

The More Excellent Way

What more could anyone say to define the word “love”. Still, all the Valentine’s cards in the world, just don’t quite do it. But the apostle Paul is never a man to shy away from even the most challenging subjects, and so he will try to define the word “love. And he tells us that whatever else love is, it is first and foremost . . .

A pursuit of excellence

“ I will show you a more excellent way. . . “ The sheer poetic beauty of what follows in 1 Cor. 13, ranks among the greatest of world’s inspirational texts – oft read at weddings. But the sheer power and beauty of the words must never blind us to the blood and guts realities in which these words came into being. If there is a “more excellent way,” there must have been a less than excellent way. Paul has been discussing spiritual giftedness with this church and, frankly, Paul and the Corinthians didn’t agree about much, but of all the highest human ideals, who would possibly *disagree* that indeed “the greatest is love”? And they must pursue this more excellent way.

For love can never be an abstract philosophical concept, to be analyzed and admired from a distance or programmed into a machine like these “care robots” Toshiba is developing for the use in health care settings. Love must be *embodied* in a flesh and blood community. Christianity is not a soulless moral code; it is, however, an ethical mandate. A covenant. An unconditional commitment *to the other*. Jesus’ ethic expressed in the Sermon on the Mount, stands in stark contrast to Corinthian so-called “spirituality.” For they reflect in *their* behaviour all that love is “not” and all that love is “never.”

In the church at Corinth, one could speak in tongues like there’s no tomorrow, but at the same time tolerate sexual impurity and social class discrimination. Corinthian “spirituality” had some of the appearances of the real deal: the fasting and prayer and prophecy, long intellectual debates . . . but there seems to be among them a total abandonment of *basic ethics* that would evidence genuine love.

They were “gifted,” but even the greatest gifts all have a shelf-life. Spiritual gifts are all, in one way or another, simply the Holy Spirit working through us to help others, and as such never come with a lifetime guarantee. We must choose each day, each moment to live in the Spirit. *Stop*, and even the greatest gifts will come to a grinding halt.

But what remains untouched by both time and earth-shaking events is *love*. Love lasts – which is why 1 Corinthians 13 is so appropriate at weddings where two people promise to love as long as they both shall live. But even wedding vows sometimes become mere words. Yet behind the wedding-day poetics of *these* famous 1 Corinthians words is *a very concrete action* of God in Christ.

It was a *cross* not an *idea* that saved humanity.

It took an act of God not a motivational slogan to change the world. Love is behaviour. It’s not over and against spiritual gifts, it is the way those gifts *behave*. So therefore we might say, no matter what wealth or talents or social status we may have *or lack*, in a very true sense . . .

All you need is love (1-3)

Paul begins by mentioning the speaking in tongues because that’s where the trouble lies at Corinth. But what is true for tongues is true for every single spiritual gift. It is also true for every act of self-sacrifice. Without a doubt, our gifts and sacrifices are of great value, but what is at issue is the *person* who gives and acts. What is *not* acceptable is a good religious *performance*, a

rigid obedience to a *moral code*, by someone who is otherwise not able to be described by the language we find in 1Cor 13.

What is at play between Paul and the Corinthians are two conflicting “spiritualities”; one all about public drama without much real concern for people’s needs (this being the Corinthian spirituality), and Paul, on the other hand, who defines spirituality as a fullness of the Holy Spirit. All believers are “sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be his holy people. “ Even though Paul is very critical of the Corinthians, he does, however, begin this letter on a positive note, telling them that this is exactly who they are: sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be his holy people (1:2).

But the conflict has arisen due to a misunderstanding of spirituality that is causing them to miss the mark of the Gospel. They are not lost or abandoned by God. Quite the contrary. But they must *pursue* their calling. And the first thing the Corinthians must learn if they are to enter into this “more excellent way,” this true fullness of life in Jesus Christ, is that there are some things in life that are . . .

More important than the songs of angels

“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.”

No doubt Paul was an excellent preacher. No doubt there were many in Corinth who could speak eloquently Paul *is* writing to people who actually believe they are “speaking in the tongues of angels”. The Corinthians think that they have arrived at an *angelic level* of existence. But Paul has been making the point that their so-called “spirituality” has led them into certain ethical compromises that are evidence of a lack of the Spirit and thus a lack of *love*.

Sure the church may be awash with preaching talent, but it is also rife with quarrels, pride and rivalries. To love is to act towards others the same way God in Christ has acted towards us. To “walk in the Spirit” is to live by Jesus’ command: “love one another.”

Otherwise we, he says, we are “clanging gongs”. Perhaps Paul is referring to the brass cymbals sounded in a certain pagan temple popular among the Greeks. In the temple ceremony, at the sound of the gong, some bizarre ecstasy would break out supposedly indicating the presence of the god or goddess to whom the temple was devoted. So for a church to claim to worship Christ while showing no love is to be indistinguishable from a pagan cult. A “gong show”. Furthermore, Christian revelation must take us . . .

Beyond predictions of the end of the world

Verse 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.”

Even if one could master the full range of spiritual giftedness without *love*, they would still have nothing to offer. “Mysteries” and “knowledge” were concepts popular in the Jewish apocalyptic movements before and after the time of Christ. In these groups, certain ones would claim to have received hidden knowledge from God regarding of the end of world and God’s coming judgment. But Paul says that even if one *could* possess such knowledge, (and such claims inevitably prove to be both pretentious and misleading), even if one *could* reveal these mysteries to others, this would not be any proof of the Spirit’s presence. Only *love* in the human heart can prove the truth of a revelation from God.

But there’s another aspect of bearing true witness to God in the world. True spirituality

must also go . . .

Beyond humanitarianism

Verse 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.”

In modern society there are many humanitarian organizations. How dare we, as Christians, suggest that one who gives of their life and doles out their substance for the poor gains nothing? Of course, such acts are *good*; but unless such acts are the out-flow of a relationship with Jesus Christ, with all due respect, they remain self-centred acts, and as such are of no ultimate benefit to the giver. Even Christians can do many good things and still be self-centred. This even applies to martyrdom or other extreme acts of self-giving.

So here see in the teaching of Paul, a critique of *two wrong turns* made by modern, global Christianity: *one* of going about trying to “save souls” by spreading a purely spiritual message without any regard for the social injustice and hunger and poverty and oppression. The *other* wrong turn, of course, of going about doing good humanitarian acts, building a better world, without clearly telling people the story of Jesus: his cross and resurrection, his ascension into heaven and his coming again to judge living and the dead.

God, for the sake of love, entered our broken sinful world, endured the *lovelessness*, violence, and hate so that we could *know him*. And it is by entering into a Christ-centred life, a life ultimately committed to love the God who first loved us, we can approach our world with that same love. It’s not our goal to convert others. Our goal is to reflect the glory of God. We want others to know the joy we know. We not only tell the story of Jesus to the world, we *continue* the story through the unfolding chapters of lives marked by *fifteen different verbs* which Paul is about to use. The first two are:

Being patient and being kind (4a)

When we are patient and kind to others we are telling them God’s story. Patience and kindness are the two responses God made towards us: he is patient in terms of withholding his wrath against sin, giving the world more time to repent. He is *kind* in his many acts of mercy. And this is the stance we are to have towards others. But it is not always easy to be patient and kind, the proof of which is that we often fail, which is why Paul goes on to say that love must be characterized by . . .

The seven “is not’s” (4b,5)

“Love *is not* envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It *does not* insist on its own way; it *is not* irritable or resentful;

These seven “*is not’s*” could be a page out of the Corinthian rap sheet. They are up on all these charges.

Does not envy. They envy. They see Paul and others as rivals. (3:3; 4:18)

Does not boast. They “*bray*” Once in a while when I’m running in the morning I hear the donkeys down on the goat River Bottom: “MEEEEEE! MEEEEEE!”

The boasting Paul is referring to pertains to the Corinthian penchant for the “showy gifts.” They are always tooting their own horn. But love is “is not proud” – this is to inflate one’s estimate of oneself. Is not rude – this is to behave disgracefully.

Is not self-seeking. In the large pagan city of Corinth where meat offered to idols is a big issue in the Christian community, and a real stumbling block to weaker believers, Paul will urge

them to freely eat whatever and wherever they want; *but* their consideration must never be if *I* think it's all right, if *I'm* good with it," but rather *is this in the best interests of others*.

Who among us is ever at their core *not* self-interested? We all are. Yet the transforming power of God in Jesus Christ is such that we can move more and more each day towards the Christ-centred life.

"Is not easily angered" – The root of the word here means "sharp." Often the words of others can poke us like a sharp stick. But love is *not* easily provoked.

"Keeps no record of wrongs," as the NIV translates it. God does not reckon our sins against us (2 Cor 5:19). Therefore we should not wait for human justice to be meted out or go about settling the score.

So what if you and I are willing to be constrained by these seven "is nots," if we are willing to let them shape our lives, if we are willing to put the "*is nots*'s" on like a harness and begin to pull in a different direction than the self-centred existence that is normal for our world? If enough of us put on the "is not" harness and begin to pull as team, we could move the world. Because

There's nothing love cannot face.

"It bears all things"

Harold Arlen was one of the greatest American songwriters of all time. He may not be familiar name to you, but when I name his most famous song, you will know it. But first let me let me tell you a bit about *him*.

Harold was Jewish, the son of a Cantor – that's the man who leads the hymns and chanting in the synagogue. So from his earliest days Arlen grew up with the music of God in his head. He was a singer/pianist and performer first, then later tried his hand at song writing and after composing his first hit "Get Happy" in 1929, Arlen quickly became a fixture at New York's famous Cotton Club during the early 1930's.

Then in 1935 Arlen headed to Hollywood. There he met and fell in love with the most beautiful woman in the world, starlet Anya Taranda. They married in 1937. The couple defied typical Hollywood odds, *remaining* married until Anya died of a brain tumor in 1970. Their marriage truly was "for better or worse." Anya suffered a complete mental breakdown during the 1950s and spent years in a sanitarium – often confined to a padded room –hysterical, totally out of touch with reality. But Harold remained thoroughly devoted to his wife throughout the difficult period.

Their marriage was so consuming that they say Arlen lost his zest for life after her death. He became reclusive at age 65, stopped writing songs, and generally withdrew into his New York city home for the last 16 years of his life.

That brief sketch of Harold is essential to understanding his most important work and the man himself. It was Hollywood 1937 when he wrote a little song called "Over the Rainbow," for the movie version of "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high,
There's a land that I heard of
Once in a lullaby.

"Over the Rainbow" is arguably the best known tune in the world. The mood is a perfect

blend of deep love and longing, wonderment at the future, fear and optimism. It's a musical roller coaster. They say that the inspiration for the song came as Arlen was staring at a drugstore sign. But obviously, the inspiration came from somewhere deep within the man --

Somewhere over the rainbow
Skies are blue,
And the dreams that you dare to dream
Really do come true.

He won an Oscar for that song. But Harold also wrote another song: "Stormy Weather"
'Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky
Stormy weather, since my gal and I aren't together
Keeps raining all the time.

But through what was the "stormiest" time in Arlen's life, when his wife was so ill, and he was so lonely, it was clear from his working arrangements, his devotion to family, how he conducted his life that Harold Arlen was a man of integrity. (Adapted from article on www.popularsong.org)

Love never fails.

Paul says "as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end." Harold wrote words of a love song that could be God's.

I'm gonna love you, like nobody's loved you
Come rain or come shine
High as a mountain, deep as a river
Come rain or come shine
I guess when you met me
It was just one of those things
But don't you ever bet me
'Cause I'm gonna be true if you let me
You're gonna love me, like nobody's loved me
Come rain or come shine
We'll be happy together, unhappy together
Now won't that be just fine
The days may be cloudy or sunny
We're in or out of the money
But I'm with you always
I'm with you rain or shine

To be fulfilled as human beings, we need to experience unconditional love. And we can even though we live in a world of . . .

Partials

Verse 9 "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

Paul will give two analogies. First: 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.

When I was a boy my parents gave me a pool table for Christmas one year. It was a wonderful gift. It was so cool. It made me popular with the half-dozen boys I hung out with. My basement became the place we spent a lot of our evenings. Looking back, at the time, it was just a wonderful gift. But now I realize that my basement pool table it kept me closer to home more nights than most of my friends. It kept me out of the pool hall where fights broke out and trouble always brewed. Now, as a man looking back, I realize my parents didn't just give me a pool table, they gave me love.

We don't have to crave more and more spectacular spiritual giftedness in the church. It's not that our *gifts* are only partial. It's just our gifts are only *partially able to reveal* the full presence and character of God. So we keep pursuing the more excellent way.

What's that like? Well, Paul employs a second analogy:

It 's like looking in a mirror.

“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.

C. S. Lewis asks us to imagine sitting in a room with a large picture window overlooking a beautiful sea coast; and off in the distance are mountains and valleys. And on the other side of the room, on the wall is full length mirror in which we can see reflected the same thing we can see out the window. And C. S. Lewis suggests that we would actually find the mirror more interesting than the window because it would seem more like a story we could want to be a part of.

Here's the analogy: when Paul says that we see God “through a glass darkly” that's not a negative thing. It's not the *quality* of the image, but the *indirect* nature of it. We “see” God through his Spirit reflected in each other. And here's the remarkable thing: the Spirit doesn't distort the image of Christ. We reflect it like a mirror to each other, yet it's not complete. It's limited by our human capacity to reflect it and our capacity to experience it.

But we are God's gifts to each other. And however partial and incomplete it may be...

We can be true to each other.

Faith, hope and love: these three words encompass the entire Christian existence: faith towards God – trust in his forgiveness. Hope for the future – that things will change. Transformation is possible, *if* love can rejoice in the truth (v6). This is how Christians must live in community.

Thomas Merton said, “we make ourselves real by telling the truth.”

Wendell Berry “The true worth and integrity of an institution depends on it's willingness to call things by their right names.”.

Scott Peck “Mental health is an ongoing process of dedication to reality at all costs.”

If we are “true” to each other, all else will eventually be stripped away. But these three will remain: faith hope and love.

And the greatest of these is love.