

Love, The Most Excellent Way

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[0:00] Good morning. A new commandment I give to you.

! O Lord, we do thank you for your love which calls us and brings us from death to life. We thank you for your love that sustains us. There's in your love that we can love not only ourselves, but we can love you. And we thank you, Lord, that you did not see us in our sin. And you did see us in our sin, in our filth, in our mired. And yet you came to rescue us. Be with us now as we look into your word. Help us to grow through it in deeper love for you and for one another. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. This morning, we've come to one of the most familiar chapters in the Bible.

[1:24] One might wonder why chapter 13. I wonder if you've wondered it. I've wondered why chapter 13 is here sandwiched between chapter 12 and chapter 14 of 1 Corinthians.

Chapter 12 and 14, we see, really deals with spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 13, this chapter with its beautiful prose is well known by many.

Even outside the church. But we have so isolated this chapter that we don't fully grasp its full meaning and weight. You know, 1 Corinthians is not primarily, this might be news to you, but it shouldn't be.

1 Corinthians is not primarily written for married couples as a manual to be read at weddings. Although that's well and good. But it was written primarily to a local church to help her conform to the image of Christ and to grow out of immaturity into maturity.

Or in other words, to grow, to have this church grow from worldliness to Christ-likeness. And when we read 1 Corinthians 13 in its proper context, I think that you will find this chapter to be sharp and biting and convicting.

[2:49] One of the most sharp, convicting passages, uncomfortable passages to read in the Bible. So as we look at this passage this morning, think of it, considering, think of it in the scope of our journey through this book of 1 Corinthians.

Especially as we are in these chapters of 12 to 14. And think of how we may be able to use what Paul is saying here within our church and in our own life.

Last week, if you remember that we saw in chapter 12 that truth is more important than experience. And then secondly, we saw that service is more important than self-satisfaction.

And Paul now comes to this chapter 13 and this discourse on love to help us see that love is the proper atmosphere in which our spiritual gifts must operate.

In other words, fruit, as we said last week at the end of last week, fruit is more important than gifts. So any exercise of our gifts without love yields no fruit.

[4:11] No matter how impressive those gifts may seem. So the call in chapter 12, the end of chapter 12, verse 31, the call there is to earnestly desire to pursue the higher gifts.

Which Paul will later pick up on in chapter 14, verse 1. But here in chapter 13, Paul introduced to us a more excellent way for a church to walk in.

And he's writing specifically to a church in Corinth that is mired in division. In factionalism. A church that is puffed up.

A church that is arrogant and selfish. We've seen that as we've been journeying through this book. A church that is more concerned with elevating individuals and factions while destroying the unity and relationships within the body.

And he wants them to have the right perspective in evaluating the gifts that they do have. In evaluating what is truly great in God's kingdom.

[5:27] So far, we know, based on our time observing this Corinthian church, that they're a gifted church. Paul has already said that right from the beginning of chapter 1.

He even thanked God for their gifts. And we saw, even in chapter 12, the listing of the gifts that Paul lists there are gifts that are present and in operation in the church in Corinth.

This is a gifted church. And while in chapter 12, the gift of the gift of the church.

They're also a worldly church. Because their priorities are twisted. Their giftedness, which they do have, in bounds even.

Their giftedness has not led, unfortunately, to godliness. And while in chapter 12, Paul speaks of various gifts apportioned differently to each member.

[6:31] We saw that, right? Different members, limbs, and organs of the body have different gifts that Christ, that God himself has apportioned. And distributed by the Holy Spirit. They have those.

But the love in which they are to be employed is something every Christian is also called to have.

While every Christian doesn't have all the gifts, we have some of the gifts for equipping the body.

We are all meant to have, what? The love in which those gifts are meant to operate. I think we will see as we read through these verses in its proper context.

We will find that it reveals a lot of our own weaknesses. And it reveals a lot of our own faults in the Christian community. I must confess to you that this has been the most challenging section of this book thus far.

For me, personally, as I prepare to preach this week. I wonder how many will opt to read this chapter 13 at weddings.

[7:44] If they truly understand how biting it is. Maybe you might argue that maybe that's the more reason why they should read it at weddings.

But the word love is pervasive in our culture, in our society. In fact, I might even say it's devalued in our modern vocabulary.

Because we use it as a catch-all word for everything. You know. I love the dinner I had yesterday. I love my wife.

I love my kids. I love my sports team. It's the same word. And it's so ubiquitous that it's almost devoid of the true way and meaning.

But in Greek, there are different words for love. And some of you might know this. We have the word eros, which is romantic love.

[8:43] We have phileus, which is friendship. Love between friends. Between people of equal standings. And we have storge, which is familiar love.

Love between members of the same family or the same clan. And we also have, this is not commonly known, we have what's called philotia. I don't know if I said that right. But it's probably one of the kind of love that is being proposed in our day.

Self-love. Right? It's a kind of love. Self-love. Friendship love. Familiar love. Romantic love. These are different words for love. And then we have what we, most of you might be familiar with.

Agape. Agape love. This is unconditional, sacrificial love. It is agape love that is in view here in chapter 13.

That's what, when you, in the New Testament, when you read and it talks of love, primarily, it is speaking of agape love. The word, the word agape was modified by New Testament writers to adequately explain the love of God for us.

[9:53] And that display of that love to one another and to those outside the church. It's important even now that we understand that this love is the love that proceeds solely from the lover.

And not from the value or merit of the object of love. Right? In romantic love, you love because there's an attraction.

In familiar love, you love because there's a family member. Your child. There's a bond there. Your parents. Your brother. Your cousins. Those are the reasons you love.

Agape love. The love agape stems, comes solely from the lover. Solely from the lover. Rather than anything valuable in the object of love.

Or merited by the object of love. And as we understand this, this is exactly God's love. Isn't it? God's love graciously lavished on us.

[10:59] We were undeserving and unworthy. Agape love stands in contrast to worldly love. Which is transactional. Agape love is fundamental to Christian character.

And it's a non-negotiable aspect of our life together within the body of Christ. God's love is fundamental to Christian character. God's love. God's love. This is the love of God that only those who have been called by God and given life in him can exhibit.

In other words, as the Corinthians pride themselves in their spiritual gifts, Paul wants to show them and wants to show us as well that true spirituality is found in those who have the mind of Christ, which is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

And so it goes on. And by the way, we're going to be in 1 Corinthians 13 again next week. So if you're wondering, we haven't even gotten into the verses here. We're just going to cover the first three verses this morning. So don't think we're going to be here for two hours.

Don't worry. Don't worry. So it goes on in the first three verses here of chapter 13 and talks about a gifted church. It talks of a gifted church.

[12 : 17] Supremely gifted. The first three verses show that it is possible to be gifted and yet fruitless. And Paul gives these series of apathetical scenarios that we're meant to see.

Verse 1, he says, if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I have not love, I'm a noisy gong or clanging cymbal. Suppose I can speak in every human language.

I understand it all. I can speak in all of them. And even every language. But I do not have love. I might as well be a loud gong or clanging cymbal.

If you've ever been subjected to the incessant noise, inane sound of a toy that your child forgot to turn off. And it's on the bottom of a pile of other toys.

And it's just repeating the same sound every two seconds. You might understand a little what a useless and empty rattle is.

[13 : 28] It drives you insane. Doesn't it? That's the description here that Paul is saying. Paul is saying, without love, you might as well be a useless noisemaker.

And then verse 3 says, if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but I have not love, I am nothing.

Now, this seems impressive. Look at verse 2. Prophetic powers, all mysteries, all knowledge, all faith. These are impressive gifts. Knowledge and understanding.

Paul, in these apatheticals, is intentionally describing a super-Christian. And the reality is, no believer has these gifts in the superlative, in the way that Paul describes them here.

In this unparalleled manner. No one Christian has them. But even if you were to have them. If I were to have all faith. If a little faith can move mountains.

[14 : 43] Imagine what all faith can do. And yet, even if I possess that. If I have all these gifts in its highest degree.

And I do not have love. I am nothing. If I give away all I have. If I deliver my body to be burned, but I have not love.

I gain nothing. Perhaps you've looked at verse 1 and verse 2. And you say, well, you know. I don't really. I'm not into all those showboard gifts anyway. I'm a quiet guy.

I'm a doer. I'm not giving too spectacular. And all that talking and all that stuff. I'm a doer. Well, Paul has verse 3 in mind for you.

Maybe your gift is radical generosity. Those are good gifts. All these gifts are good gifts. Radical generosity. Donating of your money to the church.

[15 : 45] To charities. To ministries. To missionaries. All of those things. What if I give myself as a martyr? Giving my body.

To be burned. What could be more selfless than that? Think about it. What could be more selfless and loving seemingly than that? It seems all this can be done.

According to Paul. Even martyrdom. Can be done. For selfish. Self-serving ends. Instead of from a heart of love. And you might think that's hard to imagine.

I don't think it's so hard to imagine. Is it? Just this week. It was reported. In the news. That a man set himself on fire. In New York City. Now I don't know the man's motives.

Or what animated him to do what he did. But I know for sure that it wasn't from agape love.

Self-immolation. Self-immolation. Is an age-old practice.

[16 : 49] Whether it's by setting yourself on fire. Or strapping explosives. On yourself. And killing a bunch of people along with yourselves. Such is the blindness of man.

That our hatred for our enemies. Can even move us. To do such things. To give our bodies a sacrifice. And so it's not hard to imagine. That people can do even.

To go to sex land. Not out of love. But out of hatred. Or animosity. Or resentment. It can be self-serving. We can.

The human mind is. Is devious. And we can deceive ourselves. You know. All these good works. And they're all really self-serving. Acts. Rather than a sacrificial act. They can be motivated by hatred. By resentment. Instead of love. And Paul says. Even that seemingly sacrificial act. All of it. If it's done without love.

[17 : 51] It counts for nothing. It profits nothing. In the context of the local church. It's easy to aspire to all these gifts.

In their excellence. And still profit nothing before God. That's essentially what Paul is saying to us. This is as someone put it. The way to be gifted. This.

This. Three verses. Describes. The way to be gifted. And useless. It would have been understandable. It would have been.

Wouldn't it? If Paul was saying. Without love. Your gift loses. Some of its shine. You know. If you don't have love. But. You know. Without love.

It's not. It's not. It's not as shiny. It's. It. Your gift loses. Some of its luster. Without love. It's less valuable. But that's not what Paul is saying.

[18 : 48] He's saying. Without love. It is nothing. Zero. And that is a stark judgment. commitment. But yet.

That is God's economy of work. The love of God. Creates. His love for us in Christ. Brings us. From death to life. It rescues us from destruction. And gives us a living hope. His love does not find us worthy. and deserving and then chooses us.

No. His love sees us as unlovable, unworthy, dead in our sins, and yet loves us and makes us worthy.

God's love creates. And it is from this love that we draw from as we interact with one another in the church. We do not love one another because we are so lovable.

[19 : 51] You are, don't get me wrong, but that's not the grounds of our loving one another. It's not because we're so nice or so agreeable.

That's not the basis of why we are called to love one another in the church. We do not show respect for one another because we share the same culture. Or the same gender.

Or the same age. Same economic demographic. That's not the basis by which we are to respect one another. The basis upon which we love one another is because God has set His love on us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We who have known the love of God, we who have known this great love, are then commanded to love one another and then commanded to love the world, even our enemies.

That's how we resemble our Father in heaven by loving the way He does. It's sobering, mind you, it's sobering to think that our gifts, which we often pride ourselves in, to think that these gifts say nothing about our relationship and standing with God.

[21 : 18] after all, Jesus said in Matthew 7, remember Matthew 7, He says, Many will say to me on that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?

And in your name, did we not drive out demons? Those are gifts in operation. And we did all of them. And in your name, we perform miracles. We perform miracles. But what would Jesus say to those people?

I never knew you. Away from me, you will practice lawlessness. It's gifts in operation. Jesus doesn't deny that they did all of these things in that parable.

But yet Jesus says, I never knew you. Away from me, you will practice lawlessness. You walkers of iniquity. And I think this is what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, when he warns us, in that chapter, to take care of how we build upon the foundation that has been laid.

Some will build on the foundation with gold, we're told. And some will build on it with silver and precious stones. Remember that in 1 Corinthians 3. But others will build upon it with wood, hay, and straw.

[22 : 35] And what would happen on the day of the Lord? It will be disclosed on the day of the Lord by God's refining fire what quality we build with. And we might be tempted, when we read those verses in chapter 3, we might be tempted to think that the gold, silver, and precious stones are feats and deeds of great renown in the church.

Those people who had great gifts, those are the people with the gold, silver, and precious stones. We might be tempted to think that. The great Bible teacher, the great evangelist, those people who know their Bible and can turn every leaf of doctrine and understand every distinction.

Man, those are the ones that's described there by those who build with silver and gold and precious stones. And we might be tempted to think that those who come with hay, straw, and wood are the new Christians, the simple Christians, the basic Christians, who don't possess great gifts.

Those who just go to church every Sunday. They sit faithfully under God's word every Sunday. But no one knows them, you know, no one knows them for anything. You know, they just quietly love their brothers and sisters, even though it doesn't always come easy to them.

[23 : 57] Yet they give themselves, humbly apply themselves to doing that, to loving God and loving the brethren because it is in obedience to their Lord.

So, we might be tempted to think that these wood, hay, and straw Christians are the ones who are constantly going to God in weakness and asking God to give them strength to love.

Asking God to give them strength to be faithful. Asking God to give them strength to stand. These Christians are weak. They're dependent. They're like sheep, ever reliant on their good shepherd to feed them and lead them.

And so, it's easy to read 1 Corinthians 3 and say, well, yeah, those are the ones building with hay and straw and wood and those would burn up. Those are not strong. But I think 1 Corinthians 13 actually helps us to see.

It shows us that we are measuring with the wrong yardstick. It shows us how we measure usefulness in the church is not how God does.

[25 : 10] The law of God is love in this tangible sense. Love is the currency that matters to God. And Paul already alludes to it in chapter 8.

Remember when he says to the Corinthians, knowledge puffs up. But what does love do? Love builds up. Knowledge and spiritual giftings without love.

No matter how jazzy and flashy those gifts are. No matter how much you know, knowledge and spiritual giftings without love are in fact the wood and the hay and the straw that is consumed by fire.

But love, love for God, love for the brethren, love even in weakness, love accompanied with gifts that the Holy Spirit gives.

Those are the gold. Those are the silver and the precious stones that will endure. And as I said earlier, this is sobering.

[26 : 22] I think a healthy appreciation for 1 Corinthians should dissuade people from reading it at their weddings. Because it isn't just lofty, fluffy, beautiful passage as we're often meant to think when we come to 1 Corinthians 13 as it's made out to be.

But really, these words bite. They convict. And it sobers one up as you read them. Even now, I wonder how you're feeling.

I, I feel the bite. I know how far I have fallen short of this in my life and how far I still do. And yet, I think there's a wonderful hope and comfort in these verses.

As we think of Jesus as our good shepherd in our gospel reading this morning, it's important to note that he perfectly lives up to this standard that's given him 1 Corinthians 3, 13 rather.

You might have heard it said that if you read 1 Corinthians 13 and you exchange, instead of love, you exchange those words for Jesus, it makes perfect sense. Look, read 1 Corinthians 13 verse 4 to 7, for example.

[27 : 44] Instead of love, you say Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus does not envy or boast. Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way. Jesus is not irritable or resentful.

Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. That make sense? this is our Lord.

This is how we lived. But if I were to put my name in there instead, if it is patient and kind, if it does not envy or boast, yeah, yeah, it's hard.

My kids know that. What are you saying, Papa? This is not, my wife knows that. we know that in our own hearts. But yet, there is comfort in these words.

There is comfort in them. It's this Jesus because Jesus is the perfect example of the Father's love.

[28 : 52] But it would be challenging if I, again, I said it would be challenging if I were to insert my own name. But yet, that's exactly what God calls us to do. To live up to these standards.

To grow into Christ who is our head as his body. Through the work of the Holy Spirit as he sanctifies us. But, Holy Trinity, this is, this is how God assesses our usefulness.

This is how God assesses our profitableness in his kingdom. It is on the basis of how we love. Not on the basis of how many gifts we have, how much we give, or any of the other things that we do. Those things are wonderful and useful and needed in the body of Christ. We saw that last week. Use your gifts that God has given you. But you must use them in the atmosphere, in the context of love.

Otherwise, it's nothing. Jesus sees our hearts. He looks beyond any human eyes. He knows our motives.

[30:04] And he judges perfectly. I mentioned earlier that there is comfort in these verses for us as well. The comfort is this. From the strongest among us to the weakest.

From the oldest to the litless. in terms of how long you've been a Christian to a new Christian or even in age. For every member of the body, each limb and organ in the body, we are capable of bearing fruit that is pleasing to God by loving one another.

Here's the comfort. All of us can do this. We don't need to look at each other and compare our gifts with one another. Well, I don't have that person's gift. There's not much I can do.

No, that's not how God measures usefulness in his kingdom, in his body. He measures our usefulness by how we love him and how we love one another.

So, we're not to look at ourselves and say, well, I am spiritually gifted or I'm not spiritually gifted or we are a doctrinally sound church. Not like those churches who are going, you know, wokish and going with all the sort of agendas of the world.

[31:29] That's not how we measure. Those are good things, mind you, but that's not how we measure our usefulness ultimately before God. We don't measure our goodness by saying, well, I've given so much to this church.

I've given so much to the body of Christ. And we, you might say as Anglicans, we all know that, you know, those Baptist and Methodists will finally become Anglican in heaven.

And that's how we take pride in our, in our distinctive as Anglicans. That's not the measure of our usefulness. But it's so easy to be wrongfully prideful over these things that amounts to nothing.

It's so easy to measure in the minor than the focusing on the major. The thing that amounts to much before God.

We ought to pride ourselves in this, that we are loved by God for His goodness. Out of His goodness, we're loved by Him, not from our deserving.

[32:38] We ought to pride ourselves in this, that we are sustained and upheld by Him as because we are His. And that we love Him and we seek to show His love unto others.

I want our church to be known as a place where God's love dwells. A place where we love God and we love one another wholeheartedly. That we would delight in what God delights in about us.

We may not have the most beautiful building. Our music is good, but it's not what class. The preacher is sound, he doesn't preach heresy, but he's a little boring.

But you know what? You know what that church is known for? Those people know how to love. They love God.

They love one another. Even though they're a little weird. They love God. They love one another. They strive to love one another as Christ loves them. That's the Holy Trinity.

[33:47] But if we're known by those standards, brothers and sisters in Christ, that is the highest, that is the most beautiful thing that could be said of us. And that is the only thing that amounts to greatness in God's kingdom.

that we love like God loves us. May this continue to be true of us in an ever-increasing measure by God's grace. Amen.

Amen.