

THE HIGHWAY
1 Corinthians 12:31b - 13:7
March 21, 2010

INTRODUCTION

Late in his life John Newton, the writer of the hymn Amazing Grace, was quite humiliated because of his long participation in the slave trade. He has profited from slavery for year, even for a time after becoming a Christian. However, as God got a hold of his heart, he began to change. He gave up all interests in slaving and turned to a great desire to be a pastor and a preacher. It took him years to attain that position. Once he did, he became known all around as a man of great kindness, a man of great love and hospitality. He never forgot his own sinfulness as a slave trader and years later, as a mature Christian, reflecting on the change in his life, would write the words to Amazing grace.

What a great and kind God who would have mercy on a man who destroyed the lives of many human beings! This grace softened him, made him a good man, the best of men. He had been on one path, had been going one way, and the Lord of love got a hold of him and showed him a more excellent way. He took that better way, and the rest is history. It is my prayer today, for each of us, that we would take that path also.

TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:31b - 13:7

31.... And I will show you a still more excellent way. 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

THE EXCELLENT WAY

The more excellent way –this is the way that surpasses all other ways, all other paths. Paul is pointing now to what he believes is the highest teaching, the highest path, the most important road for all humanity, for all Christians, to be sure. When you came to church today, did you know that the message would be on the one text that reveals the way that is far surpassing all other ways? Paul is not saying that this is a good option, a good way to go, as if there were other roads and this one could be avoided. He is saying this is the way to live your life. To say this in a practical way: This passage should define your life, for the rest of your life. This is what you should work on above all other things you work on in your life. This is the far surpassingly best way.

THE VALUE OF LOVE

The first three verses of chapter 13 are concerned with defining the comparative value of love. You might want to challenge that love is the most excellent way. Well then, what is it that you can do that is more valuable to you? Speaking in tongues; in the languages of angels, or of earth? Amazing, right? It is an unpleasant noise if you don't have love. If you walk around saying, "I am a prophet and have all kinds of insights into the spiritual realm," or if you are able to believe God for great things, to the extent that you can move heaven and earth, but you don't have love? You are a nothing, a nobody, unimportant, a wart, a useless waste of skin, nothing. If you say, "I have sold everything and given it to those in need, and when persecuted for the faith, I gave my life for the truth!" If you don't have love, you get nothing for all you gave up. All you gave away was wasted. Your life spent to gain nothing at all. You are nothing.

This is strong language. The Bible is telling us that everything you think you can do to be religious, to be a Christian, if you don't have love, is useless. This applies directly to our lives today. Let's use our own terminology. If I have more discipline than a Navy Seal, and am able to have quiet times every morning and prayers every night, if I fast regularly, and never miss church service, but I don't have love, I am a clockwork fool, and gain nothing. If I teach classes, and preach to the lost, but do not have love, I'm like a bat banging on a dumpster. If our church programs work, if we get great crowds to our retreats and game dinners and teas, if we have 18 campuses, if our community groups are full, but we have not love, we are useless, like a gang of rats or maggots. If I preach sermons that delight the crowds, if our music causes people to sing with joy, but we have not love, then we are like rakes on the cement. If we go off as missionaries, and plant churches throughout the world, leaving everything behind and giving up my life for the church, but do not love, I have wasted my life, and gain nothing at all.

Do you see? What this text says applies to everything we do as a church and everything you or I do as individuals. There is not good deed we could do, no activity we can perform, which we cannot say, "If I do all this, but have not love, it profits nothing, I'm wasting my time." In that sense, this might be the most important sermon you will ever hear, for what the word is telling us in 1 Corinthians 13 is that which is required in order to make your and my life count. Do you want your life to matter? It's not going to come through your industry and your gifting. It will come by your love. Therefore, it is logical, that the number one focus of all you do should be to love.

Description of God

The next three verses define love for us:

[nasb] 4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

If you go to many Christian weddings, you might be very familiar with these verses. Most every wedding has these words read. And that is appropriate. However, it would be a grave error to believe that these verses pertain only to, or even mostly to, romantic love. The opposite is true. These words are for all of life. These words are action centered. They talk about the way we behave. This is different from what we do, isn't it?

Love often changes what you do, because it is action-oriented and other-centered. However, love often doesn't change what you do, but how you do it. If you go see your local mechanic and want your car worked on, he will handle his relationship with you with love or he will not. But his job is the same. But he will either be patient with you, or impatient. He will either brag or he will be concerned about you. He will either seek your best or just his own. He will either be truthful, no matter what it costs him, or he will hide the truth for his own gain. Love determines how he will handle you when he fixes your car. You might say, "Wait, love has nothing to do with it. It's just business and it's about a car." If that is what you are thinking, then you are missing the point and need to change your thinking. EVERYTHING is about love, or it is about nothing worthwhile at all. Likewise, you as a customer will act in love towards your mechanic, or you will not. You will be patient and kind or you will be impatient and unkind. You will seek to make his job easier and benefit him, or you will seek only to make your own life easier and seek to get him to serve you as you receive it from him. You will be rude and self-centered, or you will be concerned with him.

This is true if you are a cashier or a customer. You will do it with love, or not. This includes, obviously, family issues, husbands and wives, children, brothers, sisters, and all the rest. We will either be patient or not, rude or not, concerned with the others or the self, bragging on self or praising the other –if you love, then you are doing family right. If you do not love, you are wasting your life and time and are nothing. This is of course true in church and all the interactions and all the communications and all the politics, etc, etc. And since no one loves perfectly, working on loving better IS the job of the Christian every day.

Near the end of his very long life, the longest-living apostle, John, was so broken from all the persecution he suffered for the gospel, that he was carried from church to church so that he could bring messages to the Christians. It is said that as time went on, every message became the same: love one another, as Christ has loved you. We love because He first loved us. If you love God then you will love the brethren. All he preached on was loving one another. When asked why this had become his sole focus at the end of his life, he is said to have replied that if the church loved, then nothing else was needed. This is not one thing, it is the only thing.

Some people struggle with this because they have a view of love as something like care-bears and hearts and softness. But this is a misconception of love. You see, when we see these verses on love (patient, kind, etc) we are seeing a description of God. To love is to act like God.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Can I make it any clearer than this direct text does? Imitate God, walk in love. As Christ loved us, as Christ gave Himself up for us, as He sacrificed His life out of love for God, so you also, Walk in love, imitate God. You want to imitate God? It will not be measured in your great spiritual giftedness, or in your ability to employ them in the church. It will be measured in your love. Your life is to be about nothing else. Love is what God does. Love is the center of the Christian world and Christian theology and Christian behavior. Whenever we act as if love is not the most important thing, we get out of balance. Love is the center thing. Now, to understand love well, we should look at love's greatest expression:

Romans 5: 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

John 3:16 16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

John 15:13 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.

What these texts show us is that the expression of God's love for us in the giving of His Son to die for our sins. It was not just the giving of His Son, but it was the giving of His Son in order to save us. We were dead in our sins, under the control of the devil, awaiting the day of Judgment when we would be punished for our sins, helpless. He sent His Son, who laid aside His rights to take on the body of a man, to live among us, to die to buy us back, to rescue us, to redeem us, to save us. Why does He do this? Because love does not take into account a wrong suffered. Though we sinned against Him, He did not let that determine how He would treat us. Jesus has risen from the dead and returned to the right hand of God. And now, the love of God is spread throughout all the earth, as we share His gospel, awaiting His return. Look at these truths and see the love of God displayed:

Acts 17: 30 "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

God's love caused Him to endure the sins of mankind until He came to rescue us on the cross. This text tells us that we live in an urgent time. We are not here to find a way to survive ourselves, but we are here to spread this message so that the entire world knows about the love of God, that they would repent and believe in Him. Many wonder, "Why doesn't Jesus come and put an end to all the suffering and all those who sin against Him?" The answer is His love for you and for those yet saved:

2 Peter 3:9-10 9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...

The end is coming. But every day that God holds off the return of Jesus to the earth, is kindness, for another person repents, another person receives the salvation of Jesus. God is patient, love is patient. God is kind, love is kind. And now here is where we fit in: we live in these times before He comes like a thief. When? Don't know, but it could be at any time that He wraps things up. And do you know what Jesus says will happen to many people at the end of all things? He says, that the "love of many will grow cold," because of the lawlessness. I can see how that could happen. I could see how many Christians can talk about gathering their guns and their food, and killing any who are threats. But this is not how we should be. I believe we might be near the very end. If so, it is my hope that we here at Harvest will have love that, instead of growing cold, grows hotter and hotter, as we know that our redemption is near and nothing on this earth will matter when He appears.

This was what Jesus said to us:

John 15:12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

That's a whole lot of love. In these end times, brothers and sisters, the lost of this world need to see Jesus –they will see Him in our love, or they will not see Him at all. Love one another.