

Series: Corinthians, a Church in Progress

Sermon #6: The Most Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13

Dr. Matt Cassidy – April 4, 2022

This week Paul says, *I will show you the most excellent way*. Let's study that.

It was G. K. Chesterton who certainly was one of the first adults that came to make famous and understand the power of fairy tales for grownups: the values that they had, the lessons they taught for all of life—that you should live wisely, shrewdly, and maintain your innocence. You could defeat the devil without being like the devil himself. They exalt courage, they shame cowardice—you can see that in fairy tales. And he wanted adults to take notice of that.

Probably his favorite fable was “Beauty and the Beast.” And the reason he enjoyed that story so immensely was because of the theme that unlovely things must be deeply loved before they become lovable. Unlovely things (the Beast) must be deeply loved before they become lovable. Because it's based on a true story—unlovely things (me, you) must be deeply loved—“For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Love has the power to absolutely change a human soul. Love, a deep love, *agape* love in the Bible, can make unlovely things lovable.

If you just have a brief understanding of Christianity or just a passing view of the Bible, you'll see that love is the theme of that. The power of love, the power of God's love, is the story of the Bible.

When somebody asks Jesus, “How are we supposed to live?”

He said, “Well, let's love. Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, with all of your strength, with all of your might.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yes—more love. Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Someone asked, “How are we going to distinguish ourselves from everyone else?”

And Jesus said, “People are going to know that you are my disciples by the way you love one another.”

John, a disciple, said, “Everyone who loves has been born of God and loves God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”

Peter said, “Above all else, love each other, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

The writer the Apostle Paul said, “Make love your aim. The goal of our instruction is to love.” He says, “Of all these things that remain---faith, hope and love—the greatest of these is love.”

Agape Love

In all of these examples of the teachings of the New Testament, the love that they’re talking about is *agape* love. That’s the Greek word. And it’s not to be confused with other types of love. This love is not emotional; it is a choice. It’s sacrificial in nature, it is unconditional in its declaration of *I will love you*. It is a filter that we use to make decisions about how we treat one another. It’s putting another person’s good ahead of yours. It’s seeking out someone else’s best interests for them. Cover to cover, the Bible is about love. This church is about love, loving each other. Life itself is about love. And the way ministry is to be scored is, *Is there love?*

And so, if we’re going to talk about love, we have to talk about 1 Corinthians 13. It is the chapter called “the love chapter.” You are probably familiar with 1 Corinthians 13. It’s been read a billion times at weddings. What’s interesting is that’s not even remotely the context of why Paul wrote it. It wasn’t like Paul said, *Boy, you know what would be good is a chapter on love that people could read at weddings.*

So, this chapter 13 that we’re going to look at ... chapter 12 is on gifts, supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit that we are supposed to use for each other, to help each other and to build up the church. And the church is a mess, and so they take these gifts that are to be used for good and they add arrogance and pride and unresolved conflict. Their use of the gifts is disastrous. They’re not being used the way they were meant to be. So, that’s chapter 12.

Chapter 13 is the love chapter. And then in chapter 14 he talks about gifts again. So, the whole context is gifts, because when he’s talking about gifts in chapter 14 he’s talking about gifts from God being misused again. If you can imagine God having a huge banquet as a gift for a church with tables and cloths and linen and place settings that are china and flatware that is silverware, and the church says, *Okay, ready ... eat!* The next thing you know it’s like a prison cafeteria fight and God is thinking, *Look, I didn’t give you that knife to stab someone. It’s for the*

roast. And that's what's happening. That's why Paul puts this chapter in the middle of two chapter on gifts that are supposed to be for the good of the church. He puts love right in the middle, not for weddings—it's for difficult people in difficult churches that are turning trivia into reasons to divide and are holding grudges. Their egos and their selves are being inflated. There's resentment and bitterness. And Paul says, *Hey, I want to show you that the most excellent way is love.* That's how chapter 13 gets in the book.

Chapter 13 is in three major sections and each section is going to tell us more unique things about this agape love.

Love Is How God Keeps Score

And the first division is going to tell us that love is the way that God keeps score. That's what matters. He's going to say, *Look, if you can speak a bunch of languages and even angelic languages, but you don't have love, it's going to sound like a fire alarm. And if you have wisdom, knowledge, and even faith, but you don't have love, no one cares. God doesn't care. If you give away everything you own and even your life is martyred but you don't have love, you wasted everything. It doesn't matter. It doesn't count.*

1 Corinthians 13:1

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

In verse 1 it says, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and do not have love, I am ..."---this is like my essence---" ... a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." Imagine if you had the ability to sing or talk like angels or you knew many languages.

Diana Ross was in town last night. I'm sure some of you saw my wife there. If she had a duet, Diana Ross and James Taylor—both angelic voices, I might say—if they sang a duet together without love, it's going to sound like a fire alarm. You're not going to want to hear any of it. It doesn't count. It's an "I am" gong.

1 Corinthians 13:2

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 do not have love, I am nothing.

In the next sentence it says, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have the faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”

In other words, if you had all this kind of wisdom and knowledge so that you could have everything and do everything and win everything, Paul says you’re losing. “I am nothing.” And faith to move mountains—this is the sort of person that starts seminaries and world relief organizations and orphanages and has this touch. But without love—I know this is the sort of person we write biographies about—but without love, there will be a biography written. But you’re not going to like the way it sounds. As a matter of fact, look at the biography of Bob Pierce, the man who invented World Vision and who invented Samaritan’s Purse. The book is written by his surviving daughter, the one who didn’t commit suicide, because he had no love. “I am nothing,” Paul says---not without love.

1 Corinthians 13:3

I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Verse 3 says, “If I give away all that I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing from that.” If you see a need to help the homeless or the impoverished and you don’t give just savings or interest—you empty your pockets, you give principal and interest—all of that—away, still not enough. *I will give my body to the flames.* But without love—*nada*.

I can tell you this. Those three men in the Old Testament, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that went into the flames for God—you wouldn’t know their names and they

wouldn't be heroes and they wouldn't have been lionized without love. God doesn't need people to give themselves over without love.

Everything – Love = Nothing

So, if you need a formula, Paul has it right here. This is his math. He says, “Everything minus love equals nothing.” And I think he would probably say, *You know, if you just had a little bit of love, that would be everything.* That's how God keeps score. That's the whole point. That's how God keeps score. Supernatural talents and abilities? Not impressed. Amazing faith that can move a mountain over? [*Yawns audibly.*] Whatever. Generosity to the point of even giving over your very life? The angels didn't even notice. Without love, it says, “I am nothing” and “I gain nothing.” I am nothing and none of it counts.

So, you're probably thinking, *So, how do I get this type of love, this agape unconditional, unrelenting love?* Let me tell you where not to go. I've done all of these. Trying harder doesn't work. Reading books on how you need to be a more generous lover—uh-uh. Honing in on love techniques? Still nothing. Even guilt—I've got pretty good guilt running around in me. It's generational. I still can't make this happen.

And here's the reason: because *agape* love I don't have. No one does. *Agape* love is from God. And God has to give you this love, because He sparks it and He fuels it and He stokes it and He keeps that going. The model of *agape* love is that you receive the love of God and your cup runs over onto other people. So, it's not about acquiring it; it's about receiving it.

John says, “This is love, not that we loved God, but God loved us.”

Paul says, “It is the love of God that compels me.” Paul's not running on his own love. He's running on the love of God, the *agape* love of God that is fueling him to do these things. It's borrowed. It's not from here; it's from heaven. It's not within us; it's within the Spirit that might be within us.

So, you can't just muster it up. So, here's what I would consider. What we need to do to have this overflowing kind of *agape* love that we receive and then it overflows ... it would be great to have the discipline of how much God loves me. Because then I'll be able to love others that same way. The discipline of how God loves me ...

And I would suggest that you start a journal and then open your Bible to the Book of John and start reading through it. And when you see these encounters that people would have

with Jesus, that encounter is not with whoever he or she might be. That encounter is with you. Just travel back in time and put yourself in their situation and say, *That's what He would do. That's how He would love me.* That visualization of that kind of love can't be contained. That's *agape* love. That's what Paul is telling us here. That's how it's obtained so that it might be distributed by us.

His first part is about how God keeps score. He's not impressed with things unless those things have *agape* love all throughout them.

What Love Is and What Love Is Not

In the second section in this chapter, he's going to define love. He's going to help us understand what love is and what it is not. This love is essential to ministry and to life, so he's going to make sure we know what it is. He's going to make sure that we know how. What I love about it is that he's going to use attributes so that we know how to give it out at school and work and on your street and in whatever your hobbies might be. This is the shoe leather part of love so that we know what it looks like.

Paul's going to hold up the diamond of love and he's going to spin it and let the light hit it so that it casts different prisms so that we can enjoy its multi-faceted nature.

What I've done with this passage here is that I've italicized those things that we are to do, and I've underlined those things that love is not, just for the sake of clarity.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, or resentful. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

So, look what it says in verses 4 through 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, or resentful*. Love does not *delight in evil* but *rejoices with the truth*. It *always* *protects*, it *always* *trusts*, it *always* *hopes*, it *always* *perseveres*."

The first couple of descriptive words there are like a masthead for the rest, that we are to be patient in order to be kind. And then he looks at eight things we're not to do, things like envy and boasting and being proud. And then he finished with five attributes of God's love, like rejoicing and protecting and enjoying each other.

When you look at what Jesus is best known for, you can see that it is this agape love that causes Him to act in the way that He does. And if you stop and think about it, that is the very nature of the Christian church. And saints have been motivated and fueled by this type of love for centuries that compels them to sacrifice and to surrender and even give up their own lives. They would rather suffer while they give love rather than be comfortable for their own sake.

And you certainly see that in the life of Jesus. If you have a list of things that are most impressive in His story in the biographies of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, He does some miraculous and amazing things. He turns water into wine, He fed thousands upon thousands of people with just leftover food. He walked on water—during a storm, mind you. But I think that what Jesus did that made the angels lose their breath and weep was in the Garden of Gethsemane. When Jesus prayed, “Dear Father, let this cup pass,” He knew that the cross was His fate. He knew it was soon approaching, and He's just asking, *Is this absolutely necessary? Is this what love must do?* And then He says, *Nevertheless, Thy will be done.*

And from there He descended into the heart of darkness. And He did that to separate himself from the presence of His Father for the first time in eternity. And He suffers and dies and is resurrected for love. He did this for love—not for His own comfort.

And so, you and I, because of that act of love, enjoy the presence of God in this life, and absolutely, clearly, in the next life. And we get to call Yahweh (the Old Testament name for God) Father—technically, “Dad”. That's how unlovely things, once deeply loved, can become lovable. That's the power of love.

And the story doesn't end there. Then the Spirit of God indwells our soul, and that Spirit is *agape* love. And that's why we can have *agape* love and do this love everywhere else.

When you stop and you think about walking this tightrope now, when it's more difficult than ever—the tight rope of cultural impact or influence, again, whether it's at work or if you're just connecting with people at the gym—it's difficult because you want to give answers to a time when reason doesn't matter. It's hard to be reasonable in a world where math doesn't add up. And I know how difficult it is, and there's this constant sense of *I'm losing all the time.*

Application

Let me propose something. What if we've just overthought this? What if we've overcomplicated trying to have an apologetic and answer to everything instead of going back to chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians and saying, *Let's give love a run on it and just see where it ends up.* *Agape* love—uncomplicated.

Jerry Bridges is a Christian author, and I love what he says. He's taken these fifteen attributes of love, and then he attaches motive to them and then makes it into a sentence and says, *Well, how do you think this would work in our culture with your friends or your family or even your enemies?*

Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like us to read out loud—I'll show you how this works—read out loud together as a congregation what love looks like mixing it up in the real world. He's going to say, for example—I'm going to show you how he's attaching these attributes to the motive.

I am patient with you because I love you and want to forgive you.

See how they work together?

So, let's do this. Let's read these out loud as a church. We'll start again with patience. Ready? Here we go.

I am patient with you because I love you and I want to forgive you.

I am kind to you because I love you and I want to help you.

I do not envy your possessions or your gifts because I love you and I want you to have the best.

I do not boast about my attainments because I love you and I want to hear about yours.

I am not proud because I love you and want to esteem you before myself.

I am not rude because I love you and care about your feelings.

I am not self-seeking because I love you and I want to meet your needs.

I am not easily angered because I love you and I want to overlook your offenses.

I do not keep a record of your wrongs because I love you, and “love covers a multitude of sins.”

Yeah. Wow, right? Wow. Let's see what would happen if the Church globally did that.

Love is required. That's how God keeps score.

Love Is Eternal

This is the definition of what love is. And then Paul's third section in chapter 13 says that love is eternal.

In the debate of the value of what is permanent and what is passing, it is easy to just stop and not consider that. I think one of the easiest things we can do—or let me put it another way—one of the hardest choices we have is the choice before the choice. And the choice is to stop and evaluate what is passing and what is eternal, what is permanent. Because if we don't stop and think about that, what happens normally is that we spend our time and our worries and our resources usually on things that are passing. All the while, we're neglecting the things that are permanent and not enjoying those permanent things.

And so, Paul comes in and says, *Wait, let me help you if you're troubled with what's passing and what's permanent. I'm going to tell you what matters. You need to invest in things that are eternal.*

1 Corinthians 13:8-13

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 completeness comes, what is in part 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 the ways of childhood behind me.

¹² For now we see only a 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.

And so, this last section he just lays it out. Look what he says, especially in the context of all these gifts that have been given. He says, "Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they're going to cease; and where there are tongues, they're going to be stilled; and where there's

knowledge, it's just going to pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes (when the completeness comes), what is in part disappears. 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 the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a 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 by God right now." Here it goes. "And now these three things remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

It is a simple mistake to make to believe that human beings are passing, not permanent. Some of us get as many as nine decades to live. And while that is just a fact of life, while we continue to pass away, civilizations continue, countries maintain, governments still exist. And so, we find ourselves spending time and energy and worry in governments and cultures and civilizations. And Paul comes in and says, *No, no, you have this completely backwards. These values that you have are nonsense. People are eternal. They're the ones that matter. Because soon enough all the suns are going to burn out and the planets are going to stop their rotations and civilizations are going to crumble. And cultures will cease to exist. Government?—gone. Humans, made in the very image of God, are everlasting. They're eternal. They're permanent.*

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked with a mere mortal. It is immortals who we joke with and work with and worry with and marry and snub and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

--- C. S. Lewis

C. S. Lewis is trying to help us understand the value of a human soul regardless of their appearance in *The Weight of Glory*. Look what he says: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked with a mere mortal. It is immortals who we joke with and work with and worry with and marry and snub and exploit. There are immortal horrors and there are everlasting splendors." But there are no ordinary people.

God gave His only begotten Son because of *agape* love for the eternal—not for a civilization, not for a culture, not for a government. And that's why we read this: "And now

these three things remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.” Focus on the permanent.

And even look at that sentence. I like what Haddon Robinson says. Dr. Robinson says, “Love gives virtue to the virtues. Faith without love can be calculating.” Hope without love is just expectations that are unrealized. Love gives virtue to these virtues.

Love is the greatest of these, because (in my opinion, anyway) faith and hope are over here. Love, all by itself, is an attribute of God. God is love. And so, it’s greater than any of these other things because God doesn’t have faith. He doesn’t need faith. He knows all things. He doesn’t have hope. All of our future is His past, so He’s not hoping for anything. But like John says, “God is love.” So the greatest of these is love.

And we as believers in Jesus Christ are indwelt with that *agape* love. And it is supposed to overflow into other people’s lives, because the unlovely, once deeply loved, become lovable. It’s a permanent thing, these human beings that are all around us. And love the power to change the people around us.

A famous Scottish writer, George MacDonald (G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis loved his writings), wrote a lot of fiction. And in the context of fiction he wrote mostly about princes and princesses. And it was so prevalent in his writing that somebody just asked him in an interview, “Why do you write so much about princes and princesses?”

And he said, “Well, that’s because a prince and a princess are the children of the king.” That’s us. We’re the children of the king. And so, we should love each other for who we really are—children of the king.

Application

When the perfect comes, that’s Jesus. When He comes, if there’s regret—I don’t know how that works—but if there’s regret, I can tell you what people will NOT regret. No one is going to wish that they would have been more intelligent or been able to expound the Word of God or had a shot at preaching and never had that. I don’t know if that’s going to come up much. I don’t know if anyone is going to say, “Boy, I wish I had spoken in tongues of men or angels.” It won’t matter.

But if I have regret—and I will, if I can—it will be that I did not love; that I did not *agape* love the way I was meant to do and the way I could. I didn’t put other people’s highest

needs above mine. I wasn't kind and generous in manners that I could have been and should have been. I didn't look at my neighbors or the person behind me in the grocery line as anything but an ordinary person.

You and I have almost infinite potential to love people the way Christ loved us, because the Spirit lives within us, and that Spirit is *agape*. It's *agape* love. It's unconditional. It's sacrificial. And it has the power to change people. Unlovely people, once deeply loved, become lovely.

When you look at the brand of Jesus—I mean the brand on His back—the scars—those are scars of love. That's what love looks like. And as followers of Christ, those scars changed us. And as followers of Christ, we're to take that same love and give it out generously and recklessly.

I'd like to pray for our church, and I'd like to pray that the Holy Spirit would come down upon us in a mighty, great way, in a powerful way; that the Spirit of God would overcome us with this love, this *agape* love. And that we would look for opportunities to share that with other people, that we would give and enjoy and appreciate the eternal nature of every set of eyes that we find ourselves staring into. And then we'll just watch and see what God will do when we recklessly *agape* love some unlovables and see the power of the transformation of God's love in a human soul. I'd pray that our church could be an *agape*-loving, sacrificial church. Would you join me in that prayer? Anybody want to pray that prayer with me? You three—you join me.

Lord Jesus, we are grateful that we receive and are receptors of this agape love from the Father through You and Your obedience to the Father. And now we pray to the triune God that the Spirit would overwhelm us with this love; that the spirit of agape love would fall upon us and be in us in such a way that we would see the permanent and the eternal and cast off the temporal and the trivial; that we would love deeply and unconditionally, sacrificially and joyfully; that we'd be a church that is famous for and known for its grace and its love and its joy; and that we would be witnesses to the power of this love as it touches other people's lives and as those who were lost become found, and those who were afraid become courageous, and that those who were paupers become kings and queens, and that we'd witness that; and that would give You glory. We live through the love of the Spirit, the Spirit compels us to live for You. We pray this in Jesus' name. And everybody said ... Amen.