

Faith, Hope, and Love

I Corinthians 13:13

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

- I Corinthians 13:13, ESV

Intro: What are the essential marks of a true Christian?

How would you respond if someone asked you, “What does a real Christian look like?” or “How can you tell if someone is a true Christian?”

You might rightly respond by saying that no one can ever know for sure if someone else is a genuine Christian or not, but I wonder how the Apostle Paul would answer that question. The Apostle Paul seemed to think that two or three things were vital evidence of the genuine nature of someone’s profession to be a Christian: faith in Jesus Christ and love for His people, both of which are strengthened and empowered by hope.

In Galatians, which is probably Paul’s first letter, he declares, “*For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.*” – Galatians 5:5-6. ESV

I Thessalonians is in consideration alongside Galatians for Paul’s earliest letter, but may have been written shortly after it. Paul opens that letter by saying, “*We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.*” – I Thessalonians 1:2-5, ESV

Paul wrote the letters of Ephesians and Colossians at the same time, and they’re regarded as two of the clearest summaries of his Gospel theology.

Here’s how he expresses his thankfulness to the Colossians:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel – Col 1:3-5, ESV

And here’s how he expresses his thanksgiving toward the Ephesians:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints – Ephesians 1:15-18, ESV

It’s pretty clear from these four other letters of Paul’s that he views these three virtues – faith, hope, and love – as vitally indispensable to the Christian life, and so it should not surprise us that he concludes his encomium to love, after having talked about the incomplete and temporary nature of the spectacular spiritual gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and tongues, by saying:

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. - I Corinthians 13:13, ESV

But what are faith, hope, and love? Where do they come from and how do they function in our Christian lives? And why does Paul say that love is the greatest of the three? If we’re saved by faith alone in Christ alone, isn’t it most important for us to have faith?

I. Faith

Well, let's start with faith. Hebrews 11 is the great Hall of Fame of Faith, and it says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" in verse 1, and then in verse 6, "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

So, faith is a trust in God and His promises that assures us of the things we hope for in the Lord and makes us more convinced of the things we cannot see. It's how we draw near to God, for we approach God by faith, trusting in Him and His promises.

In 2 Corinthians 5:6-7, Paul says, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight." In this life, we walk by faith, for we do not see the Lord, and we cannot see the full substance of His promises, but we trust.

What does it look like when we trust in the Lord, when we walk by faith? Dr. Richard Patterson has a helpful article on Bible.org, where he connects faith to its description in Psalm 37. The key hinge verse for understanding this as a description of what it looks like to live by faith is the first line of verse 3, "Trust in the LORD." A life of faith is a life of trusting in the LORD, and here's how David describes it in Psalm 37:

*Fret not yourself because of evildoers;
be not envious of wrongdoers!
For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.
Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.
Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!
Refrain from anger and forsake wrath!
Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. – Psalm 37:1-8, ESV*

When we trust in the LORD, we do good. Paul had made reference in 1 Thessalonians 1 to the "work of faith" and in Romans, Paul uses the expression, "the obedience of faith." And, of course, James very famously speaks of how our faith is seen clearly by the works we do. So, faith does good. It trusts, and it works in trust, Faith also leads to delighting ourselves in the LORD and committing our way to the LORD. So, we give the LORD our emotions and our expectations, by faith. We find our delight in Him and we commit the way of our lives and the outcome of our faith to Him, trusting that He will vindicate our faith. Our faith is not misplaced when it is placed fully in Him.

And here's what faith doesn't do: Worry and get angry and seek revenge. Verses 1, 7 & 8 all say, "Fret not yourself." Three times we're told of the incompatibility of anxious worrying with trusting in the LORD.

Walking by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ trusts in Him, delights in Him, and commits our way to Him, even in the face of rising evil in the world. We trust Him to save us, defend us, vindicate us, and carry out His perfect justice in His perfect time.

II. Hope

“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all.”
Well, so said Emily Dickinson anyway.

Biblically, hope is the certain expectation of the fulfillment of God’s promises. Faith is concerned with how we live today, that we can trust in the Lord Jesus now, while hope is focused on the expectation that God will do in the future, that Jesus will do all He has promised.

Faith and hope have this in common: They both rely on and trust in the unseen God and His unseen promises more than in the limited sight we have of this present age.

Romans 8:23-25 - *“we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”* (ESV)

Hebrews 11 says that faith is the substance of things hoped for, and Colossians 1 tells us that our faith in the Lord Jesus flows from the hope laid up for us in heaven. So, we see that faith and hope are interdependent and connected. Our hope is strengthened and made more real to us by our faith in the God who has made the great and precious promises to us, and our faith in God today is strengthened by the hope we have in heaven, the steadfastness produced by our certain and living hope.

If Psalm 37 helps us understand faith, then Psalms 42-43, which were originally one psalm, help us understand hope powerfully:

*As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and appear before God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while they say to me all the day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I would go with the throng
and lead them in procession to the house of God
with glad shouts and songs of praise,
a multitude keeping festival.*

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.*

– Psalm 42:1-6a, ESV

Here, in Psalm 42, the Sons of Korah are dealing with those who mock their faith “They say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” Note the focus on the invisibility of God. Where is He? I don’t see Him. Much the same is still said today 3,000 years later by the skeptics and scoffers.

But the psalmist preaches to his own dull soul –

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation and my God.*

Here, his hope is focused on the restoration of the worship at the Temple that he's been cut off from for some reason. But we have a hope of joining a much, much better worship procession one day, and every Lord's Day we gather together here as an anticipation of that Great Day, as our hope is rekindled and refreshed by this worship gathering, which is an anticipation of the coming far-greater and far-more-glorious worship gathering.

If Psalm 37 showed us that faith does not fret or get angry and seek revenge, Psalm 42 shows us that hope is not downcast. Hope focuses on the certainty of what God has purposes and promised and is not cast down by discouraging circumstances.

And, of course, I can't mention hope in the Psalms without mentioning Psalm 130:

*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than watchmen for the morning,
more than watchmen for the morning.
O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful redemption.
And he will redeem Israel
from all his iniquities.* – Psalm 130:5-8, ESV

III. Love

Faith, hope, and love. Love is different from faith and hope, in that faith and hope are primarily, or even exclusively, directed toward God. The Psalms tell us not to put our trust in our bow or in princes – either in our own resources or in rescue by others, and that the war horse is a false hope. So, faith and hope are placed in God alone and in His great and precious and unfailing promises.

But love comes from God to us, and while we are called to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we are also called to love our neighbors as ourselves and are commanded by Jesus to love one another, even as He has loved us.

And it is love for one another that Paul specifically has in mind here in 1 Corinthians 13:13. The Corinthians lacked love for one another. It is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and love for all the saints that distinguish a believer.

John tells us it is impossible for us to love God if we do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ: *“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”* – 1 John 4:20, ESV

The Bible makes it inescapably clear that Christians are called to love everybody:

1. Jesus told us that the second Great Commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves.
2. Jesus also told us that we are to love our enemies: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.”* – Matthew 5:43-44
3. Then, Jesus called us to an even higher standard of love on the night He was betrayed and headed toward the cross for us. He repeated this commandment twice that night:
 - a. *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* – John 13:34-35

- b. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” – John 15:12-13

It is this love for one another in the Body of Christ that Paul is most especially calling the Corinthians to here, as the distinguishing mark of a believer Paul mentions in Colossians and Ephesians is distinctly “love for all the saints,” and the church in Corinth was most definitely lacking in love for one another, but the call to love is ultimately a commandment and call to love everyone.

But what is love? Well, Jesus defined it ultimately by the cross: Love is a self-sacrificing commitment to the good of another. We are to love our enemies, seeking their good. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, seeking their good as much as we would seek our own. And we are to love one another in the body of Christ in a dramatically self-sacrificing, cross-shaped way, preferring our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ above ourselves. Love is overflowing and others-centered and generous to the point of self-sacrifice.

Love is also the necessary outflow of true faith and hope in God. If we trust God and delight in Him, if we hope in His promises truly from our souls – our souls hope in Him – then we will love, because we will never lose sight of how much we have been loved.

IV. Why is Love the Greatest?

But why is love the greatest of these? If, in that sense, love for others especially, flows from faith and hope, then why would it be the greatest? Well, what gives us faith and hope? Where do they come from? They are gifts of God’s grace, given to us in love.

We are in Christ by faith because of God’s love for us. And “*we love because He first loved us.*” In love He predestined us for adoption as sons. In love, He gave us to Christ and drew us to Christ. So, love, God’s love, is the true origin of everything good in our lives, and is especially the true origin of faith, hope, and love in our lives.

And that touches on Reason #1 why “the greatest of these is love,” because God is love, and so love alone of these three most purely and directly reflects the character of God. God is love. God is not faith. God is faithful; He always keep His promises, but God is not faith and He doesn’t have faith in others. Part of this is that He sees all and knows all perfectly, but also for God to have faith in someone else would be for Him to misplace faith or to be an idolator. God also is not hope and does not hope. He knows and plans and purposes, and He fulfills all of His plans and purposes.

Some Christian teachers have said things like, “God believes in you” or “God has great hopes for you.” These things sound warm and fuzzy and are an attempt to make God more relationally relevant to us. After all, if we’re going to place our faith and hope in God, doesn’t it help us to think that God places faith and hope in us, too? No. Absolutely not. God is the Great I Am, the self-sufficient, eternal, unfailling One. It would be foolishly wrongheaded and totally nonsensical for God to place faith or hope in us. We must anchor our faith and hope in HIM.

But God is love, and God does love us. He sets His love upon us, and this is the source and strength for all of our faith, hope, and love.

Reason #2 why “the greatest of these is love” is that love alone endures for all eternity. One day, our faith will be sight, and our hope will be realized. One day, we will no longer walk trusting the unseen God and His unseen promises, for we will be face-to-face with Him forever, So, in the end, there will be no more faith and no more hope, but only LOVE. And that’s why the greatest virtue we can seek to cultivate by God’s grace is love, for God is love and love is forever.

Conclusion: Where are we heading? What’s going to get us there? How do we grow to be more like Jesus?

As we close, let’s re-examine our lives in the light of the Word of God by asking ourselves some important questions:

1. Where are we heading? What’s the goal or the trajectory of our lives? This is our hope.
2. What’s going to get us there? What we’re trusting in to get us to our goal is what we have faith in.

Hebrews 11, talking about the great Old Testament heroes of the faith, said of them:

¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴ For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵ If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. – vv. 13-16

It later says of these men and women of faith that they were people “of whom the world was not worthy”

And then, in Ch. 13, the author of Hebrews calls to us:

Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. – v. 12-14

And what is the outflow of a life lived with such a destination, such a hope in view?

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. – vv. 15-16

To grow more like Jesus, we must go to Jesus, living for the hope He has given us, bearing the reproach He endured, in love, praising God and seeking to do good to others.

In other words, we walk by faith toward our hope, and as we do so, we hear the first two words of 1 Corinthians 14, “Pursue love.”