

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany  
February 1, 2004  
1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

**Love Is the Most Excellent Way**

1. Love is essential
2. Love is practical
3. Love never fails

***NIV 1 Corinthians 12:31b And now I will show you the most excellent way. NIV 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. <sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> For we know in part and we prophesy in part, <sup>10</sup> but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.***

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A certain mother had four very gifted children. One of her sons had so much athletic ability that he became a major league baseball player. One of her daughter used her intellectual gifts to become a surgeon. Another son graduated from a service academy and made the military his career, while the youngest daughter owned and operated a successful business. While the mother was pleased with her children's accomplishments, it pained her that none of them made much of an effort to stay in touch with her. In fact, they hardly acknowledged her. You could say that they were too busy using their gifts to show love for their mother. In her loneliness, the mother once told a friend that she would have preferred to have children who weren't so gifted, but loved their mother.

While this mother and her children are fictitious, that family bears a certain resemblance to the way things were going at the church in Corinth. The Corinthian congregation was richly blessed with gifted members. Paul writes at the beginning of this letter, “**You have been enriched in every way.**” (1:5) Prophets, apostles, healers, administrators, tongues-speakers—you name it, Corinth had it. Still, the apostle has to say to them later, “**In the following directives I have no praise for you.**” (11:17) He had no praise for them because, despite their considerable gifts, they lacked love. 1 Corinthians 13 is an eloquent tribute to the basic Christian virtue that Christians then and now too often lack: love. Lest we become so busy using our gifts that we neglect love, St. Paul reminds us this morning that **Love is the Most Excellent Way**. Love is the most excellent way 1] because it’s essential, 2] because it’s practical, and 3] because it never fails.

### 1. Love is essential

Paul begins by leading us to see how essential love is. He contends that nothing else we do means anything—no matter how exalted it may appear to be—if we lack the critical virtue of love. To prove his point, Paul uses several extreme examples. “*If I speak in tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*” The Corinthians had what Paul considered to be an inflated estimate of the gift of tongues. God had undeniably enabled some early Christians to speak in languages they’d never studied, but Paul says that the use of those miraculous tongues (or even the language of angels), is just noise if love isn’t the motive for speaking in tongues. To employ miraculous tongues as a demonstration of my own giftedness, rather than out of a desire to share the gospel of Jesus, is lovelessness.

Another example: “*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.*” Here, too, Paul mentions what we call “charismatic” gifts. Prophecy and the fathoming of mysteries and knowledge all refer to special revelations that God regularly gave to early Christians. “Knowledge” is a specialized knowledge, given by direct revelation. And “faith” is what could be called “miracle faith,” the intense belief that all obstacles—even mountains—will vanish before the power of God to accomplish something that he’s specifically promised. Amazing as it may seem, a person could possess all these spiritual gifts and still be nothing when love doesn’t accompany these gifts.

The last example might be the most difficult to imagine: “*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*” We want to ask why anyone would risk poverty and martyrdom if not for love. But Paul is using extreme examples. If the motivation isn’t love, then the greatest sacrifices imaginable profit nothing at all.

The point is finally this: There is no substitute for love. In the kitchen you may be able to substitute margarine for butter or honey for sugar, but there’s no

substitute for love. It's still true today. We dare not think we can say, "I know I have been very kind to others here at church, but I sure know my Bible." Without love, all the Bible knowledge in the world is useless. Nor do we dare to say, "I know I've hurt people with what I say, but I'm a generous giver of my time and money." Without love, even a fortune given to God means nothing. Nor can we say, "I know I've been throwing my weight around in those meetings, but if it weren't for me, nothing would get done." In God's sight, impressive accomplishments lose their luster when they're achieved at the expense of love. Whether we're talking about the home or the congregation or anyplace else, God says we're nothing without love.

But what exactly does the Bible mean when hundreds upon hundreds of times it encourages us to live in love? Love is a word that must give fits to dictionary editors. It means different things to different people. The Greek language is perhaps more precise because it has at least four different words for love. The one Paul chooses is "*agape*." As opposed to passionate love or friendship love, both of which see something attractive in the object of love, *agape* love isn't based on some kind of attraction.

There's something else that's different. C.S. Lewis, the well-known defender of the Christian faith, said this about the 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love: "Love in this second sense—love as distinct from 'being in love'—is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit." This sort of love isn't something that we have no control over, as if it were a mysterious virus carried around in the breezes. It's intensely practical. We can work at it. We can repent of our failures to love. With the power of God's gracious forgiveness, we can do a whole range of things that make love grow and refrain from doing a whole other list of things that fray the bonds of love.

## **2. Love is practical**

Paul demonstrates the practical nature of love when instead of defining love in the abstract he gives concrete examples of what love does and doesn't do. "*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*" Is there at times a lack of love in our homes? We don't need to despair. Things can get better, with the Spirit's help. First, we must acknowledge our sins and confess them to God. Then, in the assurance of his forgiveness, we are here directed to do what love does. Even when that's not our natural response, even when it seems that our love isn't being requited, even when we don't feel like it, be patient and kind. Turn away from boasting and pride. Refuse to keep a record of wrongs and refuse to cite that record when disagreements arise. Stop asking what's in it for me and begin thinking about how I can put others first. Love is not careless or suspicious or pessimistic or a quitter. Love always protects, always trusts,

always hopes, always perseveres. And remember as you look at this list: God never asks you to do anything he won't also give you the strength to do.

The pattern for this *agape* is God himself. His patience would be legendary if it weren't also Scriptural. He gives us time to come to faith in his Son and time to repent of our sins. We couldn't dare to stand in his presence if he were busy tallying all our sins, so instead of keeping a list he's tossed his records into the depths of the sea. When God looked at sinful humanity, reeking of rebellion and disobedience and selfishness, it's impossible that he should have found anything attractive or admirable in us, but he loved us anyway. The Bible says, "**God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.**" (Rom. 5:8) Revulsion would seem to have come more easily to God than love, given the fact that humans had ruined his perfect creation, but the Bible tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." When God responded to our predicament of sin and death by giving us Jesus, he defined for all time what love is. "**This is love,**" the apostle John says, "**not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**" (1 John 4:10)

### 3. Love never fails

Then there's one more reason why love is the most excellent way. It's stated simply here: "*Love never fails.*" Do you remember those battery operated toys are lined up and turned on. One by one the batteries wear down and the toys cease to function until only one is running. It's like that with the spiritual gifts that been given to the Corinthians; the day would come when these gifts would cease. Finally, only love would be left. "*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.*" Tongues and prophecy and knowledge were gifts God distributed to help establish the Christian church during the days of its infancy. The day would come would those gifts would pass into disuse. As Paul says, "*When the perfection comes, the imperfect passes away.*" He compares it to the way our speech and thinking change when we mature. A man, when he becomes a man, puts away childish things. And so the Christian church, when the perfection of heaven comes, will have no more need for spiritual gifts that establish the credibility of God's servants. We'll be in the very presence of God. But there will still be love. Love endures.

Paul can even say that love is the greatest virtue. "*Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.*" Faith is being sure of what we hope for, the Bible says, and certain of what we do not see. You can't be a Christian without it. Nor can you dispense with hope, because hope is the confident expectation that God will deliver on all those things he's promised for our future. But in heaven we won't have the need for faith or hope anymore because we'll be seeing what we hoped for and we'll be looking face-to-face at

the Savior we believed in. But there will still be love. Love never fails. Love is the most excellent way.

In the “me first-ness” that comes so naturally to us, in the pressures and strains of the daily grind, in the zeal to be somebody and get something done, we all too often opt for a way that is not most excellent. Sooner or later it catches up with us; the lack of love always does. But it’s possible to change and improve. Our heavenly Father showed us the meaning of love when he sent us Jesus. Now he asks—more than that—he equips and enables us to live in love like his. Essential, practical, and enduring, love is the most excellent way. Amen.