

Led by the Spirit / "The Most Excellent Way"

Today I call your attention to 1st Corinthians 12:31ff. I know it's unusual to begin with the last verse of a chapter, but it actually introduces what has often been referred to as "*The Love Chapter*." In the midst of a discourse of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Paul has this to say: ³¹ **But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.** Though many pursue speaking in tongues or gifts of healing or gifts of prophecy believing them to be the best gifts the Spirit can offer, Paul sets the record straight. Reading on in 1st Corinthians 13...

¹ **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.** ⁴ **Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.** ⁵ **It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.** ⁶ **Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.** ⁷ **It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.** ⁸ **Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.** ⁹ **For we know in part and we prophesy in part,** ¹⁰ **but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.** ¹¹ **When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.** ¹² **Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.** ¹³ **And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**

Though many believers fixate on gifts that benefit themselves, and seek those gifts that make for dynamic worship experiences, the world perishes for genuine love. Love is the most admired and appreciated trait in the world. Yet, it is also perhaps the most misunderstood and abused. Lust is not love. Neither is ignoring destructive behaviors of those we claim to love. I don't know how many times people have been manipulated by such deceptive ideas. "*If you love me you'll do what I want.*" Or "*You'll let me do what I want.*" Or "*You'll accept me the way I am*"_ which often translates into "*You will approve of my choices.*" A parent recognizes the fallacy in such reasoning from their children. Why don't adults see it for what it is when it's coming from a boyfriend or girlfriend, a spouse, or anyone else for that matter?

I doubt that many perceive it to be a gift from God, let alone the greatest spiritual gift one can possess. We saw last week that it was listed first among the fruit of the Spirit_ and from what Paul says here, it seems that anyone who claims to be led by the Spirit, but lacks love in his heart deceives himself and will profit nothing. Though love will be demonstrated_ for real love is active_ it cannot be recognized by physical activity alone. People can_ and do_ do things that can pass for love, but upon closer examination are anything but. Ladies, some bouquets of flowers and boxes of chocolates given on Valentines Day are not gifts of love, but might better be described as bribes. And guys, if "*every kiss has to begin with Kay's,*" her affection may not be genuine love at all.

A closer look at **verses 4-8** should affirm that **the way of love** described there would perhaps sum up what we saw in the fruit of the Spirit last week. ⁴ **Love is patient (patience)_ love is kind (kindness).** ⁵ **It is not rude (gentleness)_ it is not self-seeking (self control)_ it is not easily angered (peace)_** ⁶ **Love does not delight in evil (goodness)_ but rejoices (joy) with the truth_** ⁷ **It always perseveres (faithfulness).**

This should not surprise us, since we know something at least of the “*Love of God.*” He is the author and the perfecter of love. His divine motivation for everything from creation to the crucifixion was love. John writes in the 4th chapter of his first letter: ⁷ **Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.** ⁸ **Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.** ⁹ **This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.** ¹⁰ **This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.** I don’t know how John could have made it any clearer. God is all about love.

And doesn’t Jesus tell us that “*His disciples will be identified by genuine love*” for one another? Not what version of the Bible we carry or what songs we sing in our assembly, or how often we observe communion, or what name is on our sign_ but love. Of course, those claiming to be Christians haven’t always displayed that particular trait well. And when they haven’t, the world has had a real “*field-day*” taking potshots at Christianity.

But to be honest, to *love like Jesus* is not an easy thing. Matter of a fact, if I may be so bold_ it is an impossible thing. I’m not capable of loving so unselfishly and so unconditionally_ and neither are you. When it comes to loving the unlovely and the unlovable, I’m weak. Don’t get me wrong, **I want to love like Jesus_** I really do. At least, I think I do. Most of the time, I do. Except perhaps for those times when someone hurts my feelings or makes me angry_ or when I’m particularly tired or sad. Then, I find my love bank running low. I just don’t seem to have anything left. What can I do?

Thankfully, as a child of God I have access to an abundant amount of love. **Romans 5:5** says that “**God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us.**” Catch that. It’s not just that I have been loved by Him_ as awesome as that is in and of itself. It’s that my heart has been filled with His love. So, listen closely....

Can’t find it in your heart to forgive someone who hurt you? Having a hard time being kind to a neighbor who is anything but neighborly? Finding yourself more annoyed than overjoyed by the people God has been sending your way? Ready to walk away from someone that you were once absolutely convinced that God had brought into your life? Losing your patience with difficult people? Feeling dried up and empty when it comes to serving others? And have you found lately that you even have a hard time liking yourself? Feeling guilty or self-condemned?

It’s time to **open up your heart** and let God pour in His love. In the process, you will be assured that He loves you with an incredible and unconditional love. But, you’ll also find that you can begin to love others that way, too.