

The Most Excellent Way

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of November 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Most Excellent Way and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 13.

I pray that your word will speak to our hearts so that we may be loving servants of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Aren't love songs and love poems sickening? So syrupy and sickly sweet. Where is love? Does it fall from skies above? Is it underneath the willow tree that I've been dreaming of?

I mean really, what nonsense. Two phantoms in the shadow of the moon. Can people really fall in love so soon? He walked alone. He seemed alone like me. Could he have known that moment was my destiny?

I saw him once. The dream was true. I saw him once and once will do. Or from a very well-known song in the last two years.

[1 : 19] Love can touch us one time and last for a lifetime. And never let go till we're gone. Love was when I loved you.

One true time I hold to. In my life we'll always go on. Well, by and large love poems in my opinion are meaningless drivel and sweet and soppy sentimentality.

But the world buys it every time. You don't have to listen long on the radio to find some sweet love song that is expressing some nonsense. Often wedding couples, when they want to get married, say we'd like to have a poem about love at our wedding.

And invariably when they produce the poem that they want, it's nonsense. It's sickly sweet rubbish. Often I give in and let them have it.

Sometimes they ask for this passage, 1 Corinthians 13. So what I do then is tell them what it means. And very often they change their minds and have something else.

[2 : 28] Well, this of course is a famous chapter. I doubt there's anyone who's never heard it or even thought about it. It's one of the high points of New Testament poetry.

It's full of sheer beauty and power. Extraordinarily noble and beautiful words. Who can ever forget Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, reading these words at Diana's funeral?

And yet it's a passage that is so often badly misunderstood. There was reputed to be one English preacher who interpreted it along these lines.

Instead of love is patient and love is kind, an English gentleman is patient. An English gentleman is kind. An English gentleman is not envious or boastful.

It's nothing to do with English gentleman at all. This is more than a nice poem. It is a clinically sharp missile to the hearts of the Corinthians. You see, the Corinthians prize speaking in tongues, as we've seen the last couple of weeks.

[3 : 34] They thought that speaking in tongues was a sign of spiritual prowess. Something in which they boasted. Something they thought that all Christians ought to do. For them, speaking in tongues was a foretaste of heaven.

It was speaking in the language of angels. They thought that if they spoke in tongues, they'd made it with God. That they were somehow spiritually superior from other people. But Paul, with a great jolt, brings them to earth in the opening verse of this chapter.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and even of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Without love, all the spiritual gifts of speaking in tongues is nothing. The noisy gong and the clanging cymbal were the sounds that were made at pagan temple worship.

Paul is saying, you may have the great spiritual gift of speaking in tongues, but if you have not love, then you are no better than a pagan in their worship. But he's not just talking about speaking in tongues.

[4 : 37] And he makes that point clear in the next couple of verses. The same applies with the gift of prophecy. For St. Paul, that was the gift that he thought was most important of all.

You'll see that next week in chapter 14. So Paul is not just criticizing the Corinthians for the gift that they valued. He's saying, even for the gift that I value, the gift of prophecy, if I prophesy without love, then I am nothing.

And it's the same as well for the gifts of spiritual knowledge and insight. Paul says, I can have every depth of an extremity of spiritual knowledge and insight, and yet without love, I am nothing.

That was another gift the Corinthians prized. You may remember a few weeks ago the very opening words of chapter 8. The Corinthians are boasting in their knowledge.

Paul says, you can have all knowledge, but without love it's nothing. And it's the same with a special spiritual gift of faith. Not the faith that all Christians must have when they place their faith and trust in Jesus, but perhaps a special gift of faith as we saw a couple of weeks ago.

[5 : 51] Faith here described as being able to remove mountains. Even with that super gift, without love, you are nothing.

Now if you had any of those gifts, or even I think Paul suggests all of those gifts, prophecy, knowledge, faith to move mountains, you'd be a somebody.

Mike Willissey would be chasing after you for an interview. Ray Martin would be queuing up behind him. But without love, you're a nobody. Not a somebody.

And of course that's God's assessment. The world would clamor for your attention. But not God. If you have all of those gifts, and even to the full, but without love, you're a nobody.

But what if you gave all your possessions to the poor? Something that not only the Corinthians would have valued, and Paul would have valued, but something that even Jesus commanded, at least to one person, to go and give away his goods to the poor as an act of love, surely then there is something to be proud about and boast about.

[7 : 04] But no, Paul says, if I give away all my possessions, but have not love, I gain nothing. You see, it's possible to give away all your possessions to the poor, yet not actually have love.

And in such a case, you gain nothing. And even, pushing this to the furthest extreme, even if you were to hand over your body, in martyrdom or death, surely there is an act of love.

Greater love has no man than this, than he lays down his life for his friends. But Paul says, giving away your life, in martyrdom or even perhaps for someone else, but without love, you gain nothing.

A costly waste of life. All the things mentioned in these verses are good. Paul is not criticizing the gift of speaking in tongues, or the gift of knowledge, or prophecy, or special faith.

He's not criticizing giving away all your possessions to the poor. He's not criticizing being prepared to give up your life in martyrdom for somebody else. But without love, all those things are nothing.

[8 : 21] It's useless. You see, this list is not just nice prophecy. These words are probing to the heart of the Corinthians. They prized things like this.

They boasted in things like this. Paul is assessing them against the one standard that applies forever. The standard of love.

For us, there may be other things that we're proud about or boast in. If I preach to pack churches week after week, but have not love, I'm a noisy gong.

If Holy Trinity, Doncaster, continues to grow and extend its buildings, but has not love, we are nothing. And if the Sunday school and the youth groups continue to flourish, but we have not love, we are nothing.

If our giving is generous so that we're able to give substantially to missions and to the poor as well as for our own ministry here, but we have not love, we are nothing.

[9 : 27] If our pastoral care is thorough, if our Bible study groups grow, if our hymns are well sung, if we enjoy coffee and good fellowship after church, but have not love, then we may as well shut the door.

Paul is saying in verses 1 to 3, love is indispensable. Love is essential. Love is necessary in everything that a Christian does.

Having made that point, he then raises the question, what then is love like? And the verses that follow, verses 4 to 7, tell us, he says that love is not sentimental, it is about behavior, how we act.

It is not just emotional, but it is about action. And love is not just occasional. Every Monday morning, I might do an act of love and that's about it.

But it's habitual. So the way the descriptions follow in verses 4 to 7, they are about ongoing things and practices. This is not sweet poetry.

[10 : 39] Against the Corinthians, this is stinging polemic. It is exposing their lack of love. It's not actually a definition of love, though it describes it accurately.

But rather the list is compiled to expose the Corinthians' lovelessness. Love is patient. Love is kind, Paul says.

But he's implying, but you are not, you Corinthians. And if you've read through the whole of the letter thus far, you'll see instances where they fail at each point. You can't even wait for everybody to arrive at the Lord's Supper before you get stuck into your meal.

You're unkind to the poor. You're quick to judge those who wrong you. But love is slow to judge. Love is patient for others who are slow or weaker or poorer.

And then to make the point even clearer, the next seven things in the list are all in the negative. Love is not this. Love is not that. To make it even clearer that he's describing the Corinthians' lovelessness.

[11 : 45] Love does not envy, but you do. Your rivalry, your factions, your pride at certain gifts. That's envy being practiced. But love is satisfied with the good gifts that God gives you.

Love does not boast, but you do. You are boastful about your wisdom. You are boastful about your knowledge. You are boastful about your spiritual gifts and spiritual prowess.

But love doesn't boast. Love is not proud, but you are puffed up with conceit at all the gifts and knowledge and wisdom that you have.

You think you've made it. You think that you're super spiritual heroes. But love is humble. It's not proud. Love does not draw attention to itself, but you do.

Love is not rude, meaning shameful or dishonorable or disgraceful. But you are, you Corinthians. Some men treat women shamefully in chapter 7.

[12 : 47] The women dress shamefully in chapter 11. There is shame at the Lord's table. The people condone sexual immorality. Love is not like that.

Love is not self-seeking, Paul says, but you are. You're full of pride and seeking your own satisfaction. And when you come to the Lord's table, you eat to your full.

You think of yourselves. You don't think of others. And when it's the issue of meat offered to idols as we saw a few weeks ago, you don't care for your weaker brothers. All you seek is your own self and fulfillment and satisfaction.

Love is not easily angered, but you are. You take each other to court when they wrong you. You express your anger in such ways. Love keeps no record of wrongs, but you do.

When somebody wrongs you, you separate into factions, into rivalry. You take them to court. You shun them from your fellowship. Love doesn't settle accounts like that.

[13 : 52] Love wipes the slate clean. Love forgives. It doesn't necessarily forget, but it takes no action against the wrong committed against you.

That's what God has done with us. That's what love is like. But you Corinthians are not like that.

Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but you do. You have pride at the sexual immorality that's being conducted in your midst. But love rejoices in the truth.

Love hates to see others fall. Love has no secret smirking at sin. Love is on the side of truth. And that doesn't mean endless tolerance for people of other faiths who get it wrong.

Love holds to the truth of the gospel. Love bears all things. Love endures all things, Paul says.

[14 : 54] Love is that is, it puts up with lots of things. It's tenacious. It holds on. For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. Whatever the circumstances, good or bad, love holds on.

Love believes always, not because love is gullible, but because love is full of faith in God. Love hopes always, not because it's happy optimism, but because it's confident in the God who has a sure future for his people.

If the first three verses were about the necessity of love, these verses four to seven are about its character. Not a definition, but a description that picks up the aspects of love that the Corinthians are lacking.

The final paragraph deals with the issue of the permanence of love. Spiritual gifts are for the present.

They're for now. They're good. They're for building up the church into godliness and maturity. The gifts that God gives for now are good, are important, and are worthwhile.

[16 : 12] But they won't exist in heaven. They're not actually the down payment of heaven in that sense. There won't be prophecy in heaven.

There won't be speaking in tongues in heaven. There won't be special gifts of knowledge in heaven. All these spiritual gifts will end when this world ends and Jesus returns and takes his people to heaven.

The Corinthians thought that the spiritual gifts were permanent, that they were everlasting and enduring. But no, Paul says, they're limited.

They're for now. They're for this present age only. It's just like when you're a child. You behave in childish ways, but in a later time when you're an adult, you adopt different behavior.

Childish behavior is appropriate for the child's age. Adult behavior is appropriate for the adult age. So the activity of spiritual gifts is appropriate for this age now, but in the age to come it's no longer appropriate.

- [17 : 25] It's not needed. So there'll be different activity in heaven. It's not saying spiritual gifts or the exercise of tongues or other is childish, but rather that it's appropriate to the day in which we live until Jesus returns.

But when he comes it's no longer appropriate for that age. There'll be new activity in heaven. No longer the spiritual gifts of this age. Paul uses another illustration to show this.

He talks in terms of looking into a mirror. When we look into a mirror and the Corinthians were famed for their bronze mirrors in the first century AD, the mirror's likeness is good and beneficial.

It helps you to see the reflection of what you're looking at. But when the real thing comes, face to face, who needs a mirror?

It's just like when you've got a photograph. When the real person comes, who needs the photograph anymore? Paul is saying that in our day and age now spiritual gifts are like a mirror that help us in some sense to get on with God and understand God and practice spiritual things.

- [18 : 42] But when in heaven we see God face to face, who needs the mirror of spiritual gifts? Now we see but in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face.

Spiritual gifts are now useful, Paul is saying, but they're not permanent. They're not for heaven. When the sun shines, the lights get extinguished.

Now we live in a time of lights of spiritual gifts, but when the sun of God's radiance is burning fully in heaven, who needs a candle anymore?

Now we may have spiritual gifts of knowledge, but when in heaven there is perfect knowledge of God, who needs a spiritual gift of knowledge anymore?

Paul's not criticizing spiritual gifts, but he's making it clear to the Corinthians just where their place is. From the vantage point of heaven, looking back to life on earth, what is the ongoing enduring thread that connects?

- [19 : 56] Spiritual gifts? No. They ended before arrival in heaven. What about faith? Well, in one sense, not even faith, because faith now is looking forward to what we yet do not see, when in heaven we see face to face.

So no, not faith, for faith will vanish into sight, and hope? hope will be satisfied in delight, but love, love alone will shine more bright.

For of the three, faith, hope, and love, faith and hope are not really needed in heaven in the same senses now. love alone is the thread that connects.

Love, Paul says, never ends. It is essential now, it is essential in heaven. if we were to look now for the greatest in breaking of God's heaven here on earth, it is love.

Even more than gifts, even more than conversion, or faith, or speaking in tongues, or preaching, or the existence of the church, it is the practice of Christian love that is the sign of heaven here now.

- [21 : 27] Christian love alone will stand that final scrutiny of God. And the love we're talking about is not soppy sentimentality.

It is the love that God models and practices. It is a love that derives from God himself. That is, it is a love that is not prompted by the object.

When you see a beautiful thing, it may inspire love within you. But Christian love is love for the loveless that they might lovely be. Well, if that is true as it is, this chapter is not just beautiful poetry.

It is a probing into our heart. Is this me being described here? Or am I more likely being found wanting in the face of such a description of love?

Is this Holy Trinity being described here? Or is it perhaps more likely exposing our lack of love?

[22 : 46] How sad that words of universal appeal are not universally obeyed? Because these words open up our lovelessness.

Some people suggest that we should substitute for the word love not an English gentleman, but God or Jesus. And certainly there is some truth or validity in doing that.

But it destroys the meaning of the passage. because if we were to read this that Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, that would be a grand statement and description of what Jesus' character is.

But that's not the point of the passage because the point is saying to us, the readers, like the original Corinthian readers, you lack love.

these you see are humbling and penetrating words. Don't be conned by our world.

[23 : 54] Love is not soppy or sickly sweet or sensual or sexual. Love is robust, love is rigorous, love is righteous.

Love is behavior, not emotion. It is habitual, not occasional. It is selfless and not selfish. Love draws its strength and its model from God.

Make this love your aim. Let's pray. holy spirit, gracious guest, hear and grant our heart's request for that gift supreme and best, holy heavenly love.

Faith that mountains could remove, tongues of earth or heaven above, knowledge, all things empty prove, if I have no love.

Though I as a martyr bleed, give my goods the poor to feed, all is vain, if love I need, therefore give me love.

[25 : 23] love is kind and suffers long, love is pure and thinks no wrong, love than death itself more strong, therefore give us love.

Prophecy will fade away, melting in the light of day, love will ever with us stay, therefore give us love. faith and hope and love we see, joining hand in hand agree, but the greatest of the three and the best is love.

Amen. Amen.