

The Most Excellent Way

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[0 : 00] Well, I wonder if you can finish this song title. It's an easy one, so I'm sure you'll get it. All You Need Is... Easy one. How about this classic old bodyguard one?

An I, E-I, will always... Oh, thank you. Thank you. It's not just songs, of course, so is it? It's books and movies.

So if I asked you what the greatest love story would be, I wonder what you'd say. So on the next slide, here's a couple. We've done that one, so next one. There's Romeo and Juliet.

It's a tragedy, but it's a love story, right? What about the next one? Yeah, everyone recognises that one. For my wife, it's this one. Anyone else?

In fact, there's this one scene that melts most girls' hearts. It's the dotting Darcy gaze. There it is. If my wife saw that, if she was here, she'd go, I'd crash.

[1 : 01] But she'd go, oh. Love is everywhere. Of course, it's not my kind of love story. I don't really appreciate that one. On the next one, this is my love story.

And in case you're wondering how on earth this is a love story, on the next slide, it's a love between a father and his daughter. It doesn't have to always be romantic love, so it still works. But the point is, there's all sorts of love, whether it's romantic, between a parent and a child, or between friends. And it all begs the question, what is love? Well, today we come to one of the most famous chapters on love in the Bible. It's read at weddings all around the world because it shows us a bit about what love is.

But first, let me remind you of the context because this chapter was not actually written originally for a wedding. In fact, at first glance, it's hard to see why Paul wrote this chapter in his present argument about gifts because it actually breaks the flow of his logic.

Let me quickly show you. So remember chapter 12, verse 1, last week, Paul is responding to their questions about spiritual gifts. And in particular, which gifts made you spiritual?

[2 : 16] And so Paul began in chapter 12 last week, as we saw, about explaining that every Christian is actually spiritual. Every Christian who says Jesus is Lord has the Spirit and therefore is spiritual.

We also saw that even though we have different gifts in the church, we are all part of the one body of Christ. The Spirit unites us together equally, which means every Christian belongs to the body and every Christian is needed.

by the body. And so the Corinthians should not be looking down on one another as less spiritual, depending on which gift they had or did not have. For them, it was tongues in particular.

If you didn't have tongues, then you were spiritually inferior. But chapter 12 actually ended with Paul saying, if you ever look in your Bibles, at verse 31 of chapter 12, he ended up saying that there are some gifts that are greater.

So verse 31, he says, now eagerly desire the greater gifts. But he doesn't tell us what they are.

Now, I need to say, as I said last week, these greater gifts don't make the person who has them greater.

[3 : 26] We all have an equal part of the body, just with different roles and gifts, as we've seen with men and women, with the Trinity and so on. What's more, in verse 31, he actually tells everyone to eagerly desire these greater gifts.

So it's not just for some people, but all people. And yet again, he still doesn't tell us what they are until we get to chapter 14. So have a look at chapter 14, verse 1, where he picks up the same language of eagerly desire.

Do you see there? Chapter 14, verse 1, eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy, he says. And so it seems like prophecy is one of those greater gifts.

Prophecy, you might remember, is speaking God's word to each other, biblical truths to each other. And why is this a greater gift? We'll look at 14, verse 5, chapter 14, verse 5.

He says, I'd like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy, the one who prophesies is, notice, greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets it.

[4 : 29] Why? Well, so that the church may be edified, or literally built up. And so here Paul is saying that the greater gifts are those that speak the word of God to build up the church.

But you see how Paul's argument actually goes from the end of chapter 12, and it kind of skips all of chapter 13, and lands in chapter 14. Eagerly desire the greater gifts, and he doesn't tell us what they are until chapter 14, verse 1 to 5.

And so in some senses, he doesn't need chapter 13 at all. It kind of breaks the flow of his argument. So why put it in? Well, because, as we heard in the kids' talk, without love, the gifts are nothing.

And the Corinthians did not have love. See, love is what helps them not to look down on each other, but to eagerly desire the greater gifts to build up each other.

Love is what guides them in their use of gifts, not for their own good, but for the common good. And so Paul begins chapter 13 by reminding us about love's importance.

[5 : 39] So point one in your outline, verse one in your Bibles. He says, Yet I will show you a most excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Now here Paul speaks of these gifts in impressive terms, doesn't he?

A faith that is so strong, it can move mountains. I mean, that would impress even our secular society, you know, move a mountain over there. It's impressive. Tongues that speak not just in human language, but the language of angels.

Or prophecy that can fathom and communicate all the deep mysteries of the universe. These gifts are impressive. And for the Corinthians who loved impressive sounding gifts, they would have been drooling over them.

[6 : 48] And yet, we're told without love, they are all nothing. They are all in vain. I remember when I was about 20 years old, I was at a big Christian conference, and the speaker was brilliant, and very engaging, but also very helpfully unpacking God's word, and showing us how to put it into practice.

And I remember being really helped by this speaker's talks at the beginning of the conference. And so I wanted to thank him for his talks, and as most Christian conferences, there's coffee on offer.

So I saw him in the queue to get a coffee, and I just went up to him and said, oh, excuse me, and I just wanted to say thank you so much for all your talk.

I didn't even get to finish the word talks, because at that point, he went, oh, thanks, took his coffee, and walked off. And then as I watched him walk off, he saw someone else, a big wig at the conference, and started talking and laughing with him.

And I'll tell you, at that point, he'd undone all the good work he'd done. And I must confess, I found it really hard to listen to him for the rest of the conference. You see, you can have the most impressive gift of speaking or doing music or gardening or serving morning tea or whatever it is, but without love, it's nothing.

[8 : 12] In fact, the language here is stronger than that. In verse 2, Paul actually says, you are nothing. See that in verse 2? If I have not love, I am nothing.

Did you see how important love is? But what is love? Well, in verses 4 to 7, Paul describes some of its character. So at point 2, you're outlined verse 4 in your Bibles.

Have a look with me so you can see I'm not making it up. Verse 4, love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Now do you notice here that love often leads to action. It's more than just a feeling or saying I love you, although it can include those things.

[9 : 17] But here, it's about being patient, being kind or not boasting or not being proud. Or verse 5, it's restraining anger and forgiving rather than keeping a record of wrongs.

Or verse 6, it's rejoicing in the truth, the truth that's found in God's word. And I need to say that given our current climate, that includes the whole kind of same-sex marriage stuff.

One of the arguments is it's loving but here, notice, love rejoices in the truth of God's word whether we like it or not. But the point here is this is the character of love and it's about action.

And not any old action of course. I remember a very country guy telling us a story about how he loves or shows love to his wife and he said the missus and I walked past a swanky new restaurant last night and she said did you smell that food?

It smelled incredible. And then he said being a good Aussie bloke that I am I thought blow it. Why not? I'll give her a treat. So we walked past the restaurant again. Now, is that love?

[10 : 26] I mean it's an action. Of course not. Just for those husbands out there who thought it was. It's not. Rather love is an action that seeks the good of the other person even if it costs you.

And we can see that particularly in verse 5 where love does not dishonor others and is not self-seeking. Rather other person seeking. It seeks the good of others even if it costs us and particularly to kind of maintain relationship with others.

So look at verse 7 where the word always is repeated. So verse 7 it always protects or literally bears. Always bears up. That is love bears with people when they annoy us.

Or the next one it always trusts and not blindly but wisely. And trust is the foundation of any relationship. Or the next one it always hopes.

I take it it's hopes in the context of relationship. relationship. I think this is what it is on about. I'm not 100% sure but I take it to mean it hopes for the best.

[11 : 34] That's why we're to keep no record of wrongs. As though we're just waiting for the other person to mess up. Ah, I knew you'd do it. Did it before. You've done it again. But rather it hopes for the best. And love always perseveres.

Again I think in the context of persevering in relationship. relationship. And so the good that love seeks here I think has to do with relationship.

But either way this is the character of love. But it's not an exhaustive description of love. For starters it's missing the kind of sacrifice element.

Rather what it is is a list that the Corinthians in particular needed to hear because they were not doing these things. And so on the next slide let me show you.

So in verse 4 of our passage love does not envy or boast. But that's exactly what the Corinthians were doing. So remember chapter 3 they were boasting over human leaders. Or verse 5 in our passage love does not dishonor others.

[12 : 37] But again as we heard a few weeks ago that's what they were doing. They were looking down on the poor at the Lord's Supper and mistreating them and despising the church. Or on the next slide again verse 5 love keeps no record of wrongs.

What were they doing in chapter 6? They were suing each other taking each other to court. And then verse 6 in our passage love does not delight in evil but in chapter 5 that's exactly what they were doing.

They were delighting or proud of the man who was sleeping with his mother-in-law and on it goes. And so this is not an exhaustive description of love but it's a particular description aimed at the Corinthians.

Unless we're too quick to judge them I wonder how we would fare. I mean if you put your name in the place of the word love in verses 4 to 7 would it ring true for you every time?

So verse 4 Andrew is patient. I'm out already. I lost it with the kids just last week. School goes back next week.

[13 : 38] I can't wait. There I go. I've lost patience again. And so while this is a great wedding passage about love it actually reminds us that we are not that loving.

In fact the only person who truly is is Jesus. As many people have pointed out if you put Jesus' name in the place of love it does ring true every time doesn't it?

He always bared with us not just our annoying habits but he ended up bearing our sins at the cross. He always trusted his father even unto death.

Not my will be done but yours he said. And he always persevered right to the cross. Christ is the supreme example of love as is his father.

Perhaps the best definition of love is found in 1 John 4. I think Vijay read it out at the beginning of the service. So on the next slide 1 John 4 this is love not that we love God but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[14:47] That's love. God acting for our good even though it cost him his only son. And Paul wants the Corinthians and God wants us to love like this.

To love like him and his son Jesus. For the most excellent way is not to have this gift or that gift.

The most excellent way is to love like God in Christ.

For love is more important than gifts and in fact love will even outlast these gifts. So point three in your outline, verse eight in your Bibles. Have a look there.

He says love never fails or ends, but where there are prophecies, they will end. Where there are tongues, they will be stilled. Where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Do you see what Paul's saying here? Love never fails in the sense it never stops, it never ceases, it never ends, but their gifts of prophecy and tongues and knowledge, these ones that the Corinthians pass away.

[15:54] Why? Well, verse nine, for or because we know in part now and we prophesy in part now, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears, he says.

Or the end of verse 12, just skip down to there. Now I know in part now, but later then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Here what Paul is saying is that, we experience here on earth only part of things. So for example, we know lots of things about the universe, but we don't know everything.

It's part knowledge. But a day will come when Jesus returns and there'll be a new creation when we'll know everything. There'll be completeness. And when that day happens, we won't need the gifts anymore.

We won't need the gift of prophecy to remind us of biblical truth because we'll all fully know the biblical truth. In fact, when the new creation comes, we'll no longer need any gifts to help us grow as Christians because we'll be all fully grown as Christians.

[17:05] You see, gifts as we know them will not last. And to illustrate this point, Paul gives us two analogies. The first one is about kids growing up. So verse 11, he says, when I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.

But when I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. See Paul's point? When you're a kid, you naturally act like a kid.

But when you grow up, you're supposed to stop acting like a kid, right? While here on earth, therefore, we're supposed to use our gifts to help each other grow.

But in the new creation, in glory, we'll all have grown up to be exactly like Christ. So we don't need those gifts anymore, like kids growing up and putting away childish things.

You see, the gifts as we know them won't last. We'll take the second analogy of a mirror in verse 12. He says, for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then we shall see face to face.

[18:10] I take it he means that we see God through the mirror of Christ in scripture. Christ in scripture shows us what God is like, but in glory we'll see God face to face.

That is, we'll know God completely. So we won't need the gifts to help us know God because we'll all know him fully, just like he knows us fully now. You see, because the partial gives way to the complete, then the gifts have a limited lifespan.

As a young kid, I remember the day I got my first bike without training wheels. I was very excited, it took me a while to accomplish this feat. So on the next slide, here I am, a bit older than I should have been to get off training wheels, but anyway.

And on the next slide, this is me going, it's blurry because of my speed, okay? It's not my parents' camera at all. But the point is, once I got off my training wheels, I got rid of them, I didn't put them back on the bike, I put them behind me.

And the gifts are like training wheels to help us grow as Christians, but in the new creation, when we're fully grown, we put them behind us. We don't need them as we know them anymore.

[19:19] And so Paul says to the Corinthians, don't get so caught up in your spiritual gifts. They're not as important as you think they are. In fact, they won't last as we know them.

Instead, they will all pass away. But love, on the other hand, that will never pass away. Love will last. Do you see verse 13? And now these three things last or remain, faith, hope and love.

But the greatest of these is love. See, those things will last. We'll be loving each other and God for eternity. And out of those three, love is like the Muhammad Ali.

Love is the greatest. Which is why Paul begins chapter 14 by saying to the Corinthians, follow love. Do you see there chapter 14 verse 1? It's literally pursue love.

That's the word. Pursue love. Chase it. Because as a church, love is what they needed above all else. For if they love one another, then they would desire the gifts like prophecy that build others up and not just themselves.

[20 : 31] So what does all this mean for us? Well, I assume it's pretty obvious, isn't it? We too are to pursue love for one another. We're to love like God in Christ has loved us.

But before we think about how, can I firstly ask you, do you know God's love in Christ for you? Do you know God's love that gave God's son to be a sacrifice for your sins?

Do you know the forgiveness that comes? In other words, have you put your trust in Jesus so that his sacrifice has paid for your sins? Because if you haven't, then you don't know God's love as you could.

So do trust in Jesus. And for us who have, then we are to love one another like God in Christ has loved us. Where we seek the good of others, even if it costs us some time or effort or money, even if we have to bear with them or even sometimes say no to them.

I mean, it's how we love our kids, isn't it? Acting for their good, bearing with them when they tell you a story that you're really not interested in, or saying no when it's not good for them, or apologizing when you've done the wrong thing to them, or even bringing them to church for their good, even though it would be a whole lot easier to not do the battle on Sunday morning and let them stay home.

[21 : 51] We're to love like that. There's another guy at my old church. I mentioned one last week. This is a different one, a different church actually. But he was very difficult to love. He had some autism, which meant he would always stand in your personal space and share his saliva with you in conversation.

And he was a big guy, so he was somewhat overwhelming. But there's a couple at this old church of mine who offered to give him a lift home every Sunday night to give his parents a break and enabled this guy to hang out with people who were closer in age to him at the Sunday evening congregation.

Now, it might not sound like much, but it was costly. Because this couple had worked all week, they then came and did ministry, they did youth group on Friday night and they led a Bible study on Sunday afternoon and often were involved in music at the evening service too.

And so by Sunday night, they're exhausted and they've got to get up early Monday morning and do it all again. What's more, they knew giving him a lift home meant hearing his stories, the same stories over again and bearing with those, acknowledging them.

And it even meant sometimes having difficult conversations with him when he wanted to ignore his parents and go out to a cafe after church when they had to bring him home. You see, it was costly, but that's love.

[23 : 12] Acting for the good of others, even if it costs us some comfort or effort or money or time. And can I say, I am so encouraged by the way so many here at HCD love like that.

It's terrific. I mean, I know of people here who provide meals for others to help them. I know people who call others up to check on them. I know people who visit others and pray to encourage them. I know people who show hospitality and give lifts to others to include them. All these things are actions that seek the good of others, even if it costs us time, money or effort.

But that's love. And it's so good to see it in our church. So thank you. Of course, loving like this is not always easy, is it? It's often very hard, actually.

Sometimes when I get an email complaining about something, I said this morning, like, we don't have any complaints in this church. No one ever complains about anything at this church. But occasionally when I get an email from a visitor complaining about something, I have to take a deep breath.

[24 : 19] Like, literally. Okay, love. Sometimes we have to do that, don't we? Because it's not always easy. But if we are finding it hard or tiring, then look back to the cross and see how God has loved you in Christ.

And look back at the cross and see how deep the Father's love for us is. Look back at the cross and see God's love that we might be encouraged to keep loving like him.

In fact, that's what the Bible tells us to do. So on our last slide, here's that verse again from 1 John, but notice what he puts the very next sentence. So this is love, not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And the very next verse, dear friends, since God loved us like this, we also ought to love one another. See, remember God's love love and let that encourage you to love like him.

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly Father, we do thank you for your love towards us in Christ. We thank you for your deep love which gave up your one and only son for us.

[25 : 33] And so Father, we pray that you would help us by your spirit to love like you, that we may be known as a church here at Holy Trinity that loves one another, that the community may know us as a church that loves one another.

Help us in this, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.