

The Most Excellent Way – 1 Corinthians 13

When you hear the name “Stradivarius”, what do you think of? You think of violins, of course. How many violin experts do we have here today? How many can even play the violin? How many of you even know the difference between a violin and a fiddle? Not many of us know very much about violins and yet most of us know the name “Stradivarius”.

The name Stradivarius is synonymous with fine violins. This is true because Antonius Stradivarius insisted that no instrument constructed in his shop be sold until it was as near perfection as human care and skill could make it. Stradivarius observed, *“God needs violins to send His music into the world, and if any violins are defective God's music will be spoiled.”* His work philosophy was summed up in one sentence: ***“Other men will make other violins, but no man shall make a better one.”*** Our Daily Bread, January 25, 1993.

Now, let me ask you, (and don’t raise your hand or respond out loud) what do you do better than anybody else? Are you the best athlete; the most intelligent, the best looking, the greatest cook or the best singer? You might be good. You might be really good but chances are, there is somebody, somewhere better than you. It’s a lesson we usually start learning as kids and yet, some people may never really admit it.

The good news is that today we are going to learn how to do something in *“the most excellent way”*. We have the opportunity as individuals and as a church to be the best and most excellent at something. I remember as a kid wishing that I was the best at something, even if it was Tiddlywinks and here in **1 Corinthians chapter 13**, Paul tells us how to do that, not in Tiddlywinks, but in something vitally important.

Like anything of value, it is not going to be easy but it will be worth it if we follow Paul’s way. **Booker T. Washington** once said, *“Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way”* and what is more common today than love? Right? Love is everywhere. People fall into it and out of it. Turn on the TV and love is everywhere.

The salesman on TV said that if I buy his “MyPillow” that I will love it. So, I looked it up online and for \$50 that pillow better love me back! Every advertiser says we will love their product. From peanut butter to toilet paper to online dating services, we are guaranteed love everywhere we look. It is so common and yet, in reality, the world is starving for it and here in the love chapter of the Bible, Paul shows us how to do it the most excellent way.

In **1 Corinthians 13**, Paul writes what may well be the most beautiful piece of literature in all of scripture. I read one commentator who said to tear it apart in study is like tearing apart a

beautiful flower to study it, but it has to be done if we are going to make a difference in this world for the sake of Jesus.

What we have to keep in mind, though, is that Paul is continuing his teaching to the church in Corinth about spiritual gifts. Chapters **12, 13 and 14** are all pertaining to gifts; where they come from, why we have them and what they look like. In **chapter 12** we see that God gives us each at least one gift when we become Christians and He gives it for the edification or building up of the church. And, by the way, it's hard to build up the church with our gifts if we are not going to church. But that's another sermon.

We see there that we all have different gifts and we have different ministries and we have different results and it is all for the glory of God and for the sake of His bride, the church. So, if we are really going to be biblical and use our gifts to benefit the church, we want to strive for excellence, right? Look at what Paul says in **1 Corinthians 13:1-8**.

*And now I will show you the most excellent way. *Stop right there.** Keeping all this in context, Paul is saying that to have the gift of preaching is good. If you have the gift of teaching, good for you. To have the gift of speaking, that's nice. Whatever your God-given gift, here is the most excellent way to use that gift. Here is the most excellent way to live, the most excellent way to edify the church and give glory to God. Here it comes.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have 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 do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have 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 does not dishonor others, 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.

Have you ever known of anybody that was very gifted but lacked love? Maybe it was a pastor who could speak without notes and be so eloquent and never pause or say "uh" but he wasn't a loving man. Maybe it was a singer with the voice of an angel but a heart of a demon. A person who could organize things incredibly but dealt with people poorly. A person of great faith who never shared that faith.

Paul is saying that anything good that comes out of a person is overshadowed by the hardness of their hearts and is a waste of time and energy. Like preaching a beautiful message or singing a powerful opera all the while banging a gong. It just doesn't work. That is the context for this beautiful passage. Paul is saying that you can have all those gifts that he talked about in **chapter 12** but if you don't have love then it just doesn't matter.

As we read through this list, I bet that most of us are comparing ourselves to the list and we should be. Most of us are checking off the boxes as we go saying, *“Oh, yea, patient, kind, that’s me. Not jealous, not proud. Nailed it”* ...well, at least with some people.

We all have that one person or maybe a couple of people or maybe even most people that we can’t check those boxes for. Well, I want you to think about those people and know and understand that it is those people that Paul is writing about here today. You can’t check any box until you check it about everybody in every situation in your life.

Just like with all the gifts, Jesus is the perfect embodiment of every one of these descriptions. You can put the name of Jesus in the place of every word “love”. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind, etc. The question is, can you put your name in the place of “love” in every situation and person in your life? Are you patient? The word literally means “long-tempered”. It is the opposite of short-tempered. Are you patient when somebody does you wrong?

Are you kind? This doesn’t just mean are you having kind thoughts toward someone? Every one of these is an active form of love. It is only proved by doing something. Are you kind? Do you do kind things for people who use you and mistreat you? Ouch! That’s hard. I know.

Now insert your name in each of these as we run through them really quickly. (Your name) **does not envy**; is not jealous. This isn’t talking about being jealous when your spouse is flirting with a member of the opposite sex. You have every right to expect loyalty. God is a jealous God. This is talking about *“I want what that person has.” “I wish they didn’t have that and I did.”* This is common when we are talking about gifts especially when someone has good results from using their gifts.

But, like I said, these are all action words. How can we show that we are not jealous of somebody else’s gifts? How about supporting them with your presence or even your money if necessary? That’s how you show that you are not jealous.

So, next is love (insert your name) is not **boastful**. It does not brag. Now we all hate this and yet so many of us struggle with doing what we can’t stand. So, how can we show; how can we prove that we are not boastful or bragging?

Bragging is the other side of jealousy. Jealousy is wanting what somebody else has. Bragging is trying to make them want what you have. How can we prove that we don’t brag? **Charles Trumbull** once vowed: *“God, if you will give me the strength, every time I have the opportunity to introduce the topic of conversation it will always be about Jesus Christ.”* You can’t make yourself look good at the same time you are making Jesus look good. At least make the topic of conversation not about you.

Next, moving quickly, love, is **not proud** or arrogant. I have often thought that if I were a door-to-door salesman I would start my sales pitch by saying something like, *"Now several of your neighbors told me you wouldn't be able to afford this..."* I would say that because of this fault: pride.

When it comes to gifts we need to remember that they are just that – gifts. They are given to us by the Holy Spirit. We have nothing to be proud about. So, how do we prove that we are not proud?

A young woman asked for an appointment with her pastor to talk with him about a besetting sin about which she was worried. When she saw him, she said, *"Pastor, I have become aware of a sin in my life which I cannot control. Every time I am at church I begin to look around at the other women, and I realize that I am the prettiest one in the whole congregation. None of the others can compare with my beauty. What can I do about this sin?"* The pastor replied, *"Oh, Mary, that's not a sin, why that's just a mistake!"* (Source Unknown)

Love (your name) is **not rude**. Love does not act unbecomingly. My mother told me one time about when my Dad had just become the pastor at a new church and one of the deacons there introduced himself by saying that his God-given gift was being able to keep the pastor in line and evidently he felt that criticizing everything the pastor did was keeping him in line.

I don't have a problem with loving, constructive criticism but being rude is not a gift. It's just rude and it's sinful. If you say you have the gift of speaking the truth, then it better be done in love or it is not a gift but a fault. So, how do we prove we are not rude? What actions can we take to show that? The best way is to show grace, just like God has shown us grace. Grace is not getting what we deserve. Show grace and you show love.

Moving on in **verse 5**, love is **not self-seeking**. Are you? Okay, here's the scenario. A friend of yours has lied about you to make himself look better. How do you handle it? Do you make up a lie about him? Scream at him? Or do you allow the Lord to handle it, knowing that He knows the truth and will protect and provide for you? I told you this was difficult.

Next, love is **not easily angered**. It is not provoked. It does not get into arguments easily. Paul is talking about only getting angry at what angers God. Sound like you?

How about this next one? Married folks, listen up. I know you love your spouse but the next time you are losing an argument, remember this. Love keeps **no record of wrongs**. I know it's tempting to bring up that stupid thing they did to misuse their gift last year but true love forgets it. It is similar to forgiveness. It is actually a bookkeeper's term that means there is no record of debt. It has been erased, forgiven and forgotten.

Look at **verse 6**. Almost done and going quickly. Love does **not delight in evil** but rejoices in the truth. You show that kind of love by not justifying sin. **Isaiah 5:20** says, *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil.”* It’s not love when you mask over your loved one’s sin by saying it is not sin. We all want the truth. Speak it in love.

I love this next one. I’m not saying I’m good at it. It’s just that it says that **love protects** and what it really means is that love will show itself when you shield your loved one from something bad, even if they deserve it. Isn’t that interesting? I was at a high school baseball game a while back and the batter hit a ball way up in the air but back behind the fence. I saw a young man in the stands, who obviously couldn’t see where the ball was, stand up and lean over an older woman sitting next to him. The ball didn’t hit him but it was close. That is a picture of showing you have love that always protects. Maybe you need to protect your loved one from something somebody else says or even from seeing something that might hurt them.

Love **always trusts**. How do we show that we love someone so much that we always trust them? We trust them by allowing them to fail without judgment and then our first response is to heal and restore. **Galatians 6:1** says, *“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.”*

Similarly, love **always hopes**. Another way to say this is love shows itself by refusing to take repeated failure as final. We all mess up. Some of us are better at failure than others and what better way to prove your love than to always hope that this failure is not the end?

Love **always perseveres**. It endures all things. That’s a military term meaning to withstand against overwhelming opposition. In **Acts 7**, Stephen is being stoned to death and his last words are, *“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”* That is love that always perseveres. That is love that just keeps on loving, no matter what.

So, there you go. No problem. Just use your gifts in love. Should be easy enough, right? Actually, no. It’s not easy. In fact, it is impossible. There is no way you can do it, at least, not without the Spirit of God living inside you. Even then, it’s not going to be our default setting. We have to be so close to God that He is able to work in us His will and His plan.

Do these words describe you? Unfortunately, they don’t describe the vast majority of people in churches today and, yet we wonder why church membership is declining. Why don’t more people come to church anymore? Why should they when the church looks just like the world.

This agape love that Paul is talking about here is impossible without a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. It is much easier to have right doctrine than it is to love like this. It’s much easier to have great spiritual gifts than to agape love the unlovable. It’s easier

to be right and win an argument than it is to love biblically. The question is, do you want to be right before men...or right before God?

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In **John 13**, Jesus said, *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love (agape) one another.”* If these words don’t describe you, especially when it comes to loving the unlovable, then you can’t be recognized as a disciple of Jesus. Jesus was the perfect embodiment of all of these descriptions of agape love and He wants our church to look just like Him.

That starts with a relationship with Him. We can have a relationship with God the Father through His Son Jesus and when we do the Spirit of God lives inside of us allowing us to love and to look like Him. You can have that today. Ask Him to be your Lord and Savior and to forgive you of your sins. Then repent of those sins – turn away from them – and He is faithful and just to forgive you.

That is the ultimate, most excellent way!