

The Most Excellent Way

Slide -

This sermon examines the circumstances that led Paul to write a beautiful ode to Christian love.

My lesson today is drawn from what the Bible commentary writer, R.C.H. Lenski, calls The Psalm of Love.

The title of my sermon, The Most Excellent Way, is a quote from chapter 12:31 of that letter.

Up to this point, Paul the Apostle has been providing a series of instructions to these brethren, concerning the many problems and challenges that were affecting the church at that time.

From issues of unity and sexual immorality, to instruction on marriage, the proper use of Christian liberty and maintaining order in the public worship.

Paul is running down a checklist of issues that have cropped up among these brethren.

He finishes discussing the proper function and the use of spiritual gifts in the church in chapter 12

and he ends this section with the proposal that they follow a more excellent way: and that is the way of love.

Now Paul is not suggesting that the following description of love was something in itself to be pursued to the exclusion of other things

To pursue all things with the character of love, that he will so eloquently be described in chapter 13.

A More Excellent Ingredient – 13:1-3

Before we go to the text, I need to tell you something very important about the Agriesti spaghetti and meatball recipe.

Agriesti was my original last name before I was adopted and changed to Shingledecker.

You see, Italian families each have their own special formula for the traditional spaghetti tomato sauce and meatball recipe.

The Agriesti recipe didn't taste like anybody else's recipe.

Gramma's recipe was given to my step-mother which then passed on to my family.

But the strange thing was that even when we followed the instructions that she had given us to the letter, the meatballs never quite tasted exactly like the original recipe.

One day I was over at my step-mother's house Rosa, as she was preparing pasta and meatballs, when I noticed that she combined another type of meat with the ground beef to make the meatballs.

I asked her about it and she told me that she used the combination of ground pork and beef to create those succulent meat balls in her recipe.

She said that she must have "forgotten" to tell us.

So, when we prepared the dish the next time, we added this missing ingredient, and to our delight, we were able to duplicate the family recipe that I had known.

You may be wondering what Italian spaghetti and meatballs has to do with I Corinthians 13.

Well, here's the connection: for several chapters, Paul has been providing teaching and encouragement to these brethren concerning their many problems.

In chapter 13:1-3 he summarizes what, for the most part, has been their solutions, their approaches, their spiritual recipes for successful Christian living and growth in the church.

And he points out to them, however, that without the more excellent ingredient of Christian love, their approaches and their solutions and their recipes will not work.

In verses 1-3, Paul refers to three recipes - if I can use that word - that the Corinthians were using without success, and why they failed.

Recipe #1

Slide -1. Miraculous Signs

I Corinthians 13:1 *Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.*

In their quest to grow spiritually and establish leadership, the Corinthians had abused their gifts by using them to elevate themselves over one another.

This led to **disorder** in their assemblies and a **lessening** of their spirituality in general.

Paul says that without love, without that ingredient - you get the connection?

Without love, they're showy signs of heightened spirituality are nothing more than noisy exhibitionism, annoying both God and man.

Recipe #2

Slide -2. Spiritual Wisdom/Knowledge

I Corinthians 13:2 *And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*

Another recipe for the knowledge of God was the great wisdom and insight given to many, concerning God's Word and the revelation of Christ.

To know about godly things, to handle with skill the word of the Almighty, surely this would enable them to deal with the ignorant, the disbelievers, and the weak.

Again, their misuse of these abilities pitted one teacher against another in the battle for a leadership position in the church.

Paul declares that knowledge without love accomplishes nothing.

Of course, we know why this is so.

In I Timothy 1:5, Paul says that the goal of our knowledge or our instruction in the church, is love.

What we're shooting for with our teaching of the brethren, is that they grow in love.

And so, if love **isn't** factored into the knowledge and wisdom, then no amount of knowledge and wisdom will accomplish anything that is worthwhile.

Recipe #3

Slide -3. Benevolence and Self Sacrifice

I Corinthians 13:3 **And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.**

Although it was not an issue in this letter, there were many in the church who promoted a way to righteousness through personal self-denial and the doing of good works.

This recipe had only produced pride and division wherever it had been tried before.

And Paul preempts any drift in this direction by establishing the virtue of love as the only legitimate motive for self-denial and benevolent work, not the pursuit of righteousness.

In other words, no amount of self-sacrifice or benevolent effort advances one in the kingdom, unless the basis for it is love.

And so in his opening comments, Paul states that the three common avenues, the three common recipes for enlightenment and spiritual elevation and godliness, **Slide** -the recipes of signs and wisdom and self-denial are in themselves worthless, unless they are exercised in the context of love.

This is not to say that they are without merit altogether:

signs point to God's truth; and wisdom articulates God's truth and self-denial witnesses God's truth.

But only love embodies God's truth.

And so, you can manage: some expression of signs, some measure of wisdom, some level of self-denial without truth, many people do.

Slide -**But you cannot love without truth, because love is the source of truth.**

It gives life to truth. It reveals essential truth. And so, true signs point to love.

True wisdom speaks of love. True self-denial is motivated by love.

Now, if you were a Corinthian reading this letter, you might ask yourself at this point, well, what kind of love is this, that does all of this?

Is Paul speaking of the sensuous kind of love that the Corinthians, in their sexually immoral city, were all too aware of?

Was it the love of family and culture, so familiar among the Jews?

Was it the high calling of friendship, so dear to the Greek philosophers of the day?

No. Paul goes on to describe a kind of love far removed from these familiar notions common to his readers.

In the following verses he's going to describe the kind of love that God has for man, and the quality of love that God wants each person to have for another.

He doesn't spell it out, but the inference is that with the practice of this kind of love, their problems regarding unity and marriage and holy living and acceptable worship, will be solved.

Slide -**With this kind of love, their gifts will produce an effective witness.**

With this kind of love, their knowledge will truly edify, and with this kind of love their good works will bring honor to God and themselves.

This agape, as he calls it, is the ingredient that will bring to life their Christian experience, and peace to their fractured relationships.

The Character of Love - vs. 4-13

Now in verses 4 to 12, Paul will go from explaining love's central role in the Christian experience, to a description of love's character.

This list of features describing God's love can be divided into three main characteristics.

Slide -1. Christian Love is Visible

Slide -1 Corinthians 13:4-7 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

We don't have time to do a word study over every single term here, but I do believe that the English words are fairly clear.

We know what patient means. We know what kind means.

We know not being arrogant, we know what that means. We know what these things are.

For the purpose of my lesson today, I just want to point out that all of these characteristics that he describes here,

this God's love, this agape, all of these things here are visible things, things you can see.

You can tell if a person has this kind of love, it's obvious to everyone, because these things stand out in contrast to how others act.

This would have been especially obvious to the Corinthians, because despite their promoted spiritual gifts, very few, of these characteristics were present in their behavior.

God's love, when it is expressed, is always clearly visible and easily recognized for what it is.

You can see patience.

You can recognize kindness when you see it, and humility, and goodness, and self-control, and the attributes he mentions.

These are all unmistakable visible things that are easily recognized.

Slide -2. Christian Love is Eternal

Slide -1 Corinthians 13:8-10 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

Slide -1 Corinthians 13:11-12 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

This passage here raises many questions as to the meaning and the reference to the word, when the "perfect" comes in verse 10.

Some say this refers to the completion of the New Testament Canon.

Others say this refers to the return of Christ.

But when we focus on this particular verse to the exclusion of the passage as a whole, we kind of lose sense of what Paul is saying here.

Paul has been describing the character of Christian love.

And in this final section he makes the point that love is eternal, and this is its most important feature.

What does he say?

Love never fails, love never falls away, love is always present.

This is just another way of translating this passage.

Of course, the reason for this is that love is from God. Love is God. It's His essential nature.

This is why it's always there. It will always exist.

The Corinthians have been focusing their attention on the temporary things, those things that will pass away in time, which Paul mentions here.

They have put the emphasis on the means rather than on the end, which is the goal, which is love.

The spiritual gifts and abilities were there only to enable them to get started in the faith.

They were not a goal in themselves.

He urges them to grow up and recognize what the true objective is.

And that objective is the character of love that he has been describing.

Their true maturation will come when they recognize that love is the objective.

And it is the objective because it is the essence of their experience with God.

He encourages them to realize that love will be the everlasting experience of Christianity, not the temporary gifts of prophecy or tongues and the like.

And then he finishes the passage with an extraordinary statement concerning the third characteristic of love.

Slide -3. Christian Love is the Greatest

Slide -I Corinthians 13:13 **And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.**

After describing the character of love, Paul places this virtue, this experience at the pinnacle of spiritual values.

This is his conclusion after stating the various qualities of love, but Paul doesn't answer the question why.

He just said, love is the greatest. You've got faith, you've got hope, but love is the greatest.

Why? Why is love the greatest? How is it greater than faith or hope?

What is it about love that exalted it above these qualities necessary for Christian life? He doesn't answer it.

Slide -In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul does mention love as the first and preeminent quality and result that comes from walking in the Spirit.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

In Corinthians he goes one step further by exalting Christian love above the already precious attributes of faith and hope.

So, as I closed up my lesson today, I'd like to tell you in my own opinion why love is the greatest.

Slide -Love lasts forever

Faith and hope are necessary to bring us to salvation and maintain our spiritual lives while we are here on earth.

Obedient faith puts us into Christ (Galatians 3:26).

Constant hope maintains our faith (Galatians 5:5).

Once we reach heaven, however, faith and hope will no longer be necessary.

Because once we reach heaven, we will see God face to face (Revelation 22:4).

No need to believe as true, we will actually be in His presence.

We will also experience the glorified body, the body without sin or death.

We will no longer hope for it, we will have it. In heaven, only love will remain.

Only the context and experience of love will be true.

In heaven, we will love God perfectly, because we will know Him and do His will perfectly.

We will love ourselves perfectly, because we will be sinless.

There will be no shame, no regret, nothing to dislike about ourselves.

We will love others perfectly, because Satan will no longer divide us.

We will all be together in Christ perfectly suited and united in perfect peace and love.

So, love is the greatest, because there will be nothing left to respond to in faith, nothing left to hope for, only love will remain to experience and to rejoice in forever.

Another reason is because

Slide -God is love.

John didn't say, "God is faith" or "God is hope." No, he said God is love (1 John 4:8).

The essence of God's character is love. People say, well yes, but He's also a God of justice. Absolutely.

He is the God of justice. And He's also the God of righteousness.

Absolutely he's the God - And don't forget He's a holy God.

But the Holy Spirit through John, when called upon to simply compress everything together to communicate to man the essence of who God is, **three words: God is love.**

Love is what motivates His actions. Love is what defines His being.

Love is the greatest virtue, because to love is to know God intimately, and to do His ultimate will.

Faith believes what God says. And hope expects what God promises. **But love does what God does.**

Faith and hope are the best characteristics of the human heart, but when a person loves, they become spiritual people and the true children of God (1 John 4:16).

All religious people believe in something, they hope for something, but only godly people love as God loves.

Love is the greatest because it is the defining characteristic of a spirit-filled man or woman.

The true faith and a genuine hope are expressed in Christian love. Without love, faith and hope are worthless.

Finally, love is the greatest

Slide -Love is the power of life.

It isn't our faith that has the power to save us, it's God's love that saves us. Faith is our response to that love.

Slide -What does it say in John 3:16? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"

Love is what motivated God to set the entire plan of salvation into motion.

It isn't our faith or hope that draws people to Christ, it's the love of Christ we show them that brings them to faith and hope and eventually their own love for Christ.

The disciples had favor with all of the people (Acts 2:47) largely due to the love that others witnessed among themselves.

You didn't hear them say, man look at those disciples, do they ever have a lot of Bible knowledge.

That wasn't what impressed them.

Slide -What does Jesus say? John 13:35 "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

There would be no faith or hope if it wasn't for love. Love was there first and love will be there last and forever.

Love was the power that created us.

Love was the power that saved us.

Love is the power that sustains us.

Love is the power that identifies us.

Love will be the power that resurrects, glorifies, and exalts us to the right hand of a loving God.

The most excellent way begins with faith in what God has done, continues with a hope for what God has promised, and will be consummated when Christ's love will be perfectly formed in us.

I'm looking forward to the day when God finally perfects love within me, because the thing that discourages me about me are all the times when I do not love.

If I'm critical about a person, that isn't love. I don't like that about myself. Sometimes I don't love me.

What I look forward to in heaven is being able to love you without reservation and loving myself without criticism.

Summary

So in finishing this lesson, please let me invite each of you to remember one important thing in connection with this lesson and our position in the world as a people attempting to restore New Testament Christianity,

Slide -remember, **we will never truly become the church of Christ unless we first become the church of love.**

Unless we become more famous for our loving than our fighting,

unless we become more known for our loving acts than our position on this doctrine or that doctrine,

we will not effectively restore the church of the New Testament.

It's not just about how we do things in public worship, that is important.

And it is biblical, but it's also how we do things with one another. God looks at both.

I leave you with the words of John, another apostle who knew something about the most excellent way,

a way we must follow to become the church of the Bible.

Slide -In I John 4:7-8, he said,

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

So, if you are in need of God's love today, the love that He has to forgive you, or to restore you back to a faithful service to Him,

whatever part of His love you need, then we encourage you to come forward and express that now as we stand and as we sing our song of invitation.

Slide -