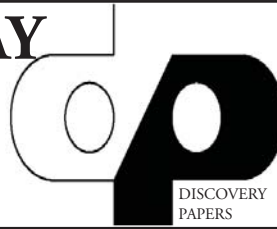


A MORE EXCELLENT WAY



SERIES: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

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1 Corinthians 13
1st Message
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In 1967 the Summer of Love focused the attention of the world on San Francisco.

“Be sure to wear some flowers in your hair.”¹

We’re nearing the fortieth anniversary of that time of new music, new drugs, new sexual freedom, and defiance of old norms. It was “the dawning of the age of Aquarius,”² with the promise that the darkness would be rolled back, sorrows would end, and humankind would enter a new era—foolish projections all.

However, the language of that time pointed out the human longing for love. If the world would change for the better, it would change because we could call on one another to love in ways that we hadn’t loved before. The deepest longing of our heart is for love. The greatest hurts in our lives come from the absence of love. Our sorrows are most profound when love is lost.

Love is at the heart of the way of God. True and lasting insights on love are found in the Bible, not in the music of the late sixties. In particular, 1 Corinthians 13 calls for Christian love and is among the best known texts of the Bible. It’s also one of the least understood. This chapter is often read at weddings or other occasions when we want to express sentiment, but we don’t very often think about what it means.

In this series we will look at the text of 1 Corinthians 13 in some detail, taking time to appreciate its instruction. The text is not primarily sentiment, as it’s often held out to be. The verses, although poetic, weren’t written to be heartwarming. Paul is calling on his readers to be instructed and challenged, to turn from choices they have been making and make better ones.

We’ll see in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13 that we can be as religious as we want, take actions that have God-language and God-structures attached to them, accomplish impressive things, and yet without love we’ve done precisely nothing. Even though we are the church of Christ, speak the language of the Bible, and have well-established credentials, absent love we will end up like the flower children in San Francisco, making claims that are not true, that amount to nothing, that will fade, and be forgotten.

Churches today are often regarded as places where people talk too much and have high regard for themselves, not as places where love is the primary characteristic. Evangelical churches in particular are subject to that kind of accusation. Too often it’s accurate. But we are called to be characterized by the love of Christ: to love each other, those around us, and the Lord who gave us life in Himself.

The Corinthian church received a warning, one that has been useful in every generation. In the midst of religious enterprise, the question of whether love is central comes back again and again.

In this message I’m going to provide some background. I want to offer help with the language, and set this passage in its context. One of the reasons 1 Corinthians 13 is sometimes misunderstood is that it gets taken out of context. My hope is that we’ll be prepared to begin looking at the actual text of this chapter in the next message.

Let me clear away some underbrush to start with.

One little word

The word “love” in English is used in many settings: “I love my children.” “I love my iPod.” “I love fudge.” “Don’t you just love Superbowl commercials?” “I love ya, man!” “I love you. Will you marry me?” Now, the word “love” serves perfectly well in all those sentences, but it means very different things. You have to have the context in order for the word to have any content at all.

In the New Testament that is not the case. The word *agape* in Greek (found in 1 Corinthians 13) is more specific. The early Christians used this word to capture what Christ had done for them, to speak of love in a profound sense. So I’ll introduce the word *agape* now, and then we’ll talk more about what it means beginning in the next message. *Agape* is a word that properly speaks of sacrificial love, of love that comes from a deep place, of love that will spend itself for its beloved. It is a word that fits well in this sentence: “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

John 3:16 uses the word *agapao*, the verb form of *agape*, when it says; “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” This verse is speaking of

the heart of the Father. Such love, having fixed on those who are broken, needy, and desperate, will send the Son to rescue them.

Jesus was asked, “Which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36, Mark 12:28). The question really means, “What is the purpose of God?” Commandments in the Bible exist to tell us the intentions of God, what matters to Him. In reply Jesus summarized the commandments in two sentences, and love was at the heart of each. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:28-31). And, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:35-40). This, again, is the word *agapao*. This love is not merely a shallow preference for one person or thing versus another.

Also, God creates a people for His name’s sake. How will the people of God be known? The night before He died, Jesus said this: “Love one another, even as I have loved you...also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35.) Here again is the word *agapao*. It describes God’s love for us, our love for God, and then God’s love lived out through us as we love one another.

Now let me say a bit about the context of 1 Corinthians 13.

Competing for importance

Paul wrote the letter, in which our chapter is located, to a church that he founded in the Greek city of Corinth. He eventually went on to other places, and subsequently he and the church corresponded back and forth. Two of Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church found their way into the New Testament as 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians.

The believers in Corinth were difficult to lead. They would challenge the teaching of the apostle, or would be puffed up in pride, and he would have to write back and correct their thinking. We shouldn’t be surprised that Paul writes so well of love, because it’s clear that he loved these people very much.

I’ve noted before that one way to think of the Corinthian church (as a whole) is as an irresponsible adolescent. They were intoxicated with the new power and importance that faith in Christ had conferred upon them.

Paul makes note of their background: They were mostly the weak and the foolish (1 Corinthians 1:26-28). They were from the lower rungs of society, not from the upper

crust. They weren’t used to being important. Yet now they have eternal significance, the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They have been joined to the history of the people of God. Having been given so much, they don’t know how to handle it. They’re competitive, immature, self-focused, and cocky. They assume no one has ever been as smart as they.

Imagine that you have been set free from the superstitions of idol worship. You realize that the history of Israel, with its great prophets, its magnificent Law, and its beautiful poetry, is now your history. You have been a nobody on the fringes of society, with a dark religion, and now you’ve been given the Holy Scriptures as your heritage. Some of these people had never aspired to leadership, and now they have been called to be pastors and shepherds, looked up to by others, and they are filled with a sense of importance that they have never had before.

The Corinthians were enamored with miracles and displays of power—healings, visions, and the emotional overflow of ecstatic languages. They loved the dramatic. They reveled in these new experiences. It marked them off as important. They loved rhetoric. Their preachers refined their style and would speak with flourish and use powerful language to stir their hearers. They were competing with one another, using religious displays to outdo rivals and ridicule outsiders. Shouting matches would interrupt worship. Someone would stand up and start speaking in a language no one knew, and no one would interpret. There was chaos when they met for worship, and competition to be at the center of the chaos.

They were arrogant. They would get drunk when they met together for the Lord’s Table. They winked at gross sin and championed pride. They were a community that did the opposite of what Jesus said is essential, loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as yourself.

In the final verse of chapter 12, having said a good bit about the problems of Corinth, Paul now makes these statements: “Earnestly desire the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). In Corinth new awareness of God made many believers desire to stand out. We observe that the apostle doesn’t say to them, “Sit down, fold your hands, and be quiet.” He doesn’t tell them that their ambition is completely unholy. What he says is, “If you want standing, I will show you choices you can make that will surpass every other path to significance. I’ll guide you in a way that will allow you to be what you’re longing to be and are foolishly failing to be.”

This is reminiscent of Jesus’ remarks to the disciples

when a couple of them came to him and said, “Grant that we may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left, in Your glory” (Mark 10:37; Matthew 26:21). Jesus said, “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant....” (Mark 10:42-43; Matthew 20:25-26). The longing to be great is not the problem. It is the way you’re trying to be great that is the problem. If you want to be great, give up your life for other people. Have higher regard for others than for yourself. Promote someone else. Give your life away to see someone become what God intended them to be. Then you’ll be great.

Let me say a couple of words about why love surpasses other paths to stature and wholeness.

The ultimate answer

One reason that love surpasses its alternatives is that it deals with the center of who you are, not the surface. Someone can appeal to your appetites and change your behavior; to your vanity and change what you imagine about yourself; or to your intellect and change what you think about yourself and the world around you. But the only way you’ll be changed at the core is to be loved. You are shaped by those who loved you well, or those who loved you badly. What we are at the deepest level—our willingness to hope, whether we overcome fear, whether we have honest regard for ourselves—springs from whether we have been cared for or rejected, or both. Receiving God’s love alters the core of who we are.

Second, love surpasses other alternatives because all of us can love. This planet is peopled by billions of human souls, and every single one of us has the opportunity to give and receive love. In any competitive environment, the beautiful people, the smart people, or the rich people have an advantage. A person has to be in one (or all) of those categories to finish well, to stand tall. But the invitation to receive love from God and give it away excludes no one.

Whether we are important or unimportant, great or small, love has enormous power to change us. We can be on the lowest rung of the ladder, someone who is scoffed at most of the time, but we can love another, and we can receive love.

I want to recommend the book *Adam: God’s Beloved* by Henri Nouwen. It’s the last book he wrote before he died in 1996. Henri Nouwen was a Catholic priest and an internationally known author and lecturer. He served

for a time on the faculty of Harvard, but he lived the last years of his life in a small community of profoundly disabled adults and their caregivers. His task was to care for a young man named Adam Arnett, and it took him a while to enter into this. Adam was terribly disabled. He couldn’t wash himself, dress himself, shave himself, or speak. But eventually Nouwen realized that Adam loved him, and he loved Adam. With almost nothing to offer, love grew. Nouwen wrote the book as a result of this discovery. He writes:

*“While I was concerned about my individual accomplishments, Adam was reminding me that “doing things together is more important than doing things alone.” Adam couldn’t produce anything, had no fame to be proud of, and couldn’t brag of any trophy or award. But by his very life, he was the most radical witness to the truth of our lives that I have ever encountered.”*³

Finally, love surpasses the other alternatives because love allows us to participate in what Jesus is doing. If it’s up to us to compete and win to gain our place, to succeed in making our lives what they ought to be, eventually they will fade, even if we do an extraordinary job of becoming a big deal. But, if we participate in letting Jesus love us and giving love away as a result, we are connecting people to the One who will last forever. We’ll see at the end of chapter 13 that love lasts forever, and it does so because it connects people to Jesus. His life, and His kingdom, has no end.

John the Baptist said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). And as we love people and see Jesus increase in the lives of others, we are taking part in something that doesn’t fade away.

I was at a Stanford basketball game not too long ago, and there were two little boys sitting in front of me, about eight years old. During a break in the action the camera was showing different people sitting in the stands up on the screen. It panned over to Bill Walsh, and people clapped. Later the camera panned over to Jim Plunkett, and then to Mike Montgomery. But these little boys didn’t know who any of them were. At age eight, the names they knew were different. Whatever accomplishments any of these men have (Stanford sports heroes all); they’re going to be forgotten someday. But, if we love folks and allow the love of Christ to flow through us to others, we participate in something that will last forever.

I commend to us this chapter that we’ll begin in earnest in the next message. It may be that some of us are like

the Corinthians—busy building our own little kingdom, using religion to become important. Perhaps we have an inclination to spiritual pride. If that's true, I hope we'll hear the Spirit-inspired words to give ourselves away, to choose others, and to love rather than promote ourselves.

Let me end with this word. You may want more than anything to be an avenue of love for Christ, but feel beaten, inadequate, and uncertain. You may wish to participate in eternal things, but don't know how. The apostle John said, "We love, because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Be sure of this: love abounds in those who are loved. The way to love others is to be loved first by Christ. Go back and let Him say to you how much you mean to Him, reassure you of your forgiveness, and remind you that He went to the cross because you matter so much to Him. Receive the gifts He would give you, the tenderness, and the words of commendation.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is the story of a woman who was a well-known sinner who came to a dinner party Jesus was attending and began to cry. She anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, and poured perfume on them. To the proud Pharisees all around, of course the scene was an embarrassment. Jesus used the occasion to teach about forgiveness. At the end he said, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). The flow of love through our lives to other people comes because we are certain that we have received forgiveness, approval, standing, and care as well loved children of God.

1 Corinthians 13

¹If 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. ²If 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. ³And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love 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. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part; ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. ¹¹When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. ¹²For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known. ¹³But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love.

NOTES

¹John Phillips, San Francisco, *Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair*, © 1967.

²5th Dimension, *Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In*, © 1969.

³Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved*, © 1997, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY. P. 56.

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