

We left off last week in 1 Corinthians, justified by faith, depending on God and relying on the Body. This week we pick up with what Paul calls "a still more excellent way." Today we see the purpose of a justified life – love. Love is what we call Jesus' summary of the Law: to love God and to love neighbor. Love is the still more excellent way and Paul waxes poetic in the next chapter.

The passage from 1 Corinthians 13 is stunning in its power. It's probably the most famous passage in Scripture. Since love is the theme, I'm sure you've heard it at weddings over and over again. Yes, it's beautiful. But it is also widely misunderstood. To understand it we've got to set the context. What kind of love is Paul talking about? How can you and I receive that love? How can you and I give that love to others? Is it even possible? Asking "is it even possible?" is the right place to start if we are to begin to understand this passage. Are our hearts capable of such love?

In one of his early short stories, David Foster Wallace talks about his depression, the haunting hurt which finally overcame him. He called it "The Bad Thing". The Bad Thing, he says, attacks you and puts you out of commission. It robs you of your own ability to fight The Bad Thing and get better. Wallace talks about depression, but you could substitute "sin" for the depression and end up in the same place. *"It's made you sick in such a way that you can't get better. And you ask yourself, "Boy, oh boy, how the heck is this Bad Thing able to do this? You think about it really hard, since it's in your best interest to do so – and then all the sudden it sort of dawns on you – that the Bad thing is able to do this to you because you're the Bad Thing itself! The Bad Thing is you."*

I read because I want to learn, but also because I want to recognize myself in what I read. Don't you? I'm particularly attuned to an author's understanding of the human heart. What does he or she say about the human condition? Where do I relate to his or her characters? How are they like me? How am I like them? David Foster Wallace says the same thing as Shakespeare in Hamlet. Hamlet's his description of himself – I find a description of me.

*"I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in."*

Wow. Of course this is not just a description of me, but of anybody who understands the human condition in the light of Bible truth. There is no one righteous, not even one. Hamlet's description of himself is true to Genesis 6: *"The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."* Everybody is overcome with The Bad Thing.

With this kind of insight into the human heart reading the passage for today is deeply...distressing. Did you feel distressed as you listened to it? Distress is not the usual emotion elicited by this famous text, often called a "Hymn to Love" and read jarringly out of context at weddings. 1 Cor 13 has less to do with Eros (romantic/sexual) and everything to do with Agape (selfless love for the other).

If we see this passage as Eros – romantic love at a wedding – then we can feel sentimental and removed. *"Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous, love is not boastful or arrogant; it is not rude nor does it insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right."* Isn't that nice? What a lovely sentiment, dear. What a nice ideal. Let's get to the reception for a gin and tonic.

Hearing those words in the glow of nuptial sentiment is not really to hear them at all. They are not a hymn to love; they are description of love. Paul's description of love is decidedly not within the realm of human capability. (We've just answered our question!) And knowing our human condition, people at weddings should be weeping and wailing and repenting, on their knees begging God to give the couple what they cannot by their nature have! That would be an interesting wedding. I can read the paper's report now. *"The bride was dressed in sackcloth and the groom in a hair shirt, while the wedding party groveled on the floor in conviction of sin. The reception was held at King Family Vineyards."*

Paul contrasts the human heart overcome with The Bad Thing with the description of the Agape love that comes only from God. We see this in the negatives in the passage: not jealous, not boastful, not arrogant, not rude, etc. Paul uses the behavior of love as a foil to typical behavior of human beings – jealous, boastful, arrogant, rude. Or as Hamlet says, proud, revengeful, ambitious. In short, we do not have the capacity to love. Love does not rise unaided from the human heart.

As a test, insert your name where the word "love" is. Do you recognize yourself? Or do you more easily recognize yourself in the words of Hamlet or Genesis? If we hear this text and do not fall flat on our faces in light of the "thoughts of our hearts", then it is because they are too much for us to bear.

And yet! Here Paul is clearly calling the Corinthians to this agape love! He's calling us to The Good Thing, even in light of The Bad Thing. That which we're not capable of he's calling us to! In fact he says that anything they do and say is entirely worthless without it! If I have not love I am nothing, gain nothing. What a thing to say!

If I give all my money away, but have not love I give nothing. If I pray everyday, go to Haiti to help rebuild, serve the poor every Tuesday at soup kitchen but have not love, I gain nothing. If I preach an amazing, accurate, powerful sermon on 1 Cor 13,

without love, then I'm nothing but a windbag. Everything you do worthless and hopeless without love. Tough standards, eh? Distress, distress distress!

To hear this Scripture rightly, as we've said, is to throw yourself on the mercy of God. And, it is also to recognize not yourself in its beautiful lyric, but to recognize someone else. The meaning of the text is clear when we insert another name, the Name above all Names, the Name at which every shall bow and every tongue confess. "Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus is not jealous; is not boastful or arrogant. Jesus is not rude, does not insist on his own way. Jesus is not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Jesus never fails."

So how do we get this love that we do not have in our prideful, revengeful, ambitious hearts? Well, as Fleming Rutledge says, "*there is a secret at the heart of this passage. Agape would be unattainable for the human being if it were not for God's invincible activity on our behalf, through the power of his Son's sacrifice. Love does not lead to God; God in Jesus Christ leads us to love. Agape is not an ideal for me to aim at; agape is already actively at work in me from beyond myself.*"

We love because we have first been loved. What does this Agape, this love that comes from being loved look like? Think about what it is to be loved. Some of you are extremely blessed – you knew love from childhood; others of you were deprived of love and feel your lack. Either way, you recognize love as it's described in this passage: patient, kind, enduring.

Someone who loves you puts your needs first. She thinks about what you need before you can even think of it yourself. She works behind the scenes to make you look good. He puts down what he's doing when you come in the room and fixes his attention on you. He listens to you pour out your day; the details he delights in, the hurts he wipes away. He loves your friends because they are your friends; she's in your corner in every case, taking your side because it is your side. At your life's end, she cares for you when you cannot care for yourself.

If you have experienced this kind of love from another person then you have experienced the hints and whispers of the love of God. You have "known in part", you have "seen through a mirror dimly" the love of the One who died for the misbehaving heart. You will recognize this agape love from the receiving end; although you will not be aware of giving it out.

For the nature of Agape is that it is unselfconscious. It is spontaneous, it is unwitting of its goodness. As Watchman Nee says, "*It is from the Fountain of Life that the sweet water issues.*" When a child runs in the street in traffic, does a mother have to calculate her action? If love is forced, disciplined, chosen or calculated, it is not love. And if you have not love, you have nothing.

But thanks be to God that Agape is not an ideal to aim at. For those who have been loved by Jesus Christ, Agape is already actively at work in us through Him. That we cannot recognize it is a sure mark of its presence.

Be sure of this. Love is the only thing that counts in life. "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love." (Gal 5:6) And Love is the only thing that counts in the next life too. The rest you can leave behind. All that you fashion, all that you make, all that you build and all that you break. You've got to leave it behind. But Love, it's -the only baggage you can bring. It's all that you can't leave behind.

We love because we have first been loved. We have been loved specifically, concretely in the self-sacrifice of the one who is patient and kind, the one who asked His Father to remove the bitter cup of suffering, but did not insist on his own way. Jesus Christ, who alone was perfectly good, became The Bad Thing for our sake.

Amen.