

The Greatest of These

January 30, 2022

1st Corinthians 13: 1-13

¹ If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand 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 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

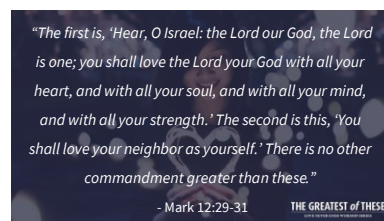
⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰ but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.



Earlier in worship we watched a video about what love is. There were a lot of profound insights about love - especially from a group of children. For the past two weeks we have been talking about gifts and how they build unity, about gifts and how we are called to use our gifts for the building of the kingdom of God. Today we focus in on another gift: the gift of love, the greatest gift of all. We will delve into 1st Corinthians 13 as we seek to shape our everyday lives into the pattern that Paul describes in these verses. As we prepare to do so, let us pray...

As we begin to explore the idea of love, we first turn to Mark 12, verses 28-31, where Jesus identifies love as our first priority, as our main commitment. One of the scribes, a religious leader, asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is. In response Jesus says, *"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."* Jesus draws deeply upon the Jewish understanding of love as he connects into the ancient foundations of the Israelite's faith. I believe that these two commands should be the foundation of our faith too. Loving God with all that we are and loving neighbor as self should be the centering ideal, the guiding force, the place where our faith begins and is rooted.



These commands, of course, are challenging to actually live out. It is not always easy to love. It is sometimes downright hard to love. I shared a video earlier to illustrate how children see and understand love. In some ways loving is easy. It is joyous.

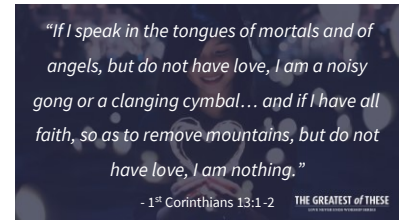
In our passage from 1st Corinthians 13, Paul goes beyond the command to love to explain what love is. In the children's explanations that we heard earlier, there are echoes of Paul's writing. As we look at what love is, according to the apostle Paul, please turn with me to 1st Corinthians 13 as we look at "the greatest of these".



Chapter 12, which we have been working through the past two Sundays, ends with these words: *"And I will show you a still more excellent way."* In chapter 12 Paul wrote about giftedness and unity, about being the body of Christ within the walls and outside of the walls. But instead of delving into all the ways that the church and the members are failing to be the body of Christ, Paul launches into the foundation of being Christ to one another and to the world. These verses are familiar verses. They would maybe stack up there right next to the Lord's Prayer and John 3:16. At most every wedding that we attend we hear the words of this passage read and applied to the marriage that is taking place. That is right and good that God should bless the covenant of marriage with these words about covenant love. The covenant love declared at a wedding is a reflection of God's love for us – unconditional, total, forever. That is the type of love that we are called to in our everyday lives as we hear and ponder these words of Paul. As we delve into these words of love, hear them once again.

[VIDEO 2: "Love Is" (1:08)] – *End of Part 1 PowerPoint*

Our passage begins with these honest words: *“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.”* If I do not have love, I am nothing. These are honest words because they are



powerful words. And because they are honest and powerful, they are challenging. These words of Paul lead me to ask, how do we make this declaration? And maybe more importantly, how do we honestly seek to live out these words?

If I avoid certain people because they hold different viewpoints than me or if I hold back my honest thoughts so as not to engage in honest but hard conversation, am I nothing in terms of how I love? If I look at those different than me – different race, different religion, different orientation, different whatever – with anything other than love, then am I just flapping my lips? If I sit at a meeting in silence, reluctantly accepting whatever decision is being made, grinding my teeth and seething inside the whole time, am I really practicing love at its best? If I just stand up here on a Sunday morning and tell you to love, but do not truly love God and others myself, then am I not a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal? And if I give and give and give because I want others to notice me and how generous and kind I am, but do not give from the heart, out of love for those in need, then I gain nothing.

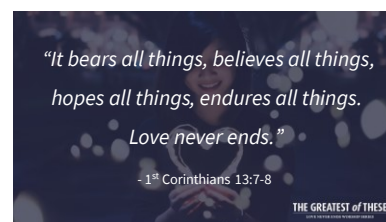


As we continue into verse 4 and beyond, Paul presents this most excellent way of love. These words present a new way of being in the world, a new way of seeing the world and all

those who live in it. Love is patient and kind.

Love gives grace when we would rather dismiss or move on from that person or situation. Love gives when kindness is not our first thought, when we would rather not engage and offer assistance to that person. Love does not boast. It is not rude or arrogant or envious. Love does not focus on self, on our own wants or needs. Love does not lift up self nor does it tear down or degrade others. Love does not say “me” or “my.” Love doesn’t insist on its own way. Love considers the other more than self; it seeks to work towards the common good, not unilateral, personal victory. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not see with eyes of greed or in the other ways of the world. Love is happy for the other, joyful in the joy and blessing that the other is experiencing. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing. Even though it may get us what we want, love does not go there. Love prevents us from doing harm to the other, from taking advantage of the other. Love rejoices in the truth. When we love really well, we never have to look back and wish we had treated another better or that we had done or said things the right way the first time. When we lead with love, we are choosing God’s way, “the more excellent way.”

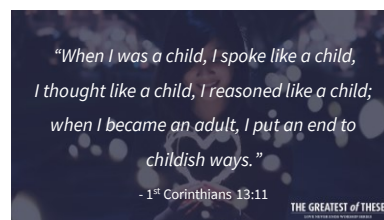
Turning to verses 7 and 8 we read, *“It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”* Paul has a pretty high understanding of love, doesn’t he? It is so because Paul is thinking in terms of covenant love here. Think of the best marriage or the greatest friendship that you have ever been around or witnessed. The foundation is this type of love, this covenant love. But Paul is not calling us to just practice this covenant love in our marriages or with our best friends. No, Paul is calling us to live out this covenant love in all of our relationships – with our friends, with our brothers and sisters in Christ, with our families,



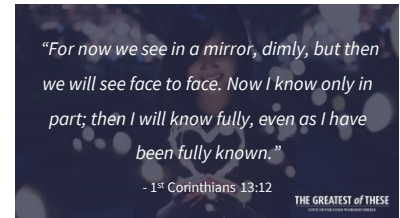
with our acquaintances, with our co-workers, with our classmates and our teammates, with the stranger that we meet, and with those who we could chose to see as our “enemy.”

Imagine for a moment, what loving in this more excellent way would do to change our world, our church, our communities, and what it would do as it transformed all of our relationships. I know that this is a challenging and difficult way to live and to love. It is not easy. Far from it. But if we were able to love in this way, even a little bit more than we are right now, then would it be possible for some who are without faith to catch a glimpse of this God of love that we proclaim? Would it be more possible to lean into faith if in our lives they saw this love being lived out in real and authentic ways?

Take a look at verses 11 and 12. Here is an honest admission. These verses speak of a spectrum or of a continuum. We are all someplace along this line between childlike faith and mature faith. In verse 11 Paul writes, *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.”* As I think honestly about my relationships and how I love – or fail to love – I realize that I am all over the place. Sometimes I can be quite childish in my ways. I can be self-centered and arrogant. I can be a clanging cymbal.



Yet at other times I manage to love in the more excellent way. It is then that I begin to live into verse 13. Here we read, *“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”*



In those moments where I am practicing unconditional and pure love, I can begin to see Christ at work in and through me. I can catch a glimpse of how God wants me to live out my faith. I can start to see Christ in the face of the other. It is in these moments that Christ becomes more fully known in my heart.

In these times when I practice this more excellent way, I become more fully known by Christ as Christ becomes more fully known in me. In these holy and sacred moments, I understand that the greatest of these is love. In that moment, when we are there, it is a moment that we want to hold onto, that we want to live in all of the time. That feeling is illustrated well in the image for today's sermon. In those experiences we feel like this woman, like we are holding the greatest thing ever in our hands and in our hearts.



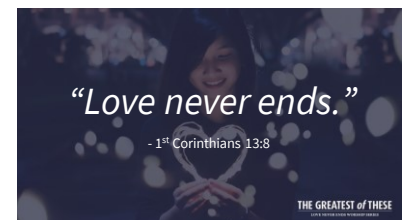
As I close, I want to share an illustration that came to mind. It is a little odd, but I think it works. When you walk into McDonald's and order a Big Mac, this is what you have in mind. It is the picture on the menu. When someone says that they are a Christian, there are certain expectations that kick in. Even when people have had a bad experience with "Christians", I think these people still expect to feel loved, welcomed, valued, and honored the next time around. They hope for better.



People hear you are a Christian and they expect kindness and generosity and justice and forgiveness and mercy. And then you sit down at the table, and you unwrap your Big Mac, and this is what you get. And it is not just McDonald's, right? This can be people's experience with Christians too. They think: What you said was not very loving or kind... What you did failed to live up to my expectations of kindness and mercy... What you offered was not really generous at all... You did not even try to listen or to understand where I am coming from... You do not see me for me... You are not at all what was advertized when you said you were a Christian.



My friends, may we choose the more excellent way. And when we fail to love God or neighbor as we are called to love them, may we offer a sincere apology and repent of our sinful ways. May we declare our failure and ask for the privilege of trying again, of trying to practice the more excellent way of love. Again, in verse eight we read, "*Love never ends.*" As we seek to live out our faith and love this week, may this be what others think and say and experience from those of us seeking to follow in the way of Christ, the one who embodied love lived out. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about the challenge to love in the “more excellent way”, what are your biggest barriers? How can you overcome these?
- 2) *Pray*. Reflecting on those who have been difficult to love, how can you pray to God about what is in within you instead about that other person?
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 19:16-22. What “possessions” do you need to let go of in order to more fully give of yourself as you seek to follow Jesus?