

“The Most Excellent Way” 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Introduction

- I don't know about you but when I read this passage my heart breaks. I read what Christian love is, this *most excellent way*, as it says in 12:31, and I just want to cry because my life falls so far short. When I think about my relationships with all of you, with Miriam, with Ethan and Micah—I try to love you, really I do, I try to love my wife, I try to love my children; but my way of loving is anything but excellent. Instead of something lovely and beautiful and sacrificial more often than not my love is Frankenstein-ish—ugly and disgusting and selfish. Maybe if I were to use a different definition of love I might be doing okay in someone's eyes. But compared to God's standard my love is a sham. Forgive me.
- Please don't take what I'm saying as some kind of false modesty. *My heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure*, Jeremiah 17:9. And whatever pretenses I've set up in my own mind about how spiritual I am or how well my progress in ministry might be going the words of 1 Corinthians 13 reveal the hollow, imperfect nature of my love.
- Let me say right up front that it is impossible to love in the way this passage describes if you haven't given your life to Christ. You won't be able to do it on your own. We all stand condemned before God because of our sin. And how is it possible to not see your sin when reading this chapter? The good news is that Christ died to pay our penalty for sin. That's what the cross is. It's Christ, fully God, fully man, taking our penalty for sin upon himself so that we might be righteous—without sin—in God's sight—not because of something we've done but because of his grace and mercy. If you've never received God's grace by faith in giving you what you don't deserve then you won't be able to love this way.
- But even if God owns you and your life now belongs to Him it's no guarantee you'll love this way. A wise man once put it like this. “Experience proves that a man, after opening his heart with faith to the joy of salvation, may soon cease to walk in the way of sanctification, shrink from complete self-surrender, and, while making progress in mystical feeling, become more full of self and devoid of love than he ever was.”¹

Proposition

- **The life of love God calls us to can only happen with the Holy Spirit's help**
- May self decrease. Daily, hourly, may God fill us with his Spirit up and overflowing so that we might live lives of love toward one another, toward our spouses, toward our children, toward our teachers, toward our coworkers, toward our bosses, toward our coaches.
- In context it's almost impossible to miss what Paul's trying to accomplish here. This chapter sits nicely between two sections on spiritual gifts. Obviously, there were two competing forms of spirituality. For the Corinthians being spiritual meant tongues, wisdom, knowledge (and pride), but messed up interpersonal relationships. For Paul being spiritual meant being full of the Holy Spirit, with the emphasis on holy.² As he started the in 1:2, *to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy*. And the supreme

¹ Garland, p. 608 quoting F.L. Godet and vol. 2 commentary on 1 Corinthians.

² Fee, p. 630.

evidence of God's sanctifying work; the supreme evidence of a Spirit filled life is love. Paul's chief purpose here is to dethrone the Corinthian self-centered and warped view of spirituality so that they might love and then be truly spiritual.³ May we learn these lessons from a failed church.

- So what is love? Well, there are...

Organizational Sentence

- **Three declarations about love is in this passage**
- In verses 1-3 Paul declares the absolute necessity of love if a person is to be spiritual. In verses 4-7 he declares in almost poetic form the character of love. And in verses 8-13 Paul declares the permanent, enduring nature of love. **Three declarations about love.**

Background/Setting

- Let me say right up front that that we all have different ideas of what love is. In ordinary conversations we often say things like: I love chocolate or I love math or I love my dog or I love my job. And we often times mean very different things. But more than that. It is all too easy to think of love as some kind of abstract quality.⁴ Maybe it's a [Danielle Steele](#) pie in the sky passionate, romantic kind of thing. Or an internal welling up of emotion. Or even a great philosophical idea like Plato's ideas on love.
- But for Paul and in the world of the Bible love is concrete—it's an action. It's not some ethereal wisp of an idea. It's tangible. It's demonstrable. And Paul's expression of what love is comes from God's example. *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*, Romans 5:8. That is love. Sending. Dying. Forgiving. Action. As [Gordon Fee](#) says, "Love is not an idea for Paul, not even a motivating factor for behavior. It is behavior. To love is to act; anything short of action is not love at all. To have love means to act toward others the way God in Christ has acted toward us."⁵ God's love for us is a love of the utterly unlovely. His love for us is lavished on us regardless of whether or not we are worthy of receiving it.⁶ In fact, we're not worthy. We don't deserve God's love. We deserve eternal conscious punishment. And yet he loves. May God be praised for his glorious grace!

Transition

Let's look at the [first great declaration](#) about love from [verses 1-3](#). Listen. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is absolutely essential to being truly spiritual.*

Main Points

³ Garland, p. 608.

⁴ Fee, p. 628.

⁵ Fee, p. 628.

⁶ Morris, p. 177.

- What strikes me most about these verses is that you can do the deeds of a saint and still be a spiritual zero in God’s eyes.⁷ Do you hear me? Big fat goose egg. In fact, it doesn’t matter what you do in Christ’s name, if your heart is loveless, in God’s eyes you’re a spiritual nobody.
- Paul uses four conditional sentences to make his point. Four *if* sentences, to convey how essential love is to spirituality. *If I speak in tongues. If I have the gift of prophecy. If I have a faith that can move mountains. If I give all I possess to the poor.* And I think Paul has tailored this list to the Corinthian situation. He lists things they probably thought were the pinnacle, the mountain top of spirituality.
- Personally, you might not consider the things Paul lists as super-spiritual things; maybe you do, I don’t know. Substitute in place of these four things whatever you think makes someone a spiritual giant—a saint. Paul’s point is still the same. No love. Spiritual zero.
- For instance. You speak in tongues? Good. You speak in tongues without love—it’s like banging a gong or a crashing cymbal. If you don’t know what banging gongs and crashing clashing cymbals sound like may I suggest you hang around after the service and listen to my five year old and two year old play the drums. In other words, the best speech of earth or heaven, without love, is only noise.⁸ It grates on God’s ears. Spiritual zero.
- You have the gift of prophecy? Great. You understand the deep mysteries of God? Fabulous. You have mountain moving faith? Wonderful. You parcel out your possessions to the poor? Awesome. You preach fine sermons? You lead great worship? You teach Sunday School? You’ve left home and family for the mission field? Bravo. Well done. No love? Spiritual goose egg. How much of what you do in Christ’s name for your family, for others, for the community is done without love?
- I don’t know what’s more sobering about these verses—that it’s possible, for instance, to be generous to the point of the poorhouse and be completely lacking in love.⁹ That’s a scary thought. Or that I’ve been a Christian for 24 years now and the quality of my love for others is so conditional, so tepid. I don’t know which is scarier. All I know is that love is absolutely essential to spirituality.

Transition

One of my favorite jazz albums is [John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*](#). When Coltrane plays his saxophone, in my imagination, he’s put to music [verses 4-7](#). Verses 4-7 are a love supreme. The [second declaration](#) about love is its character. What is it? *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

- Let’s read these verses together aloud except this time substitute your name in place of the word love. For instance, Eric is patient, Eric is kind. And when you read these four verses think about your marriage. Think about your relationship with your parents or your kids. The people sitting next to you. Your arch enemy. The person who drives you nuts. The

⁷ Thisleton, p. 1042.

⁸ Morris, p. 178.

⁹ Morris, p. 179.

customer at the counter. Ready? *Eric is patient, Eric is kind. Eric does not envy, Eric does not boast, Eric is not proud. 5 Eric is not rude, Eric is not self-seeking, Eric is not easily angered, Eric keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Eric does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 Eric always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

- Let's do it one more time. This time substitute Jesus for the word love and think about the girl who's addicted to drugs. The guy who beats his wife. The woman who sleeps around. The teenager who's hooked on porn. The child who lies through his teeth. The lazy man who's a sponges. Your ex-wife. Your ex-husband. Think about your character flaws, and those things for which you repeatedly ask forgiveness. *Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy, Jesus does not boast, Jesus is not proud. 5 Jesus is not rude, Jesus is not self-seeking, Jesus is not easily angered, Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Jesus does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* Our love is pathetic but God's love for us through Christ is beyond comparison.
- I want to take a few minutes to talk about each of the phrases in this section. By the way, our English translation makes it sound like Paul lists a whole bunch of adjectives that describe love. Actually the words Paul uses are verbs—action. Love is an action. Not a feeling. Not an emotion. Not an idea. If you aren't doing these things your love is incomplete. To love this way is to imitate God.
- *Love is patient.* What is love? It's longsuffering. It holds out. It takes a long time before fuming and breaking into flames.¹⁰ It waits, and waits, and waits and withholds. It's what God does for us in Romans 9:22 *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction? Are you impatient with those around you or are you quick to fume?*
- *Love is kind.* Love responds to others with a tender heart.¹¹ Oh, how we need to be more kind with each other. Think about the way in which you talk to people? Is there a tender heart behind your words or are you harsh and brash and full of edges? God is kind. He is so gentle with us. Romans 2:4 *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?*
- *It does not envy.* Love does not boil with envy. As one commentator put it, "Love does not allow fellow believers to be in rivalry or competition, either for 'vaunted positions' or to curry people's favor...[or] adherents. Indeed, it seeks quite the opposite: How best do I serve these for whom Christ died, [irrespective of] my own desires?"¹²
- *It does not boast.* Love is not conceited—it doesn't brag or call attention to self. Love is not showy it's behind the scenes.
- *It is not proud.* Love is not arrogant. It doesn't puff a person up like a pair of bellows.¹³ It's humble.
- *It is not rude.* Love does not behave improperly. Love is tactful and does nothing that would raise a blush.¹⁴

¹⁰ Reinecker, p. 432.

¹¹ Garland, p. 617.

¹² Fee, p. 637.

¹³ Reinecker, p. 432.

¹⁴ Reinecker, p. 432.

- *It is not self-seeking.* Love does not seek its own. Love is not enamored with self-gain, self-justification, or self-worth.¹⁵
- *It's not easily angered.* Love is not irritable and touchy. It's not moody and easily provoked by others.¹⁶
- *It keeps no record of wrongs.* Love keeps no tally. It has a short memory, like God. *Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him.*¹⁷ Some of you have been holding on to things way too long. Like years too long. Like weeks too long. Like days too long. Give it up. Let it go.
- *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* Do you like to see other people struggle and suffer and fail?
- *It always protects.* “Love conceals what is displeasing in another.”¹⁸ Not blind to something seriously wrong but always covers and doesn't notice the wrong in others.
- And it *always trusts.* Love always sees the best in others—is eager to believe the best. Love keeps believing in other people.
- It *always hopes.* Love refuses to give in to failure in God or in other people or even in God's sanctifying work in your own life. Love is confident in God and his promises.
- And lastly, it *always perseveres.* Like a roof under a load of snow “love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.”¹⁹ In the words of [V. Raymond Edman](#), former president of Wheaton College, “It's always too soon to quit.”²⁰ On people, on a calling, whatever. It is the character of love to put up with everything.
- What kind of lover are you?

Transition

The [third declaration](#) about love is its permanence. Listen to [verses 8-13](#). *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.*

- The most permanent thing you can do is love. The most enduring thing you can do is love. The greatest legacy you can leave is not a big bank account but how you've loved. The greatest gift you can give your children is to teach them to love. Your health is not permanent. Your marriage is not permanent—it won't endure into eternity. Even your spiritual gifts will cease at Christ's second coming should we live to see his return. But love

¹⁵ Fee, p. 638.

¹⁶ Reinecker, p. 432.

¹⁷ Psalm 32:2.

¹⁸ Morris, p. 181.

¹⁹ Garland, p. 619.

²⁰ V. Raymond Edman, [Men of Integrity](#), Vol. 1, no. 1.

will last forever. And because of love's enduring permanent nature it is to be valued as an action, as a goal, as an end more than anything else.

- Paul gives here three analogies to make his point about the permanence of love. All three analogies contrast the present with the future. In verses 8, 9 and 10 Paul singles out three of the spiritual gifts, tongues, prophecy and knowledge—it could be any of them or all of them—and indicates that *when the perfect comes*, when Christ returns at his second coming the gifts, all of them, will cease. The church no longer needs to be built up at that point. The gifts which were essential to the edification of the church aren't needed in eternity. To quote [Karl Barth](#), 'because the sun rises all lights are extinguished.'²¹ And Paul's point is that love is the one light that endures.
- The analogy of childhood and adulthood, the second illustration Paul gives in verse 11, is not a commentary on the childishness of tongues or prophecy as things that need to be grown out of. Paul's point is that childish behavior is appropriate in childhood. The gifts are appropriate now. But in adulthood childish behavior is done away with. In the church's final existence the gifts are inappropriate. But love is both now and forever.
- Finally the illustration of a mirror. Corinth was famous as a producer of some of the finest bronze mirrors in antiquity.²² No glass then. Mirrors were polished metal. But mirrors, even the best of them, distort. They reverse right and left. They limit what you can see because of their size and their reflection is indirect, it's in part.
- We recently purchased a web cam. It is very satisfying to sit in front of the computer and talk, for free by the way, to my sister or parents in Cincinnati. It's almost like talking to them in person. But it's not quite the same as being face to face.
- In the same way, our present 'vision' of God as the one who loves us through Christ, as great as that is, is as nothing when compared to the real thing that is yet to be. The Christian knows a little of what love is—right now we know in part—and every scientific laboratory in the world confirms the truth of that statement. But there will come a time when those who trust in Christ will see love face to face. Not like in a mirror or a web cam which is imperfect and distorted and incomplete. We will fully know what love is just as God fully knows us now. He knows you better than yourself. One day, if the righteousness of Christ is the basis for your standing before God, you will know the fullness of his love—forever. *Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; his love endures forever.*²³
- *And now these three remain: faith hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Conclusion

- **The life of love God is calling us to this morning can only happen with the Holy Spirit's help.** The measure of a man is the measure of his love. Small men, small women, small meaning inconsequential, they love little. I don't want to be like that. Nor do I want to be stuck always loving in the way I love now. I want to grow in love. [A.W. Tozer](#) once wrote, "Think about people who find themselves in religious ruts. They discover a number of things about themselves. They will find that they are getting older but not getting any holier. Time is their enemy, not their friend. The time they trusted and looked to is betraying them, for they often said to themselves, "The passing of time will help me. I know some good old

²¹ Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (ET, London, 1933), p. 86 quoted by Fee, p. 646.

²² Fee, p. 647-8.

²³ 1 Chronicles 16:34

saints, so as I get older I'll get holier and better. Time will help me, purify me and revive me." They said that the year before last, but they were not helped any last year. Time betrayed them. They were not any better last year than they had been the year before."²⁴

- Another year is about to end. Has your love for God and for others grown or are you in a religious rut? What will you say a year from now? May God grow our love in all ways. Let's pray.

²⁴ A. W. Tozer in Rut, "Rot or Revival," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 38, no. 3.