Love is...

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Key Verse 13:4: “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

1 Corinthians 13, known as the ‘love chapter’ is one of the most frequently used verses in the Bible, especially as the message for weddings. I remember that I also wrote one of these verses on the wedding cards for Ben and Rebekah, and Michael and Hershey. “Love is patient, love is kind...” In this popular Bible passage Paul teaches us three things, 1) why love? 2) What is love? 3) Love never fails.

First, why love? (1-3) Other words for ‘why love?’ is what happens without love? In the previous chapters Paul admonishes the believers in Corinth Church to be united to build up the body of Christ. They received all sorts of different gifts from the Holy Spirit such as the gift of speaking in tongues, healing, prophesying, performing miracles, and so on. Paul said that all these spiritual gifts should be used for the common good which is to build up the church of God. Now Paul wants to show what the most excellent ways to serve God and serve others? Let us read verses 1-3. “***If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing***.” Speaking in tongues is one of the gifts from the Holy Spirit. People who speak in tongues say that they have deep fellowship with God by speaking in tongues. How wonderful and blessed it is when we speak in tongues! But if they despise those who cannot speak in tongues or destroy the unity of the church, it is better not to speak in tongues. In chapter 14 Paul admonishes them to speak in tongues personally in a private place, not in public or in a church. Paul added more warnings, that without practicing love, speaking in tongues is nothing but noise like squeaking metal sounds.

Prophecy is foreseeing what God is going to do and delivering his message as Prophet Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Jonah did. But if they prophesy only to condemn others, they are nobody. The message of God’s judgment always contains his divine love of salvation like God’s message for the people of Nineveh in the book of Jonah. Today prophesying is teaching the message of God through Bible study. We Bible teachers teaches about God and his word and his plan. Still, without love we only become teachers of the law or the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Jesus asked his disciples to have faith in God, faith even that can move mountains. (Mk 11;22-23) Still, if they don’t have love in their faith, they gain nothing. Those who practice charitable activities are the same as the Pharisees if they do only for people’s praise and recognition. The purpose and motivation of those righteous and charitable activities must be pure and accompany genuine love. Why love? This is because love is the most essential and indispensable element in using and practicing all the spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit. Love is the spirit of the law and the fulfillment of the law.

Second, what is love? (4-7) There have been many people who try to define what love is. Some say that love is giving, not receiving. It makes sense. I used to sing "Love” by John Lennon, “Love is real, and real is love.... Love is old and love is new. Love is all and love is you...” It sounds poetic, but Mr. Lennon sang of human and erotic love. In verse 4-8 love which Paul mentions is not erotic love, but agape love, which is love from God. John the Apostle said that God is love. Now let us read verses 4-7. “***Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always persevere.***” Why did Paul mention ‘patience’ first? This is because we are not patient, and because patience is one of the most difficult matters in practicing love in a relationship with God and us, between husband and wife, between parents and children, between teachers and students, and among friends and co-workers, and so on. Why do we have to be patient? This is because God is patient. God is patient with us. Therefore, we must be also patient with God and with others. Those who are patient become true winners in the end. Patience is waiting with hope. When we become patient in conflict matters, we will see all problems solved as time passes by. All misunderstanding and discord will be resolved because God intervenes in the situation and changes the result. Those who become patient will experience that in all things God works for the good of those who become patient and wait for God’s time. Paul said in Romans 12:12, “*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*” Amen!

 I heard that Dr. Charles Stanley, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta Georgia, passed away last Tuesday at the age of 90. He is one of the most powerful and influential pastors and preachers over the world. This morning I heard the testimony of his wayward grandson Matthew, who had been converted recently. He rebelled against his parents and moved to California where he used drug and alcohol until he struggled with suicidal thoughts caused by depression. He often received a phone call from his grandpa who was very concerned about his condition. Imagine how patiently Dr. Charles counselled him and waited for him to come back to his sense. Finally, God answered the grandpa’s prayer for Matthew who was converted and started new life with Christ Jesus. This morning he testified how his grandpa loved him and waited for him with patience to meet Jesus personally. Love is patient, waiting with hope.

There is a young man who loves his wife. Whenever they had a conflict, they struggled to be patient with each other. God blessed this family with a handsome baby boy. Do you know whom I am talking about? They follow the way of Jesus who endured the cross for the sake of sinners. Jesus was patient with Peter who made many mistakes until he became a good shepherd and fisher of men as Jesus had prayed for.

 Love is kind, which means those who love are not violent. They are humble and gentle like Jesus. (Mt 11:29) They do not use any violence in all situations verbally or physically. Those who are kind understand others. They don’t envy others' success because they are thankful and satisfied with the love of God. They do not boast their success because they knew that all things came from God. They are not proud. They don’t diss others or falsely accuse them because they have the truth of God in their hearts. They are not selfish. They are not self-centered but consider others better than themselves as Paul said. They are well self-controlled. They are not easily angered. They try to understand others. Above all, they forgive others’ mistakes and bear others’ weak points. They do not hold bitterness because they delete all records of wrong from their memory. They always protect, always trust, always hope, and always persevere (7). Can you find anyone who follows all these standards of love on this earth? Of course, not. If you put the name of Jesus instead of the word ‘love’, you will get an answer. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, he does not envy, he does not boast, he is not proud. He does not dishonor others, he is not self-seeking, he is not easily angered, he does not keep records of wrongs. He does not delight in evil, but always rejoices with the truth. Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Amen! Then put your name in the place of ‘love’. Let us start! Paul is patient? Paul is kind? Really? …. I pray that we may not only memorize these verses, but also put them into practice so that we may become the apostles of love. Amen! Love is not knowledge or theory, but life.

Third, love never fails. (8-13) From verse 8 Paul teaches us how love is different from all other spiritual gifts. Look at verses 8-10. “***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. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears***.” We cannot boast about the gifts of prophesying or speaking in tongues or having knowledge because they all remain temporal and incomplete. But love never fails. Love never disappears but remains forever. Whatever you do for God and for others with love, your labor of love never fails, never in vain, but they bear fruits, fruits of life. Jesus said in Matthew 10:42, “*And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward*.” Amen!

God poured his love for sinners on the cross. (Ro 5:5) Romans 5:8 says, “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” God’s love through Jesus’ death on the cross never fails but saves many. His death on the cross and resurrection never failed. Our faith and labor for the Lord never fails. All our labor and acts of love are rewarded and kept in heaven for us. (1 Pe 1;3-4) This is our living hope. And Paul said that this hope never disappoints us. (Ro 5:5) Amen! We sometimes lose our heart when we do not see any visible fruit after we have loved someone. As missionaries and Bible teachers, our hearts hurt when they leave without saying goodbye. As parents, we become discouraged when we have trouble with our children. As husband and wife, we become angry when they do not understand our genuine love. But do not lose your heart! You don’t have to be disappointed with your children, your spouse and students because your love never fails. Your labor for the Lord is not in vain. In God’s appointed time it will come with good results. Someday in the near future your labor will bear fruits, fruit of life and fruits of love. God will bless your labor for your students and your children that they will meet God someday when you do not realize. Dr. Joseph Park was a little disappointed when his student Kevin didn’t respond to his email for Bible study. But I believe that his labor and love for Kevin are not in vain. Amen! God will change our children, our spouse, coworkers and students when we do not give up doing what is good. Keep on loving, loving today and tomorrow until we see the final victory. Love is patient and love never fails. Amen!

Love lasts forever and love brings completeness. This is the reason why Jesus said on the cross, “*It is finished*!” (*tetelestai*) Jesus meant that God completed the demonstration of his love on the cross through his obedient death. Paul believed that God’s love brings completeness of the law. When he followed the law, he saw God only in part. When he received the love of Christ, he saw God in full. When he was a Pharisee, he talked like a child, thought like a child and reasoned like a child. But after he experienced the love of Christ, he put the way of his childhood behind him and talked like a man, thought like a man and reasoned like a man. This is because love made him grow mature. Love opened his spiritual eyes. When he lived under the law, he saw only a reflection, but when he met Jesus, he saw God face to face. Many people, even among believers, still see only a reflection which comes from the law. They think that they are righteous by doing many great things visible to the eyes of people. They don’t pay attention to the acts of love which are being done for the smallest and the least people. But all the worldly achievements and activities for their glory will pass away, but the act of love which was done for the smallest and the least people will last forever. We must see Christ face to face, not only see a reflection.

Let us read verse 13 as the conclusion of this passage. “***And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love***.” We need mountain-moving faith. Faith is victory! We need a living hope which never disappoints us. But we must remember that faith and hope are fulfilled in love. When we love, God provides us with a mountain-moving faith. When we love, we become patient with the hope of eternal life, hope of resurrection, hope of transformation. Amen! May God bless those who understand this and make us the apostle of love in this generation. Amen!