

## **The Still More Excellent Way**

### **1 Corinthians 13**

Good morning. We will be continuing our series through 1 Corinthians with the famous chapter 13, the love chapter.

This is the second time I've preached on this passage in my life, and in both instances the prospect has been overwhelming. The reason for this has to do with the profound importance of this text, and my desire to do it even a sliver of justice. I have thought more than once that if I could only preach on one passage for the rest of my life, this would be it. Because I believe that if we really understood and took this chapter to heart, seeking to work it out in our lives, it would cure so many of the ills we perpetrate upon one another and our neighbors. And, as we will see, it is no exaggeration to say that if we are not committed to living out our faith in the way this chapter invites us to, then we are wasting our time, and whatever it is we are trying to build or accomplish is not the Kingdom or mission of God.

So, please hear me: this chapter is very near the beating heart of what it means to be a Christian. What it calls us to is non-negotiable, if we want to follow and serve Jesus. It calls us to an approach that is essential to the health of the Body of Christ; we cannot be the Church Jesus wants us to be without the love described in this chapter. Which is why Paul locates it here in his letter to the Corinthians.

This chapter on love is sandwiched in the middle of Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. In chapter 12, as Pastor Grant walked us through a couple weeks ago, Paul paints the picture of the Body of Christ, formed by the Spirit of various members with diverse gifts and roles bound together by the Spirit in Christ. In chapter 14, Paul will continue to show how the Body is supposed to operate, specifically when it is gathered together with all those gifts and roles being carried out somewhat simultaneously. The big question is: how is such a diverse combination of members supposed to operate as a unified whole?

I mean, have you ever stopped to consider just how diverse our body parts are? Can you name a single similarity between an eye and a foot? The only thing those two parts have in common is that they both belong to the body. And this is the image Paul draws on to describe what the Church is *supposed to be like*. You and I should not be surprised to find then, that some of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ are *very* different than us. Some of you are *very* different than me. And that's not a defect, that's the deliberate design of the Spirit. And yet, those differences so often divide us. But Paul's point in chapter 12, as he envisions the Body, is that we *need* each other, that we are *better together because* of our differences.

So, in chapter 13, he is going to show us the love required to live according to that reality, because, as he says in Colossians 3:14, it is love that binds us together in perfect harmony, without it we cannot and will not hold together as His Body.

We first need to remind ourselves of what Paul says at the end of chapter 12, because it sets up what he's trying to do in chapter 13. 1 Corinthians 12:31 says, "But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way."

It's difficult to know which gifts from chapter 12 Paul considers to be "higher" than the others, but he nonetheless encourages the Corinthians to seek after those gifts. So, he sets up this hierarchy of higher and lower things, and then he says there is something better than even the highest gifts. He says there is a more excellent way of doing things than fixating on spiritual gifts, and that is what he is going to get at in chapter 13.

As important as gifts are, love is in a whole other category of importance. That seems to be how Paul talks about it here at the end of 12. Not just as a more excellent gift (although you could perhaps think of it that way too), but as a more excellent way of approaching everything. In fact, it is love that enables spiritual gifts to be truly valuable, as Paul starts 13 by saying.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and

understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Please let what Paul says here sink in. First, he describes someone possessing what seems to have been in the Corinthian church (and is in many churches today) considered one of the “highest” spiritual gifts, the gift of tongues. This person can miraculously speak other languages of men and angels. Second, he describes someone of great knowledge and miraculous faith, who can explain the deepest mysteries of theology and can work great miracles. Third, he describes someone of great sacrificial service, who sells everything to follow Jesus, and even dies as a martyr. If we knew people who exhibited this level of gifting, we would doubtless think them heroic saints, in fact, we *do* think this of gifted individuals all the time in our culture. And yet, Paul says you can do any or all of those things and have it count for nothing. If done devoid of love, those things count for nothing.

Notice how you can see many modern churches in these descriptions. The charismatic church, the teaching and preaching church, and the social service church; these are all prevalent church types today. What we all need to hear is that no matter *what* we do, if it is not done *in* and *for* love, it is a waste of time.

So often as Christians we get caught up in the *what* we’re doing to the neglect of the *how* and the *why* behind what we’re doing. For instance, we might think, “We just need to preach the truth.” But then we do so in a way that lacks love in all the characteristics Paul will describe, and so people do not hear the truth as good news, because it’s devoid of love. We should preach truth, of course, but *how* and *why* we preach truth matters just as much, if not more than the actual act of preaching. And the same could be said about exercising the gifts of the Spirit, great displays of faith, and great acts of service. Again, don’t miss the gravity of what Paul is saying here: it does not matter *what* we do, if it isn’t done in love, it’s worthless or worse. Now Paul moves on to describe what characterizes the love he has in mind in verses 4-7.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

And there it is, one of the best definitions, if not the best definition of love ever written. First, love is patient. Patience is the first characteristic of love, because without it the rest is impossible. It's easy to be kind for one second. It's the next second and the third second, and so on where love gets challenging, right? If you're wondering how patient love is, just consider how patient God has been with humanity in general, and with you in particular, and you'll have an idea of the patience called for here.

Second, love is kind. This seems so absurdly obvious and basic, and yet it must be said: Christians are called to be kind. Again, absurdly obvious and basic, but how often is unkindness perpetrated by those calling themselves Christians. There will be times when tough love is needed, and may not be perceived as kindness, but even then, all should be done in genuine kindness, and, generally speaking, I would say what we do should be perceived as kind.

Third and fourth, love does not envy or boast. These two characteristics are clearly shared with the Corinthian tendency to elevate certain people, gifts, and roles in mind, which has been well-documented throughout the letter. The point is this, there will be people who are more gifted than us in any number of ways, and we are called to be grateful to God for the gifts they bring to the Body, not envious. Conversely, we will be more gifted than others in any number of ways, and we are called to use those gifts to humbly serve them, not boast about our supposed superiority.

Similarly, love is not arrogant or rude. Whatever the level of our relative gifting compared to the gifting of others, we are to relate to them humbly and respectfully. Love recognizes that our gifts do not justify us viewing or carrying ourselves as intrinsically better than anyone else; they are gifts, which implies our possession of them has nothing to do with us having earned them in some way, and so we have no grounds to be arrogant.

Love also recognizes that every person carries tremendous innate value, even if their gifts are not ones that are typically viewed as especially great, and so it is not rude. One of our church values is a value for people, which says that we value every person as made in the image of God and every Christ-follower as an essential part of his body, the Church. Those identities, image bearer of God and essential member of Christ's Body, are things of unspeakable honor that are grounded most deeply in the grace of God, not our respective abilities, and so to be rude to any fellow image-bearer and/or Body member is a flagrant disrespect and disregard of that reality. Ultimately it is disrespectful to God who created each person, and the Spirit who gifted and placed each person how He wanted.

Next, love does not insist on its own way and is not irritable or resentful when it doesn't get it. To force, coerce, or manipulate others is fundamentally unloving. If a woman agrees to marry a man because he put a gun to her head, that marriage is not based on love. Force is not in the nature of love, and therefore, love does not insist on its own way.

And since love does not insist on its own way, that means it will very often not get its own way, and in those moments, it is not irritable or resentful. We become irritable when things do not seem to be going our way, don't we? But love doesn't, it graciously lets things go when the time comes. And after things don't go love's way it doesn't become bitter about it. The NIV translates this as "it keeps no record of wrongs". Love does not hold onto hurts or disappointments in order to pull them out at a later date as ammunition, or to fuel the internal pity parties to which we are all so prone. It is not resentful.

Perhaps those last few points make you wonder, "So love just doesn't care about what's right and what's wrong then?" To which Paul says love does not rejoice at wrong but with the truth. Just because love does not insist on its own way, does not mean it does not care about which way is right and true. Love grieves when wrong is done, which is also why it rejoices when truth is realized. This means that love will often call us to seasons of grievous waiting. I know there are many in this room who know exactly what I'm talking about. To those of you who have a loved one living wrongfully in some way, deaf to all

pleas and loving witnesses to the truth, be encouraged: to prayerfully grieve the wrong and wait for that loved one to come to see the truth is an operation of love, and the God who is love waits and grieves with you.

Finally, love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things. In case you hadn't picked up on this yet, love is not terribly easy, and so it must be resilient. Love willingly bears hurts, slights, disappointments, and so on. Love believes all things, giving the benefit of the doubt, believing what people say, giving them a chance to honor what they've said. Love hopes all things; it is not pessimistic but believes God can work in any situation and acts according to that hope. And because giving the benefit of doubt and hoping for the best will inevitably lead to disappointment at times, love endures all things.

Love requires vulnerability, there's no way around it. It opens us to the possibility of being taken advantage of, which means at times we will be taken advantage of. But don't let that reality convince you to not be loving; rather, like Jesus who continued to love those who took advantage of Him, endure, because you are participating in something divine and eternal. Look at verses 8-13.

"Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 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. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

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

Paul begins these verses stating that love will never end; in other words, it is an eternal thing. He then contrasts it to prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, all of which he says will one day come to an end. Once again, Paul is making the point to the Corinthians that the love he's just described is of a superior order than the spiritual gifts they so value. One day prophecy, tongues, and

knowledge will go away, because they will no longer be needed, but love will remain for eternity.

Paul then sets up a contrast between the here and now and eternity. In the here and now we only know bits and pieces of God and His reality, and so we necessarily can only prophesy (and exercise our other gifts) in bits and pieces as well. But when we are brought into the immediate presence of the perfect God, those partial things will be superfluous and will pass away.

When the meal comes, you no longer need the menu. A menu is designed to give you some inkling or imagining of what a meal will be like, but to actually eat the meal is a far superior order of experience. This is something like the difference between what we can know now, and what it will be like to actually experience eternity with Jesus. Paul then lays out a couple of analogies to stress this change in experience.

First, he gives the analogy of moving from childhood to adulthood. There's nothing wrong with children being childish in their speech, thought, and reasoning. But when one reaches adulthood, those things should change.

Love is the difference between carrying out our roles within the Body as children and as adults. We are all gifted, but those gifts can be exercised with immaturity or maturity. Immaturity is marked by impatience, petulance, envy, boasting, arrogance, rudeness, a need to get one's own way, irritability, resentfulness, an indifference toward what is actually right and true, and a victim mentality that thinks the worst of others, is pessimistic, and gives up easily. Is that not the portrait of a child's character? It's just the opposite of the description of love we've just looked at. In children that's expected. In an adult, such a character is troubling, and yet how many of us struggle with those attitudes? And, of course, maturity looks like the opposite of that portrait, the love already described.

There are many examples of people with great gifts who lack mature love in Christian culture. Great preachers, teachers, evangelists, and more who truly benefit the Church. The sad part is they also leave a trail of hurt, disillusioned, ex-admirers, and at times ex-believers, in their wake, often

because they valued their gifts over loving the people for whom Christ died. They are children in need of growing up.

The second analogy Paul offers is the difference between seeing a person in a mirror and seeing them face to face. In Paul's day mirrors were polished pieces of metal that varied greatly in their clarity. Paul seems to have an unclear mirror in mind here as the word translated "dimly" in verse 12 is the Greek word from which we derive our English word "enigmatic". It typically refers to a riddle or a puzzle of some kind. Paul's use here creates the picture of someone puzzling over a hazy reflection. If you've ever looked at your reflection in the back of a spoon, you'll have some idea of what he's getting at. Such is our view of things in this life, Paul says, and especially without love. If you do not understand what the love of God is like, and that we are called to be vehicles of that love, you will be severely limited in your ability to know Him and recognize His work in the world. Love clears away the smudges and polishes the metal, revealing God and His ways more clearly.

In these analogies, Paul is doing two things. First, as I've tried to point out, he's trying to show the difference between living with and without love. Second, as I said he's comparing our experience now with what our experience will be like in eternity, but in so doing he's drawing out the implication that love is a thing from beyond our world. He's saying that we will have our time on this earth, using our gifts the best we can, understanding things the best we can, but eventually all that is partial will pass away as we enter the fullness of eternal reality, just as our childhood passed away at our entrance into adulthood. But love will not pass away. Why? Because love is a thing native to that eternal reality. Indeed, according to 1 John 4, God *is* this kind of love.

So, while faith, hope, and love make up the pillars of Christianity, the greatest is love because it is the only one that will never end. Eventually, faith will turn to sight, and hope will turn to fulfillment. But love will endure eternally. So, here's the incredible reality that implies: love is a thing of eternity we can experience and participate in now.

Paul gives the Corinthians this vision of love to show them how to carry out their gifts on earth as they will one day in heaven. He will go on in chapter



14 to show how love, for God and neighbor, will at times limit the expression of gifts. Because it is by submitting our gifts, and indeed our whole selves, to this kind of love, and to the God who is love, that allows us to contribute to the common good instead of detracting from it. So, here's our main idea: The more excellent way of love is a present participation in eternal reality, which enables the Church to function as a unified, mutually edifying whole for the good of others and the glory of God.

For application, I would simply encourage you to examine yourself. Again, this message is not so much about *what* we do, as it is about *how* and *why* we do what we do. So, I would simply ask: do you carry out your role within the Body and the world in a loving way, as defined by 1 Corinthians 13, and because you love God and the people with whom you interact? Because if you're not, I'm sorry to say, your efforts are wasted.

I know that's a hard thing to consider. As Christians, often one of the hardest things to do is to be honest with ourselves. We know the answers we're supposed to give, and they're easy to claim in theory. It's easy to think, "Oh yeah, I'm a loving person..." but have our lives show something different. And so, it's important to recognize that the *actual* value of what we do is directly proportionate to the love we do it with in *actuality*, not just theory.

Which means it is important to honestly answer the question: in regard to acting in love, what does my heart and life show in practice? How do I measure up to this definition of love in my *actual* feelings and *actual* conduct toward others? If we're being honest, and using that standard, we'll surely recognize that we fall short to varying degrees. But that should be neither a condemnation, nor an excuse. It's not a condemnation, because Jesus *did* measure up, and if you trust Him, you have been gifted His righteousness, the righteousness that comes by faith.

It ought not be an excuse either, in the sense that we can say, "We all fall short, it's just the way it is..." as though it were fine to settle for that reality. First of all, do you really want to settle for that reality when an ever-expanding taste of eternity is offered to you? And second, we are told to keep pursuing Christ until He is fully realized in our lives, as Paul says in Philippians 3:12-14 in

reference to the resurrection to new life Jesus came to give us, which is a life characterized by this kind of love, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

What this means in regard to what we’ve been looking at is that those who follow Jesus are invited deeper into the love of God, both to experience and express it. We all are invited to walk in the still more excellent way.