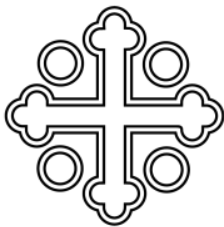


The
**MORE
EXCELLENT**
way

1 CORINTHIANS 13



CHRISTCOMMUNITY
CHURCH

Changed Hearts. Changed Lives. Changed Community.

The More Excellent Way:
A Series on 1 Corinthians 13

Introduction

Our sermon series for the next three weeks will focus on 1 Corinthians 13, which serves as the heart of Paul's first letter to the divided and perplexed church at Corinth.¹ We probably feel that we understand this chapter more than we truly do. Our familiarity is due to this chapter's ubiquity in many of our practices. We read it at weddings, print it on picture frames and greeting cards, and display it on posters and decorations. There is nothing wrong with these practices. But we will miss Paul's full meaning if we fail to consider 1 Corinthians 13 in its context. As Richard Hays argues, we must "rescue the text from the quagmire of romantic sentimentality in which popular piety has embedded it.... [Paul] did not write about *agapē* in order to rhapsodize about marriage; he was writing about the need for mutual concern and consideration *within the community of the church*."² In other words, this chapter is not about marriage; it is about the church.³ Therefore, the only way to understand the more excellent way of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is to see its connections to Paul's teaching on church community and unity in 1 Corinthians 12.

Remember from our recent series on chapter 12 that the Corinthians looked to flashy spiritual gifts as proof of their personal spiritual maturity and greatness. Their way of viewing spiritual gifts gave rise to competition and comparison in their hearts,

¹ Anthony Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 14: "The chapter on love (13:1-13) stands at the very heart of the theology of this epistle. Virtually all the qualities ascribed to love resonate with features (or the absence of these features) in Corinth."

² Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 231.

³ This does not mean it is wrong to read 1 Corinthians 13 at weddings or that the chapter has no application for marriage. The key is to see that 1 Corinthians 13 applies to much *more* than marriage. The more excellent way of love is available to and commanded for all Christians in all of life. The chapter applies to marriage precisely because of the role marriage plays in the life of the church and in the call to discipleship.

which in turn brokered rivalry and division in their church. As Robby helped us see, Paul likens the church to a body with many parts to show why Christ gives us different gifts. Our variety of gifts enables us to build up one another in our union with Christ. Christ always intends for His church to be a community of diversely gifted brothers and sisters building up one another. Thus, Paul neither dismisses spiritual gifts as pointless, nor does he rank them in importance, but he instead calls us to use whatever gifts we have received from Christ in pursuit of a “still more excellent way” (**1 Corinthians 12:31**). It is here, in chapter 13, that he now charts out the more excellent way that leads to richer unity as the body of Christ. And that way is love.

The more excellent way is for all Christians. This is seriously good news. *Serious* in that Paul makes it clear: there is no other way. We grow in love, or else we do not grow as Christians. Having or not having a specific gift, personality, or preference does not grant anyone a pass from traveling the way of love. Anything else we could deem significant in the Christian life is nothing if it lacks love. No amount of rightness in thought, word, or deed compensates for or justifies a lack of love.

Not only serious, but Paul’s message is also *good*. Every conceivable challenge we face as Christians can be helped by growing in love. Is an idol shipwrecking our hearts? There is no other cure than love for God. Is selfishness derailing our relationships? There is no other help than love for neighbor. Is a sense of being unloved, unworthy, or unwanted haunting our hearts? There is no other hope than God’s love for us. Growing as disciples of Jesus goes hand-in-hand with growing in love.

But how, exactly, do we grow in love? How do we go from praying about growing in love *in general* to seeing new fruit take root in the *specific* places we find a lack of love in ourselves? Answering that question is the goal of this sermon series.

As we will discover, Paul's teaching on love gives us three key practices that help us walk the more excellent way of love both as individuals and as a church community. These practices are:

- 1) Confronting our lack of love
- 2) Beholding the love of Christ
- 3) Walking in the more excellent way

These are *practices*, not techniques. Techniques are tips, tricks, and life hacks we use to try to control life through our own effort. These three practices are rooted in the means of grace—drawn from and submitted to Scripture, nourished by the sacraments, exercised in prayer—and they can only take root and bear fruit in our union with Christ and with one another as His body.

Our emphasis on practicing what we hear preached from 1 Corinthians 13 is integrally tied to the text's meaning. Paul has no interest in philosophizing about the nature of love. His focus is always first and foremost on the church—its faith and its practice. If we care about the Christian teaching on love, then we must submit ourselves to Paul's message and ask the Spirit to shape our hearts accordingly. There is no greater tragedy than for Christians to be puffed up about what we think we know about love rather than exercising our love in practice (**1 Corinthians 8:1**). After all, Paul equates standing firm in the faith and being strong with *doing* everything in love (**16:13-14**). May we thus keep in step with the Spirit and follow Christ on the more excellent way of the Father's love!

Before we set foot on the more excellent way, it will be helpful to have a shared definition of love. Our definition is not meant to be a comprehensive picture but a compass that orients our hearts to the more excellent way. We need a simple definition that we can trust when faced with the countless decisions we make every day in walking along the more excellent way.

It is common to say that love is more than a feeling; it is an action.⁴ Though true, this does not go far enough because it does not say what *kind* of action love is. But Jesus tells and shows us just that. In **John 13:1-20**, Jesus washed His disciples' feet and called them to follow His example. Key to His example was the fact that He willingly and humbly gave Himself for the disciples' true good. He then gave them a new commandment: "that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (**13:34**). Jesus's commandment to love one another as He has loved us is connected to His example of washing the disciples' feet. Jesus's actions display and define love as **willingly and humbly giving ourselves for someone else's true good**. Or, as Andrew Peterson, puts it, "Love is not a feeling in your chest. It is bending down to wash another's feet."⁵ We will build on this definition of love as we work through 1 Corinthians 13.

During this series our calls to worship will come from **Psalms 103**. In these words, God invites us to bless Him because of His great love for us. This rightly orders our love as a response to God's love for us. Thus, we will fittingly respond to our calls to worship with **1 John 4:7-12**. John's words invite us to join our hearts in professing the connection between God's love for us and our love for one another. Our assurances of pardon will come from selected passages in **the Gospel according to John**. Each of these passages assures us of God's love for us as embodied in the person and work of Christ. Only when assured of, and empowered by, the love of Christ can we walk in the more excellent way of love. Finally, our benedictory blessing

⁴ Note well: it is an error to say that love is *not* a feeling. Jesus and Paul both express their love with great feeling and affection (e.g., John 11:35-36 & Phil. 1:8).

⁵ Andrew Peterson, "For the Love of God," record February-May 2005, track 9 on *The Far Country*, Fervent, compact disc. This is a beautiful song well worth your time and reflection. Music has great power for shaping our heart's working definition of love. For other songs worth your attention, see also Peterson's "Love Is a Good Thing," track 6 on *Resurrection Letters, Vol. II*, and Liturgical Folk & Jon Guerra's "Love," track 3 on *Three Gifts*.

will come from **2 Corinthians 13:14**. As in our series on 1 Corinthians 12, this blessing sends us out each week with the assurance that our Triune God has extended the holy and loving fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit to include all who are united to Him by faith. Because we have been drawn into this divine fellowship of love, we get to walk along the more excellent way of love for God and neighbor in all of life.

This devotional is designed to encourage daily meditation and prayer in personal devotions and/or family worship. You are encouraged to use it the week prior to the associated sermon so that you are prepared for worship. In addition to the Scriptures and associated questions, there are opportunities to pray for our growth in love. Each Wednesday will focus on beholding Christ's love. We can grow in love only because God has first loved us. Then, on Saturdays, we will ask God to grow our love for Him in specific ways. On Sundays, we will ask Him to grow our love for our neighbors in specific ways. Our goal is to continue to grow in our dependence on the Lord through prayer as we seek His power to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

May God bless our time in personal devotion, family worship, and corporate worship as we seek to walk in the more excellent way of love in Christ!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Sermon Schedule

DATE	CALL TO WORSHIP	ASSURANCE OF PARDON	BENEDICTION	SACRAMENT
<i>Sunday, 4/21</i> 1 Corinthians 13:1-3	Psalm 103:1-5	John 15:8-11	2 Corinthians 13:14	
<i>Sunday, 4/28</i> 1 Corinthians 13:4-7	Psalm 103:6-14	John 15:12-17	2 Corinthians 13:14	
<i>Sunday, 5/5</i> 1 Corinthians 13:8-13	Psalm 103:15-22	John 17:24-26	2 Corinthians 13:14	Lord's Supper

Weekly Congregational Response

Beloved, let us love one another,
for love is from God,
and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.
Anyone who does not love does not know God,
because God is love.

In this the love of God was made manifest among us,
that God sent his only Son into the world,
so that we might live through Him.

In this is love,
not that we have loved God but that He loved us
and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Beloved, if God so loved us,
we also ought to love one another.
No one has ever seen God;
if we love one another,
God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:7-12

Weekly Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14

The Week of April 21st

Monday 4/15: **Psalm 103:1-5:** So often our lack of love is the result of forgetting God's love for us. What makes you prone to forget His love for you? Take time to remember the benefits of God's love for you.

Tuesday 4/16: **John 15:8-11:** Keeping Christ's commandments is the way to abide in His love. Are you harboring disobedience in your life? Take time to repent knowing that repentance and obedience lead to experiencing the fullness of Christ's joy in you!

Wednesday 4/17: Ponder the ways Christ's love is patient and kind, free of envy and boastfulness, and without arrogance or rudeness. Thank God for specific experiences of these facets of His love for you.

Thursday 4/18: **1 Corinthians 13:1-3:** Paul speaks of words, knowledge, and actions as all being meaningless without love. What are you most likely to prioritize over love? Why?

Friday 4/19: **2 Corinthians 13:14:** How has Jesus shown you mercy in response to your lack of love for God and neighbor? How is His grace growing your love for God and neighbor?

Saturday 4/20: Ask God to grow your love for Him. In particular, ask Him to humble your arrogance, calm your envy, and strengthen your patience by delighting you with His mercy, grace, and goodness.

Sunday 4/21: Ask God to grow your love for your neighbors. In particular, ask Him to fill your words with patience, your actions with kindness, and your thoughts with humility.

The Week of April 28th

Monday 4/22: Psalm 103:6-14: Do you ever feel like you already know everything you need to know about God's love? Ponder the contrast between our limited, dusty frame and the boundless heights and depths of God's love. Ask Him to deepen your wonder at His love for you!

Tuesday 4/23: John 15:12-17: Jesus calls us His friends whom He loves. He also calls us to love one another. Do you view your brothers and sisters in Christ as friends? Are you loving them as Christ loves you, His friend?

Wednesday 4/24: Ponder the ways Christ is not irritable or resentful toward you, never rejoices at proving you wrong, but always rejoices with the truth at work in your life. Thank God for specific ways you have experienced these facets of His love.

Thursday 4/25: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7: Paul's description of love exposes the Corinthians' lack of love and points to Christ's love. How do his words confront you with your own lack of love and point you to Christ? Run to Jesus with praise and repentance!

Friday 4/26: 2 Corinthians 13:14: Paul speaks of the Father's love being *with us*. How is the Father's love making its presence known in your life? (See also **Rom. 5:5**.)

Saturday 4/27: Ask God to grow your love for Him. In particular, ask Him to uproot your irritability and resentment by His kindness. Ask Him to replace your desire to be right with a sincere love for His truth, beauty, and goodness.

Sunday 4/28: Ask God to grow your love for your neighbors. In particular, ask Him to train you to respond to interruptions with love instead of irritability. Ask Him to guide you in the hard work of rejoicing with the truth at work in those with whom you disagree or struggle to love.

The Week of May 5th

Monday 4/29: Psalm 103:15-22: How have you experienced God's steadfast love throughout your life? How has His love been at work in the generations before and after you? Bless the LORD for His steadfast love to you and your family.

Tuesday 4/30: John 17:24-26: What does Jesus desire? What is He committed to making known to us as His people?

Wednesday 5/1: Ponder the ways Christ's love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things for your good and joy in union with Him. How has He remained faithful even when you felt unsure of His love?

Thursday 5/2: 1 Corinthians 13:8-13: What gaps exist between what you know and what you love? How might resting in the truth that God fully knows and truly loves you help close these gaps?

Friday 5/3: 2 Corinthians 13:14: The Holy Spirit binds us in union with Christ and with one another as Christ's body. How is the Spirit using fellowship with others to grow your love for God and neighbor?

Saturday 5/4: Ask God to grow your love for Him. In particular, ask Him to fill you with faith, hope, and assurance of His love. Ask Him to strengthen your endurance so that you would be quicker to run to Him in love in good times and bad.

Sunday 5/5: Ask God to grow your love for your neighbors. In particular, ask Him to use difficulties and disagreements to strengthen your love's endurance. Ask Him to replace your cynicism with humble faith and your anxiety with sincere hope.