

A More Excellent Way

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 12:31–14:1

Tina Turner released a song in the 1980s called *What's Love Got to Do with It*. In that song she mentioned that love is just a second hand emotion and an old fashioned notion. Maybe some of you have wondered the same? What's love got to do with it when all we get is heartache, pain and suffering? Indeed, life is full of experiences with pain and trouble. Sometimes we do not want to love others for fear of making ourselves vulnerable, for fear of being hurt. But love is required to have fellowship with Jesus Christ. Love is required for God's holy people. Love is required if we are to be the Body of Christ, the church of the living God. What is the Greatest Commandment? Love God and Love others. So, love has everything to do with it.

We have been looking at the letter of First Corinthians the past couple of months. If I were to ask many of you about a familiar passage in First Corinthians, I suspect most of you would say "chapter thirteen." Most people are familiar with this chapter and refer to it as the "Love chapter." In chapter thirteen, Paul addressed the issue of love. It was not so much about a fear of rejection or hurt, by making ourselves vulnerable to others. Chapter thirteen speaks of love in the context of spiritual gifts and being the Body of Christ. If you recall, last week we looked at the church being the Body of Christ, a body that consists of various members who are empowered by the same Spirit with various spiritual gifts. We saw in chapter twelve, that God has given to members of His church these gifts for "the common good", in order to build up the church and fulfill the mission of the church.

One issue Paul addressed in the letter of First Corinthians was the *use* of spiritual gifts. We have already read how Paul had addressed other issues in the church in Corinth. If you recall, the church in Corinth was a troubled church with many problems, issues such as what it means to be the church, about following Jesus and not various leaders in the church, about being united in faith and purpose, and about doing everything for the glory of God. In chapters twelve through fourteen, Paul addressed primarily the use of spiritual gifts and right in the middle of this section, he included this beautiful description of what love is. Sandwiched between two chapters on spiritual gifts and orderly worship, Paul, under the inspiration of God, wrote chapter thirteen to address love in the church.

Why did Paul insert a chapter on love within a discussion on spiritual gifts? It would seem that a people who are empowered by the Spirit of God would have love, wouldn't it? It would seem that a people called out of the world by God in love, would also have love and be loving to one another. Right? Well, as we probably all know, being a Christian or going church doesn't make you perfect? Sometimes, many times, God's people, need a reminder about loving one another. This was true for the Corinthians. They had spiritual gifts, but some at least were missing a critical ingredient. Some were apparently not loving one another as they should. It might be they thought the gifts of the Spirit were more important than the fruit of the Spirit.

Love is Essential

Paul ended chapter twelve of the letter with this passage:

1 Corinthians 12:29-31 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still *more excellent way*.

After providing a list of spiritual gifts, Paul basically asked, “Does everyone do the same thing? Does everyone have the same gift?” The answer, of course was “No.” Though Paul acknowledged that not everyone has the same spiritual gift, he encouraged the church to earnestly desire the “higher gifts”, something he repeats in chapter fourteen. The “higher gifts” are those that do more to build up the church. Though the Spirit of God gives as He wills, Paul encouraged us to desire these spiritual gifts. However, even though Paul stated that the church members should desire these gifts, he mentioned that there is a “more excellent way.” What could be more excellent than having gifts of healing, or speaking in tongues, or prophecy?

A more excellent way than merely seeking spiritual gifts, even those that are considered “higher gifts,” is to use the gifts in love so that the church is built up. Paul mentioned that the way of love as a more excellent way. Even though members of the Body of Christ have these gifts, they must use them with love. Even though we may have the gift of teaching, or preaching, or prophecy, or healing, or any of the other gift, they are **meaningless** if we do not use them with love. Without Love, nothing matters. Paul provided three scenarios regarding the lack of love:

- If I have the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I am just making noise. Almost like fingernails on a chalkboard. It would not a pleasant sound or very useful.
- If I have the spiritual gift of prophecy, if I can discern God’s will and purpose, and I understand all mysteries, things not humanly discerned, and even have all knowledge and faith to move mountains, but I do not have love, **I am nothing**. I am worthless.
- If I give away all that I have, if I am the most charitable person alive, and even sacrifice myself, but do not have love, **I gain nothing**. What good is it to me if I do not have love? Even self sacrifice done without love is meaningless.

All of these things are good things. If we have these spiritual gifts or do these things, it would be wonderful. But, Scripture tells us that what motivates us, matters. What motivates us to do things or to desire things is important. Simple acts of goodness are not enough. This may cause us trouble. In fact, we live in a world where random acts of kindness are praised. We are taught to be kind to one another, to help one

another. And these things are important. We should do them. We are told to do them. But love should always motivate us to action.

The church is the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, the church is empowered with the Spirit of God through various gifts. But the church must be God's people, using the gifts of the Spirit to accomplish the mission of the church motivated by love for one another. Paul does not suggest that the church should neglect the spiritual gifts, but that there was a way in which the gifts should be used properly. No matter what gifts and good things we have and do, if we do not have love, it is meaningless. **Love is essential.**

Love is Selfless and Divine

So, love is a necessity. It is required. What's love got to do with it? Everything! But unless we know exactly what love is, it does us no good. So, what is love? What does it look like? I am sure we all have heard of love. We have probably all experienced love. Many of us have even been in love. But what is it? If I were to ask you what love is, what would you say? Would you say love is an emotion or a feeling? Would you say love is a word or phrase you say to someone? Would you say love is an action, something you do? All of these are popular descriptions.

Love is not just some feeling you have for another person. You may know someone who just causes all sorts of feelings within you about that person. While love is emotional, it is not *just an emotion*. Feelings change, but love endures. Just because I wake up one morning and I am angry with my wife because of something she said or did (maybe it's the other way around!), that doesn't change the fact that we love one another. I can imagine that many of you have already done something this morning that your spouse did not like. I am sure he or she didn't stop loving you because of that. Likewise, you have most likely done something this morning that God doesn't approve, perhaps you hurt His feeling, but God did not stop loving you! The point is this, feeling change, love doesn't! Love endures.

Love is also not words, like those words of compassion you long to hear from that someone special. It is also not the three words you may want to hear from that person you like, who you hope will love you back. It is not like those letters children used to write in school asking one another "Do you love me, check yes or no." I wondered if there ought to be another option...*it depends!* Sadly, sometimes the love we have for one another or that someone has for us often depends on something. That is not love. **Love is unconditional.** Love is also not just some act. The Christian music group, DC Talk, released a song in the 1990s called *Love is a Verb*. Basically, they said that love is action. It is something you do. Love cannot be measured by actions alone, although love ought to result in actions. What motivates us is important. Love is commitment. Love is sacrificial. Love results in acts of love, but those acts do not define what love is.

Paul gave us several descriptions for what love is. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not boast. Love does not envy. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not rejoice when another is wronged, but rejoices in righteousness. The church which loves one another is patient with one another. When one wrongs another, members of the Body of Christ are not quick to anger, but quick to forgive. The church which loves one another is kind to one another. The church which loves one another does not envy one another. The church which loves one another is not boastful, arrogant, or rude to one another. The church which loves one another does not strive for what they want but selflessly works together for the good of each other.

The description Paul gave us about love sounds a lot like the love God has for us. John 3:16 tells us that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. Jesus told us in John chapter fifteen:

John 15:12-13 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

Love like Jesus did. Love sacrificially and consider others more important than you.

Love is Eternal

Love is essential. Love is selfless and divine. **Love is also eternal.** Have you ever thought about how long spiritual gifts are supposed to last? The Corinthian church focused a great deal on certain spiritual gifts and probably did not think about their true purpose and how long they were intended to exist. Human beings can oftentimes spend a great deal of time on things that won't last. Paul told us that spiritual gifts will pass away. Prophecy will pass away. Knowledge will pass away. In fact, this world will pass away. But love will never pass away. Love never ends. If there is one thing we experience both here and in the life to come, it is love. Love is eternal. This makes sense given that God Himself is love. (1 John 4:8)

People disagree about when Paul expected prophecies to pass away and speaking tongues to cease. Many believe that some or all of the spiritual gifts ceased once the entire New Testament was written and the apostles died. Others believe that Paul expected these gifts to continue until Jesus Christ returns and the church is gathered into heaven. This second position appears to be more likely since verse twelve seems to say the following:

1 Corinthians 13:12 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.

The point Paul is making is this: What we experience here will end. Spiritual gifts, the accumulation of knowledge, even the mission of the church will end at some point. They will not remain forever. What remains and what endures is love. As God's people, we were purchased by the love of God, for He loved the world so

much, He gave Jesus Christ. While we were still sinners, at the right time, Jesus Christ, out of love, died for us. When Jesus comes to get the church, we will then spend eternity loving Him and each other, worshipping our great God and Savior. While all Christians will not possess each spiritual gift, they should each have faith, hope and love. Paul stated that these three remain. But the greatest of these three is love. So, pursue love.

Conclusion

In closing, the point to First Corinthians chapter thirteen is that there is a more excellent way. The church is the Body of Christ whose members have been empowered by the Spirit of God with various spiritual gifts. We are encouraged to seek these spiritual gifts, and to use them for the common good of the church. But whatever we do, we should do it in love. Love should motivate everything we do. Whatever we do and whatever we desire should be from a love for God and a love for each other. This is the Greatest Commandment. In fact, it is by our love for one another that the world will know we are the Body of Christ. Jesus declared this:

John 13:34–35 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this *all people will know that you are my disciples*, if you have love for one another.

Are you lacking love for one another? Is there someone in your life who is difficult to love, maybe even unlovable? Pray for forgiveness and that you will love that person. Love is very much a choice. You can choose to love that person. Have you been doing things or using your spiritual gifts and talents selfishly, or for the wrong reasons? When you use your gifts and talents, is it with pride or with selfish motives? If so, then ask God for forgiveness. Turn to Him and pray He places the right desires in you. Pray that the same love He has for you, you will have for one another and will use your spiritual gifts with love. It is by love that the world we know we are His. If perhaps you have not placed your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, then you are missing the greatest love ever known. Jesus willingly died out of love for the world so that people would know Him and enjoy the love of God for all eternity. Turn to Him. That is a more excellent way. Amen!