

1Corinthians 12:31b "The Most Excellent Way. Be Agape-ers."

1CO 12:31 "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.

1CO 13:1-3 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

This is a portion of Scripture most of us are familiar with, at least to the degree that we've read it or heard it read. It's kind of like John 3:16 in that respect. In fact, it's not uncommon to hear this passage or parts of it at events like weddings where the bride and groom vow to love one another and use this portion to express their love.

But, like so many other portions of Scripture we have a tendency to view the 13th chapter of 1Corinthians through our own eyes instead of through the writer's eye and his intent of the passage. Though this is often referred to as the love chapter of the bible, the fact remains that this entire portion comes on the heels of a rebuke for the misuse of the gifts of the Spirit.

And so, to pull this portion out and display it by itself without considering the context is really to miss the importance of Paul's expounding of such love and the proper function of such love.

Keep in mind that in the preceding portion which we studied last week Paul was explaining that not everyone has the same gifts, and therefore we must not measure the spiritual maturity of each believer by the gifts they possess or don't possess.

This is why he ended that portion in the way he did.

1CO 12:31 "But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way."

As we come to chapter 13 Paul is about to show these Corinthian believers the most excellent way. And this most excellent way has nothing to do with placing any particular gift of the Spirit at the forefront. Instead, what Paul is about to contrast for these people, and for us, is that as important as the gifts of the Spirit are, it is the

fruit of the Spirit which must take precedence, even in the use of the gifts.

I've said this before but it's worth repeating. Having any particular gift of the Spirit is never to be used as a litmus test of how spiritual or mature a believer is. For someone to suggest that having the gift of tongues, for example, is the evidence of the baptism of the Spirit, and therefore the evidence that you have actually "arrived" as a believer, is to miss the whole point of what it means to be a Christian walking in the Spirit.

And this is the point Paul has been making up to now. He's been painting a picture of these people and it's not one you would want to display. And yet he has made it clear that they possess the gifts of the Spirit and they are in use in their midst. In fact, this is the way Paul started this letter.

1CO 1:5-7 "For in him you have been enriched in every way - in all your speaking and in all your knowledge - 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed."

Paul confirms the work of the Spirit, at least in the outworking of the gifts within that body of believers. But simply having such gifts, but not using them properly, is like giving a new Ford Mustang to a drunk and telling him to be careful on I-75. Eventually someone is going to get hurt.

And so, Paul exhorts these believers to consider the gifts they have, but to use them responsibly and with the proper motives. Contrary to popular belief, character counts. And, in the entire chapter we're looking at, Paul shows us the proper character of a Spirit filled, Spirit controlled believer in the body of Christ.

And the contrast we have before us is that of "gifts without love vs. gifts with love, and the permanence of love vs. the temporal nature of the gifts." (Robert Gromacki).

But having said that Paul is not suggesting that it is an either/or situation. It's not, choose between love and the gifts. It's choose love and the gifts.

But the question we ought to raise at this point is, what is this love that Paul is talking about? If this love is so important for us to put into action what exactly is it and how does it differ from the love

these very Corinthians would have had prior to them coming to Christ?

After all, there isn't a person in this room who hasn't used the word love in your vocabulary, prior to you coming to Christ. "I love ice-cream." "I love watching sports." "I love my wife or husband." "I love going to the mall, especially with my Visa Card."

When we use the word love in our culture we have a variety of different things we mean. But what does Paul mean when using the word love? Well, Paul makes clear the type of love he has in mind.

Actually, there are three words which might be defined love in the ancient Greek language. *Eros* was a Greek word which described sensuality and sexuality. It's usually associated with what we might call romantic feelings. It's where we get our word erotic.

*Philia* was the Greek word used to describe a love a child might have for a parent, or one might have for a brother or sister or just a good friend. It's where we get our English word filial which describes that very thing. It's also where we get the name of the city of brotherly love, Phila-delphia.

But this is not what Paul is describing in chapter 13 of our text. He doesn't use the words *eros* or *philia* when describing this love. The word he uses is a Greek word which was rarely employed in ancient Greek, but used prolifically throughout the New Testament. It's the word *agape* and its derivatives.

Now the question is, if *agape* does not mean a sensual type of love or a brotherly type of love, what in the world does it mean? What is left? As always, if we are to define a word or phrase in Scripture it is always best to let the Scriptures do the defining.

And it just so happens that the Scriptures do this with the word *agape*. In fact, this very chapter of 1 Corinthians lends itself to such a correct definition. But even before we get to chapter 13 the word *agape* has been a word to describe the kind of love which no mere man can possess in a spiritual sense.

In fact, the word *agape* is best defined by what Jesus Christ did for us in loving us. And it's found in the one passage which we all associate with the love of God.

JOH 3:16 "For God so loved [*agapao*] the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

At the last supper Jesus showed His disciples what was about to take place through the elements of wine and bread. He showed them what love was as He told them that His body was to be broken and His blood spilled for their sin.

JOH 13:1 "It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."

In some translations it reads, He loved them to the end. "A more literal translation would be, "He loved them to perfection, or completion. Jesus loved to the fullest degree and measure. He loved to the limits of love." (John MacArthur)

This kind of love only originates with God. It is not a natural love of man. It is a self-sacrificing love which does not take into account the vileness of the recipient of this love when it is extended.

I mean we can read of a variety of accounts of where men and women gave their lives for other people. But that is not necessarily agape love. Often times in those instances people simply react to a situation, be it a soldier throwing himself on a hand-grenade to save his fellow soldiers, or a person risking life and limb to rescue someone.

As noble and impressive as those acts are, the human nature still has a tendency to do those acts for other reasons; either to fulfill a desire in their own lives for feeling needed, understanding the immediate need of someone else, or simply for for some lower goal of needing attention.

This is not the motivation for God's love. In fact, what we find is that His love for people is a bit hard to understand since it doesn't take into account what we actually deserve. You and I, if we knew the heart of a person, would not love the way God loves. And this is what Paul points out to the Christians in Rome.

ROM 5:7-8 "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Paul's point is that, given the facts about a person, we are selective in our love. We might possibly die for a good man, or we might not. The contrasting implied imagery used here is that the chances of us dying for a bad man are next to zero. And yet, God demonstrates his own love for us in this: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

He knows what we are and He knows what we deserve. And being a righteous and holy God it is His supreme prerogative to administer the justice we deserve. And yet knowing this and having the power and the will to carry it out, He chooses to love us.

But that love is not a cheap love or a sentimental love. It is a love involving the ultimate sacrifice; the life of the Son of God became man to die in our place.

This is the definition of agape. It is God's sacrificial love for us, who deserve nothing. Now here's the hard part. This is the kind of love we are expected to demonstrate. You'll notice as we go through our text that Paul is not simply "suggesting" that we love like this; it is expected. And the reason it's expected is because of one very simple fact, as Paul points out in the letter to the Romans.

ROM 5:5 "... because God has poured out his love [*agape*] into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

The love of God which Christ gave to us in becoming our sacrifice for sin is the same love which has been poured out into our hearts. There is not a believer anywhere in the world who does not possess such love from God. And this is precisely the reason that Christ can tell us that there is one commandment which sums up our existence.

It is to love [*agape*] the Lord our God with all of our minds, hearts and souls. And a second like it is to love [*agape*] our neighbors as ourselves. The reason we now have the ability to accomplish this is because, in Christ, God has given us that love [*agape*] to give back to Him and the world out of gratitude that He didn't give us justice and wrath instead.

We don't have the option to say, "I just don't *feel* like loving." I wonder how Jesus Christ *felt* about loving us to the end as He went to the cross. Well, we know how He felt that morning.

MAT 26:38-39 "Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with

me." 39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

If our Lord Jesus had acted on His feelings you and I would still be in our sins. Agape is not dictated by how we feel. It is motivated by what is best for others and then acting on that.

How many times have we all felt like not loving someone for reasons which all of us would understand. "Well, that person said something hurtful to me, therefore I won't love them; I won't be a servant to them; I won't share my gifts with them; I won't put myself out for them."

That person in question might be a brother or sister in Christ and yet we all have found ourselves in situations where we chose not to love for whatever reason. And yet, what does Jesus say?

MAT 5:44-48 "But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Now, again, this is not to suggest that loving our enemies, or even those who may have hurt us is going to be easy, any more than it was easy for Jesus to die for us even while we were yet sinners. But it is possible, because we now have such love, in Christ.

This is also not to say that being those who extend agape is to make us doormats. But sometimes we may have to humble ourselves in situations which may make us feel that way. How much lower could the Son of God go, than to leave His throne of glory and take on flesh, as the Creator now becomes one of us?

This is what these Corinthian believers were fighting. They couldn't bring themselves to love the other brothers and sisters in their local body because of differences they were not willing to reconcile. And I understand that some differences will never be reconciled and in some cases shouldn't be reconciled.

But those cases are the type which involve a departure from God's word as it pertains to our salvation and the way in which we are to grow up in our faith.

But much of the petty things happening in Corinth could have been dealt with in the love of God. And this is what is meant by that phrase found in 1Peter.

1PE 4:8 "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

Peter is well aware of how we can say things or do things which might not be appropriate. We still have a sin nature, even as believers in Christ. And so, we're always struggling with that nature.

But, in those cases where we have the choice to either live in peace with each other, or selfishly pursue our own desires, knowing that some of those things could be covered in love, we still need to make the kinds of choices which show the love of Christ.

And we do this not simply because it will make us look better, or show others that we're bigger than the other person and we'll show them the way. No, that was not the motivation of Christ in His love for us. His motivation was to freely give His people the love of the Father and to bring glory to Him.

JOH 13:34-35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. 35 By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Jesus was saying to His disciples, 'that the reason you love one another is to show the world that you do not belong to this world and the temptations of this world and the ways of this world, but rather that you belong to the One who is love and gave you love which no mere man could give you. You show the world you belong to Me, you belong to God.'

When we put it in that light we begin to realize that it doesn't make any difference how someone has treated me, I will continue to love because it pleases the One who gave me such a love to be given away to others, and in the process I show them Jesus, not Drew, or whoever, but Jesus.

JOH 15:9 "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."

To remain in His love is to walk in that sacrificial love in the power of the Spirit. This is not a love that can be accomplished in the flesh, because it doesn't originate in the flesh. It is God's love

which must be appropriated by faith and accomplished out of thanks.

This is why Jesus says, "if you love Me do what I command." He is saying that it's not a matter of how you feel. Feelings alone are deceptive and will usually choose what is comfortable for us. This doesn't negate feelings, it simply means that feelings are not the ultimate indicator of how we should act.

Jesus says that a true agape love will show itself in doing, not just talking. That's why we're encouraged to be doers of the word and not just hearers. By the way, there is an interesting addition to that verse which we often avoid because we don't want to be accused of such a thing.

JAM 1:22 "Do not merely listen to the word, *and so deceive yourselves*. Do what it says."

To only hear things we've learned from God's word and not act on them in matters of choices that we make in this world with one another is to be deceived. And the thing about deception is that we don't realize it at the time. And if we do then we're not deceived, we're simply rebellious.

But either way, it is not God's will. His will is that we abide in His love, which is a love of action.

I had a Pastor friend years ago who told me about a counseling session he had with a couple who was being counseled about their marriage. And the underlying problem is one we hear a lot these days in the world. This couple had arrived at the conclusion that they simply didn't love each other any more.

They didn't have feelings for one another. The spark was gone. The attraction had waned to where they felt that it would simply be better to divorce than to live in the same house where they now felt like strangers. But at least they were willing to talk to their Pastor about it since they knew what the Scriptures said about marriage.

And in their session with the Pastor they argued that they just didn't feel as though they could get this love back. But they were willing to at least get some input. And so they told the Pastor that they would try and get the marriage back on track if he could come up with a plan to help them fall back in love.

And this Pastor looked at this couple for a moment and then said, I have the solution. I know how you can bring love back to your

relationship immediately. And they looked a bit surprised because they had been trying for years and nothing seemed to work, and now this Pastor was suggesting that he had the solution right now.

And so, they looked at each other and then back to the Pastor and said, well, what do you suggest? The Pastor said, listen closely because this is the answer. And so, they moved to the edge of their seats with anticipation. And he said, you need to be about loving each other.

And they said, excuse me. And so the Pastor repeated it for them. You need to be about loving each other. And with some frustration and anger, the husband said, look we've come to you for some advice to help our marriage. We don't love each other and now you're telling us to be about loving each other. What planet are you from?

The Pastor then went on to explain to them that the reason they don't love each other is because they will not love each other. They had confused the feelings associated with love, with a real agape love from God.

They were not willing to love each other sacrificially because they didn't feel like it. Somewhere in the course of their marriage they stopped loving each other. They stopped doing for one another and they stopped giving to each other sacrificially. They stopped covering each other's sin with love. They stopped considering one another more important than themselves.

And so, naturally the feelings they thought were to be associated with love, that they felt early on in their marriage when they were willing to give to each other, were gone. The instruction to this couple was, start loving the other unlovely person now, like Christ loved you while you were still a sinner and His enemy.

Begin to see this person as one who is loved by Christ. Begin to be that one who goes the extra mile in trying to please and do what is best for that other person without considering how you feel at the time, because despite how you feel, if you will be obedient unto the Lord you will be pleasing the One who loved you even unto death.

And what this Pastor told this couple was that if you will be willing to simply love and obey your Lord and master and Savior, you will find that your willingness to love that other person through that obedience will begin to bring hope back to your

marriage. And the feelings that have been lost will once again become a reality. He said feelings will follow obedience, not the other way around.

Now granted, this takes effort and it takes a proper perspective and appreciation of what Christ's love really is, and where it comes from. But when we consider that we have such love which has been lavished on us from above, then we can know that not only in our marriages, but in our relationships with others, including other brothers and sisters in Christ, co-workers, bosses and everyone else we run into, we can demonstrate to the world that we belong to Christ by "doing" love.

Christ didn't simply talk about love, He did love, because He is love. And it is His love we have received by faith in Him alone, along with a new hope of life eternal as He loved us in taking our sin and nailing it to the cross.

It is this kind of love and pursuit of love that was not being practiced in Corinth and which we all sometimes choose not to practice to one degree or another. But we can't say we don't have the capacity to love with the love of God, because as Scripture says, we have been given such a love with the express purpose to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves.

This is Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi and it's God's desire for all of us.

Next week, we'll actually get to chapter 13. Let me end with this encouragement from the Lord's own word.

PHI 1:9-11 "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ - to the glory and praise of God."