

The Way of Love on Mother's Day1st Corinthians 13Pastor Tom
May 14th, 2017

Today is Mother's Day - a wonderful opportunity to pay tribute to our Mom's or the people who filled that role in our lives. But, it is also a terrifying day for a pastor. How does a male pastor preach a message on Mother's Day to Mothers and Grandmothers when he does not know what it's like to be a mother? I could go to Proverbs 31 and talk about the wife of noble character that no one can find. But, I'm not sure how encouraging that would be.

So maybe we need to start by thinking about the kids. Mother's Day does imply children are part of the picture. So I thought I would turn to a woman to get some help for Mother's Day. Hilary Price, the wife of Pastor Charles Price shared some quotes from kid's in a mother's day message she gave a few years ago. Someone asked some questions of elementary aged kids about the Old and New Testament. She quoted their answers verbatim with no spelling corrections. Here is what the kids said.

- Adam and Eve were created from an apple tree.
- Noah's wife was called Joan of Arc and Noah built an Arc, which the animals came into in pears (spelled p e a r s).
- Moses led the Hebrews to the Red Sea where they made unleavened bread, which is bread without any ingredients.
- The Egyptians were all drowned in the dessert.
- Afterwards, Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the Ten Amendments.
- The greatest miracle in the Bible is when Joshua told his son to stand still and he obeyed him.
- Jesus was born because Mary had an immaculate contraption.
- The people who followed the Lord were called the 12 decibels.
- The epistles were the wives of the apostles.
- Christians have only one spouse – this is called monotony.
- St. Paul cavorted to Christianity. He preached holy acrimony, which is another name for marriage.

So that's what the kids had to say. Hilary Price also said, "When we are children we find a lot of things confusing. We still do when we are adults, but when we are children we actually admit it. When we are adults, we just pretend we know it all." (Hilary Price, Mother's Day Sermon, May 2012, 1)

I certainly don't know it all when it comes to mothering. So instead I thought we'd turn to God's Word to hear about something that plays a big role in motherhood. But it also plays a big role in all of our lives. That something is love.

We are going to look at one of the most famous passages of the Bible to consider love from God's perspective. I think you can participate with this in several ways today. As we go through this passage, you might praise God for ways you experienced such love from your Mom. Or you might be reminded of ways you have received this kind of love from others in your life. We can certainly appreciate how God loves us like this as we walk through this passage. In fact, you could substitute Jesus' name for love through the passage and you wouldn't have to change a thing.

But we can also participate by recognizing God's call to us to offer this kind of love to others. When we seriously contemplate this love, we cannot help but run to Christ. We will need His forgiveness for the times we have failed and we need His strength and power to offer this love.

We can also participate today by thinking about our motivation for serving and ministry. This passage comes in the middle of a discussion about ministry in the church. The way these recipients did ministry had some serious flaws that needed correction. So I pray that as you think about any ministry you might be involved in, you will be encouraged and challenged in your approach to that ministry. So I pray that you will open your heart to what God has to say through this passage.

1st Corinthians 12:31-13 ESV

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

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

⁴Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹When 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.

How many of you have heard or read this passage before? It has become one of the most famous writings about love. But this was not some “love poem” that the apostle Paul had in his collection that he decided to insert in the letter for a nice touch. A specific context caused Paul to compose this. He writes to the church He founded in the Greek city of Corinth. Paul spent 18 months planting and nurturing this church composed of Jews and Gentiles. It apparently grew quite dramatically.

God entrusted this church with a great many spiritual gifts. They had gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healings, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, tongues and interpretation of tongues. If you gathered with the believers at Corinth, you would likely experience an exciting time.

But this church had many serious problems. They divided into factions. They tolerated immorality in their membership. They took each other to court. Some taught that if you truly wanted to serve God as a married couple, you should devote yourself to celibacy. They openly challenged Paul’s authority as an apostle. And this was the church where gross abuses took place during the Lord’s Supper.

Prior to chapter 13, Paul gets into another church problem. People argued about the most spiritual group in the church. Some said that if you had gifts like prophecy, miracles, healings, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues, you were more spiritual than those who didn’t have these gifts. Some who had the gift of tongues would use their gift even if no one could interpret it. Perhaps those who didn’t have the gift of tongues condemned those who did. We don’t know the specifics. But we do know there were serious problems between members in the church. So in the midst of this discussion about spiritual gifts, Paul inserts this chapter about love.

At the end of 1st Corinthians 12 he states “But earnestly desire the higher gifts. “And I will show you a still more excellent way.” Then he plunges into this chapter on love. Here he explains why offering Christ-like love is the more excellent way.

Why is offering Christ-like love the most excellent way?

The first answer is found in verses 1-3. Paul presents 3 contrasts. First he talks about speaking in the tongues of men and of angels. This most likely refers to the gift of tongues that some of the Corinthians had received from the Holy Spirit. It could also talk about human speech and angel speech. In either case, Paul points to a great speaking gift that has potential to impact many in a deep and profound way. But great gifts can become useless. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, BUT HAVE NOT LOVE, I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol.” Using a gift or engaging in some ministry has potential to impact many. But if we offer it without love, we only make noise. Some wonder if in using the term “gong,” Paul refers to the sound of the gong that summoned pagan worshippers to their temples. Whatever he meant, we can be sure this was not a positive image. This means we can do some ministry or exercise some talent but if it’s not done in love, it is nothing more than a loud useless noise in God’s eyes.

Then he talks about great gifts of prophecy, knowledge, understanding and faith. Paul piles on the superlatives here to paint a picture of someone who has more knowledge than anyone else. And their faith is so massive that they could actually keep trusting God to remove great obstacles when everyone else had given up. Certainly, this person had the ability to accomplish great things. But Paul states if personally he had all these abilities and used them without love, he calls himself nothing. Notice Paul’s pastoral sensitivity here? He doesn’t say “you are nothing.” He applies this possibility to Himself. He demonstrates love while talking about love. Like a skillful surgeon, he gently cuts an incision that will cause the least pain so he can get to their hearts.

Then he talks about great acts of self-sacrifice. Imagine you see a person giving away all they had to the poor. You would likely conclude “that person’s heart is right with God.” Or if we saw a person willingly give up their life for the cause of Christ, we’d likely conclude they had their heart right. These are great acts of self-sacrifice. Yet Paul says if he sacrificed like this without love, He would gain nothing.

So what has Paul done in the first 3 verses? He has placed love as the critical motivation for any act of ministry. And why is Christ-like love the most excellent way? **It ensures our ministry comes from a right heart and has lasting effect. (1-3)** It is sobering to recognize that we can use our gifts in the service of God, or exercise our gifts with excellence or we can be generous to the point of our own poverty and yet completely lack in love. To God, motivations matter immensely. I remember thinking and talking about this during the construction of this sanctuary back in 2007.

We now get to enjoy this place of worship and the many opportunities it gives us and others to gather together for significant events. Yet the completion of this building was not the most important accomplishment in the eyes of God.

We talked about placing great importance on how we treated one another through construction than the actual construction. Paul talked about this earlier in 1st Corinthians. If you have a Bible, would you go back a few pages to 1st Corinthians 3? Here he directly addresses divisions in the church. Look at what he writes in verses 9-15 of chapter 3.

1 Corinthians 3:9-15 (ESV)

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

Paul talks about Judgment Day for Christians concerning rewards. Yes, we will receive reward for our faithful service to God during our time on earth. But look at the criteria for receiving a reward. Verse 10 – Let each one take care HOW he builds upon it. How have we ministered; how have we served? How do we treat one another in the midst of serving? Did we complete the project of getting that room in the church painted but along the way bowled over 5 people? Or maybe we did some ministry and didn't hurt anyone. But we did it without love in our heart. God sees that. On the Day of Judgment, ministry and acts of mercy done without love will be burned up while we will be saved.

In my own life, I am very challenged by these three verses. They challenge me to ask myself if I am carrying out my ministry from a place of love and not duty. They alert me to guarding against preaching out of anger. I need to preach out of a place of love. That doesn't mean I just talk warm and fuzzy. I still need to preach about tough topics, sin and unrighteousness. But when my preaching is governed by Christ-like love, it tempers any moral superiority that might slip into my preaching. The most excellent way is to offer ministry and help from a place of love.

Then Paul goes on to describe the type of love He's talking about in verses 4-7. Why is Christ-like love the most excellent way? **It calls forth a beautiful love that people desperately need (4-7).** Jesus offered this love. We talked earlier about substituting Jesus for love in this passage.

Well just listen to verses 4-7 with love replaced by Jesus. “Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus does not envy or boast. He is not arrogant or rude. He does not insist on his own way. He is not irritable or resentful. He does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. He bears all things; he believes all things; he hopes all things; he endures all things.” Jesus embodies this kind of love. Jesus loves you and me with this kind of love. Sometimes, we need to get rid of pictures in our mind that Jesus loves us just like other people in the world. His love is far superior to the natural human response to situations. This love is the beautiful love of Christ that drew the crowds.

I don’t know about you, but I know I can do the exact opposite of the descriptions here without even trying. I can be impatient and unkind. I can be envious, boastful, arrogant and rude under pressure. I can sometimes insist on my own way, get irritable and harbor resentment. I have sometimes rejoiced at wrongdoing instead of the truth. I have not borne with people. I can believe the worst about people. I can give up hope that God can do something with people. I can give up enduring with people. These natural human response are just that – natural. This paragraph calls for a supernatural dose of power and help from Christ.

Such love is patient – not short tempered. It was once translated long-suffering. This meant such love showed a willingness to suffer along with another person’s difficulties and the things that bug us about them. Yet, we don’t let ourselves get irritated by it all. We suffer along recognizing that God displays long suffering towards us.

Love is kind which takes time. It involves stopping and noticing another – listening to their perspective and demonstrating appreciation for them. Such love does not envy. It does not exhibit a strong sense of jealousy when another succeeds or gets something that we don’t have. It is not arrogant or boastful putting one’s own accomplishments on display for others to praise.

It is not rude by defying social and moral standards. It doesn’t put other people in situations where they are disgraced, embarrassed or ashamed. It doesn’t insist on its own way. Have you ever had to work or live with someone who always has to have things their way? They can’t let a decision move forward unless they get the last word in. They will not agree until they bend things their way. Such people make life in families and churches way more difficult by insisting on their own way.

Love is not irritable or easily angered. Husbands and wives, how are we doing towards our spouse with this one? How are we doing towards our kids? Kids, how are you doing towards your parents? You don’t have to look far to

see this one violated. I once was talking with someone in their office when their phone rang. It was their spouse calling from home with a question. Instantly this persons' facial expression changed. They talked gruffly and sharply, greatly irritated that their spouse had a question. They were so easily angered. They hung up the phone and turned back to me pleasantly. But love is not irritable or easily angered. It has space for interruptions and the unexpected.

Love is not resentful or keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not harbor resentment. It does not make a safe place for keeping a record of wrongs in their lives.

But this love is not pushover love. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love doesn't laugh at wrongdoing. It is filled with sorrow over it like God's heart filled with pain when he saw the wickedness of people in the time of Noah. But when love sees truth, it rejoices.

Love bears with people and protects them. It doesn't bring bad stuff about a person unnecessarily out into the open. Love believes all things meaning it believes the best about people. This doesn't mean we let people take advantage of us who have abused that privilege before. Love sets healthy boundaries but still believes that Christ can turn a heart around like we heard about last week. Love hopes all things especially in God's ability to do something with a person that most others have written off. And Love endures all things – It is willing to bear with people and their shortcomings.

When I look at the beautiful love described in 4-7, I fall short; far short. Yet, I am attracted to such love. I long to receive it and to give it. It points me to Christ and my need to depend on Him each day/hour to offer such love. I am thankful when I have been on the receiving end of such love especially my wife and kids who put up with a lot from me. I was privileged to have a Mom who offered much of this kind of love through my childhood years.

What about you? What might God be saying to you about this kind of love? What might be one area of love that you might need to grow in or pray through? How might you do your work in a way that flows from love – rather than solely motivated by a pay check; duty or job description? Might you treat your employees differently if you approached them from this Christ-like love approach?

In thinking about the people you live with, what is one area of love that you might need to ask the Holy Spirit to help you with? What area of love do you see flowing out of your life?

What aspects of this beautiful love did you receive from your mother or the person/people God put in your life to fulfill that role? Spouses – in what area of love might we need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us grow towards our spouse? How are we doing in kindness towards our spouses? Moms – with your kids – celebrate when you receive this kind of love from your children; ask the Lord for His help/strength to keep going in love for them. If you have received Christ, will you also receive this kind of love from Him?

The more excellent way includes a Christ-like love that is profoundly different from the common love in our world. Paul uncovers a lot in his description of the nature of love. But he doesn't end there. Verses 8-13 contain His final reason why Christ-like love is the more excellent way. **It remains while all other "great" works will fade away (8-13).** Christ-like love somehow lasts forever. Its impact goes on forever. Much of the other stuff emphasize won't last. That's basically the contrast of verses 8-13.

Love lasts forever. Many other things won't like prophecies, tongues and knowledge. When we are young in life and faith, we place great importance on temporary things. But as we matured, we realize that loving God and loving people are the most important. Paul was no Peter Pan who refused to grow up. He put the childish ways of placing a higher value on the temporary behind him.

When I think about 8-13 and the discussions about what lasts and fades, I am challenged. I live in the here and now. I thought little about the eternal early in my life. I was much more into accumulating stuff. But now, I see how much time stuff takes. I am learning to put more emphasis on that which lasts.

Yet, I can still get caught up in the here and now. I can still focus more on the short term than the long term. But during those occasional reminders that my life will one day end on this earth, God reminds me to focus my energies in something far more permanent like Loving God – Loving People – Using opportunities for God's glory.

The more excellent way is to offer Christ-like love. People desperately need it. We can receive this love from Christ. It is a love that we can offer to and receive from one another by the power of the Holy Spirit. So will you ask the Lord to give you the strength to offer this kind of love in maybe one of the areas discussed in this passage?

If you don't know Christ, you may want to receive His love for you for the first time. No one has to tell you that you fall short in some of these areas. Yet Jesus is ready to forgive you based on what He did on the cross. He showed

His love for you by going there. He waits to give you His love if only you will receive it. Let's respond to what Jesus has said to us during this time before we meet Him at His table.