

Love Never Fails

By Dr. Philip Ryken

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:8-10; Romans 8:30-39

Preached on: Sunday, December 13, 2009

Tenth Presbyterian Church

1701 Delancey Street

Philadelphia, PA 19103-6714

Website: www.tenth.org

Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/tenth

Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 13 which you will find on page 960 in the church Bible.

As you are turning there I do want to say we warmly invite you to attend not only our Christmas Eve services on the 23rd and 24th of December, but also to begin planning now for our New Year's Eve service. There is an article about that in the *Tenth Press* this morning, but an opportunity to join us for all or part of that evening of testimonies as church family celebrating with food and good drink and also celebrating the end of the year and the beginning of the new year around the Lord's table.

Well, we turn again this week to 1 Corinthians 13. We have been seeking for some months now to learn how to love the way that Jesus loves. And so we have been taking various aspects of the portrait of love that we find in this great chapter of Scripture and seeing how they find their perfection in the life of Christ and we have been looking at many passages in the gospels to illustrate that. And we have found repeatedly that Jesus never does anything without love. His love is everything that the love chapter says that love should be. He is patient and kind. He does not envy or boast, but offers himself in humble service. The love of Jesus does not insist on its own way but submits to the will of the Father in heaven. It is a love that is able to forgive, able to trust, able to hope, able to persevere.

In other words—and we have found this again and again as well—his love is everything in so many ways that we are not.

We illustrated this back at the very beginning of the chapter by replacing the word “love” here in 1 Corinthians 13 with our own names and then later substituting the name Jesus instead. You insert your own name into the passage you get some awkward statements like Philip is patient and kind, like Philip is not irritable or resentful and so on and so forth. But you put the name Jesus in here and the whole passage reads beautifully. He is not arrogant or rude. He always perseveres, always endures.

Now nowhere is this contrast, I think, more clear than between the love of Jesus and what our own life... love is like than at the beginning of verse eight where the Scripture says that love never ends or in some translation never fails.

You put your own name at the beginning of that verse, you pretty much end up with a logical impossibility because our love often does end. It often does fail. But the verse is true for Jesus. His love never fails.

Now if we were to translate this phrase literally it says, “Love never falls.” It is not entirely clear which kind of falling might be in view. Some things fall apart. Some things fall down. But really it is clear from the verses that follow that Paul has in mind the way that love keeps on going, the way that it does not end. I say that because he contrasts love with various gifts that will cease, for example, in verse eight or pass away. That phrase comes up in verse eight with respect to prophecy and, again, in verse 10.

And all of that is in contrast with love which never ends. It never fails in that sense. With love, as we find when we get down to verse 13, always abides.

And to make this point of never ending love, the apostle mentions various spiritual gifts that were causing a lot of controversy at the church in Corinth because some people were treating them as the be all and end all of the Christian life. And his point is simply that however useful these various gifts may be, they are temporary. They are transitory. And, therefore, they are not as important as love which will last forever.

When Jesus comes again and all things find their perfection, there are gifts and graces that will no longer be needed. We will no longer need prophecy which is looking forward to that coming of Christ. We will no longer need the gift of tongues. We will no longer, even, really, in a sense, need faith, because we will see face to face, but we will still need to love. And what Paul says here about these various spiritual gifts really is true of every earthly thing. It will all pass away. Even the world itself will be destroyed by fire, but love will outlast everything and because God is love, his love will go on forever.

And it is the staying power of love, most of all, which explains this triumphant and climactic statement that you get at the conclusion of the chapter.

“So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”¹

Love is superior even to these other cardinal virtues of faith and hope. Really it is the greatest thing in the world. And one of the things that makes it so great is its abiding power. It will never end. Love is not just for now, but forever.

Now I want to illustrate, again, this aspect of love from the life of Christ. We have been seeing it again and again. 1 Corinthians 13 is a portrait of love and it must, therefore, be a portrait of Jesus because he is love incarnate. Every aspect of love finds its perfection in his affection.

And after all of the other things that we have seen about love and about the love of Jesus, how patient it is, how kind it is, how humble it is, how much perserverence it has, how

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

much strength and hope and faith it has, you can add this to all of those other things that his love is all of those things forever, because it never ends. It never fails.

Now where is the best place to illustrate that in the love of Christ? Well, I supposed we could try to illustrate it one place or another in the gospels. But I actually want to turn to Romans chapter eight, something to a passage where the apostle Paul looks not only to the history of what Jesus has done, but also to the future and makes the point that the love that God has for us in Jesus will never end.

I invite you to turn there as so many are doing already, Romans chapter eight.

It is a happy providence that Dr. Tripp will be preaching from virtually the same passage tonight, this morning focusing on the love of Jesus and this evening focusing on the hope that we have in the love of Jesus. Let me begin reading at verse 31.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.²

Now there are times in life, are there not, when it is tempting to think that God has turned against us, to fear that he will abandon us, to worry that he might stop loving us? Yes, there are many reasons why we have these thoughts and fears. Sometimes our sufferings are so great that we find it hard to believe that God could be loving at all. Sometimes the guilt of our sin makes it seem like God and his love are very far away. And sometimes simply our fears get the best of us and we worry about things that we know deep down are not true to the Word of God.

But whenever we are tempted to have these kinds of doubts and worries, doubting the love of God, the place to turn is Romans chapter eight where we find the apostle Paul

² Romans 8:31-39.

making a knock down, drag out argument to prove that nothing can ever, ever separate us from the love of Jesus.

He makes a series of rhetorical statements here, rhetorical questions, all of them, really, in a way, unanswerable, to make his argument. He begins in verse 32 by arguing from the greater thing to the lesser thing. Here is the greater thing. God did not spare his own Son, but offered his Son for our salvation. And if that is true, now here is the lesser thing, how will he not also with Jesus, that supreme gift, graciously give us all the other things that we need?

Do you follow the logic here? God the Father has already given us the greatest gift, his Son to be our Savior and if he has done that, well, then, surely he will do any and every other loving thing that we will ever need.

And yet sometimes we may still be tempted to doubt the love of God and so the apostle goes on to consider some of the things that might perhaps be considered to be an obstacle to that love or to take that love away.

Verses 34 and 35 he mentions several legal troubles. And sometimes maybe we may worry about being disqualified from heaven. Our sins are so sinful that Satan, that clever lawyer, if he were to show up one day and accuse us, we fear that we would be banished from the presence of God forever.

The Bible says no. If we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, then God himself, the infinite, the almighty God will declare that we are righteous. And who therefore, this is the question Paul asks in verse 33. Who, therefore, shall bring any charge against the elect? It is God himself who justifies.

But now you know how doubts operate. You hear an argument. It sounds very convincing, but then you start to say, "What about this and what about that?" And so here the question comes even if no one brings some kind of legal charge against you before the court of heaven, what if just God himself as the judge decided that he would condemn you anyway whether or not someone was there to accuse you?

Paul answers that with another rhetorical question. Who is there to condemn? And the implication is no one. God will not condemn us because we are covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If he does not condemn us, then no one can.

And, furthermore, at this very moment Jesus himself is praying efficaciously for our salvation. And so Paul answers his own rhetorical question by saying this. You see it there in verse 34.

Christ Jesus... and then he refers to the gospel. Jesus is the one who died. He is also the one who is raised, who is now at the right hand of God. That Jesus is, indeed, interceding for us, the most powerful defense attorney you could possibly imagine. And who,

therefore, can condemn you if you Jesus himself is there to defend you against every charge?

Well, next the apostle turns from legal troubles to all of the other troubles of life. He asks another, in a way, unanswerable question. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? And he lists some of the things that might possibly do it: tribulation and distress and persecution and all the rest of it, all very serious dangers. And no one knew that better than the apostle Paul. He had faced all of these things himself.

And here he describes the kinds of physical dangers that are common in many parts of the world to humanity and maybe particularly to the people of God as we do kingdom work and sometimes are called to suffer for the cause of Christ. There is tribulation and persecution, poverty and hunger, war and violence, everything up to and including martyrdom.

And when we, ourselves, suffer such troubles and sometimes even when we just see other people suffer, we... it is tempting for us to think that God must not love us. Otherwise, he wouldn't be letting this happen. That is the way we reason.

The Bible insists that if we try to interpret God's affections on the basis of our present circumstances, we are bound to misconstrue his intentions.

Let me just repeat that, because we often look at things exactly the opposite. We look at our circumstances and then we try to understand the character of God on the basis of those circumstances. What Paul does here is he starts with the gospel, with the things that God has promised and then he interprets our experiences on that basis.

And so let me say again, if we try to interpret God's affections on the basis of present circumstances, we are bound to misconstrue his intentions. No. No matter what we are going through, God is loving us all the time. There is no trouble or hardship or difficulty that can actually and truly separate the believer from the love of Jesus. No, the apostle says.

“...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him...”³

Notice this at the end of verse 37,

“...him who loved us.”⁴

And this is the testimony of suffering, conquering believers down through the ages. And by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, it will be our own testimony in all of the hard struggles of life. There are times when we may be tempted to doubt the love of God. In fact, for some of us here this morning that may be the temptation that we are struggling with right now. And the thing to do in the middle of that

³ Romans 8:37.

⁴ Ibid.

circumstance is to preach yourself the gospel again and to say, “Now my Father God has not spared to give me his own Son. My Lord Jesus Christ has offered his offered his life as a sacrifice for my sins and even now he is praying for my salvation. How, then, can anything possibly separate me from the love of God?”

That is the way that you have to speak to your heart.

At the end of his life when his body was weak, the Reformation theologian Casper Olevianus was filled with faith and the love that God had for him in Jesus. His physical senses were almost too weak to perceive the world around him, but he had not lost his grasp on the love of God. Here is the dying testimony that he gave.

He said, “My hearing is gone. My smelling is gone. My sight is going. My speech and my feeling are almost gone. But the loving kindness of God is still with me and will never depart from me.”

You see, this is the testimony that the believer has through all the troubles of life, built on confidence in the promise of God and of his love.

Do you believe that it is really true that you can never be separated from the love of God in Christ?

The apostle Paul certainly did. He begins verse 38 with this statement of conviction, something that he is sure of, something that he is persuaded of, something that he is absolutely convinced of that his whole life, even with all of its suffering is covered under the love of God.

And so as his argument for the inescapable love of God builds to its logical and rhetorical climax, he lists every obstacle that he can ever possibly imagine, anything that could ever get in the way of God’s love for you in Jesus.

And he tells us here that he is sure that none of those things could ever get in the way. Paul starts with death. It is a persuasive way to begin an argument, isn’t it? You take the strongest opponent, the strongest thing that can be said on the other side and you deal with it right at the beginning. And Paul does that there. He takes death, what elsewhere he calls the last enemy and truly death is one of the world’s most fearful dividers because it has the power to separate us from the ones we love, but not from love itself.

That is the argument Paul makes here because for those who believe in Christ, death although it is an enemy is also a doorway into the presence of God. This is... the Bible says this everywhere. Jesus Christ has abolished death. This is the testimony of 2 Timothy chapter one. He has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And, therefore, death does not divide us from God’s love. It actually unites us to God and to his love forever.

I love the comment that Alexander Maclaren made about this verse in his commentary. He said, regarding death, “The separator becomes the uniter, because although it rends us apart from the world, nevertheless, we are brought into the presence of God.”

I love the story of a young pastor who was called to the bedside of an old woman who was in her last days and he wanted to offer some kind of comfort. He wasn't exactly sure how to do it. He muttered something about how sorry he was that she was going to die. And she interrupted him.

“God bless you, young man,” she said, “But there is nothing to be scared about. I am just going to cross over the Jordan in a few hours and my Father owns land on both sides of the river.”

You see, that is a way of looking at death, how it does not have the power to separate you from the love of God.

But now what about life? It may seem to you a little bit strange, having dealt with death to say... to even talk about whether life can separate you from the love of God, but if that sounds like a strange thing to say to you, you are, indeed, blessed, because many people here can testify that life sometimes is crueller than death.

And yet the Scripture assures us here that no matter what we suffer in life, God is still with us. He is with us in Christ who himself has gone through all kinds of earthly suffering and therefore has the power and the grace and the understanding to minister to us in our time of need. He continues to show us his love no matter what life may bring.

Well, so much for the great issues of life and death. Paul turns next to various authorities. Here is another thing he is convinced of. Neither angels nor rulers can separate us from God's love. Some question here as to whether angels refers only to good angels or simply to bad angels, those demons who fell into sin with Satan and are always trying to separate us from the love of God.

In fact, the Greek word of devil, διαβολος (dee-ab'-ol-os), means separator or divider. Also some debate here, although we won't get into in detail as to what is exactly is meant by rulers, whether these are earthly or heavenly powers, whether they are gods or governments, but the point is whoever these rulers are, they cannot separate us from the love of God. The most that the demons can do for all of their power is to tempt us to think that we are separated from the love of God, but they cannot actually separate us from that love. No, the love of God is too powerful for that.

Earthly powers are even weaker. Oh, at times governments can close down churches or they can take God out of the courtroom or out of the classroom or wherever else they can try to get rid of him, but even for all of that, they cannot stop God from loving his people anymore than simply closing the shutters can stop the sun from shining.

No, the love of God continues. It is invincible against all of these powers that be.

Next Paul considers time and eternity things present and things to come. What about those things? Can they separate us from the love of God?

Well, in the present we have all kinds of problems. Concerning the future we may have various kinds of uncertainty. But Jesus Christ is the Lord of history. He is the ruler of both this life and the life to come and, therefore, from now until forever he will keep on loving us with his everlasting love.

So much for time, what some people call the fourth dimension, Paul next turns to the second and third dimensions. He says neither height nor depth. These things as well cannot separate us from the love of God. He speaks here in spatial terms. He is trying to show that there is not one single place in the entire universe that is outside the love of God. It doesn't matter where you go, God is there. And if God is there, his love is there.

This is what gives believers the courage to go to some of the most difficult places in the world and carry the gospel to those places even if they don't have a single friend there. They know that God will be there in all of the power and grace of his love.

And here, again, is something to preach to ourselves from the gospel whenever we feel alone or abandoned or unloved. We can say, "Lord, Jesus, this is how I feel, alone and abandoned and unloved, but I know that you are right here with me as you have promised to be and that, therefore, your love is right here with me."

Now I think Paul has pretty well covered things. Life and death, angels and demons, present and future, up and down. Is there any other dimension to God's love that he has neglected to mention?

Well, probably not, but just in case, wanting to close every last loophole he ends by saying, "Nor anything else in all creation."

And if you say, "creation" that includes everything apart from God. He is the Creator of all that is. If there is nothing in creation that can separate you from the love of God, then there is nothing at all that can separate you from it. All that is left is God himself in all his love and nothing can ever keep us from his love.

I like the way James Boice put it. "We are bound to the living God by a gracious unchanging eternal and indestructible love. And now having been loved in this way, we are called to live in this way, that we ourselves would be those who love the way that Jesus loves."

We have been saying this again and again and seeing it again and again in this love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13, that God has not given us his love so that we can keep it to ourselves, but so that we can share it with others.

Jesus said it himself.

“This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.”⁵

And the more than we know the inseparable, indivisible love of Jesus, the more his love will flow through our hearts and into the lives of others.

And in order to encourage us in that kind of lifestyle, I want to turn again for the final time back to 1 Corinthians 13 and I want you to see a very simple command there. It really closes the love chapter. It is a command that ought to motivate and animate everything that we have been learning about the love of Jesus. I say it closes 1 Corinthians 13, but it actually comes at the beginning of chapter 14, a practical conclusion to the love chapter, a command that every Christian should take to heart. It is simply this.

“Pursue love.”⁶

Or, to translate the verse a little more literally, follow love or run after love or even chase after love. You see, it is a word for hot pursuit. The Greek verb here describes someone who is going hard after love.

Now this command gives us, I think, a very simple way to test our commitment to Christ. A Christian is someone who has experienced the love of Jesus in a saving way and who, therefore, pursues love in relationship to God and to other people. And so here is the question we can use to test ourselves. Am I going hard after love? Am I really pursuing it? Have I made this my life long pursuit that I would become more and more a person of love?

Jonathan Edwards said that if love is so great a thing in Christianity, if it is so essential and distinguishing a thing, if it is the very sum of all Christian virtue, then surely those that profess themselves Christians should live in love and abound in the works of love.

And so here is another way to test ourselves. Am I living in love? Am I abounding in the works of love?

Well, anyone who has read or studied 1 Corinthians 13 should have some idea what that would look like. It would mean being patient with other people's failings. It would mean being kind to them even if they don't deserve it. It would mean not promoting ourselves or boasting about our own accomplishments or insisting on having our own way. It would mean, really, making much less of ourselves and more of other people. It would mean forgiving those hurt us, refusing to get angry when they irritate us. It would mean all of the things that this passage says about love and it would mean doing these things even in desperate circumstances that that we are able even at those times to keep believing, keep

⁵ John 15:12.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:1.

hoping, keep loving. This is the high calling of love that Jesus has given us in which, of course, we all fail miserably.

If there is one thing that we have learned over the course of studying 1 Corinthians 13 it is that we are not yet this kind of lover. And so when we read at the beginning of verse eight that love never ends or love never fails we know immediately that we are falling short of that kind of perfection. We find it so hard to keep loving others that we give up loving them long before God stops demanding that we love them and certainly also long before they stop needing that love. We get tired of the pursuit. Our affections slow to a jog, then to a walk before finally we give up the chase all together.

Our love often fails. In fact, we fail the love as much as we fail in anything else in life.

Well, let me say connecting this failure back to Romans chapter eight that it is when we feel like we are out of love or have run out of love, so to speak, that we need to remember again that love of Jesus which never fails, because when the Scripture says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, that would include logically our own feeble efforts to love like Jesus and all our failures in doing so. Even those failures cannot separate us from the true love of God.

As often as we try and fail in love, we are at that moment being loved by God because we can never be separated from that love and therefore we should never say, "I have no love left to give," because even at the very moment we are saying that, we are still loved by the invincible love of Jesus.

And so at every place in life where you find it hard to love, you say, "Lord, how can I keep loving in this circumstance? I just don't have the love to do it."

At that very moment, at that place in life, Jesus is with you and his love is with you to enable you to love.

Not even a loveless heart can separate you from the love of Jesus.

No, by faith in him you are permanently connected to a love source that will never fail which means that your own love can be renewed again and again.

And so this command to pursue love comes to you not simply as a command, but it also comes with this promise that as you pursue love, the love of Jesus is running alongside beside you. And so do not give up the struggle to keep learning to love the way that Jesus loves.

Live in hope for the day when, by the grace of God and by the work of the Holy Spirit you can read 1 Corinthians 13 and put your own name into the love chapter and do it with something less than total embarrassment and be able to say, "Yes, by the grace of God it is true in some measure. Philip is patient and kind. Carol does not envy or boast. Johnny is not arrogant or rude. Danielle does not insist on her own way. Julio is not irritable or

resentful...” And on and on it goes. Put your own name in there. You are the one, by the grace of God, who bears all things, who believes all things, who hopes all things, who endures all things for the sake of love.

And, see, we are enabled and empowered to love in this kind of way because, and only because we are loved with an everlasting love. Jesus proved it on the cross and will keep proving it day by day every day as we run hard after love.

Oh, we find again and again we cannot love without his love to carry us along, but we may also find, again and again, that his love is right there with us to the very end.

On the morning of his death, the Scottish Covenanter Robert Bruce sat down to breakfast with his family and suddenly he called out very much to their surprise, “Hold, daughter, hold. My master is calling me.”

Bruce asked then for a Bible to be brought to him. He requested that it be opened to Romans chapter eight. His sight by this point was failing and so he had to quote much of the passage from memory. Praise God he had memorized Romans eight and was able to do that. So like the apostle Paul he was able to testify that he himself was persuaded that neither life nor death nor anything else in all creation could separate him from the love of God for him in Jesus Christ his Lord.

And when he had given that testimony, he asked for his children to take his finger and place it on these very words from the Bible. He wanted to make sure that he had his finger in the right place and then he said, “God be with you, my children. I have breakfasted with you, but I will sup with my Lord Jesus tonight. I die believing these words.”

You see, Robert Bruce had found what every believer finds, the love of Jesus that lasts all through life will be there with you at the time of death and then afterwards on and on for all eternity.

Father, we praise you that this is so. We praise you that we are connected to a love that never fails and that will never end. And so, Father, in the strength of that love may you empower us more and more to love the way that Jesus does love. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.