Buzz Lightyear, catches Woody in a reflective moment. He says, "Woody, are you still worried?"

Woody replies, "About Andy? Nah! It'll be fun while it lasts. Besides, when it all ends, I'll have ol' Buzz Lightyear to keep me company, for infinity and beyond."

I want to submit to you that Woody made the right choice. He took a risk, to be sure. Because anytime you choose love you don't really know what the immediate results will be. As C.S. Lewis says, "Love is not a safe investment." At least it's not safe in this earth realm. But it *is* an investment that lasts for eternity. It's one of the *only* investments that lasts for eternity.

We've been talking about love as we've studied the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. We've learned many things about love, and this morning we are going to discover what kind of investment love really is.

Look at **verses 8-13**. ⁸ *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.*

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

Please remember that 1 Corinthians 13 is the centerpiece of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. He was writing to a church that made the mistake of measuring spirituality by one's performance. It was a church that awarded spiritual status on the basis of the kinds of spiritual gifts people had and how impressively or dramatically those gifts were exercised.

In chapter 12 Paul was adamant when he said that spirituality has nothing to do with the kind of gift a person has. Gifts are given by God—and distributed by Him accordingly to *His* will, so that *He* can be revealed and *His* purposes can be accomplished. Gifts are good, to be sure, and we ought to be thankful for them and use them in the way God has designed. But don't make such a big deal about them, because there is something far more important and far more effective and far more lasting than spiritual gifts.

It is love. Love is what makes anything we do valuable to God. Love is God's way of measuring spiritual success, which is the only measurement that matters. And Paul goes to great lengths to declare that if you do not have love your spiritual gifts, your service, even your sacrifices, are meaningless. They are inconsequential, from God's perspective.

So Paul's purpose in writing 1 Corinthians 13 is to say, "Look, folks, instead of making such a big deal about spiritual gifts, you ought to make a big deal about love. And in his concluding comments in verses 8-13 he tells us why.

Paul begins with the statement, "*Love never fails.*" Literally, "love never falls." That word means "fall off", "fall to the ground", "collapse," or "fall apart." It was used to describe a dead, withered leaf that falls to the ground. And so Paul is saying that love doesn't dry up and wither and become detached and fall to the ground.

In other words, love doesn't have a lifespan. It never dies. It never ceases. It never comes to an end. Love will last for all eternity.

Woody was right. It lasts for infinity and beyond.

Now you might hear this and say, "Well, that sounds nice. But I'm not sure I really believe it. I know lots of people who were once in love but are no longer. I know a lot of people whose love has diminished or evaporated over time."

Again, I want to remind you that the kind of love Paul is referring to, *agape*, has nothing to do with feelings or affection. *Agape* is a deliberate choice and an enduring commitment to pursue the best for someone else. And it's a choice that is not based on how you feel about someone or even whether you like that person. It's choosing to see them from God's perspective, and treat them how God would treat them.

But it's important to know that Paul is not saying here that when you pursue the best for another it will always be appreciated or reciprocated and that you'll have a good relationship with that person that will endure forever. No. He's not referring to the *relationship* here. He's referring to the *act* of love.

When Paul says, "Love never fails" or "Love always lasts," he is saying that the choice and commitment you make to seek another person's highest good has eternal value. The act itself will endure, beyond this life, for all eternity. Let me repeat that. The act itself will endure, beyond this life, for all eternity.

That is amazing! How many things do you know that will last forever? How many activities or pursuits in *your* life are going to last forever?

Those are good questions...but they are sobering questions. Because, frankly, there are very few things that will endure for all eternity. And some of us don't like to think about that, because, if truth be told, we invest a lot of time and energy on temporal things—things that won't last.

Some of us spend 40, 50, 60 hours a week in our jobs producing something or promoting something or selling something that will be consumed or used up or wear out. We spend an awful lot of our time and energy trying to obtain or expand or upgrade our personal assets, like our homes, our vehicles, our toys, our bank accounts, our appearance, our skills,

our athletic ability, our physical health and strength. But none of these things are going to last.

That's not to say that we shouldn't care about these things or that they can't be used for eternal purposes. But what really lasts? The Bible says there are only three things on this earth that will last forever. The souls of people, the Word of God, and love.

Again, that's not to say that everything else is unimportant, or that we shouldn't give attention to other things. It's just that we need to know that if we want to invest in something that has lasting value, we've got to invest in people, we need to pursue their highest good, because any act of love, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, will endure forever.

It's a logical choice, according to Paul. But it is not necessarily the easy choice or even the obvious choice. And I'll tell you why. Because you don't always see results of love. In fact, you *often* don't see the results of love. Love may go unnoticed. Love may be ignored, misinterpreted, even spurned. And you know how we are, especially in our culture. If we don't see results—immediate results—we get discouraged, and we feel like giving up.

I think that's one of the reasons why we invest so much time on temporal things. Because we can see results, and those results make us feel good about ourselves. They make us feel important, and useful.

Even spiritual things, like spiritual gifts, make us feel this way. But Paul says, "don't let that deceive you. Whether you see the results or not, you need to love, because love is one of the few things that will last forever."

Look at what Paul says in **verses 8-10**. *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*

Please keep in mind that Paul is making a contrast. He is contrasting that which is permanent to that which is temporal, and, in verse 10, that which is perfect to that which is imperfect.

There have been some Bible teachers who have used these verses to try and prove that certain spiritual gifts have ceased, particularly the gifts of tongues. They assert that at some point in the history of the church (most would say when the New Testament was completed) some spiritual gifts like tongues failed to serve any purpose, and therefore the Holy Spirit stopped issuing those gifts. So they use this passage to try to discredit the charismatic movement—a movement which affirms and practices all the spiritual gifts like tongues and healing and prophecy, etc.

With respect to those teachers, that is *not* very good scholarship. Paul is *not* trying to identify certain gifts as permanent and certain gifts as temporary in this passage. He is saying that *all* spiritual gifts are temporary, and he is contrasting those temporary gifts with love, which is one of the few things that is permanent.

Again, he's emphasizing the importance and supremacy of love. And the reason he mentions only certain gifts, like tongues and prophecy and knowledge, is because they are the gifts that were thought to be of particular importance in Corinth. They were the gifts that people emphasized and sought after and by which people inappropriately measured spirituality.

"Don't make *such* a big deal about gifts!" says Paul. Gifts are temporary and will one day cease. And the reason they will cease is because they are imperfect provisions for an imperfect world (Blomberg, p.260). When perfection comes spiritual gifts will be

unnecessary.

Think about it. What do spiritual gifts do? They reveal the Lord to *some* degree. They reveal a portion of His mind and His will. They impart a portion of His grace. They enable us to understand God better and encounter, be it ever so brief, the eternal dimension of reality.

But there is coming a day when spiritual gifts will be obsolete because we'll be *living* in that eternal dimension of reality. That's what "perfection" refers to. Perfection refers to the time when we will encounter God directly. We won't need anyone to tell us what God says, because He will speak to us directly. We won't need anyone to tell us what God is like or what God thinks about a matter. We will see Him for ourselves. When we are with God there will be no more mysteries, because everything will be clear. There will be no more need to acquire knowledge, because we will know what there is to know. To put it in our language, "we will have arrived."

Look at **verse 11**. *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.*

This is an illustration of what our spiritual lives are like on this earth, as compared to what they will be in heaven. On this earth we are spiritual children. Even the most spiritually mature are spiritual children, and no matter how much we learn and how much we grow none of us is going to reach spiritual adulthood until we get to heaven. The smartest theologians who have written volumes about the mysteries of God; the most profound poets and songwriters who are able to touch our hearts with their insights; the most eloquent preachers and teachers and prophets who seem to make things so clear to us, are all spiritual children. And their efforts, while helpful and important, are limited and incomplete.

And when we get to heaven they and us will realize just how little we really knew and how relatively poor we were in communicating those things. It's the nature of spiritual gifts. They are an imperfect provision for an imperfect world.

When I get to heaven I am not going to be pulling out one of my sermons and preaching it on the streets of gold. We will not be singing the same songs we sing here, as good as some of those songs are. We will not be debating over whether John Calvin was right or John Wesley was right or any of those kinds of things.

Now, that's not to say that our spiritual insights and words and reflections right now are unimportant or insignificant. They *are* important! But they are imperfect. That's because we're spiritual children and with our limited capacity to understand and comprehend spiritual truth on this earth, spiritual gifts reveal only a portion of that truth. But in heaven, we're going to be spiritual adults. We'll think differently.

There used to be a great commercial for Progresso soup. A woman has her face buried in a bowl of Campbell's Chicken and Stars soup with its minuscule bits of noodles and vegetables and its microscopic bits of chicken. The other person is eating a hearty bowl of Progresso soup with its thick noodles and sliced vegetables and chunks of chicken breast. And she turns to the person slurping the Campbell's and says, "That was fine when we were kids, but we're adults now."

That's what Paul is saying. "Spiritual gifts are fine for us right now, since we're just spiritual kids, but don't make too much of them because when we become adults—when we get to heaven, we're not going to have them. We're going to be complete."

Look at **verse 12a**. *¹² "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror..."* This is reference to a polished piece of bronze that was used for a mirror in the ancient world, but which was not anything like our mirrors today. The image was blurry and distorted at best.

Verse 12b. *then we shall see face to face.* Incidentally, “perfection” and “face to face” are the same thing. Perfection *is* seeing Jesus face to face. The Apostle John said as much in his first letter: *“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).*

This is the climax and goal of our existence, for not only will we get to fulfill our greatest desire—seeing Jesus, but we will be complete. Look at what he says in the last part of **verse 12c.** *Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

So, spiritual gifts and knowledge and the other provisions God has given us in this life to know Him and encounter Him are good, but when Jesus comes to this earth they will become obsolete. So if you want to invest in something that will endure for all eternity, invest in love. Because love is eternal. Love is the link God gives us to eternity (MacArthur, p.367).

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

Faith and hope are important. The Scriptures tell us that faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things *not seen*, and that without faith it is impossible to please God. But faith will be unnecessary in heaven because we will see Jesus, face to face.

Hope is essential in this life because we are not living for the here and now, we are living for the time we depart this life when we are able to encounter Jesus face to face and live with Him forever. But we don’t need hope in heaven either, because what we hope for will be a reality.

So, as important as faith and hope are, love is the greatest because it will endure for all eternity. It is going to be the very atmosphere of heaven, because it is the very nature of God.

So, what does this mean for you and me between now and the time we get to heaven?

It means that we ought to make love our highest priority. It means that people are more important than tasks, and when we have a choice between loving someone we know needs to be loved, and performing my task, loving that person ought to take precedence.

It means that practicing what love does (verses 4-7) ought to be our mission in life. So that when we have a conflict with someone we will do whatever we can, in the timeliest fashion, to resolve that conflict, because that’s what love does. We don’t go about business as usual, and go to church and do our ministry, we resolve that issue.

It means that in our marriages we take the time to listen to our spouses and bless our spouses and minister to our spouses, rather than just turn on the ball game and zone out. It means that we spend time with our kids and build them and encourage them as much as necessary, rather than being so busy doing our stuff that we think is so important.

It means that when we see someone in need we don’t ignore him/her or say, “Well, that’s too bad,” or “you brought it on yourself.” Rather, we respond by trying to meet that need or at least pointing them to someone who can.

I started by talking about Woody’s choice in *Toy Story 2*. I told you that Woody made the right choice. He chose love, even though he risked not being loved back. He chose an investment that was not safe, in terms of his own psychological well-being. Loving other people is not safe in this earthly realm. Loving makes you vulnerable.

C.S. Lewis, in his excellent book, *The Four Loves*, said it so well. “Love anything,” he writes, “and your heart will certainly be wrung and quite possibly be broken. If you want to

be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable” (p. 279).

Yes, to love is to risk hurting. To love deeply is to hurt deeply. And you can be pretty sure that the intensity of your pain will be in proportion to the intensity of your love. But the alternative to that pain is far less desirable. A cold, callused heart that is insulated by selfishness.

Love is not a safe investment. But it’s the best investment you’ll ever make. It is an investment that lasts for eternity.

The Permanence of Love

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Main Idea: Because love is one of the only things that lasts forever, the most enduring investment we can make with our lives is to love. Therefore, love ought to be our highest priority.

The Nature of Love

The Nature of Spiritual Gifts

They are temporary (v.8,10)

They are incomplete (v.9)

They are imperfect (v.12)

The Goal of Our Existence

“When perfection comes”

“Face to face”

“Knowing fully”

The Best Investment

Family Life Groups

Sermon Discussion Questions

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Main Idea: Because love is one of the only things that lasts forever, the most enduring investment we can make with our lives is to love. Therefore, love ought to be our highest priority.

1) In a church that was placing an inordinate emphasis on spiritual gifts (how one speaks, serves, or ministers to the body through the talents and abilities God gives) why was Paul trying to convince them that spiritual gifts are temporary and their effectiveness is limited?

2) Why is love permanent and its effectiveness unlimited?

3) Is love the top priority in your life (this includes loving people you don't like, loving people who get under your skin, and loving people who are out to get you)? If not, how can love become the top priority in your life?