

“What Is Heaven Like?”
1 Corinthians 13:8-12
August 25, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

We come today to our final sermon in our summer series on 1 Corinthians 13. Paul concludes this chapter with a description of love as something that is present in this life and that endures into the next life. Love is the primary and greatest feature of heaven. When you think of heaven, is love a prominent feature that comes to your mind? What do you imagine heaven to be like? For many people, the first thing that comes to mind is to describe heaven negatively by the bad things that will not be there. We long for a place where pain and sorrow are absent, and draw great comfort to think of heaven as just such a place. Indeed, the Bible describes it similarly in this negative manner. There will be no more tears there, no more sorrow and no more death, and that is all glorious and something to be celebrated.

Let's turn, though, to consider the positive side of heaven—not the bad things that are missing but the good things that are present. Is love something that you want to be the dominant quality of heaven? Or would you prefer something else in that dominant place? Maybe you were hoping for material riches or a greater ability to pursue a favorite hobby. There was a 1985 called “Jewel of the Nile,” starring Danny DeVito and Kathleen Turner. Danny DeVito's character hears about this “jewel of the Nile” and assumes that it is a priceless gem. He is a crass materialist and pursues it with dreams of riches. Eventually, he discovers, to his great disappointment, that this “jewel” is not a gem but a person, a holy man who is greatly treasured by his people. If the positive feature of heaven in your mind is something related to material riches or the ability to pursue self-interests unfettered by any limitations, you have completely missed the point.

Our vision of heaven says a great deal about us. Let me give an illustration. If your dog could talk and you could ask him to describe his dream vacation, what would he likely say? Perhaps he would imagine unlimited chew bones and lots of cats to chase. Or maybe he would want plenty of nasty smells to explore. I dare say such a vacation would be far from any of our dream vacations. Why? Because our nature is different than a dog's nature. What you imagine about heaven says a great deal about your nature. Paul says that love is the primary feature of heaven. Those who have never learned the first thing about love will not want to be in heaven. The best preparation for heaven is to learn to love.

Paul develops these themes about the dominance of love in heaven through three claims he makes. These claims are stated in a progressive way that I have tried to capture by the three statements below.

I. Love Is Better than Gifts – v. 8

Paul names three gifts that were important to the Corinthians—prophecy, tongues and knowledge—and then says that all three will pass away. Love, on the other hand, will never end or fail. We often think of this love chapter as standing alone in Paul’s letter, but it doesn’t. It is in the context of a lengthier section on spiritual gifts. The Corinthians were somewhat enamored with spiritual gifts, especially those that were outwardly impressive. For example, tongues-speaking is a gift that Paul classified as a second-tier gift. It was a gift from God’s Spirit, for sure, a gift by which the tongues speaker was freed from normal, brain-controlled speech into an experience of Spirit-given ecstasy. Paul taught that other gifts, such as prophecy, were far more important than tongues-speaking. But all gifts, from the first tier gifts such as prophecy to the second tier gifts such as tongues-speaking, are far inferior to love.

I wonder if we’ve fallen into the same problem of valuing gifts over love. The gifts we tend to value may not be in the area of spiritual gifts, but there are other gifts that are valued in our culture. Let me try to get at this by asking a question of those of you who are parents of young children. Which of these two scenarios would please you more? Scenario one is that you are approached by a coach of your daughter’s soccer team, who tells you that your daughter is unusually gifted and needs to be on an elite team in order to properly develop her skills. Or another version of this scenario might be an approach by a teacher who has noticed a significant intellectual gift in your child and urges you to consider a special school. Scenario two is that you are approached by your child’s Sunday School teacher who wants to encourage you by telling you how great a job your child does in loving and welcoming new people to the Sunday School class.

If that first scenario would give you greater joy than the second, then you need to hear what Paul says here. Gifts are good, but love is better. The really important thing in life is love. Our culture values not only giftedness above love, but also efficiency above love. We value those who can accomplish a lot in a short period of time. But love is usually very inefficient. Still, its value is greater than any gifts and greater than being efficient.

II. Love Is Better than Gifts Because It Endures – v. 9-12

Why is love better than giftedness, better than efficiency and better than significant accomplishments? It is because it will stand the test of time. **“Love never ends.”** It will last beyond this life and into the next. Love will be present in heaven, proving itself to be of great value for all eternity. Paul makes this point in three ways. First, he says that many of the things that make life

manageable in this present existence will be unnecessary in heaven, because perfect love will exist there. He gives two examples, beginning with knowledge. There is such a thing as the gift of knowledge. It consists of special insight and discernment regarding reality. In the spiritual arena, it is a very useful gift for pastors and counselors. In normal life, knowledge is very useful. We rely upon our car mechanics and doctors having knowledge that they use to help and serve us. The Corinthian church was characterized more by Greek culture than Jewish, and Greek culture highly valued knowledge. Our modern world does as well. So we need to hear Paul when he says, **“we know in part.”** No matter how significant our knowledge, this side of heaven it will always be partial. That means that there will always be matters we don't fully understand. We need to be okay with that. It is often the case that when people suffer trials and tribulations, they will often want to know why. Most of the time, we will not be able to discern the reason. We know in part, and we need to be okay with that.

What is it that will change in heaven? Is it that we will know everything? Paul says that the thing that will change is the fullness of love. **“When the perfect comes, the partial will pass away”** (v. 10). The perfect is perfect love. If you are looking to heaven as that place where all mysteries will be revealed and you will understand everything, you're barking up the wrong tree. Heaven is the place where perfect love will be revealed and experienced, and that will satisfy the need for perfect knowledge. It's like the three-year old child who rests content in the love of parents. That three-year-old doesn't understand much about life in the adult world. A three-year-old doesn't know why mom and dad have to pay taxes, have to go to work or have to do all those household chores that need doing. And the child feels no need to know those things, because he rests content in the love of mommy and daddy. That's what heaven will be like. When we finally experience the perfect love of God for us, and are then able to give that perfect love back to God and others, we will no longer feel it necessary to know all the mysteries of life. It's like taking a flashlight on a camping trip. When you're camping and it's nighttime, a flashlight is a very important tool to have. But when the sun comes up, the flashlight becomes unnecessary.

The same is the case with the gift of prophecy. This gift is not primarily one in which a person predicts the future. Rather, it refers to speaking for God by proclaiming the will of God. It is what we as preachers do. So you can add the occupation of preacher to the long list of occupations that will no longer be needed in heaven. When perfect love comes, my work as a preacher will be replaced because people will be attuned to God's love and obey him with joy.

In verse 11, Paul gives a well-known illustration that makes this same point about the enduring value of love. **“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”** Children and adults have different values. When I was a boy, my friends and I used to like to fasten old playing cards on our bicycles in

such a way that the spokes of the wheel would catch the end of the card and make a sound we thought at the time made the bicycle sound like a motorcycle. I still ride bicycles, but I no longer fasten old cards on my bike. Similarly, when we get to heaven we will see perfectly that love is the thing that counts more than anything else, and everything else we have given ourselves to will be like a child fastening cards to his bicycle.

The third point Paul makes about the enduring value of love uses another illustration, that of a mirror. In Paul's day, mirrors did not produce the sharp image produced by today's mirrors. It was often just a piece of metal that had been polished some, something like looking at your image on the side of a car. There is a big difference between seeing someone's image through a poor mirror and seeing that person face-to-face in the bright sunshine. On the day we come to see things with clarity, love will prove to be of great value.

Love will stand the test of time. It will endure through this life. When we come to the end of our lives and look back on what has been accomplished, we will see that the most significant achievements had little to do with what people commonly regard as successes, such things as money and career. Rather, what will be most significant will be the people we have loved well. The same is true for eternity. Love will pass the ten billion year test. When you have been in heaven for ten billion years, the important thing will be love.

III. Love Endures Because It Is the Dominant Feature of Heaven – v. 13

The final verse of the chapter says that three things will endure: faith, hope and love. This is a common trilogy in the New Testament, and here provides the best description I know of for what heaven will be like. It will be marked by faith, hope and love. Let's consider each of these. Heaven will be marked by faith. In what sense will faith endure after we see Jesus face-to-face? After all, we will no longer have to walk by faith when we can walk by sight. Faith has another sense in the Bible, though: the idea of trust. It is this element of trust that will endure forever. For all eternity we will have a deep intimacy with God marked by complete trust in him. A heart that trusts completely is a heart that is at rest. How many of you had extreme anxiety this morning about the ability of the pew you sat in to hold you up? Why not? Because you trusted its sturdiness to be able to hold you up. Trust leads to confidence, security and rest. In heaven, there will be no more 2:00 a.m. panic attacks.

Hope will be present in heaven. Hope is simply the confidence in a bright future. It is a wonderful thought to me to consider this. No one will lose hope in heaven. Even our best times in this life are somewhat marred by the thought they might so easily disappear. You're having a great time on vacation, but it is never far from your mind that the end of the vacation is approaching. When we think of our future in eternity, no dark clouds will ever mar our thoughts. It

will only be, “Today has been the best day imaginable and tomorrow will be even better.” And there will never be any fear that this is all going to end tragically. That is our hope, and all eternity will be filled with such joyous, life-giving hope.

As great as it is to think of heaven as a place of complete trust and hope, the greatest feature is the third one—love. The dominant feature of heaven is love, because God is the dominant character in heaven and God is love. What does that mean? Lewis Smedes says it like this.

If we have even a fleeting impulse to forget our self-interest and act solely for another, with no regard for any reward, we are in touch with the core of cosmic reality. If we are driven by a desire to heal or help another, and are glad when that person is helped, even if no one knows or cares that it was we who helped, we are under the influence of almighty God.

God himself has been like that for all eternity. God exists in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and all three persons of the godhead are always self-forgetful and completely focused on the other two. God is love, and almighty God will be completely focused upon you for eternity. And you will have the ability to forget completely all self-interest and act solely for God and for others. God asks you to glorify him not because of a need within God, but because of a need within you. This is what love does, and you were created to love.

CONCLUSION:

As we come to the end of this study, I can identify with Leon Morris, one of the commentators I consulted.

The commentator cannot finish writing on this chapter without a sense that clumsy hands have touched a thing of exquisite beauty and holiness. Here what is true of all Scripture is true in especial measure, that no comment can be adequate to so great a theme. Yet no commentator can excuse himself from the duty of trying to make plain what these matchless words have come to signify for him. And no Christian can excuse himself from the duty of trying to show in his life what these words have come to mean for him.

My hope is that two things are going on inside of you now. First, I hope that there is a growing desire to live a life marked by love instead of self-centeredness. Second, I hope that you will realize that your only chance of living such a life will come through God’s strength and enabling of you, and that you will therefore look to him to grow you as a lover of God and of others. May he do so for us all, that we might as a church show our needy world what heaven is truly like!