

February 14, 2021

“Love – A More Excellent Way”
1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:7

FCF: Clueless when it comes to love

PROPOSITION: (anchor) God has shown us a “more excellent way,”
(magnet) one in which we must learn to walk.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Historically, Valentine’s Day was the feast day of the third-century martyr, Valentinus of Rome. While not a lot is known about Valentinus, the most widely accepted version is that he ran afoul of emperor Claudius II. Believing that Roman men were unwilling to join the army because of their attachment to their wives and families, Claudius banned marriage. Valentinus defied the emperor by marrying couples in secret. He was caught and executed. Whether things went exactly that way, every ancient reference to Valentinus ties February 14th to his martyrdom.

Over time, his story became identified with love. Again, not a lot is known about Valentinus. If you look around and take time to listen, it’s pretty clear that we don’t know much about love either. What is love? What does it mean to love? Is it possible? And, if so, how?

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:7

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

Some background to the situation in the Corinthian church. By all appearances, they had everything going for them – strong teaching, great giftedness, dynamic worship. But they had not love. They were self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-focused. And it showed. So Paul, knowing all this, wrote them this letter to guide them out of the mess they had made of things.

And it is a letter that needs much reading today. The human heart has not changed. We still struggle with being self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-focused. We still have such little sense as to the need to love. And it shows – in our community, our families, and in the church. We too need to be shown a way out from the hot mess we are continually making of our lives.

We have it. For God has shown us, as Paul notes in the last verse of chapter 12, a “more excellent way.” By that, Paul is not making a comparison but showing a way beyond measure. Here’s the point, the thing we need to press into and let be pressed into us. God has shown us a “more excellent way,” the way of love. And it is the way in which we must all learn to walk.

I. THE PRIORITY OF LOVE

“*Why? Why should we love?*” That’s the first question. And it’s one that speaks to the priority of love. Listen to what Paul says (**READ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3**). Let’s break this down.

A) Over Speech

1. What it is

The people of Corinth treasured eloquent public speakers. They were superstars. And the church was splintering over such spiritual gifts. Love takes priority. Speech without love is nothing.

2. How it lacks

Without such gifts being used for love, we become hollowed out, reduced to something less.

B) Over Knowledge

1. What it is

Paul goes further. Knowledge of God's purposes and plans, of all that there is, is not enough.

2. How it lacks

Such knowledge, great as it may be, is not meant to be the goal. It must be an extension of love.

C) Over Faith

1. What it is

Then there is faith, even the greatest trust in God, relying on Him in the toughest of difficulties.

2. How it lacks

Such faith, good as it may be, is useless and pointless without love. It must serve love.

D) Over Sacrifice

1. What it is

But what of sacrifice, overflowing generosity or even suffering the agonies of martyrdom?

2. How it lacks

They, by themselves, no matter how much pain is involved, are still nothing. Love is the priority.

Without love, all these good things are worse than lessened. They are made nothing.

Illustration:

They become, we become, a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. They may make noise. They may be loud. But that is all. For they communicate nothing. They mean nothing.

Application:

Love must take the priority. It must be the driving force behind even the best things we do. Think over your life. What do you deem to be the most important things you do? What efforts do you take, what sacrifices do you make? It may be volunteering in the community, giving of yourself in the church, at home, or to a certain person. These are all good things. But are all nothing if driven by fear, guilt, for the sake of self. It's all nothing if not done for love.

II. THE PATH OF LOVE

Fair enough. *But what does love look like?* We need to know the path of love (**READ 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**). Not so much a definition but a description, the evidence of love's presence.

A) Positive Expressions

1. Patient

Positively, love is patient. It keeps doing good. It perseveres in the face of difficulties.

2. Kind

Love is also kind. It responds with compassion to those who cause pain. It returns good for evil.

B) Negative Expressions

1. Not envious or boastful

Negatively, love is also seen in how it does not express itself. It is not envious. It delights in the good fortune of others and knows nothing of selfish jealousy. Nor is it boastful or puffed up.

2. Not arrogant or rude

Love is not marked by arrogance. It is humble. Nor is love rude. It does not behave indecently or in a disgraceful manner. It inspires others to be and to do what is good and honorable.

3. Not insisting on its own way

Love does not insist on its own way. It focuses not on self but on the needs of others.

4. Not irritable or resentful

Love is not irritable. It is not quick-tempered, easily provoked to anger. Nor is love resentful. It does not keep account of the wrongs of others but instead delights to not count them at all.

5. Not rejoicing in wrongdoing but with truth

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. It grieves over news that someone has fallen into sin and prays for their restoration. For love rejoices with the truth. It deeply longs for what is good.

C) Universal Expressions

Moving from these negative expressions, we have what I'll call "universal expressions."

1. Bears all things

Love bears all things – forbearing the annoyances others bring and the troubles that they cause.

2. Believes all things

Love believes all things – readily accepting what others say without assuming the worst.

3. Hopes all things

Love hopes all things – yearning and looking for the very best in the life of someone else.

4. Endures all things

Love endures all things – sustaining assaults, even if that brings suffering and persecution.

Again, this is not meant to be a definition of love but a description of its beautiful fruits.

Application:

These are its signs. And with love there are attitudes of the heart. The emotions are in play. We can't say, "I'll love you but I don't have to like you." That is just wrong. It's a copout.

The emotions are involved. But these emotions go far deeper than that of attraction and pleasure. There's movement. These are verbs used here, actions of the whole person. The will is engaged. It is a sacrificial self-giving that seeks the highest good for another. Even if it costs.

III. THE PATTERN OF LOVE

Which brings us to this. The marks of this path and the difficulty of walking such a path make it quite clear we need someone to show us the way. *Where can we find that?* With Jesus.

A) The Incarnation of Christ

1. Not insisting on His rights

Certainly that is reflected in the Incarnation – His becoming man. Not insisting on His rights.

2. But yielding for our sake

But yielding all for our sake. Paul quotes an early hymn on this (**READ Philippians 2:5-7**).

B) The Life of Christ

1. With His people

And this pattern of love is reflected in Jesus' life and ministry as well. Think just of what He endured and the silence He kept in lukewarm synagogue services – bad singing, poor teaching.

2. With His disciples

Or the slowness of His disciples just to understand what He was saying. Much less embrace it.

3. His enemies

Then with His enemies, He was willing to say what needed to be said, whatever it cost Him.

C) The Death of Christ

1. Loving to the end

We see this pattern of love playing out most obviously with His death, loving people to the end. Consider His “seven words” on the cross – expressions of kindness and compassion even there.

2. Modeling His teaching

From the beginning to the end, Jesus perfectly modeled His teaching (**READ Luke 6:27-28**).

Jesus is unlike any other. So consistent, so completely real and truly “authentic.”

Application:

So much so it is no stretch to say that you can take these verses in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and substitute “Jesus” each time you see the word “love” (**REVISED 1 Corinthians 13:4-7**).

Read the Gospels with this in mind. Pray to Him with this in mind. In Him is love.

IV. THE POWER TO LOVE

So thus far, we have love's priority, path, and pattern. But what of its power? Take that same passage and try and insert your own name. It can't be done. We need power to love. And we have it – both through the Spirit of God in us and the love of God for us. Change is possible.

A) The Spirit of God in Us

1. Definitive sanctification

When we embrace what Christ has done for us and turn our lives over to Him, His Spirit comes to dwell within us and He changes us. We are renewed. The old goes and the new comes.

2. Progressive sanctification

A work of restoration begins. Our eyes open. Our desires change. The Spirit is present and His power is at work within us. So we become more like Jesus and grow in what it means to love.

B) The Love of God for Us

And the thing He uses to change us is the the gospel, the love of God for us in Christ.

1. The need to know

Which we need to hear all the time. For the idols of our hearts – all the things we look to for acceptance, security, and comfort outside of God Himself – have a tyrannizing grip upon us.

2. The joy of knowing

But here's the thing. As we grow in the gospel, as the deep questions in our minds about our standing with God all become settled, we become settled deep within. And it flows out of us.

Think of it. Knowing how much we are loved by God frees us to then love others.

Illustration:

A part of spaceflight is breaking free from the force of Earth's gravity. That's how you reach orbit. Then, if you want to get to the moon or out to Mars, you have to break free from the force of Earth orbit. How can you do that? It takes a powerful engine and the right kind of fuel.

Application:

The same is true for us. The love of God for us in Christ is what frees us to love. Think with me about the trouble spots in your relationships. Who comes to mind? This can free you.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you know you are forgiven. And now you have the ability to forgive others. You know you are accepted. And you now have the ability to accept others. You have access to God. And so you can take any need in those relationships to the One who can do all things. In Him, you have hope. And so you can endure whatever difficulty, hardship, or suffering those relationships may bring. The love of God for us in Christ frees us to love.

CONCLUSION:

This is why Paul says this is a "more excellent way" in which we must learn to walk. It is surpassing, beyond measure, a far greater way. We know this intuitively. Our hearts - every one of us - are drawn to it. So how can it take root in our lives? How can we see it flourish?

The question points to the answer. For love to flourish in our lives, it has to take root. It has to be something that happens at a deep level. It might be helpful to think in terms of the opposite. I recently read Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In the story, there's a set of sisters and the most unattractive of them, according to the narrator, is Mary. Mary is the most religious, always lecturing her sisters as to their Christian duty and moral calling. Austen notes ([READ](#)):

Mary in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments of which she was impatient for display. It gave her a pedantic air in a conceited manner. Her religiosity was about her. It didn't go deep. And it just made her harder to live with.

So where does that leave us? For love to take root and to flourish in our lives, it's never ultimately about the works we do but the One we've met. It takes an encounter with the living Jesus, the very embodiment of love, the incarnation of love, God in the flesh. That's what you see happening in the lives of the disciples and all through the history of the Church. Jesus meets us. There's really nothing more to be said than that. If you want to grow in love, go to Jesus.

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