

Love, A More Excellent Way 2022
Romans 15:1-7 1 Corinthians 12:1, 27-13:8, 13

Romans 15:1-7 (*The Message*)

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, “How can I help?” That’s exactly what Jesus did. He didn’t make it easy for himself by avoiding people’s troubles, but waded right in and helped out. “I took on the troubles of the troubled,” is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it’s written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we’ll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus! So reach out and welcome one another to God’s glory. Jesus did it; now you do it!

1 Corinthians 12:1, 27-13:8, 13 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

In 1690, the British Admiral Phipps and his fleet of ships
were sent to assist the army’s attack on the city of Quebec.

He and his ships got there a few days before the infantry arrived,
and apparently offended by the statues of various saints
that adorned the roof and towers of the Catholic cathedral,
he used the time to shoot at them with his cannons.

When the infantry arrived, he was supposed to support the attack,
but it seems that he had already used up most of his ammunition,
he had wasted it, **taking shots at the saints-**

--- but of course Christians would never **shoot at the saints**
except, that is precisely what was happening in Corinth.

As a group, the Christians in Corinth were abundantly blessed
with a vast array of spiritual gifts, skills and abilities,
and as a faith community, they had it all going for them,
but their self-focused misunderstanding about God's gifts
was leading to conflict and misuse of those spiritual gifts.

The problem was, those with the more visible and prominent gifts
assumed and professed there's a hierarchy of spiritual gifts,
and of course they saw themselves as superior to the others...
... which led to destructive resentments, bitterness, jealousies,
conflicts and battles that were tearing the church apart.

Paul's letter to the Christian church in Corinth was intended
to resolve their divisive conflicts, distrust and resentments,
by clearing up their misunderstanding of spiritual gifts, vs. 1

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

Paul wants them to know that everybody is necessary and needed,
that they are all connected-members of the one body of Christ,
and that each one is **equally** important and significant
in the life, the ministry and mission of the church.

Paul wrote urging those groups that were jostling for position
to shift away from selfishness and pride, from ego and arrogance,
toward mutual respect, acceptance & to appreciate each other.

Unfortunately, that is not a uniquely Corinthian problem.
Throughout my ministry, I have encountered far too often,
wonderfully gifted individuals, who will never serve again,
because of mistreatment, what someone did or said to them...
... a waste & loss because of **someone taking a shot at a serving saint**.

When I bought my first car, my dad carefully explained to me,
that my car wouldn't keep running or last very long,
unless all the engine parts were kept well-lubricated.

Otherwise,
the **friction of part against part** would surely destroy the engine.

In the Church, because we are indeed still sinners who sin,
intentionally & unintentionally, we still hurt & harm one another,
so lubrication is necessary against the friction
of one member rubbing against another member.

Or as Paul tried to make clear, vs. 12:27,31

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it... strive for the greater gifts. **And I will show you a still more excellent way.**

- so what is this more excellent way ?

Paul explains in the next verse, vs. 13:1-3

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

The 1st time I tried to follow my mother's chocolate frosting recipe,
I was very careful to melt and stir in the butter,

the bakers chocolate, milk and the other ingredients.
I was so pleased that it looked right, exactly as I remembered it.

Then I tasted my cooking, and it was awful – horribly bitter.
I had forgotten to add and mix in the sugar,
so an important ingredient was missing.

If I preach the finest sermon ever heard by anyone in pews,
but if it's not done with love --- **then my preaching matters not.**

If I contribute enough money to build and accomplish any goal,
but not out of love, then as far as God is concerned,
I have given nothing at all and **my gift is wasted.**

If I put in hour after hour of endless Christian service and ministry,
but do not love, then **there is no point to anything I have done.**

Now it's not a case of love **instead** of gifts and Christian service,
but that if my gifts and good deeds **are done without love,**
they do not serve to build up the body of Christ,
and do not honor or glorify the Lord our God.

**Love is the necessary motivation and indispensable ingredient,
the lubricant against friction so the body parts can function,
and what makes our offerings and service pleasing to the Lord.**

The Corinthian Christians were very talented and gifted.
They probably worked very hard and were committed to their faith,
but for all their efforts, divisiveness pointed to a problem
... and so Paul makes the **connection between love and our good works.**

We often hear this 1st Corinthians 13 passage read at weddings,
and certainly the words are appropriate and beautiful poetry,
but Paul wasn't writing about love as in romance and marriage.

Paul's concern was spiritual gifts and service within church family
specifically our love for one another within the body of Christ...
... and the necessity for God's gracious love to be flowing through us.

As Paul describes it, vs. 4-8

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

That is the standard for **godly self-sacrificial Christian love.**
Paul is not describing some idealistic or theoretical dream-world,
but rather he is frighteningly specific, concrete and pragmatic.

Substitute the word "Jesus" in the passage for the word "love"
and this text describes the life, mission and message of Jesus.

Here's where the test is troubling and makes me cringe,
drop your own name into this passage replacing the word love.

Norm is always patient; Norm is kind; Norm is never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Norm never insists on his own way; nor is he irritable or ...

This love that Paul is describing is very specific in the Greek.

The *αγαπε* love that Paul uses here is by definition, that which
seeks the best for that other person, an active and practical love

that places the wants, needs and welfare of others above self.

αγαπε love calls for wisdom, patience, courage and integrity,
knowing when to keep my mouth shut and even take the hit gracefully.

I saw this recently when one church member was inappropriately
harsh and excessively expressed anger toward another member.
But rather than making it a big deal or trying to get payback,
chose instead to let it go without adding to the conflict.

Paul's focus is on their lack of love for one another, the one thing
that most limits, and does major damage to Christians and churches,
the one thing that most interferes and blocks us from
fulfilling our purpose and accomplishing our mission.

As Paul tried to make clear to the Christians in Corinth, that it's
not about **our** rights or gifts, **our** sacrifice or accomplishments,
for all that is meaningless, pointless and nothing,
if it is not accomplished within the context of love.

**It's about a blending that's greater than the sum of the parts
as we are brought into harmony to the glory of God,
by all serving to accomplish our shared mission,
as a community trying to live out the love we've received.**

And what exactly does that context of Christian love look like?

Paul urges for mutual forbearance and mutual respect – gracious love,
and paints a picture of it for us in Romans vs. 15:1-2

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who
falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to
look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

Paul explains that further in other writings, Galatians 6:2

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Or, Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit... let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the
interests of others.

Clearly this is a constant and reoccurring theme,

for Paul envisions something better from those walking with Christ,
much better than Christians **taking shots at the wounded among us.**

Paul continues in Romans 15, vs. 5-7

May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each
other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in
harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus! So reach out and welcome one another
to God's glory. Jesus did it; **now you do it!**

Paul is defining the Christian life & growing toward faith maturity,
not as having been a Christian and church member for lots of years,
not based upon having a thorough knowledge of Scripture,
or having attended lots of camps, retreats & conferences...
... it has nothing to do with being gifted, or our service in the church.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Mat. 22:37-40)

The measure in Church is 'getting along with other members',
for our lives to sing in harmony with others to the glory of God.

So the critical question is frighteningly pragmatic and simple,
by **our** self-sacrificial Christian love, by our ways of living,
**are we building up our fellow Christians
the Church as the one body of Christ?**

This kind of godly self-sacrificial love that Paul is describing
does not come naturally or easily, and it's not just warm feelings.
This kind of love is truly a lifetime of hard work and tenacity,
of repeated repentance & courage **to get back up when we fail & fall.**

When you use a sponge to wipe off a kitchen counter,
you've got get the sponge wet
before it can soak-up anything and clean a spill.

Our heart needs to be moist with God's gracious love first,
by accepting and trusting that we are God's beloved children
before we **can love** and can serve the needs of other people.

We've got to receive & trust God's love before we can share that love.

Only then, as we are moistened by grace and as our heart changes,
that God can call and use us to love and to serve other people.

Paul's message is not about piling on more guilt and shame.

Rather its intended to point to our goal – a hope to aspire,
to challenge us when we find ourselves angry-resentful.

So how do we accomplish this goal of living self-sacrificial love ?

I know it's far more than just our human effort and will power,
and even with fervent desire it doesn't happen overnight.

I am reminded of my sixth grade Sunday School class,
and when our teacher decided that our class of squirmy boys
might pay attention & listen better if he kept our hands busy.
Since he did beautiful wood carvings of birds as a hobby,
he set us up to whittle a small duck during his lesson.

I've never forgotten the instructions gave us,
"Just sit there, be quiet and listen, and gradually
carve away everything that doesn't look like a duck."

I think we need to be quiet and listen, reflect on our living,
on the things we say and do, our feelings and deep motivations,
and much like whittling a duck out of a block of wood,
gradually cut away everything that doesn't look like love.

We know what God wants and desires from us,
and we do know what love looks like and what love feels like,
for through Christ we have bathed in the waters of grace,
for we're already receiving God's sacrificial love.

So as Paul writes 1 Corinthians 13:13-14:1

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. **Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts.**