

THE MORE EXCELLENT WAY

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

KEY TRUTH:

NOTHING BUILDS UP THE FAMILY MORE THAN LOVE

Earlier this month was the Awana Grand Prix. This was my first year doing the “Awana grand prix”, and it didn’t start out too well.

My lovely wife reminded me on a Tuesday night that Levi’s car was due at club on Wednesday night, the next day. And by “car” she meant the untouched block of wood inside the bag filled with car parts and a simple instruction sheet, that I had stuffed into our roll top desk somewhere. Not good. That, coupled with the fact that Wednesday was going to be very busy at work, it left Levi and I had about 90 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes around lunch, and he worked hard on it in between.

Though I hadn’t kept track of the due date, the one thing I had done, was my research. YouTube. Where I learned, that out of all the things that make a successful box car, there is one thing that is FAR more important than any other. The weight. If the car is too light, or the weight is in the wrong place, the car has absolutely no chance.

As we have been studying the last few weeks, in 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul has been meticulously unpacking and illustrating the many truths about grace-gifts. What they are; how we get them; who gets them; why they are given; why they are different, etc. We hope and pray you have been encouraged and equipped to discover, develop and deploy your grace-gifts in the ministries God has gifted you for and called you to. I know in our home group we have had some wonderful conversations regarding these grace-gifts, and I hear these conversations are happening in many other home groups as well. So join one! 😊

Paul closes out chapter 12 with an interesting line. “I will show you a still more excellent way”. This begs the question, “way to what?” The answer lies in 12:7, here Paul reveals the reason that there are grace-gifts at all. They were given for the “common good”, or for the proper Godly function of the body of Christ. These grace gifts are indispensable to our call to minister to one another and the world around us. However, there is a “more excellent way” to minister to one another and pursue this “common good.” Agape Love. In Chapter 13, Paul will show us three things: the uselessness of using grace-gifts apart from love, the true definition of love, and why love is greater. For nothing builds up the family more than love.

THE USELESSNESS OF USING OUR GRACE GIFTS APART FROM LOVE (13:1-3)

1 Corinthians 13:1–3 (ESV)

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² 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 have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Paul moves from talking about the church as a whole and focuses in on the individual. There should be no confusion here about what he is saying. There is something more foundational and important than using one's grace-gift to build up the body of Christ. True love for one another. Here Paul says quite clearly that if the use of a grace-gift is not born out of love for others and a desire to build up the body, then it will be useless and futile. It is like putting an acorn on your counter and waiting and expecting it to grow and be a beautiful oak tree. It is worthless until put into soil where it was designed to grow out of. So it is with our grace-gifts. They are given to each one of us to use to minister in beautiful and God glorifying ways. But if they aren't used out of love, then they will never fulfill their purpose. God's family at Corinth had an unhealthy perspective on the grace gifts, particularly seen in their use of the gift of tongues. Using the gifts had become more of a chance to perform than minister, to seek an audience and accolades over building the body up and blessing one another. The exercise of their gifts had become an activity in itself, divorced from the paramount call to love. So, Paul take this chapter to remind them that nothing builds up the family more than love. To ensure the correct understanding of love, Paul spends some time unpacking...

THE TRUE DEFINITION OF LOVE (13:4-8)

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a (ESV)

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

In the N.T. there are two different words that we translate as "love". The first is *phileo*. This is "brotherly love" for example *Phila*-delphia is the city of *brotherly love*. This type of love involves feelings of warmth and affection. Best friend type love. You aren't able to have this type of love towards someone you don't like, or who invokes negative feelings, nor towards a perfect stranger. The second word used for love is *agape* love. *Agape* love describes the love that exists in, and emanates from, God himself. "God is love (*agape*)" (1 John 4:8) God doesn't just love, but He is love itself. This type of love is defined by an act of the will. A desire and intent to do good to another. Notice the lack of emotions attached? That's because *agape* is not dependent on any emotion, and often acts contrary to all the emotions we might feel toward a person. Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 6:35? "Love your enemies and do good to them" This is only possible with *agape*, and it is *agape* that Paul is talking about in vs. 4-8. This patient, kind, and self-sacrificial love is not what he is hearing about from the church in Corinth. They are abusing the grace-gifts at the cost of their brothers and sisters! This *agape* must be the foundation of any church if it is to fulfill its God given purposes. Grace-gifts are wonderful tools given to every believer for the common good, but before these precious gifts can be used, a believer must hear and heed the call to *agape*. Let us guard our own hearts against complacency, and continue to find ways to *agape* those already in our church family, and to *agape* others into our church family. For nothing builds up the family more than love. Paul closes this section with a final piece of the definition of love, "Love never ends", which builds a bridge into an explanation of...

WHY LOVE IS GREATER (13:8-13)

1 Corinthians 13:8-13 (ESV)

⁸ As for prophecies they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophecy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³ So now faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love

Paul's point here is simple. In this age, the church age, we are to use our grace-gifts to build up the church in love, but this is not an eternal practice. What we experience here and now is just a part; not mature; dimly seen. We pursue perfection in our relationship with each other but it is never attained. Until the "perfect" comes. This term "perfect" does not mean "sinless", rather it means, "complete" or "fully-fulfilled". Paul is referring to the time when Christ returns to "complete" what we have been striving for. Paul began this letter looking forward to this day, "...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:7-8)

The day that Jesus returns for His bride will be the day that all the grace-gifts will end. There will no longer be any need for them! This *agape* that we have been pursuing will be fully known by us, and in us as we fully experience the complete and "perfect" love of God toward us, love toward Him and love toward each other. Paul wraps up this incredible truth by stating that love is even greater than faith and hope. Why is that? Because faith and hope are for "now" as well. When we have the immeasurable gift of seeing the risen Jesus face to face, there will no longer be any need for faith nor hope. Both will be fulfilled. Love however, is the greatest for it will never fade nor pass away, but will continue on for all eternity. Grace-gifts are incredible and powerful tools, but nothing builds up the family more than love.