

# PURSUING THE EXCELLENT WAY

## 1 Corinthians 13

INTRODUCTION: Do not raise your hands because where I am going with the questions might be embarrassing, but speak your answers to yourself. “How many of you have ever been in love?” “How many of you are in love, now?” “How many of you love somebody the way Paul describes love in 1 Corinthians 13?”

1 Cor. 13 has been called the greatest of Paul’s writings, the Beatitudes set to music, and the Hymn of Love. Who of us have not read it? Which of us has mastered it?

The apostle wrote the words as the Spirit of God breathed them out.

## 1 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. 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. 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.

4 Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 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. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

11 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. 12 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. 13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these *is* love.

Another title we might give to this chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is “**The Single Most Important Instruction to be Given to Any Follower of Christ.**”

Before I dare to try to peel away the precious petals of this exquisite rose of a Scripture to help us see it in greater detail, let me speak to some general matters that are of utmost importance.

1. We should see both the verse that introduces this chapter and the one that follows it.

1 Corinthians 12:31 **But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.**

Then the Spirit proceeds to teach us more about love than we could ever master in a single lifetime.

1 Corinthians 14:1 **Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy.**

From these I have drawn the title of my message this morning, 'Pursuing the Excellent Way.'

I want you to see this because what we read here is not just a treatise on love. It is not given to us just so we will have better understanding or be more properly informed. It is given because we are being commanded to pursue it. We are being told to pursue love. Love is the more excellent way of living, and we are told by the Holy Spirit to go after it.

If you leave this place this morning knowing something you did not know about the meaning of this kind of love, but you do not love others more and better than when you walked in, then I have failed, and you have failed. Because **God has sent this word for us** to put the truth into action, **to pursue the practice of this kind of love with our spouses, with our family, with our friends, and even with our enemies.**

2. The dominant word in the passage is love, and as you would expect. It is what we often call agape love. It is the love that God Himself exercises.

It is not romantic love nor sexual love, what the Greeks called eros. Neither is it mere friendship love, which the Greeks and the Bible call philia.

It is this God-like love we who are followers of Christ are commanded to exercise. Our Savior said,

John 13:34 **A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**

**Agape love**, God-like love is self-giving love. It is self-sacrificing love. It is not merely a feeling nor a sentiment. **It is an action word. This kind of love is something we do, and it always costs something for us to do it.** It is the love demonstrated by God Himself in the most memorized verse of the Bible:

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Practicing this kind of love is the supreme mark of discipleship, and the lack of it is the primary cause of all disobedience.

John 14:21 He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. ...

3. We are not being commanded to do something we cannot do if we have trusted Christ. Paul explains in Romans

Romans 5:5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Are you ready to see more clearly that which we are so boldly commanded to do? Look at

## I. THE PREEMINENCE OF LOVE (verses 1-3)

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 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. 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. 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.

Wow! We are barely into the passage and I am challenged by it! And I barely even fit Paul's description, yet enough of it applies to humble me.

- I do not have the gift of languages or of interpretation of languages or I would not have to work so hard to be able to use Portuguese in Brazil.
- Yet Paul's point still applies. Even if I work hard and discipline myself to learn this language to make my ministry among Brazilians more effective, if I do not do use it with God-like love then my words come out like the

sound of cymbals in the hand of a middle school boy who just put on his first pair. Do you get the picture?

- I do have the gift of prophecy, in the biblical sense of the gift of proclaiming the Word of God, not in the sense of predicting the future. Yet even with that gift of the Spirit, I would never claim to understand all mysteries or knowledge.
  - Yet still the point hits me between the eyes. Even in those places where I do have a degree of understanding of the things of God, if I do not use that understanding motivated and empowered by Christ-like love, I am nothing!
- Are you understanding this with me? **Whatever gifts or abilities we have, no matter how great**, how noble, how powerful,
  - Whether it is our faith
  - Our generosity
  - Our sacrifice
  - **If we do not exercise them with agape love, God-like love, the greatness of the gifts or abilities falls away to nothing.**

**Love motivated what Christ did for us.**

**Love must motivate what we do for Christ, or it is nothing.**

**Love is preeminent.**

## **II. THE PRACTICE OF LOVE (verses 4-7)**

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 4 Love suffers long *and* is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Let's talk briefly about each of these Spirit-inspired descriptions. This sermon could be a whole series, yet there is value in seeing the whole and not just each individual part.

<p>Love suffers long</p>	<p>Literally, love is long-tempered and patiently endures. <b>The word is used more about enduring <u>people</u> who are difficult</b> than about enduring difficult events or happenings, wouldn't you know. Most of us would much rather deal with a difficult situation than with a difficult person!</p> <p><b>The person who loves like this does not <u>retaliate</u> or seek revenge.</b> He or she does not defend their rights nor their honor. Their concern is the welfare of others and not their own injured feelings, reputation, or person.</p> <p>Stephen was like this as the Jews stoned him. "Lord, don't hold this sin against them." Jesus was like this always but especially on the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."</p>
<p>Love is kind</p>	<p>Patient love takes anything from people; insults, slights. Kind love will give anything to other people. <b>Kindness not only desires the welfare of others, it actively <u>works</u> for it.</b> Jesus taught this directly: "If someone tries to take your shirt, give him your coat also. If someone forces you to walk a mile, walk two." <b>Love that is kind functions even when, no especially when, people are <u>demanding</u>.</b></p>
<p>Love does not envy</p>	<p><b>Love is not <u>jealous</u> or envious.</b> It does not want what others have. It does not want to take away good things others possess that we do not. Jonathan's love for David was like this. Jonathan was not jealous of David's popularity or success. Even when David was about to take the throne, which would have normally gone to Jonathan, he did not want to take it from David for himself.</p>
<p>Love does not parade itself</p>	<p><b>Love does not <u>brag</u> or boast.</b> It does not parade one's accomplishments. It is the other side of jealousy. Bragging tries to make others jealous of what we have or what we have done.</p>

Love is not puffed up	<p><b>Love is not <u>arrogant</u>.</b> William Carey is often called the father of modern missions. Unlike your pastor, Carey was a brilliant linguist. He translated parts of the Bible into 34 different languages. One evening at a dinner party a snob trying to embarrass Carey said, "Mister Carey, I understand you were once a shoemaker." To which Carey replied, "Oh, no sir. I was never a shoemaker; I was only a shoe repairman."</p> <p>Jesus was God incarnate, but He never exalted Himself. Instead He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.</p>
Love does not behave rudely	<p><b>Love practices good <u>manners</u>.</b> Love does this, not because the customs are necessarily important, but because the people who practice them and are sensitive to them are important. Sometimes we sacrifice our witness because of being insensitive or rude. Before we respond to a stranger with words or tone that is less than kind or gracious, we should ask, "Could I share Christ after I have said these words?"</p>
Love does not seek its own	<p><b>Love does not seek its own <u>way</u>!</b> I am a Burger King kind of guy, not because I like their burgers better than others, but because I like it my way! Don't we all, much of the time? That is the problem. That is the essence of sin. We want to do things our way rather than God's way. God-like love not only yields to God when we love Him. God-like love yields to others also. Jesus, whose way was always right; nevertheless, came not to be served, but to serve.</p> <p>This kind of love is focused on the needs and the good of others and not on our own needs or desires. <b>A perspective that interprets everything in light of how it impacts <u>me</u>, is the opposite of love.</b> VBS is the perfect laboratory for developing the selflessness of love!</p>

Love is not provoked	<b>Love does not take <u>personal</u> offense.</b> Love will be righteously offended when God is offended, as Jesus was when He cleansed the temple. But God-like love does not take offense over personal insult or injury.
Love thinks no evil	Here the meaning is different than the English translation communicates. It means <b>Love does not keep a <u>record</u> of evils done.</b> Love does not keep books about offenses, slights, or injuries because there is no place for resentment or grudges.
Love does not rejoice in iniquity	<b>Love is never glad about <u>sin</u>.</b> One who loves as Christ loves is never glad about sin in one's own life or sin in the life of another, even in the life of a rival or an enemy. Sin does not entertain the one who truly loves.
Love rejoices in the truth	<b>Love loves the <u>truth</u>!</b> Love never rejoices in falsehoods or false teaching. Love never says "truth does not matter." God-like love loves people before they know the truth, even when they deny or refuse the truth, and even when they do not practice the truth. But love never abandons the truth, because people are only set free by the truth.
	The following four statements build to climax.
Love bears all things	<b>Love endures the <u>penalty</u> for others.</b>  Isa. 53:4-5 <sup>4</sup> Surely He has borne our griefs And carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed Him stricken, Smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.

Love believes all things	<b>Love is <u>trusting</u>.</b> Love is not suspicious or cynical. The loving person wants to believe the good about others. When we are unloving we are quick to think the worst about a person. Even when trust is broken, love desires to forgive, heal, and restore.
Love hopes all things	<b>Love <u>retains</u> hope.</b> When trust is broken, even when the one who breaks it refuses repentance and restoration, love keeps hoping. This is the love that keeps a spouse trying to save a marriage with an unfaithful partner. This is the love that keeps parents praying for and seeking after backslidden children. This is the love that keeps a church longing for the repentance and restoration of a sinning member.
Love endures all things	<b>Love endures all things at all <u>costs</u>.</b> Interestingly, the term for endure is a military word. It means to hold a vital position at all costs. That is what God-like agape love does. <b>It stands against overwhelming opposition and will not give up loving.</b>

Finally we should see...

### III. THE PERMANENCE OF LOVE (verses 8-13)

Time prevents a full exposition of the last verses of the chapter, but the essence of the thought is summarized in the first sentence.

**Love never fails.**

**That does not mean that love is always successful.** If love were always successful, there would be no men or women who remain lost in their sin to be condemned for eternity in hell, for God's love is perfect and God loved so much that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever would trust in Him would not perish but would have everlasting life.

Love is not always successful in accomplishing the loving good for those who are loved.

**Love never fails means that love never ends. Love never ceases. It will abide forever.**

Paul then explains that many other important and wonderful things ultimately will pass away, even prophecy and knowledge, when God brings in the perfect eternal state, the eternal kingdom, when sin shall be no more – the perfect has come.

But while things like languages, prophecy, and even knowledge shall pass away, love will not. The love of God, and God's God-like love in us for Him and for others will never, never pass away.

And that is why he concludes **the greatest of these is love.**

CONCLUSION: I wonder how this text impacts you. I tell you that it rattles me to the core. It shakes the very fiber of my being. It challenges everything about me.

I like to think of myself as a loving person, a loving husband, a loving father. I like to think that while my parents were alive they thought of me as a loving son. I hope you think of me as a loving pastor.

But encountering these verses as I have this week makes me wonder if I have ever loved at all. Have I ever even come close to loving in the selfless, unselfish way that God loved and God loves?

And these truths move me to action. I am going to love Karen better and more. I am going to love my sons, Jeremy and Kyle better and more. I am going to love my grandchildren and great-grandson better and more. I am going to love you, better and more.

I don't have many people I don't like, but there are a few. I am going to do all God will empower me to do to love them better and more.

And I already love you enough to hope, that the same thing will happen to each of you; that we will begin to practice a greater, larger, deeper kind of love than we have ever practiced before.