

The Rock: 10-24-2021**The Gifts series**

First reading: 1 John 2:7-14

Title: A still more excellent way

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:7
(black bible Pg. 902)

Theme:

Love is the supreme driver in everything.
Without it, we are just making noise.

Introduction:

Every other month I get the opportunity to go to Portland ME and meet as a presbyter with the six others who help give oversight to our district. Probably shocking to absolutely no one, when 11 pastors total get around a table for a few days, we talk, a lot.

One of the conversations we had was how discipleship is working and what our evangelistic outreach looks like as it relates to how Jesus looked and functioned.

Trying to sort out where we as leaders are doing well and also where we are functioning poorly. Asking questions like: "How do we translate what we are

learning in our personal growth into action.

We ought to be driven to seek those who don't know Jesus yet, and they ought to see Him in us.

So, what does that have to do with a "more excellent way"? To me, and I hope to you as well, everything.

John records for us what Jesus said to them during His last conversation before His death:

-John 13:34-35 (ESV)

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The sign of this new covenant? Love. Love is the more excellent way; it becomes the outworking of discipleship as we grow to be more like Jesus in what we do and how we act.

All in terms of the "other", or those who have no relationship with Jesus, love ought to drive us to seek their welfare, salvation, and friendship. Not necessarily in that order.

The question I asked myself in studying was: If Jesus is our example of perfection, and love is the outworking of that perfection, how do we begin to walk that out in our lives as we strive for excellence as we work out our salvation?

The Story:

Love drove Jesus to the cross -this God with us -Immanuel- and saved us from sin - Jesus of Nazareth. (A bit of a Christmas theme there isn't it?)

You see, love came down, love walked the road we should have, but couldn't. This is critical for us to understand. Why? Because this truth must frame out how we live, how we evangelize and how we, in turn, make disciples.

-John 3:16-17 (ESV)

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

So, with that as our framework, this "God so loved"... Paul here in chapter 13 begins to paint a picture of how one can be so incredibly gifted, and even know / teach

things (truths), but doing so without love, they are nothing but a noise maker.

You see, Paul discovered this very thing. He had been a Pharisee and was faultless in regard to obedience to the letter of the law, and yet oozed hatred.

I get this sense that he is drawing that comparison here with his new self in Jesus that has worked a few of these things out. Having put to death some of these sinful things he realized that being "perfect" yet without love, he had missed the entire point of the mission of Jesus:

-1 Corinthians 13:1-3 (ESV)

"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."

It is actually possible to be entirely right and entirely wrong all at the same time. His conversion experience on the road to Damascus taught him that.

Paul is right here, if we think it through. What do we have without love? Anger, envy, arrogance, selfishness and so on. All of which Paul had been living in and through.

We lose the ability to even understand what grace is, not only for others, but for ourselves as well. Paul does not want us in that place.

You see, IF love drives us to be unified as a body with these gifts edifying the church and glorifying God, then that love will compel us. Compel us to what?

Toward compassion for example, not just for one another here, but for all those lost and without Christ:

-2 Corinthians 5:14-15 (ESV)

"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

This discipleship piece ought to, by nature, drive us to the evangelistic piece -the calling people to Jesus -love itself being the primary driver.

We are given the gifts, we are knit together for one another's benefit, and are then sent on behalf of Jesus to reconcile the world back to God.

The Christian life is to be lived out in that framework alone. Why? Paul continued in his second letter to this church to talk about individual responsibility within the body, and carried it even further:

-2 Corinthians 5:11-12 (ESV)

"Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart."

We ought to be compelled (constrained, controlled) by love. The identifying mark of the believer. You see, as we recall, the lack of compassion, patience, selflessness, love of this community toward one another affected more than just themselves.

They were divided, angry, self-absorbed and as a result, the world (culture around them) could not see Jesus. Their

witness was weak because their focus was wrong.

Paul doesn't just drop the love chapter here because it sounds good, but because it fits! It is essential!

If you want to be like your King, if you want to have an impact on the world, remember: Faith-hope-love.

Faith and hope are personal growth things. But love, love is the outworking and the expression of what God has done within you personally as you walk out your faith journey in this world.

Love is: patient, kind, rejoices with truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love is not: envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, demanding of its own way, irritable or resentful, it is not happy when things go wrong or not its own way.

One of the painful lessons I was taught from this passage, and perhaps you were too, is to take my name put in the place of "love".

Then I ask myself the question: "Am I?"

Now, that can be a boring, mundane exercise if you don't take it seriously, or you focus on others.

However, it will be most helpful and one of the biggest tests in your growth as a Christian if you take it to heart. Listening to the Holy Spirit with regard to what He reveals to you.

Why? Because if you want to be conformed to Jesus, operate properly in the gifts, and as importantly, reach others with the gospel, Love is:

-1 Corinthians 13:4-6 (ESV)

"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."

Am I patient and kind? Especially toward those who push my buttons. We are called to overcome evil with good - and one of those things the enemy hates is when we are kind and patient when people least deserve it and expect it.

In a world that is unkind and impatient, be kind, be patient. Every one of us has the capacity to do it, if we choose what is right. It's so simple a way to show

and preach the gospel. It is genuine, and it is real.

Am I envious or boastful? Do I wish I had what others have, or could do what others can do? Sadly, if I am honest, at times yes, I am both.

Am I constantly comparing myself and trying to keep up with the Jones's across the street? Or, do I brag about what I have or how good I am at what I do? I'm not talking about having a false sense of humility which is nothing more than pride in disguise.

I often say I'm not good for much, and that's true. I'm not saying I can't do much, I can. There is actually a lot I can do, but what am I called to do in life and here within this community? That's the question and focus of my life.

Zero in on these things in your life and thank God for those things He has called you to. That gifting and calling, and you will find you have very little time to be envious or boastful.

It also keeps us from being arrogant and rude, which a good many of us need. You see, love is many things, but one of the things it is most definitely not is a feeling.

Being arrogant and rude typically drives us to demand our own way, and if we don't get it, we become what? Irritable and resentful.

Love is a choice, not a feeling. We choose how we will respond, don't forget that. No matter how we are treated in this world, we are always given the choice on how we will respond. Will we do so in love?

Paul is telling us what love is, isn't and how we are to respond in any situation and circumstance. Particularly in our interpersonal relationships.

There are days and weeks even where I bat 1,000 on all the wrong things in this list, and my wife still chooses to love me. Even when I don't deserve it. If she went based on how she felt, it would be an entirely different story, wouldn't it?

You see, that's grace, and that drives me to try to do better, to be better. It also keeps it from feelings (which aren't bad in their place) and the attempts at manipulation of one another.

It's not that we can't have feelings or emotions. After all we aren't Vulcan, but loving as we should keep us from the unhealthy behavior patterns and

manipulations of those around us based on how we may feel at that moment.

You see, Love is the most excellent way!
Am I, Michael, any of these things?
Either positively or negatively?

We don't rejoice at wrongdoing, even when it comes against someone we feel deserves it. Why? Well, Paul tells us again in his second letter to Corinth.

The fear of the Lord (as we read earlier), driven by love, HAS to move us beyond our self-centered selfishness and into the place of seeing as Jesus saw:

-2 Corinthians 5:16a (ESV)

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh."

The NIV renders this verse a bit clearer, at least to me:

"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."

Instead, seeing people as Jesus did IE: through His eyes, we rejoice in the truth that God has reconciled the world to Himself:

-2 Corinthians 5:19 (ESV)

"...that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

Our assignment goes beyond these walls then, and that is why we, the Church, was left behind:

-2 Corinthians 5:20 (ESV)

"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

Discipleship always leads to evangelism - compelled by love. It has to. Why? Because the Love of Christ compels us. What does love look like? Ultimately it looks like a Jewish carpenter on a cross outside of the city, suffering on a hill on our behalf.

All of these things Paul tells us. This is why he says what he does in verse 7:

-1 Corinthians 13:7 (ESV)

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

So, as I close this morning, my thoughts go to what has become my life's verse. It

has been with me for as long as I can recall being called into ministry.

It is a hauntingly and powerfully true statement by this great Apostle Paul, which ought to apply to all of us if we belong to Christ at whatever level He calls us to:

-Acts 20:24 (ESV)

"But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

LOVE... I leave you with this thought - Paul's course was full-time vocational ministry, but testifying to the gospel of God's grace is not confined there.

What course has God set for you? What gifts has He given you and how do you glorify Him with them?

