

The more excellent way

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Date: 03 April 2022

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Father, thank you for the gift of your word. And I pray now, Lord, that we would be able to intently listen to what you have to say to us.

Please help us to concentrate and to focus. And please help us to get to know you better through this chapter. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen. What do we tend to value as a congregation? Looking at three different church websites recently, I was struck by the variety of answers out there.

One of these churches boldly proclaim, We value the presence of the Holy Spirit and the demonstration of the miraculous in our midst. We value anointed praise and worship and God-inspired messages as catalysts for transformation.

Another one said something along these lines. We are committed to going deep, not content with a shallow knowledge. We want to be uncompromising in the pursuit of the word of the Lord.

[1 : 11] Still another said, We are affirming, open and not judgmental. We simply want to welcome and help everyone. What did the Corinthian church value?

Well, it seems as if there were a bit of a mishmash of these three churches I just mentioned. They valued similar things. For some of the Corinthians, they proudly showcase their tolerance and charity.

Look at us, they said. We can even eat your idol food. No problem. We aren't like some of these other legalistic Christians. We are free.

We are open. And last week, Paul, you mentioned the gift of helping. Hey, we have that too. We take care of the marginalized around us. And then there were those who were really into knowledge and wisdom.

If you were with us last year, you might remember this, especially from the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians. These people said, Oh, we love the eloquent. We love those who seem to be able to impart to us the most wisdom.

[2 : 17] We like knowing stuff. We like those speakers who seem to possess the most knowledge. And boy, were they excited to know that spiritual gifts included the word of knowledge and wisdom.

And then there were those who were really spiritual. Church, they argued, could do with more of an infusing of the more spectacular gifts.

More tongues, more miracles, more prophecy. Hey, if God is great, then we as his representatives need to look great, right? And didn't Paul say last week, right at the end, now eagerly desire the greater gifts?

That was their reasoning. And yes, Paul did say that. And it is a thought that he will return to in chapter 14, where he will unpack more of what he means by greater.

But before he does that, he goes on to say something else, right at the end of 12 verse 31. And I will show you the most excellent way.

[3 : 31] It's as if he's saying, Church, you want to pursue the greater gifts? Good. But first, you need to know and pursue the greatest gift of all.

If you truly want to be spiritual, and exercise spiritual gifts rightly, there is an even bigger perspective you must grasp. There is something you must value above all else, without which you will lose your bearings as a church.

And that something is love. And so that's the literary context of 1 Corinthians 13. It's not really about weddings at all, which is the context in which most of us tend to hear this chapter.

It's really about church. There's nothing wrong, of course, with using this passage in weddings as a reflection on the character of love.

But realising that this chapter is part of the larger whole of chapters 12 to 14, helps us grasp why Paul writes chapter 13.

[4 : 45] It wasn't because he had just spent the whole night watching romantic comedies and was now feeling sentimental. It's because he wants us to understand that a gifted church is of no use to God if it is not a loving church.

After all, the last time Paul mentioned love was way back in chapter 8, verse 1. And what did he say then? Love builds up. Love, not gifts alone, is what makes the building project successful.

And so let's listen to what Paul has to say to us. And basically, he reminds us of three things. When exercising your gifts, he says, remember the primacy of love, the particularities of love, and the permanency of love.

And so let's work through this passage now. Firstly, remember the primacy of love. In verses 1 to 3, Paul begins by showing the absolute necessity of love.

As a veteran postmaster, he employs great rhetorical skill three times. He says, if you had this gift, or perhaps even more amazingly, that even better gift, if you had all that, but you had not love, you are nothing.

[6 : 16] If, but, if, but, if, but. And so verse 1, if you could speak in languages that people don't know, well, that's something, isn't it?

How impressed we often are by people who can speak English, Malay, Hokkien, Mandarin, Fuchal, Iban, Vidayu, and Tamil all in one breath. But what if the person, or what if the person could speak the language of angels?

Wow, that's even more impressive. You know, saying that you know how to speak Cantonese is one thing. Saying you know how to speak Angelese is another.

But, Paul says, sorry, but even if your linguistic abilities are out of this world, without love, do you know what you sound like?

Well, you sound like a gong, a static, lifeless thing that produces only a booming sound. Oh! You sound like this.

[7 : 21] And here, instead of just telling you, I'm just going to invite our drummer, Daniel, right now. And he's going to give you a live demonstration of what you sound like if you don't have love.

So, Daniel, are you ready? This is what you sound like when you don't have love. Thanks, Daniel.

Now, imagine if Daniel continued that for a couple of more minutes. Now, that would get old, real fast, wouldn't it? And that's Paul's point.

Even if you have highly valued gifts such as this, without love, all you'll be is unbearable, aggravating, exasperating.

You'll just be a one-note instrument. And if that's all you are, no beautiful music will ever be made. Or verse 2, suppose you have the gift of prophecy.

[8 : 36] Suppose you have such amazing insight into the sign of the times and the culture of our generation and which portion of scripture is a word for today. You don't just have knowledge, but understanding.

That's what we so often crave for, don't we? You know, we love experts who can tell us what's going on in Russia or what's going on with the pandemic or what's going on in the church. And that would certainly be a gift worth having.

Or even better, what if I have the gift of profound faith? Faith, the kind that Jesus says could move mountains. Well, Paul says again, if there is no love, so what?

I'm nothing. Not that the gift is nothing, but I am nothing. And then in verse 3, Paul heightens the stakes even more.

What if I give all I possess to the poor? Sounds good, right? After all, now I am really giving. You know, I'm not just focusing on giftedness.

[9 : 41] And even better, what if I give over my body to hardship? And so this time, I'm not just giving my things away, but I'm giving myself away.

And perhaps Paul could even be thinking of his own ministry here as one who has made great personal sacrifices for the gospel. But, Paul says, here's the scary thing.

Did you know that there is a way of making great personal sacrifices that can also be self-serving at the same time? In those days, and even today, to give away one's possessions and even one's life for a cause that is noble in the eyes of the world is one way to gain status and honour.

But Paul says, even those moments of doing good won't gain you any status and honour before God if it is not grounded in love.

I remember once hearing of someone being interviewed about why he gave away so many things and spent lots of time and energy helping others. Because, he said, it makes me feel good about myself.

[11 : 03] That's verse 3 in action. And that, Paul says, will not gain you anything. And so, each time, Paul is pinpointing a spiritual gift he's already mentioned.

Tongues, prophecy, faith, helping. But he tells the Corinthians, if prophecy, theology, and charity are loveless, they're of no use.

Now, it's important to note that he's not pitting gifts against love here. He's not saying that you have to choose between the two. Rather, he's saying that the exercise of gifts must come in the context of love.

And love is primary. Without it, gifts are nothing. The question is, do we believe this?

What do we value more? Today, God might have granted us good gifts. We have the gift of teaching kids or teenagers or of welcoming and hospitality.

[12 : 12] We are ready to open our wallets for the poor, even willing to give above and beyond what is needed as an act of faith. Our giving figures each week might make us feel good about ourselves.

We have technical skills in building maintenance, abilities to design flyers and websites, the capacity to influence and to lead.

But is there love in our hearts? after all, it's possible to use these gifts in such a way that it becomes about me. Perhaps not in an overt way, we don't go around bragging or anything like that.

But deep down in us, we're more concerned about how we're perceived by others when we exercise these gifts. We're happy to exercise the gifts whenever they positively impact how others see us, but we neglect them when we know that no one will ever notice.

Or we want to use the gifts selectively, only for selected people, only at selected times. We're motivated by pride, not love.

[13 : 32] Well, let it not be so, God's word says to us today. And just as an aside, these verses remind us not to be too impressed by mere giftedness.

Over the last two years, it seems like almost every month, a well-known evangelical leader is exposed because they've abused their power in some way. I've just heard of another two in the last two weeks.

And so often, it turns out that quite a number of people knew their feelings, but turn a blind eye because they said, oh, look at how gifted this leader is. Look at how good he is at connecting with non-Christians and bringing them into the kingdom.

Look at how he's growing the church. Look at what an amazing preacher, what an amazing musician he is. And Paul pleads with us, stop!

Think clearly. Is love present? If it isn't, never mind the giftedness, it's nothing.

[14 : 40] And stop measuring by the world's criteria, measure by God's criteria instead. Remember the primacy of love.

Then secondly, remember the particularities of love. there was a story once told in a daily bread devotional about a child psychologist who spent many hours constructing a new driveway in his home.

Just after he smoothed the surface of the freshly poured concrete, his small children chased a ball across the driveway leaving deep footprints.

And the man screamed and cursed at them. And his shocked wife said, you're a psychologist who's supposed to love children. And the man shouted, I love children in the abstract, not in the concrete.

Now, once you stop groaning internally at the pun, that's precisely what Paul now avoids. In verses 4 to 7, he begins to describe what love is.

[15 : 51] And he says, let me show you what love looks like in the concrete, not in the abstract. Instead of coming up with some technical definition, he simply tells us what love does.

And although we might not notice it straight away, Paul only uses verbs throughout. And so, for example, in verse 4, when he says love is patient, love is kind, what he's really saying is something like love shows patience, love shows kindness.

And he does this because he's just shown us that it's possible to exercise gifts and do good without love. And so, he needs to paint for us now a picture of what love looks like.

And so, let's spend some time observing the particularities of love. If you do have love, what does it look like on the ground? Well, first of all, love is patient.

Now, this isn't just about a willingness to wait in a long queue in a government office. This is about bearing with others. This is about discerning the right time so that the right thing can be done in the right way.

[17 : 07] In a church context perhaps, perhaps it could be about recognising that although moving a lot of things online and automating a lot of our processes is more efficient and that we have the people with the IT gifts to do this.

It might mean that we try not to rush it too quickly. Perhaps love means slowing down, taking time to walk with the less tech savvy among us, showing them how to do things in a new way, even if we have to explain it multiple times.

Or in a misunderstanding among brothers and sisters, love means not being too quick to react when hurt, but to consider as Proverbs 19 verse 11 tells us whether it is worth overlooking the offence.

Now, sometimes love means not overlooking, believe it or not, as Jesus says elsewhere, it is good to point out the fault of a brother or sister to facilitate reconciliation.

After all, verse 6 tells us later on that love does not delight in evil. But if it is something minor, we can sometimes just bear it.

[18 : 26] Love is patient. Love is kind. When we talk about kindness, I think we sometimes think of stereotypical examples from our days in pendidikan moral classes.

Kindness is helping the old woman across the street. kindness is sharing your food with others. Well, those are certainly acts of kindness, but perhaps they don't go deep enough. For what is kindness?

One theologian puts it nicely. Kindness, he says, is love's readiness to enhance the life of another person. Let me say that again.

Kindness is love's readiness to enhance the life of another person. And that's exactly what God does, does he not?

In Romans 2 verse 4, we are told that God's kindness leads us to repentance. In Titus 3 verse 4, we're told that the kindness of God is expressed by sending Jesus to regenerate and renew us.

[19 : 33] Well, that is the ultimate way of enhancing the life of another person, is it not? By bringing them to repentance and to the only person who can raise us from death to life.

Now, of course, we are not Christ. We can't rescue people from sin. But we show kindness when we actively think about how we can benefit another person's good, objectively speaking.

And so that can encompass everything from pointing people to Jesus, to the one who can really enhance their life in the best possible way, all the way to how we exercise our spiritual gifts.

And so if you're a ministry leader, for example, have you ever thought, how can I lead in such a way that my leading is experienced, not as lauding it over another person, but as helping someone else to flourish where they are, to see God's goodness where they are?

That is kindness. Or if you're an usher, have you ever thought about how you might enhance the life of a newcomer, no matter how small the enhancement might be, while he or she is sitting with us in the congregation?

[20 : 56] Have you ever thought about how your welcome of them might demonstrate the welcome of God? Love is kind. Paul then changes tack a little and as he now shows us the particularities of love in a series of negatives, what love does not do, it does not envy.

Envy is that emotion where you wish ill on another person because he has what you don't have. It appears whenever someone appears to have a greater gift, or is praised more often, or is given more opportunities, envy is a fellowship killer.

But love is the great fellowship builder precisely because it does not envy. Rather, it celebrates when someone else's gifts are being used and blessed by God.

It does not boast, it is not proud, it is not so fixated on one's own gifts that it does not that when someone else's gifts are being used, right, and when it sees other parts of the body going well, it actually rejoices.

That's how love acts. For love, verse 5, does not seek to dishonor others. Now we're back in some of the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians.

[22 : 30] Remember 1 Corinthians 11? We're to honour our head. Why? Well, here's the simple answer, that's what love does.

Or remember how Paul tells the rich to stop engaging in supper snobbery, but to wait for their poorer brothers and sisters to eat together and to honour them in that way? Why?

Because that's what love does. Or last week, why do we honour even the so-called less presentable parts of the body? Because that's what love does.

Love does not dishonour others. For love is not self-seeking. Now that is probably quite counter-cultural in today's age.

Today the emphasis has shifted towards self-love. Now there is a sense in which that is appropriate if we are talking about making sure that you don't harm yourself in the context of mental health and similar kinds of situations.

[23 : 38] But the terminology of self-love is unhelpful, I think, as it pulls us away from seeing what love in God's kingdom is really like.

And love, according to God, is always oriented to the other more than it is to the self. love. And it is oriented in such a way that it doesn't pull back at the first sign of trouble or at the first sign of conflict.

Look at verse five again. Love is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs. In other words, love doesn't keep score.

more. Whew! That's a challenge, isn't it? Perhaps a number of us can still remember something someone else said to us, maybe even in this very building years ago, which caused us some grief, and it's still in your memory bank, never to be erased.

But think of God's love towards us. how many times have we wronged God? Just imagine if he kept score.

[24 : 59] But God is love, and love doesn't keep score. And God sent Jesus precisely so that he doesn't count our wrongdoing against us.

And then verse six, love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It isn't like a tabloid magazine, or like social media outrage, which sometimes pretends to get mad at something horrible, but secretly likes to seek out the gossip of whatever scandal is being discussed.

It doesn't delight in Chris Rock's tasteless jokes, or Will Smith's violent slap. instead, it rejoices when truth is magnified, as it was in this incident through the words of Denzel Washington's wise counsel.

You can Google it later if you don't know what that is. But in church, and outside church, love always wants to take the side of righteousness.

righteousness. So love does not do all these things. And just before we move on, I want you to realise that this is not a random list of things that Paul just put together.

[26 : 23] Rather, he still has the Corinthian church in mind. He's showing them what love should look like in the concrete for them. For notice, all the stuff in verses 4-7 are precisely what the Corinthians are not doing.

And I've put a list of references on your outline for you to look up. But basically, the Corinthians envied, they were proud, they dishonoured others, they were self-seeking, they delighted in evil, they kept a record of wrongs.

Quite simply, the Corinthian church were not a loving church by any stretch of the imagination. And so, verses 4-7, far from being a lovey-dovey kind of thing, is actually a rebuke from Paul to the Corinthian church.

And so, one question to ask ourselves today is this, does Paul also have to rebuke us? If he becomes a member of our congregation for the next six months, what will he observe?

Love in action? Love in the concrete? What will he say at the end of those six months? What a wonderful testimony it would be if after six months, he writes to his friends, KEC is patient, KEC is kind, KEC does not envy or is proud, it is not self-seeking, it certainly doesn't delight in evil, it keeps no record of wrongs.

[28 : 01] That is what we are known for. even if we are not the biggest church or the most gifted church or the most beautiful church or the most energetic church or the most youthful church, well, what a moment that would be for us because I dare say we will be pleasing God because that's what he's after, a loving church.

And so that is what Paul is encouraging us to go for. He wants us verse 7 to always protect or perhaps better translated to bear all things as in the ESV, to always trust, to always hope, to always persevere.

He wants us to ensure that love is primary in our church, not just in general ways but in particular ways and to motivate us to that end.

he wants us to remind us about one more characteristic of love and that is the permanency of love. Thirdly, the permanency of love. Verse 8, love never fails but where there are prophecies they will cease, where there are tongues they will be stilled, where there is knowledge it will pass away.

Paul is making a very simple point here. Corinthians, he says, you know all those gifts that you highly value? Well, they're not going to be around forever.

[29 : 37] Because when the new creation comes, there will be no more need for them. And so, yes, verse 9, we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness or perfection comes, what is in part disappears.

After all, why do you need prophecies and word of knowledge when you are face to face with Jesus? And that's also the point of his analogy in verse 11.

When I'm a kid, my view of things is limited. You know, I think my dad is very tall, even though he's just an average 5'8". I think that vivacity is very far away, even though it's less than 4 kilometres away from home.

But there comes a time where I shouldn't be like that because I have matured. I should leave certain things and certain ways of thinking and certain activities behind.

And so it is with spiritual gifts and prophecies, Paul says. When you reach maturity, you would know that these things aren't such a big deal as you thought they were when you're just a baby Christian.

[30 : 52] And the illustration in verse 12 makes pretty much the same point. you know, would you rather see your best friend's reflection in a mirror? Or would you prefer his actual company?

The answer is obvious, isn't it? And so it is when the new creation comes. Because when we have full knowledge of Jesus, those gifts that we think are so great now will become redundant.

God's will will end up forever. But Paul says, you know what will remain? You know what will end here forever? Faith, hope, and love.

And of the three, love exceeds even faith and hope. love is. I've been thinking about why that is and I'm not exactly sure, but perhaps it's because love is tied up with God's character in such a way that faith and hope are not.

After all, it is only because of God's love revealed in Christ that faith and hope are possible. but here's the big point.

[32 : 02] Spiritual gifts are not permanent, but love is. So why not invest all your energy into the thing that lasts?

Why not pour out your life into the very thing without which you are nothing? And that, of course, prompts the natural follow-up question.

How then can I love better? How can I pursue the most excellent way of all? Is it simply by saying, well, I resolve to be more kind, more patient, more forgiving?

Well, resolutions are well and good, but the scriptures show us an even better way. In 1 John 4 verse 19, we're told, we love because he first loved us.

In other words, love in this full of concrete versus 4 to 7 cents is possible only because of Jesus. And so, the way to keep growing in love is actually to keep growing in Jesus, to keep knowing his love more and more, to keep company with Jesus.

[33 : 20] For we become like the people whom we both esteem and spend time with. love in love. And Jesus is love personified. In Mark 6, Jesus and his apostles had a full day of ministry.

And so Jesus says to his disciples, come with me to a quiet place, get some rest. But unfortunately, their quiet is soon interrupted as the crowds get wind of where they are and they chase after him for more.

And then Mark tells us some very beautiful words. So, think about it, here is Jesus, tired after a long day of ministry, and he could easily have said, go away, that's enough for today, I'm tired.

But Mark 6, 34 says, when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

And so, he began teaching them many things. And after that, he feeds them with the famous miracle of the five loaves and the two fish. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind.

[34 : 37] And that miracle, of course, foreshadows what Jesus is going to do. That feeding miracle is like the exodus, but Jesus is going to perform a greater exodus, a greater act of redemption.

And so, one night at supper, he gets on his knees, and he begins to wash his disciples' feet. Imagine that God bowed down, making sure that the soles of your feet are not blackened.

Love is not envious or proud. And then he heads out to the garden to spend time with God, where he prays.

take this cup from me, but not what I will, but what you will, because I know that, I know what must be done for the salvation of sinners.

Love is not self-seeking. And then he takes up his cross and endures the spitting and mocking of the Roman soldiers.

[35 : 46] love and love and abandonment of even his closest friends, and yet he felt no resentment.

He never had second thoughts about sacrificing himself for them. Love is not easily angered. While crucified on that cross, in great pain, he tells John, look after my mother.

Love does not dishonor others. And as he dies on that cross, bearing the wake of our sin, taking our evil seriously, he does not delight in evil, and yet he takes our record of wrongs and says, your names are being transferred into the book of life instead.

You wrong me, but I want to bring you joy, and that's why I'm dying on the cross. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

And then he entrusts himself to the father, telling him, into your hands I commit my spirit. Love always trusts.

[37 : 05] And then three days later, as he rises again, he shows that love never fails. Indeed, he shows that he has never failed to love you.

And as a result, it becomes possible for us now to love as he does. For as Jesus fulfills his mission, God can pour out his spirit. And Romans 5, verse 5 tells us that God's love itself has been poured into our hearts through this Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Galatians 5 tells us that love is not so much a gift, but a fruit of the spirit. And the Holy Spirit, of course, is the spirit of Christ, who is now able to produce that same Christ-like love in us.

We love because he first loved us. And so if you want to love better, don't just make resolutions.

Instead, let the spirit instil in you a resolve to know Jesus more, to pursue him more. Slow down and spend time with this Jesus whose life and ministry I've just sketched out for you.

[38 : 21] Dwell on his love, dwell in his love, receive it, and that will lead you and I onto the way of love.

And if you don't know Jesus at all, then let me invite you to get to know him. And never forget that love is oriented towards others.

Remember the context of 1 Corinthians, 13 love takes place within a community. You can't love and isolate yourself at the same time. Remember verse 7, that love always trusts, love always holds.

And so love lets people in. And you can do that because you know you're accepted, not on how perfect you look, but on the basis of Jesus' death.

You can let people know you because you already know that you're fully known by Jesus and he hasn't turned you away, but in fact he's excited to see you face to face.

[39 : 27] And so love lets people in, not afraid to let others see our imperfections. And if that is the mindset of the entire congregation, that would be more transformative than just the mere presence of tongues or whatever other spiritual gift we have in mind.

So my brothers and sisters, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word.

Thank you for sketching out for us a picture of what love looks like. And thank you especially that in Jesus we can see so clearly what love looks like in action.

thank you for the Lord Jesus who, even when we were still your enemies, he came down to die for us.

And so Father, we just pray now that we will continue to dwell in your love, be motivated by your love, to rely on your spirit, and to seek a need, to love those around us, to be patient, to be kind, to not envy others, to not keep a record of wrongs, to rejoice with the truth, to do all those things that we've just heard from verses 4 to 7.

[41 : 05] I pray that the concrete particularities of love will be seen in our congregation, will be seen in our lives, and that will be a wonderful testimony to those watching outside.

So we just pray Lord that you will help us even more than a gifted church to be a loving church. All this we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen.