

# The Excellent Way of Love

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[ 0 : 00 ] It was quite a few years ago now, I was presiding at a wedding, and afterwards one of the guests came up to me and said, what was that amazing thing that was read out in the service?

And I must have confessed, I had to think, what was he referring to? Because I couldn't think of any kind of particular piece of poetry that had just come out and heard for the first time or anything. And as we talked, it gradually became apparent that he was referring to the very Bible passage that we've just had read to us by Margaret. I think I had to think long and hard about it because I'd heard it so many times. I remember coming away from that conversation thinking, that's the thing. We hear these things so many times, we become so familiarised with them that perhaps we tend to not notice the power of these words when we hear them for the first time.

Central to the Christian Gospel is this basic theme, this message that human beings in our brokenness are met by the holy otherness, the perfectness of God. And when that happens, there's a contradiction between our humanity and our brokenness and our fallenness and the absolute perfection of God.

When we hear God's word for the first time, when we hear words like this for the first time, we encounter them perhaps in a more powerful way than when we've become so familiar with them. Because these words are not intended as just a piece of sort of nice romantic poetry. They're words of challenge. And neither are they just targeted towards individuals, they're targeted towards the whole church community. Which is why Paul begins with, right at the end of chapter 12, by saying, and I will now show you the most excellent way.

Before he launches into these verses, that's what he says, I will now tell you, I will now show you the most excellent way. Now that word way is important. It comes up quite a lot in the New Testament.

[ 2 : 33 ] It comes up a lot in the book of Acts to describe the earliest followers of Jesus, the church. For example, we see in Ephesus that the believers were publicly, that the way, the people of the way were publicly maligned. We see Paul before Felix, who says, yes, I am a follower of the way. And we're told that Felix was heard of the way. In the book of Hebrews, the word the way is, Jesus is described as the way, the new and living way into the presence of the living God. And of course, in John's gospel, Jesus himself said, I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

So in his letter into Corinthians, when Paul says to the church, I will now show you the most excellent way that carries quite a lot of substance. And so he begins to unpack what that actually is. The evangelist D.L. Moody, over 100 years ago, once said, oh, that we could all move into that love chapter and live there. So what does that mean? What does it mean in practical terms?

Well, we're given a challenge, we're given an invitation. As Paul sets out, no fewer than 16 characteristics of love. 16. This is practical stuff. Now, it was Valentine's Day, wasn't it, the other week? And the word love appears in all sorts of different places, generally on cards with pictures of teddy bears and love hearts and things. I know that's one of those days that ought to be banned, in my opinion, but that's another subject. It seems to me that it's crazy that people that are single absolutely dread Valentine's Day because they're single.

People that are married dread Valentine's Day because they're married. Anyway, that's a sermon for another occasion. Love, as Paul defines it, means something quite different. It's not about a feeling. In some ways, it's the opposite. Paul seems to be saying, if you want to know what love means, think about how you feel and do the very opposite thing.

[ 5 : 25 ] Jim Packer, one of the great voices of the 20th century in the evangelical church, one-time principal of Trinity College, Professor Jim Packer once said this, It draws its meaning directly from the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Get this, it is a matter of the will rather than a matter of feeling. Now that's important. Because we can be fed this notion that to love is all about something that you feel. Often it does. But it's something far more profound than an emotional state.

Far more profound than that. We see this kind of played out quite a bit in the writings of Paul where he talks about love in action as being the sort of, the way we take off the old and we put on the new. That's a pair of phrases we find in the writings of Paul quite a bit. He talks about taking off the old self and putting on the new. He talks about putting on the armour of God.

He talks about putting on the clothing of righteousness. This sense of putting things on that may actually cut against the way we feel emotionally at a particular point in time. If we want to know what it is to love, then we need to know what it is to put things on a bit. To do the very contrary to the way that our emotional responses might be leading us at a point in time.

[ 7 : 25 ] There was a story about a man who was cheated on by his wife. And eventually he decided that he was going to bring his marriage to an end.

He went to speak to somebody he knew, happened to be a minister and a counsellor, and said, I want to bring this to a close. But I don't want to just bring it to a close. I want to bring my marriage to a close in a way that's really going to hurt her as much as she has hurt me.

And I don't know what to do. The minister took one thumping great big risk. And he gave him the following advice.

He said, if you really, really want to get back at her, my advice to you is to go home and be nice. In fact, don't be just nice. Be as loving as you possibly can be. I want you to rewind in your thinking to when you first met her and fell in love with her. And I want you to try and act that out. Every time you sense something instinctive in you wanting to lash back, don't. Do the opposite. Be as lovely and kind and gracious as you possibly can. Every time there's an argument, even if you might be in the right, let it go and do the opposite. Love her. Serve her.

[ 9 : 06 ] Lay down everything for her. Every time you really, really want to just lash out. Just do something that is very, very foreign to what your emotions are telling you at that point in time. Put on something that is quite alien to yourself and just be really, really unconditionally nice to her.

And then, then, after a few months of that, after treating her like she's a million dollars, then break the news.

Well, this guy was quite a state of disbelief as to what he'd been told, but as he walked away, he rather liked the idea of what he was being advised to do. So he went home. The minister didn't hear anything from him for several months. Eventually, he phoned him up about six months later. He said, how are things going? The man said, you're never going to believe this.

He said, I've fallen in love again. He said, I'm not going to pretend that it was easy. He said, I came away from that conversation with you that day, thinking, this is a brilliant plan. I can't wait to try this out. And at first, it was really hard. In fact, it was the toughest thing I've ever done.

Daring to go against everything that my inner instincts were telling me to do. And yet, that's what I decided to do. I put it on. I felt anger, but I took it off, and I put on love.

[ 11 : 02 ] I felt resentment, and I took that off, and I put on love and forgiveness. I felt bitterness and cynicism, and I took it off, and I put on grace. Really, just to act it out, because I wanted to get her back.

But very slowly and very gradually, things changed. And I can't put my finger on exactly when it was. But she started to be different.

I started to be different. We started to be different. And now we've fallen in love again.

Let's not be naive. Let's not pretend that any of that is easy, because it's not.

But what we're talking about here is not just in marriage, although it's a good model. But we're talking about all relationships. And Paul seems to be saying to us that if you want to know what love is, what agape love is, it's about taking off the old.

[ 12 : 17 ] Pulling on the new. Taking what you're feeling and doing the opposite. C.S. Lewis wrote this.

Do not waste your time bothering whether you love your neighbour. Just act as if you did.

As soon as we do this, we find out one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love them.

If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking them more. If you do them a good turn, you will find yourself disliking them less.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, as we listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 13, words which talk about love and what that means and what that is and what that looks like, we bring to you.

[ 13 : 42 ] Lord, as we bring to you, we bring to you the reality of life. We bring to you all of our relationships.

Home, in work, in our neighbourhoods. Lord, you know each and every one of them. Forgive us, Father, for the way that we often follow our feelings.

Forgive us for the way in which we respond in anything but love. Give us the confidence and the courage to put on the new and to take off the old.

Lord, give us the confidence and the courage and the strength to dare to do the opposite of how we feel at times. And to dare to live out that most excellent way.

We pray this prayer into all of our relationships. Now and in the time to come. In Jesus' name.

Amen.