

A More Excellent Way

1 Corinthians 13

One of our eight core values as a church is every member ministry. Here is what we say about this core value:

We value every-member ministry – *Each believer has a unique role in the body of Christ. We seek to discover our spiritual gift(s) so that we might serve with passion, creativity, and wisdom. This is essential for the health of the body and for the extension of the kingdom.*

This value really flows out of what we looked at last week in 1 Corinthians 12 where we saw that the body of Christ, the church, is like a human body. There is one body, but there are many parts, because the Spirit has given *varieties of gifts* (12:4). We saw that Paul teaches that each believer is spiritually gifted (12:11) and each believer is to use his or her spiritual gift *for the common good* of the whole church (12:7). This is why we value every-member ministry, because it is how God has designed the church to function.

We believe that understanding our spiritual gifts and using them is vital for the good of the church. Paul thought spiritual gifts were so important that as he started chapter 12 he said that he didn't want anyone to be ignorant about spiritual gifts (12:2). And then he spends the rest of 1 Corinthians 12 laying a theological foundation of how the church is to function as one body, but with many parts. But here's an interesting thing; having describe how important it is the each believer use his or her spiritual gift for the good of the church, as Paul comes to the last verse of chapter 12, he says this:

³¹ . . . *And I show you a still more excellent way.*

As important as spiritual gifts are there is a *more excellent way* and that way is love. In the middle of this foundational teaching on how the church is to function, Paul gives us 1 Corinthians 13, the "Love Chapter." You are probably most familiar with this passage, because it is often read at weddings. That's fine to do, but the context of Paul's discussion of love is spiritual gifts and ministry in the local church.

The first thing that Paul says in chapter 13 is that . . .

I. Love is Supreme (1-3)

Take a look at verse 1. Paul says . . .

¹ *If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.* ² *And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* ³ *And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.*

Paul presents several hypothetical situations in which spiritual gifts are exercised. The first two, tongues and prophecy, are gifts that will be the focus of his attention in the next chapter.

In verse 1, Paul says that if he spoke in tongues, whether in the tongues of men or even the exalted tongues of angels, if he does this without love, he is like *a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal*. The use of that gift without love would simply be a kind of empty, meaningless noise.

Or in verse 2, he says that he could *have the gift of prophecy* or know *all mysteries and all knowledge* or he could have the gift of *faith* that would enable him to work amazing miracles like moving the mountains, but without love, he says, *I am nothing*. There is nothing great in the exercise of even the most miraculous gifts if it is not done in love.

In verse 3, he turns from the more miraculous gifts to gifts of a self-sacrificing nature. He says that he could have a gift of giving and *give all his possession to feed the poor* or he could *deliver [his] body to be burned*, but even these acts of amazing self-sacrifice done without love, he says, *profits me nothing*. They are of no value to him.

Spiritual gifts are great. They are important. But love is supreme. Gifts exercised without love are wasted and worthless; they do not have the impact they are intended to. Ministry done in love is a more excellent way, because love is supreme.

Now, Paul could have talked about any of the spiritual gifts here, but he probably uses the ones he does because at least some of them, like tongues and prophecy, were highly esteemed in the church in Corinth and as we will see in the next chapter they were struggling to exercise these gifts in healthy ways. But Paul could also say that any gift, whether it be administration, leadership, mercy, serving, teaching, or whatever it is, if it is done without love, it is worthless and does not have the impact that it should.

Last week, the passage we looked at begged us to ask the question, “Am I serving according to my gift?” The question that we should ask this week is, “Am I serving with love?” We must serve with love because love is supreme; it is the more excellent way.

But what is love? What does Paul mean by love? He moves next into a description of love. Let’s take a look at how he describes it.

II. Love Described (4-7)

This description is certainly not exhaustive; he is not saying everything he can about love. Rather, he is describing it in a way that applies to some of the issues with which the Corinthians struggled.

Many of these descriptions are self-evident and so I will only make a few brief comments. But here is what I’d like you to do as we move through this list. I’d like you to think about your ministry in the church or outside the church or in the home and try to keep that ministry context in your mind as we look at this list. Think about the relationships you have in that ministry context and ask yourself whether you minister with the kind of love Paul is talking about here.

First, Paul says *love is patient*. This patience is not just a willingness to wait for a long time, but it is patience with people, it is a kind of enduring or putting up with offenses without retaliating.

Love is kind. There is an active goodness in how it treats others.

Love is not jealous. It may be that there were those in Corinth whose gifts were of the less miraculous variety. They might have been prone to jealousy for the more miraculous gifts. Love does not do that.

Love does not brag. Bragging is boasting in oneself. It says, “Look at me. Look at what I did.” Again, it may be that Paul is applying this to those who had the more miraculous gifts. They might have been tempted to boast in them.

Love is not arrogant. This is the idea of being puffed up about oneself.

Love does not act unbecomingly. To act *unbecomingly* is to be ill-mannered or rude towards others. Love does not do that.

Love does not seek its own. Even when a person is entitled to something, love is willing to give it up for other people. Love thinks of others first.

Love is not provoked. It isn’t touchy or easily angered or irritated.

Love does not take into account a wrong suffered. The idea of taking *into account* is that of making a mental record of offenses or hurts. It is a kind of “file in the mind” of wrongs suffered that can be accessed later. Love doesn’t do that. It doesn’t keep score of the wrongs suffered.

Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth. Love does not delight in evil, but is so quick to rejoice in something that is right or truthful.

When we come to verse 7, Paul is summing up here and he says that love *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*. *Bears all things* and *endures all things* are very similar. Love is able to endure and put up with things. The middle phrases – *believes all things, hopes all things* – are similar too. They both point to a kind of hopeful, positive outlook even when a person has been, once again, disappointed by another person.

Now, Paul could have gone on and on to describe love in greater detail. But He gives us more than enough to get the picture. Love is selfless; it is other’s focused; it gives; it is a commitment to act for another’s good even when it is undeserved.

And so, the question is, do you serve in this way? Do you serve with patience and kindness? Do you serve without bragging or being arrogant? Do you serve in ways that really are all about the other person? When people get irritating, do you avoid being provoked? Do you serve with love?

Now, having described love, Paul goes on to give one more argument for why love is supreme and that is because . . .

III. Love is Supreme because Love is Eternal (8-13)

Paul makes this basic point in verse 8 and then he will support it in 9-13. In verse 8, Paul says:

⁸ *Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away.*

Fails is a word that can be used literally of something falling like a leaf falling to the ground. It is used of Jarius when he comes to Jesus in Matthew 5:22 and he falls at Jesus' feet. Here it is used figuratively to mean that love never weakens, it never collapses, it never comes to an end. Love is eternal, Paul says, but spiritual gifts are not. There will be a time when the gifts of prophecy and tongues and knowledge *will be done away*; not so with love. Love is supreme because love is eternal.

In the rest of the passage, Paul supports this point with several arguments. Verse 9:

⁹ *For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away.*

When Paul says that we *know in part, and we prophesy in part* he is saying that through the gifts of knowledge and prophecy, we only have partial knowledge. These gifts are helpful, but they do not lead us to perfect knowledge. And so, he says that *when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away*. The *partial* is this state of limited knowing through the gifts of tongues and prophecy and knowledge. That state will be done away when *the perfect comes*.

And so the question is, what is the *perfect* that is coming? There has been plenty of debate about what the perfect is. Some have taught that it refers to the completion of the canon of Scripture, which would have been a future thing from the vantage point of Paul's writing. But I believe the context makes it pretty clear that what Paul is talking about is the future coming of Christ. When that day comes, there will no longer be a need for the gifts of prophecy, tongues or knowledge, because we will know THEN fully what those gifts NOW are only able to help us know in part.

In verses 11 and 12, Paul presents analogies to help us understand the nature of the *perfect* and the *partial*. First, he says . . .

¹¹ *When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.*

Paul is saying that our experience here on earth is like the child's experience. There is a certain way a child speaks and thinks and operates. This is normal and natural for a child, but when a child becomes an adult, that way of thinking and speaking and operating is put away. Gifts of

prophecy and knowledge and tongues exist now, but they are part of an experience here that will be put away when Christ returns. We won't operate in that realm anymore.

In verse 12, he says,

¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.

In the first century, they used polished metal for mirrors. These mirrors didn't give the kind of reflection our mirrors do today. Rather, Paul says, you can only see *dimly*. That is our experience here on earth now – our knowledge of Christ and of his truth is something that we see, but only dimly. When Christ returns, however, we will see *face to face*. And with this kind of *face to face* knowledge there will no longer be a need for these gifts. At that time, Paul says, we *shall know fully*. The knowledge that we will have then will be like how God knows us now. He knows us fully and our knowledge will be like that. And so gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge will be done away with. But not love. Love remains. Love never fails. It is eternal.

And so in a beautiful conclusion Paul finishes this argument by saying:

¹³ But now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The logical conclusion of all that he has said here, is that faith, hope and love abide. Paul adds *faith* and *hope* here probably because these three Christian virtues were often linked together in the early church. But of these three, he says that *the greatest of these is love*. Love is supreme because love is eternal.

And so, yes, spiritual gifts are really important. We need to know our spiritual gifts; we must not be ignorant of them. Each one of us needs to be discovering and cultivating our gifts and using them for the good of the church. BUT even more important is love.

Now, with that understanding of what Paul is saying, I want to address a couple of questions that you might have. And the first one is this, **“If love is so important in my service, should I wait to do any kind of service until I can do so flawlessly in love?”** The answer to that question is no. If you wait until you are able to serve flawlessly in love, you will probably never serve, because none of us probably ever serves with perfect love.

I would probably never be able to stand before you and preach (or do anything) if I waited until I was able to do so with perfect love. The honest truth is that within my spirit there is a mix of good and bad. There is love. I have a heart for others as I prepare. I want God to bless and challenge and build up the body through a message I give. That's love. But at the same time, while there are thoughts and actions motivated by love as I prepare and as I preach, so too I often find a lack of love. Love is other's focused, but so often I find a self-focus. I want to preach well so people will think I'm doing a good job. And though I don't outwardly boast or act arrogant, I can feel really good about myself if things go well. All of this is ministry done with less than perfect love.

So, should I just not preach? Here's how I handle it. When I sense that my motivations and desires are not flowing out of love, I simply confess it. I tell God that I'm sorry that I have a self-ish motivation and I ask Him to change me and to purify my motives that it would truly be done out of love. I think that in this way, we value the supremacy of love over our gifting and as we do this, I believe we grow to be more loving in our service. So, no, don't wait until you are able to serve flawlessly in love. But pursue love in your service at all times.

Here's the second question, **“What if I'm just not a very loving person; should I just not serve?”** Again, the answer is no. We are all gifted to serve and have an important role in the church. And so the focus of this question is really on how do we become a loving person in our service. And here is how I'd answer that question – YOU can't. On our own, we will not be loving. But Christ can love through you. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22 that *the fruit of the Spirit is love*. Love is something that God does in us. It is the life of Christ in us.

In my own life, when I am walking closely with Christ and cultivating that relationship, and when I am living in a kind constant dependence upon Christ, I just tend to be loving without really trying. I find that I'm patient and kind and not arrogant. I genuinely want what is best for others. But then there are other times, when I'm not walking so closely with Christ, I'm not cultivating that relationship, and quite frankly, I'm just try to live the Christian life on my own strength; in those times, I find that I'm impatient, I'm easily provoked, I take into account wrongs suffer. I'm not loving.

We will be loving, not by focusing on being loving, but by focusing on Christ and allowing him to be loving through us. Left to ourselves, we will not truly be loving. And so, if you find that you are struggling to be loving, you are not going to get there by gritting your teeth and just trying harder; you need to seek Christ and ask that His Spirit would produce the fruit of love in you. That's how you will become loving.

If you've taken Network, you've maybe heard me tell this story. In the summer of 1995, Cindy and I were part of a team in Hungary with the ministry of Campus Crusade that was running English camps as an outreach. We stayed in a facility that during the school year was sort of like a technical college with dorms. Szabolcs and Katie were the Hungarian couple who ran the facility. Sometime early during our time there we learned that they were atheists, which wasn't exactly surprising since they had grown up under communism. Over the course of the summer we got to know them and they got to observe very closely how our team of fifty staff and students ministered, how they acted, how they treated one another. Well, jump forward to the end of the summer. On one of the last nights there, they invited about four of the staff couples over to their apartment for refreshments and conversation. During that conversation, Szabolcs said an amazing thing. I don't remember word for word what he said, but it was something like this, “If you would take 50 Hungarians and have them live together and work closely like you have this summer, they would not get along. There would be fights. But you have worked together so well.” And then he said this amazing thing, he said, “Because of how you have loved each other, I believe there might be a God.”

Spiritual gifts are great. We are called to use them. But love is greater. May we excel still more in our love. Amen.