

THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

This AM, I have a list of comments on the subject of love, *and they all come from kids*. Here're real opinions from real kids about the thrills and chills of love...

Here's **why love occurs between a man and woman**, from a little girl, "Mae", age 9, "No one is sure, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell. That's why perfume and deodorant are so popular."

On **what falling in love is like...** John, age 9 informs us, "It's like an avalanche where you run for your life."

Glenn, age 7, adds, "If falling in love is like learning how to spell, I don't want to do it. It takes too long."

On **the importance of love**, Greg, age 8, "Love is the most important thing... but baseball is pretty good too."

Here are **a few general opinions about love...**

Floyd, age 8, puts it, "Love is foolish, but I still might try it sometime."

A little girl named Regina, age 10, comments on love, "I'm not rushing into being in love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough."

You single people perk up, here're **a couple of surefire ways to make a person fall in love with you...**

Alonzo, age 9, suggests, "Don't do things like have smelly, green sneakers. You might get attention, but attention ain't the same thing as love."

Here's a suggestion from 9 year-old, Bart, "One way is to take the girl out to eat. Make sure it's something she likes to eat. French fries usually works for me."

And what about **a few love songs for the person you love...** Will, age 7, would sing, "Hey Baby, I don't like girls, but I'm willing to forget you are one!"

And what about 8 year-old, Larry's song, "You are my darling even though you also know my sister."

Finally, **a few suggestions on how to make love last...** Erin, age 8, offers importance advice, "Don't forget your wife's name. That'll mess up the love."

Dave, age 8, says, "Be a good kisser. It might make your wife forget that you never take out the trash."

And lastly, Natalie, age 9, offers her wisdom, "Don't say you love somebody, then change your mind. Love isn't like picking what movie you want to watch."

All these are profound statements, indeed!

Yet as insightful as kids are on the subject of love, the most profound statement on love comes from God.

1 Corinthians 13 is **the love chapter!** It describes God's love for us, and the love He wants us to have for each other. It shows us what *real love* looks like...

1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 14 are the two great chapters on spiritual gifts. Chapter 12 compares the Church to a Body and stresses our connectedness to one another... Chapter 14 is the Bible's fullest explanation of the vocal gifts - *prophecy and tongues*.

But sandwiched in between these two chapters, 1 Corinthians 13 addresses what the Corinthians lacked most. Believers in this church were short on love.

At the close of chapter 12 Paul encourages them to “**desire the best gifts.**” Spiritual gifts are *good gifts*. Every believer can benefit from the gifts of the Spirit.

But gifts are not the most important issue in the life of the Church. There is “**a more excellent way...**” *The greatest of God's gifts to the Body of Christ is love!*

Let's read the chapter; then we'll go back through it verse by verse... Verse 1, “**Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.**”

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail;

whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

You can live in Athens and be a Tech fan... You can be a Democrat, yet vote for a Republican... You can work at Coca-Cola, and on occasion drink a Pepsi...

I'm sure it happens. It's an anomaly when it does. It's definitely out-of-character. *It's peculiar, but it's possible.*

And you can be filled with the Holy Spirit - equipped with spiritual gifts - charismatic to the core - *yet still be selfish and carnal.* It's a travesty when it occurs. It's not right. It's peculiar, *but it's possible.* And sadly, the Corinthians were proof. Their church lacked love.

In fact, in Corinth spiritual gifts had become a substitute for love. Christians were all about flaunting their gift - rattling off in tongues and looking spiritual -more so, than loving a brother or a sister in Christ.

Paul tells them in verse 1, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal."

There are four words in the Greek language that get translated into English by our one word, *“love.”*...

“Eros” is romantic or erotic love... “Storge” is familial love. It’s the love of a parent for a child... And “phileo” is a brotherly love shared by friends... But the word translated here is “agape” or God’s love. It’s the giving, unselfish, sacrificial love with which God loves us.

In Chapter 12 Paul was speaking of spiritual gifts. And the gift the Corinthians were most enamored with was *speaking in unknown tongues*. It’s a supernatural means to pray or praise God. Here Paul refers to *“the tongues of men and angels.”* Apparently, tongues isn’t just a human language - it can also be an angelic language. Apparently, *angels have their own language*.

In Chapter 14 we’ll learn more about the exciting gift of tongues. But note Paul’s point here in Chapter 13, *any divine language without divine love is just noise*.

Think of a toddler with a wooden spoon, banging on grandma’s pots and pans. That’s what their tongues speaking is to God, if it isn’t accompanied by love.

One author writes, *“People of little religion are always noisy; he who has not the love of God and man filling his heart is like an empty wagon coming violently down a hill: it makes a great noise, because there is nothing in it.”* Without love our wagon is just empty!

Verse 2, *“And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I*

have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.””

A person with the gift of prophecy acts as God’s oracle. He or she speaks a word conveyed spiritually by God Himself. What an honor to be used in this way!

But if a message from God is delivered absent of His love; though the message stands, the person speaking it forfeits his or her reward. Without love, we’re nothing.

And the same is true of *the gift of faith*. Even *mountain-moving faith* is no substitute for God’s love.

You can have juiced-up faith - a faith strong enough to bench press Stone Mountain - but unless your faith is coupled with *God’s love*, it’s nothing in *God’s sight*.

And the same is true of tremendous shows of sacrifice, verse 3, “**And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing...**” Who can question the commitment of a *monk* or a *martyr*?

Say, I go home today and sell my house. Hold a garage sale and unload all my stuff. Then I move into a monastery, and donate the proceeds to feed the poor.

If I do it, to *earn God’s favor*, or to *show-off with my tremendous piety* - and not out of a love for God and a love for people - then all my sacrifices and do-goodie-ness are meaningless to God. He could care less...

Or what if I demonstrate a martyr's courage... *Travel to Iran, preach Jesus on a street corner, call for the Ayatollah to convert...* end up beheaded or burned...

And if my actions aren't motivated by love for Jesus and for people, as far as God is concerned I would've been better off spending a few weeks on the beach.

Love, not just loss, is what pleases God!

And his is one of the many issues that sets Christianity apart from Islam. A muslim who fights the infidels and dies a martyr, supposedly earns the favor of Allah. He's afforded special treatment in the afterlife, *not the least of which are conjugal rights to 72 virgins.*

Whereas, a Christian can die a martyr - *and end up displeasing to God.* Unless he *loved not just fought,* his sacrifice meant nada. Love is *the more excellent way.*

Years ago, Scottish evangelist, Henry Drummond, wrote a short pamphlet intended for missionaries.

He writes to instruct folks headed to foreign lands...

"You can take nothing greater to the heathen world, than the impress and reflection of the love of God upon your own character. That is the universal language.

It will take you years to speak Chinese, or the Indian dialects. But from the day you land, the language of love, understood by all, will pour forth its unconscious eloquence. For the man who is the missionary, it is not his words, but his character that is the message."

Even when contrasted with spiritual gifts, and mountain-moving faith, and extreme acts of charity and sacrifice - the one Christian virtue that is most powerful and effective is *love!* It is *the more excellent way!*

But what does real love look like?

In the next few verses Paul gives us a full and vivid description of agape love. He lists love's attributes...

Verse 4, "**Love suffers long...**" Genuine love is more than a pleasant feeling. In contrast, it's the willingness to suffer and endure hardship for someone else.

Jesus not only suffered for His disciples, He *suffered long*. You don't hear Jesus say to His men, "Okay guys, you've got one last chance. Forsaking me in the Garden of Gethsemane is one thing, but you had all better stand up for Me in Pilate's Judgment Hall."

Imagine, if Jesus had taken the scourging, then got to the cross, and said, "**Wait, you can beat me... but no nails. This is as far as I go.**" No way! God's love has no limits - no borders - no barriers. His *love suffers long!*

Love bears another person's burden, as long as that burden needs to be bared. Love never quits.

I'll never forget an interview I heard one day on the *Focus on the Family* radio show. They were talking to a lady who'd been diagnosed with an untreatable cancer.

Doctors had given this lady a choice...

One doctor told her she could live out the rest of her days on the beaches of Acapulco - enjoying the life she had left... Another doctor said she could undergo rounds of grueling,

brutal chemotherapy and radiation, with the slight hope of lengthening her life a few years.

This brave lady chose to extend her life, *if only for a day*. She wrote this letter to her three small children...

"I've chosen to survive for you. This has some horrible costs, including pain, loss of my good humor, and moods I won't be able to control. But I must try this, if only on the outside chance that I might live one minute longer. And that minute could be the one you might need me when no one else will do. For this I intend to struggle, tooth and nail, so help me God."

This is what Paul means by a long-suffering love!

And "love is kind..." It's not harsh or mean. A person can definitely frustrate love, but love doesn't react by throwing down ultimatums and making demands.

Love stays tender. It doesn't push. It pulls and leads.

It's urgings and proddings are always respectful.

"Love does not envy..." Love never covets a blessing God chooses for someone else. In other words, love reads the name tags on the gifts before it grabs them.

And it's happy for the person who gets a nicer gift.

"Love does not parade itself..." Love doesn't show-off, or create a spectacle, or try to attract attention...

It was said of Teddy Roosevelt, he had a personality that filled up the room - a bigger-than-life persona. The comment was made, "Teddy Roosevelt wanted to be the bride at every

wedding and the corpse at every funeral.” I’ve met a lot of people who were like that.

Yet love is the opposite of that kind of attitude. Love is content to join and march in someone else’s parade.

And it’s “not puffed up...” It’s not inflated. Love is humble. The person who loves doesn’t have a big-head, or an inflated sense of their own importance.

Love doesn’t mind picking up a towel and washing some dirty feet. *The purer the love the less the pride.*

As a parent of four kids, I picked four noses, wiped four rumps, and cleaned the wax out of eight ears...

And seldom did I mind - *at least not the noses and the ears...* Real love doesn’t mind doing the dirty work!

And love “does not behave rudely...” Love doesn’t act in a way that directly insults or embarrasses the person it loves. It puts the dignity and reputation of its spouse, or kids, or church ahead of its own habits.

In other words, *love minds its manners.* It doesn’t aggravate the person it loves by behaving rudely.

Love “does not seek its own...” It ultimately cares for the feelings of the other guy above its own concerns.

It reminds me of the young bride-to-be who went to purchase material to make her own wedding dress.

She asked for the noisiest material available.

The clerk thought, “what an odd request...” *until the young girl explained. “My fiancé is blind and I want him to hear when I reach the altar so I won’t startle him.”*

Love "is not provoked..." The idea is that it's not provoked into a sin. It doesn't react inappropriately.

This is my biggest struggle. So often my actions are good and pure, until it doesn't go my way, and I'm forced to react... Do I continue to show love, or do I retaliate in kind - *lose my temper, get ugly, grow bitter?*

How do I respond when my love isn't reciprocated? Do I keep loving, or resort to some lessor method?

And love "thinks no evil..." The NIV translation renders it, "keeps no record of wrongs." Love doesn't hold a grudge! It doesn't carry a chip on its shoulders.

It doesn't jump to negative conclusions. It thinks the best of those it loves. It gives the benefit of the doubt.

There's a tribe in Polynesia where it's customary to hang reminders of your hatred for other people from the roof of your hut. Little symbols of the conflict, or the grievance, or the injustice done to you hang from your ceiling in order to keep alive the painful memories.

And we do the same... at least in your minds and hearts. **But this isn't love!** It's certainly not the love with which our Lord Jesus has loved us. Remember, His reaction to the people who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

Love "does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth..." Love is quick to forgive, but it's also willing to stand up for the truth! *Real love has a backbone!*

Recently, a pastor wrote me and asked for advice on how to minister to a trans-gendered person. He said he wanted to strike a balance - show this person the love of God, while at the same time not denying God's truth.

This is what I wrote back, "I don't think trying to strike a "balance" ever works. If the "balance" is half way between two ideals, then all we've done is watered down both points of view. The better approach is to be radical in the grace you show, and radical in the truth you teach! Jesus is our great high priest in that he was BOTH faithful and merciful... If you take that approach there will be some who are uneasy when you show grace. There will be others who are uneasy when you teach truth. I wouldn't worry about either camp that's uneasy. I'd just love strong and teach bold..." *How can it be love if you're not willing to tell a person the truth?*

By all means **love strong**, but **teach bold**...

Then Paul makes an observation about love that's extremely challenging. Verse 7, love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

He could've said, "bears some things, believes some things, hopes some things, endures some things..." But love bears, believes, hopes, endures **all** things!

As Paul puts it in verse 8, "Love never fails."

Love never gives up!

Love bears all things. It's patience is inexhaustible...

Love believes all things. It's the eternal optimist...

Love hopes all things. It's a dreamer. It sees life not just as *it is*, but as it should be and can be....

And *love endures all things*. It never stops loving.

Love *bears with* a person's flaws indefinitely...

Love *believes* in his potential indiscriminately...

Love *hopes* in a person's possibilities infinitely...

And love *endures* his hardships intentionally...

Love is a powder-keg. It's a catalyst in our lives. Love is the most effective change agent on the planet.

Jason Tuskes was a 17 year-old Floridian. Jason was an All-American kid. He was an honor student, an expert swimmer, and he was also an avid scuba diver.

Jason loved his parents, and had a great relationship with his younger brother, Christian. The four of them constituted a loving, tight-knit, and very happy family.

One Tuesday, Jason left St. Pete and headed for west-central Florida where he and his friends were going to explore an underwater cave. Jason promised his mom he'd be home for dinner. It was her birthday, and the family was planning to go out and celebrate the special occasion. *But Jason never returned...*

That morning he got lost in the underwater cave and panicked. He tried to slip through a narrow passage and got panned. He couldn't pry himself free.

At some point in the struggle, Jason realized his fate. He took off his yellow oxygen tank and with his diver's knife he carved a message into the paint on the cylinder. It read, "Mom, Dad, Christian - I love you!"

Jason never stopped loving His family - even to the point of death. *And that could also be said of our Lord!*

One of my favorite Bible verses is John 13:1.

John is prefacing the chapters that leads up to the cross. At first, his comment sounds like a passing statement, but it sums up the heart of Jesus, like no other verse, "Before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end."

Did you hear that! The disciples will abandon Jesus at His moment of greatest need... They'll flee in fear, and deny they even know Him... One of them will even collaborate to kill Him... Yet we're told Jesus loved them "to the end!" Jesus never gave up on love!

Think of all Jesus endured: thirty-nine lashes - seven inch iron spikes in his hands and feet - thorns piercing His brow - blood oozing into His eyes - a javelin thrust between His ribs - the jeers of the crowd – the terrifying rush of sin over His spotless soul - feelings of isolation from His Father in heaven - the tightly-wound shroud - three days in a wet, cold crypt - that huge stone...

That's right, *love endures all things!* It never, ever gives up! Real love keeps loving to the very end!

Actually, Jesus is the ultimate embodiment of love.

It's fun to go back to verse 6 and read these verses again, but this time substituting "Jesus" for "love."

“Jesus suffers long and is kind; Jesus does not envy; Jesus does not parade himself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek his own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus never fails.”

And try to read it one more time, but substituting your name for “love.” “Sandy suffers long...” If that sounds awkward, or far-fetched, or if the folks who know you snicker... why? Jesus wants us to love like He loves!

On church calendars the Thursday before Easter is called “Maundy Thursday.” The Latin word “*maundy*” means “day of the Mandate.” It harkens back to the eve before Jesus’ crucifixion. That’s when Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment - *a new mandate*.

In John 13:34 He told them, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.” Jesus mandates that we adopt love as our mode of operation.

The world mocks those who love, “*Why care about folks who don't care about you? It's better to look out for number one. Nobody else will.*” But not so among Christians. We’ve been shown *a more excellent way*.

A Greek writer, a secular writer named, Lucian, lived between 120-200 AD. He observed the love and care the early Christians had for each other. He wrote, “It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first leader, Jesus, has put it into their heads that they are

brothers.” Has it gotten into our heads - our hearts - that we’re to love each other?

In dealing with people we should never give up on love! Even when we’re tired of extending love - and we’re frustrated over its rejection - and we think there’s no hope of it ever being reciprocated... *keep on loving!*

Refuse the short-cuts. Just keep loving them, and loving them, and loving them! For **“love never fails!”**

And if you need proof... here it is, YOU!

That you are God's child is the result of God's never-failing, always-prevailing love! Even in your rebellion, even though you ran from Him, God kept pursuing you!

Listen to what little Dave, age 8, says about love, **“Love will find you, even if you are trying to hide from it. I’ve been trying to hide from it since I was five, but the girls keep finding me.”** Take Dave’s comment and substitute **“God”** for **“girls”** and you've got my story!

“God kept finding me!” I ran from His plan - bucked His will - stiffened my neck and hardened my heart - insisted on my own way - *but God kept finding me!*

There’s a famous poem that refers to the Holy Spirit as **“the hound of heaven.”** He catches your scent, and tracks you down, and runs you up a tree, or out on a limb. You and I have been *treed by the love of God.*

Yes, there is no doubt, if you’re a Christian today your faith is living proof that... God’s **“Love never fails.”**

Verse 8, "But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away."

In eternity, on the heavenly shore, the gifts of the Spirit will no longer be needed. A *prophetic word* will be unnecessary - we'll speak to God face to face... You won't need *tongues* - we'll be fluent in all languages... And why a *word of knowledge*? - we'll know all truth.

Spiritual gifts are for an underdog church - today's church. In us, God chose the weak and foolish, and He's assigned us to a spiritual battle with limited weapons. That's why we need supernatural firepower.

But in eternity, the battles will be over. We'll no longer need the spiritual gifts that aided us here below.

Verse 9 tells us, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away."

This is the verse people skeptical of spiritual gifts like to use to deny *the perpetuity* - or continuance of these supernatural gifts. They deny the gifts remain current.

There are people who believe that supernatural gifts ceased with the first century apostles. They interpret "*that which is perfect*" as the completion of the NT.

The Greek word translated "*perfect*" in verse 10 means "*complete*" - so the skeptics conclude that when the NT canon was finalized, God discontinued the gifts of the Spirit... *And I couldn't disagree with them more!*

For starters the NT was never a *complete revelation*.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul's saw stuff in heaven that was unlawful for him to discuss, let alone write down.

Also remember, the seven thunders of Revelation 10:4. They were heard by John, but he too was prohibited from recording them... My point, *"that which is perfect"* cannot be a reference to the NT canon.

It speaks of *the perfection we'll enjoy in heaven.*

And that's when the gifts of the Holy Spirit will cease. We'll no longer need them when we enter God's glory.

For now, spiritual gifts are a big part of our arsenal!

Paul writes in verse 11, *"When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."*

This is what a dad says whenever he mows his lawn. He first has to pick up all his kid's toys, *"when I became a man, I put away childish things."* But this is also the verse we'll quote when we get to heaven...

One day we'll reach *full maturity - spiritual adulthood.*

But that doesn't happen *completely* until we reach heaven. Then and only then will spiritual gifts cease.

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." This too speaks of heaven. Complete knowledge will never be a characteristic of this life.

In the here and now we all see *"dimly."*

Mirrors in the ancient world were not like the mirrors we have today. They were rudimentary. They were nothing but polished medals. The city of Corinth was actually famous for a bronze mirror it manufactured.

Mirrors today are hi-definition, 1080p, compared to the fuzzy, blurry, grainy images seen in ancient mirrors.

And even though we've come a long way in mirror manufacturing there's no such thing as *spiritual high-def*. Until you get to heaven the reception will always be a bit fuzzy. If we had 20/20 knowledge we wouldn't have to walk by faith... *But we don't, and thus we do.*

When a church today builds a sanctuary architects are careful to optimize the sight-lines. It doesn't matter where you're sitting in the room, you can see all that's going on upfront. There's not a bad view in the house.

But it's interesting, the Reformation architects of the great cathedrals in Europe had the opposite idea.

They deliberately created worship venues where your view was blocked - by a rail, or a column, or a awkward angle - where you couldn't see everything.

And it was a reminder that some things about God are hidden. No one knows all there is to know about God. We all worship Him from a limited vantage point. That means, **“we walk by faith, not by sight.”**

One Bible commentator I read, suggested that *if* we were able to see as clearly (*as exactly*) now, as we will in Glory, we wouldn't be able to handle all we'd see...

For one, **our sinfulness** might be too depressing. Some of us would completely despair *and give up...*

God's glory would be more than our minds could process. His righteousness and holiness would strike terror in our hearts. We'd be afraid to approach Him...

On the other hand, if we saw just how much He **loves us** it'd so captivate us that's all we'd focus on...

And if we saw **heaven** *as is*, who would want to stay put? We'd abandon our God-given mission, and throw ourselves in front of a car, or eat chili-cheese fries for every meal, just to reach the heavenly shore sooner.

God has a reason for our a limited vantage point...

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." And this will be the brightest attraction in heaven - not *the gold streets* or *the pearly gates*.

We'll **see Him**... in that day, we will **know our Lord Jesus**, just as He knows us now. And in that first instant *all our longings, all our dreams, all our ambitions, all our hunger and thirst* will be satisfied.

Chapter 13 closes, "**And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.**"

"Faith, hope, love" are **God's three musketeers!**

In 1 Thessalonians 1:3 Paul writes, "Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope..." All three virtues - **faith, hope, and love** - get put into practice in a Christian's life...

We *work*, having **faith** God will bless our efforts... We *labor*, not to earn God's favor, but to say thanks for the **love** He's shown us... We **hope** for a better life, in the meantime we patiently endure the refining trials.

“Faith, hope, love” - all three - play a role in this life, but in eternity *faith* and *hope* will no longer be needed.

In heaven we'll *“walk by sight and not by faith.”* All our hopes will be fulfilled. In heaven, **all that's left is love.** God's love for us. Our love for Him. And our love for each other. That's why *the greatest of these is love!*

When time fades into eternity love will be supreme!

And in the meantime, *it's still the more excellent way.* Don't resort to lessor methods. Never give up on love!