

## 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3 - “A More Excellent Way.”

Now we’ve probably all heard of ‘excellent ways’ before. You’re taking a trip out west and someone says to you – ah, you’ve got to drive the “Icefields Parkway” from Banff to Jasper. Unforgettable drive – there is no more beautiful stretch of road. You could take the Trans Canada and go around, but this, this is the more excellent way. There’s more bang for your buck, you will be awed over and over again by the sheer grandeur of the mountain scenery and you’ll have many opportunities to see wildlife along the way.

That is the more excellent way.

And if we’ve ever travelled that way before the suggestion may not come as much of a surprise to us. Certainly, that is a beautiful stretch of road. But as Paul wrote to the Corinthians of a more excellent way, we can imagine that this *would* have come to them as a great surprise. Paul has just finished speaking of some pretty extraordinary spiritual gifts.

**God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles (or miracle workers), then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues.**

Certainly these were spectacular things! We can just imagine the full pews in the Corinthian church as they have a miracle worker visiting them from Jerusalem. We can think of the unprecedented talk and discussion as a healer is used of God to raise the lame. Wow! What a gift! I wish I could have been given *that*.

And the Corinthian church *had* such gifts in exercise within its walls. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:6-7 of how he gives thanks for the Corinthians **as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in them so that they came short in no gift, eagerly waiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

They had been gifted *abundantly* in these various spiritual gifts. They knew what it was to have authentic speaking in tongues and prophesying in their very midst.

But to this very crowd Paul wrote, and meant (under the inspiration of the Spirit) – **yet I show you a more excellent way.** And it is true. Better than miracles, better than speaking in different languages, better even than faith that moves mountains or men and women willing to give themselves to the martyrs flames – better than all this is the one simple quality we speak of this morning – **Christian love.**

Paul gives three arguments in the chapter to prove that love is the more excellent way. First in verses 1-3 he shows that religion is useless apart from the love of Christ, and therefore love is more excellent than all the externals brought together. Second in verses 4-8 he shows the character of love, in order to prove that love indeed is the more excellent way. And third in vv. 8-13 he shows the abiding nature of love, to prove in a third way that love is the **more excellent way.**

Our goal this afternoon is to start with the first three verses, where Paul shows the supremacy of love by teaching that all external religion is meaningless if it does not spring from genuine Christian love for God and for our neighbour.

**God shows us the meaninglessness of religion without Christian love.**

1. the Origin of Love
2. The Way of Love
3. The Need of Love

### **1. the Origin of love**

1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most quoted Biblical text outside of the Christian church. It is a passage which, looking at it purely externally and taking it outside of the context of the Gospel in which it rests, most men and women in the world will agree with. Elton John, a man far from anything that comes close to Biblical Christianity, wrote a hit song many years ago of how, in life, you can succeed in many ways but, above all, “You gotta love someone. You gotta love someone.”

The concept of the importance of love isn’t lost on the world around us – it’s the center of most cheesy romantic comedies written for the big screen today, it’s the story line for many of the most popular novels.

But when Paul writes of the supremacy of love, and when the Bible speaks of love, it isn’t speaking of love merely on the human level. A need to have friendship, or a need for companionship. It is speaking of a love that has its source and root in the transforming power of the love of God. That is what it is speaking of.

It is only when God opens our minds and hearts to understand His love for us that we learn what love truly is. That is why John writes in 1 John 3:16 **By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.**

And this understanding of God’s love that must come first to meet the requirement of love demanded in Scripture is not merely an understanding of God’s love for us, but an understanding of God’s love for us that grasps the love of God and its magnitude – its greatness – because it understands God love for us as a love given to us as sinners.

This is why Jesus said to Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7 **He who has been forgiven little, loves little.** But if we love much, it is because we realize we have been forgiven much.

You see understanding the love of God comes not only in seeing that Christ would die for us, but it comes in seeing that God so loved us **while we were yet sinners.** That God so loves us in the midst of our sin – in the very moment of our sin. In the very moment where our hearts are hardened against Him, where we have blocked Him out of our lives, in the days and weeks and years where we cry out – Lord if You are there I do not care! I hurt too much, or I dislike You so much, that I want nothing more to do with you. It is when we realize that in our very anger and rebellion against Him He loved us, it is then that we begin to grasp how great is the love of God.

And the love that is the more excellent way spoken of in 1 Corinthians 13 is this very love. It is **Christian love** because it is love defined and shaped and conformed by the love of Christ. Even as Jesus said in John 15:12 **This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

It is Christian love, and if we have any hope of having it, we must begin by receiving it. We must begin by coming to understand it – and to understand it we must be willing to come face to face with our sin; to acknowledge that we have not even come close to loving God as we ought. And then we need to come face to face with His love – that despite all our sin, He has so loved us that He sent His Son to the cross for us. That is the starting point.

Truth of the matter is every good and virtuous quality finds its basis in God and can be known and experienced and lived only as we know and experience and live with the God from whom all good flows!

Hence forgive one another just as God, in Christ, forgave you.

Hence be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Hence we love because He first loved us.

And so also when Paul wants to call us to holiness what does he call us to do but to *put on Christ*, or to **put on the new man who is being renewed in the image of him who created him!** Speaks of being conformed to the heavenly man!

First, reciprocal love, finds its basis in God and goes out from there.

## **2. the Way of Love**

Not only reciprocal. Also a living out of an understanding of God's love which comes not only to us, but also goes through us to others. It is not merely that we become more loving, but it is that we become more loving because God's love, that great love for sinners, not only comes to us but **abides in us**. SO that in a true way what Paul is speaking of here is the love of God we have received dwelling in us and flowing through us to others we come into contact with.

This is exactly what John means when he writes in 1 John 3:16 **By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us...and we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren** and then goes on immediately in the next verse to illustrate by saying **but whoever has this world's good and sees his brother in need and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?**

It is the love of God for sinners that we have ourselves received that now **abides in us** through coming to Christ and through being made into a new creation in Him, that allows us to love others.

What this means is that when we struggle with love we should not be praying merely, "Lord, help me to love Bob – help me to love Jean." But we should be praying, "Lord, help me to have *Your* love for Bob abiding in me." Help me to be gripped with the magnitude of Your love for lost sinners and for brothers and sisters in Christ, that I may love as I ought to love.

This is what is behind the concept of being filled with the Spirit. This is the power of Paul's words, **it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me!** It is not that I somehow have to stir up my own love for others, so much as it is that I have been so gripped by the love of God for sinners that I myself have received, that His love now fills me – His love now abides in me, and therefore in all I do there is that underlying current of love. And a love that is **not self seeking, and keeps no record of wrongs, and does not rejoice in evil but rejoices with the truth.**

Really, this is the introduction to the entire series. This is what Christian love *is*. It is the love of God in Christ that we have received that now abides in us and goes through us by His Spirit as love to others.

That is why when Paul calls us in 1 Corinthians 14:1 to pursue love he is not setting before us an impossible task. And further that is why when Paul writes of seeing God face to face, he is not writing of the abolishment of love, but of its fulfillment, of the proof that it is indeed the greatest of these.

The admonition given in these first three verses is an admonition for us to realize in our Christian living that we can never fall *out of sync* with that great love of God in Christ and still be faithful Christians in the church.

And in this way its significant that we note that Paul is setting before us a **more excellent way**, NOT a more excellent **gift**. The idea of love is a path in which we walk. We don't 'add' love to an otherwise busy schedule.

Pick up the kids at soccer practice, finish my report by 5, pick up milk on the way home – oh, and yes, love.

Neither is it something that is exclusive. Paul asks in verse 29 of chapter 12 **Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Etc.** And the expected answer to each of these questions is: NO! God doesn't give these gifts to every Christian. Rather, as we noted in the beginning of 1 Corinthians 12, God gives different gifts to each member of the church so that, in working together, the body may be built up in Christ as each member does its part.

But unlike the different spiritual gifts, love is a **way, a path** that is open for every Christian to tread and that it is the responsibility of every Christian to walk as Christ lives in us.

Just as its written in Ephesians 5:2, "**And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us.**"

**Walk in love.** It is a path, it is a quality greater than all others, and it is so absolutely necessary that without it anything we do and even anything we are becomes meaningless.

## **3. the need of Love**

Have you ever had (or overheard) an argument between a husband and a wife? She's upset and you ask her, "Honey, why are you upset?" And she answers, "Because you never clean up around here – you don't even do the dishes!" SO you respond, "Fine honey, if that's what you want I'll do the dishes." And she answers, "No, that's not what I want – I want you to *want* to do the dishes."

What's the point? Its not necessarily over what you do or don't do. Its over the idea of whether there is in the heart the desire to help. A love that will put others before ourselves and serve willingly and joyfully.

So also is it to be in Christian service. God isn't looking for mercenaries! He's not looking for hired hands: HELP WANTED: 10 members needed per week to help round out our Bible study. Minimum wage and benefits included.

One commentator wrote, "Religion is no such easy thing." It is not a trade-off of external service or sacrifice for eternal rewards and glory.

And that is why Paul writes in the opening of this chapter – **Though I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love I have become resounding brass or a clanging cymbal.**

Tongues was the most sought after spiritual gift in Corinth, and it was a problem so great that Paul would take nearly a full chapter to address it in chapter 14. But Paul says – listen, the gift is nothing. If you can not only speak in the different languages of men, but even that of angels, its pointless without love.

I don't know if you've ever heard a non-Christian singing Christian music. Normally its Christmas stuff – everyone puts out a Christmas album and at some point, though they may in their lives completely deny any truth about Jesus, they sing "Sweet Little Jesus Child" or some other Christian song, and they have a beautiful voice, and it might even be one of our favourite Christmas albums.

But to heaven it is a noisy racket. Its worse than the child banging pots together in the kitchen all day long. Its just noise – because there is in that singing no love for God, because they have no understanding of God's love for them.

Paul points out to us that even in the church, we can fall under the same condemnation. Even in the church we can practice things for the wrong reason – our hearts are sinful. We can be guilty of losing our first love, as did the church in Ephesus when John wrote them a letter in Revelation 2. They had works, and labor and patience, and doctrinal soundness, and they had not grown weary in doing work for the name of Jesus BUT, said Jesus in Rev. 2:4 **Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.** And despite all their work and all their endurance and all their doctrinal soundness this one thing – the loss of their love for Christ and therefore also of each other – because of that one thing, Jesus says to them **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamps and from its place .**

What sin was so great that Jesus threatened that the church would lose its position before Him? It was this – **you have left your first love.**

Because if we have not love, though we speak in the tongues of men and angels, or though we have the gift **of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though we have all faith so that we could remove mountains, without love we are nothing.**

To quote another – "Not the labours of my hands can fulfill Thy laws demands. Could my zeal no languor know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone, Thou must save and Thou alone."

It is not saying that our love saves us, but it is saying that when God works in our heart, and when God brings us face to face with Jesus, that love must not be lost! The love of God that is poured out in our hearts by the Spirit cannot be forgotten, we cannot leave it aside, we cannot think it optional for the Christian life, so that when we come to church hollow inside, or when we open our Bibles without love for the Lord, we can never fool ourselves into thinking: Its still okay. I'm at least going to church, I'm at least reading my Bible.

Meaningless! Says Paul. Of no benefit. Of no profit. You can be so external as a Christian as to be threatened with martyrdom – the fire – and say in your heart, "This is my Christian duty," but if it is not done out of love for Christ, and in the love of Christ, it profits you not one sliver in the eyes of God.

Why then is love the **more excellent way**? Because if this is lost everything else falls to the ground. Everything else in our Christian lives becomes part of a hollow shell, a white washed tomb that looks good on the outside but has dry bones inside.

Question brought to us this day is this: Do you live your life in the midst of the love of God? Has it ever comforted your soul? Has it ever stilled your troubled heart? When the fires of trial stand around you, or when the words of the tempter come to accuse you, have you basked in the love of God that says **in this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us?**

Have you ever been gripped by the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, from which nothing, in heaven or hell or all creation, can ever remove you from?

Second, if you've been gripped, do you still live in the midst of that love today?

John MacArthur wrote a book entitled "First Love – the Joy and Simplicity of Life in Christ." Title grabs us. First love. The sweetness of the day we came to recognize the love of God for a wretch like me. Yet the book is written because so frequently we can allow the Christian life to fade into an unending lists of do's and don't's, of duties and responsibilities, of requirements and rules. And please do not misunderstand me it is not as if the Christian life does not have rules and requirements and responsibilities and do's and don'ts all those things are here. But for the Christian it is not to be merely a lifestyle pressed upon us from without, but a lifestyle written, says Jeremiah 31, upon the heart. Paul calls us to pursue this lifestyle. God calls us to pursue this living, loving walk with Him – this **more excellent way**. And beloved in the Lord we are not to settle for less.

Instead the fear of having a Christian life which profits nothing must drive us to the One who gave His body to the flames **because of the great love with which He loved us**. To the One whose sacrifice was **not meaningless**. But to the One who is able, by His grace, to turn hearts of stone to hearts of flesh that when God cries out **Seek My face our hearts can say "Your face LORD I will seek."** There is a living Christianity needed in every heart. And the mercy of God is that He calls us to it and reminds us of it over and over again that we might not fall into the trap of external acts, but turn again to the magnitude of God's love for us, that we might be filled with His love for others. Amen. But how is it gained – when all around has fallen? When there is nothing left? When there is nothing left in the heart to dig down deep for? How is it recaptured and how is this concept of pointless Christian living escaped? Escaped by the heart that cries for Christ. "And my heart, yearns, for Thee."