

“A More Excellent Way,” 1 Cor. 12:31b—13:13
Tom Johnson, January 31, 2010

Often called “the love chapter,” 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is the most requested passage of Scripture for weddings that I receive. Of course, these words are not just written for starry eyed newlyweds but for all people.

In fact, Paul has the Christian community particularly in mind. In the previous chapter, Paul tirelessly emphasizes that we are all one Body of Christ. We are all united together—what happens to one of us happens to all of us.

In the community of God’s people, there is no room for personal agenda. There is no need for Christian celebrities. The abilities and talents of one person should not be valued so much that we ignore the gifts of another.

The eye should not say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head should not say to the feet, “We can go our separate ways.” If we operate that way, we will not have community but personality cults. If each person is not valued, we will have grade school politics—with some in the inner circle of popularity and the rest outside.

But Paul wants us to know “a more excellent way”—a better path—a more honorable way of living—a much healthier way to form Christian community. And that more excellent way is summed up in one word: “Love.”

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

Paul invites us into an imaginary world—a spectacular place—a church where not English or Spanish are spoken—but “Angel-ish”—the language of angels.

He invites us into a congregation with prophetic powers—with members who can give an answer to all our questions and read our minds. Every curiosity is satisfied. There is nothing hidden from the prophets’ penetrating eyes.

He invites us into a community whose faith is so strong they can change the landscape and geography of the earth. Their prayers can move mountains into the sea—prayers that can move Lake Michigan’s lake front 13 miles westward to my front door in Maywood.

He invites us into the fold of the courageous—so bold in their faith that they will throw themselves into the fire willingly. They will jump off cliffs and throw their bodies on live grenades for the Lord.

But this spectacular world of angelic language, prophetic powers, faith that can move mountains, and offering of selves to the fire is missing one thing: love. There is no genuine, authentic, unconditional love.

The language that is supposed to sound angelic—does injury to the ear drums—like the clanging and crashing of ill-timed cymbals—without love. Without love, even our best poetic language is

like nails scraping down a chalkboard in the ears of God and in the ears of a world in desperate need of authentic, genuine love.

Prophetic powers may impress those looking for sensationalism and signs and wonders—without love. But without love, reading minds and profound theological insights are worthless—especially for a world in desperate need of authentic, genuine love.

Faith that can move mountains may flatten the Rockies and rearrange the landscape on Lakeshore Drive—without love. But without love, such faith cannot move the human heart one inch. Without love, Paul says “I am nothing.” Without love, we don’t amount to jack squat.

Delivering my body to be burned, jumping off the top of the Willis Tower for the Lord may be an impressive stunt—without love. But without love it’s a waste of human life. Paul says, “I gain nothing.” Your third degree burns are all for nothing.

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Love is not a spectacle of linguistic, theological, pietistic prowess. Love has no selfish agenda. Love is not competitive. Love is not about me. Love is not about the self at all.

Love, rather, is an open door into the reality of God’s grace. Love can be the stuttering, tongue tied Christian who speaks authentic forgiveness and hope. Love can be the believer who may not have all the answers but has genuine compassion.

Love can be the struggling prayers of God’s people that pray for a broken, needy world. Love is the unsensational, unspectacular, plain, and ordinary lives of God’s people doing acts of love anonymously without any need for acclamation or applause.

Authentic love is best defined when it is directed to the undeserving. Love is best identified when it challenges our patience. There is nothing phony about true love. Love is selfless...humble...positive...optimistic.

Love is most clearly seen in a humble manger—the Christ child born into a broken world. Love is most genuine in the words of the preacher Jesus who spoke good news. Love is most authentic in his life that was laid down to break the powers of death, the devil, and hell.

Love is the excellent way that Jesus set before us. Love is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Love is created in us when our minds, hearts, and lives are so authentically and genuinely saturated by Jesus’ love that we also become conduits and agents of that same love.

There is something better than sensational and spectacular religion—knowing that someone truly cares—the assurance of the love of God—the certainty of a Savior who is always with us and for us—and the company of a good, Christian friend—

Clanging cymbals, \$300 dollars...dynamite that can help remove a mountain, \$5,000...a 30 minute counseling session with self-proclaimed prophet, \$150...an adequately large and hot bonfire, \$75...someone who truly listens, never judges, has genuine concern, and authentic, unconditional love...priceless.