

The Greatest of These is Love – 1 Corinthians 13:13

Once again this week we have been reminded of the brevity of life. One of the dear members of the congregation was taken home to be with the Lord. In the verses that precede our Verse of the Month we read:

Our days on earth are like grass; like wildflowers, we bloom and die. The wind blows, and we are gone— as though we had never been here. (Psalm 103: 15-16) NLT

But the love of the LORD remains forever with those who fear him. His salvation extends to the children's children (Psalm 103:17) NLT

As we think about the brevity of life, we may ask ourselves, "So what is the most important thing to do in my life? How do I make my life count?" The Psalmist says,

So teach *us* to number our days, that we may apply *our* hearts unto wisdom. (Psalm 90:12) KJV

We may be tempted to say that the most important thing in the world would be to have faith. Hebrews 11:6 tells us that **"Without faith it is impossible to please God,"** so certainly this must be the greatest thing.

Ephesians 2:8 tells us: **For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.**

As faith is necessary for salvation, surely it must be the most important thing in the world. If we could learn to have faith, to live by faith, to walk by faith then certainly we will have achieved God's best for our lives, right?

Well, that is not what God says through the Apostle Paul.

Here in 1 Corinthians 13:2 we read:

If I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

As necessary as faith is, and as important as it is for our spiritual life, there is something greater still, and that, says the Apostle Paul, is love. **"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."** (1 Corinthians 13:13)

Don't misinterpret what the Apostle is saying. He is not saying that faith and hope are not important. As we have already seen, faith is essential if we are to have a relationship with God and find the salvation he offers us through Jesus Christ. Faith permeates every aspect of our walk with God, but it is not complete if we do not have love.

We also know that hope is the anchor for our lives, that wonderful quality that gets us up in the morning ready to face a new day, and allows us to tackle the next challenge, and even allows us to stare into the face of terminal illness without giving up. Yes, the hope we find in Jesus gives us the ability to persevere, to press on, and to never give up. It is essential, for Satan will

continually try to use life's challenges to cause us to throw up our hands in despair and say, "I give up!" But hope says, a better tomorrow is just around the corner...

We all need hope, but it is not the greatest thing we need.

No, the greatest of these is love...

Paul says this because he was naturally bent towards love, right? Wrong! As Henry Drummond observes in his little book, "The Greatest Thing in the World,"

*"A man is apt to recommend to others his own strong point. Love was not Paul's strong point. The observing student can detect a beautiful tenderness growing and ripening all through his character as Paul gets old, but the hand that wrote, "The greatest of these is love," when we meet it first, is stained with blood."*¹

It would be a lifelong journey for Paul to be able to live the life he describes here, but he knew that for his life to really find fulfillment this is the path he would have to take – the pathway of love.

He would not be alone in that, for the Apostles also heard the call to love from their Master.

Peter would write:

Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. (1 Peter 4:8)

John would write this:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)

And when we turn to Jesus himself, what does he say?

³⁴A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."... (John 13:34-35)

So we must conclude with Paul that the greatest of these is love. The most important focus of our life will be to pursue love. This will be a quest to be loved and also to learn to give love to others.

When we think of our need to receive love we are drawn into the great story of salvation. As we read earlier, "God is love" and that is demonstrated from the opening of the book of Genesis to the conclusion of the story in the book of Revelation. Of course the high point in this love story is in the life and death of Jesus. As the Apostle John writes:

¹ Henry Drummond, The Greatest Thing in the World (Springdale, PA, Whitaker House, 1981) 12.

¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:10, 11)

Or as the Apostle Paul wrote:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

We could spend all week going through scripture reading about the love God has for us; his broken, sinful creation. This truly is the mystery of the Gospel. But God is love, and we will find Him as we surrender ourselves to His greatest expression of love – Jesus.

Jackie Davis shared her story in the Evangelical Times, and it starts like this:

I had my own business. I travelled. I had friends, and outwardly was ‘doing okay’, but inwardly I had arrived at a place where peace didn’t seem to exist. Towards my friends and family my face was false, a mask that I hid behind. I would laugh and smile and joke around; I was very good at this deception.

My mind was so distorted and tormented ... that I was looking for a way out. I wanted oblivion and played with the idea that a bottle of sleeping pills may give me the peace I longed for. But even that road held no escape. How could I bring such devastation on my family? I was trapped, with no way out.

(On a business trip to) Vancouver (British Columbia), Canada, I got down on my knees and asked a God I didn’t even know existed to prove himself to me, because I was desperate. (He heard me)

My spiritual eyes had been opened. I believed because he had shown that he loved me. I was found because he loved me. He then showed me that I needed to repent of my sins, that I was saved by his grace alone (we are all sinners in a fallen world), and what his death on the cross and shed blood meant for mankind’s blessing.²

Jackie, like countless others, discovered through faith in Jesus that God truly is love, and His love will change our lives if we come to him. The greatest thing in the world is to discover the love of God we find in Christ Jesus, leading us to repent of our sins and invite Jesus to be Lord of our lives.

But you noticed what else God says to us through the Apostle John:

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4: 11)

The goal and purpose of our life is to love God and to give ourselves in love to others. James talks about love that is practical – faith and deeds wed together to bring help and hope to others.

David Livingston was called by God to take the Gospel to Africa. As he went into the jungles of that great continent he shared the Gospel the best he could though he could not speak the

² [Overwhelmed by God’s love - Evangelical Times \(evangelical-times.org\)](https://www.evangelical-times.org/) accessed February 6, 2022.

languages of the people he met. But the message he carried was not his words, but the love he had for the people, and the love he had for God. That came through loud and clear for the missionaries who followed Dr. Livingston constantly heard the native people speak of their first encounter with a white man. Their faces would light up as they told about the kind doctor who had passed through their lands. The greatest of these is love.

Paul would go on to give a brief description of what love was and what it was not:

- love is patient, love is kind
- it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.
- it does not dishonor others, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs.
- love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth
- it always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.
- love never fails.

So, if that is the measuring stick of what love should look like, how are you doing? I have much to learn and a long way to go, but this is what I pursue. With the help of the Holy Spirit in my life I am learning to love better, but it is a journey. Some days I do well, some days not so good.

Last week I had a dream that I rescued four men who were sleeping in their car, freezing to death. In that dream I had the sense that God was saying to me, "I have blessed you with so much – it is a small thing to help these poor souls." I do not know if the dream was from God or from the big supper I ate, but it did remind me that love must do something.

Nicky Gumbel, founder of the ALPHA program, writes in his daily devotional about Freddie Mercury, lead singer of a rock group called Queen. In one of his last songs Freddie asks the question: "Does anybody know what we are living for?" Freddy Mercury had amassed a huge fortune and attracted thousands of fans, but in an interview shortly before his death in 1991 he said he was desperately lonely. He said, "You can have everything in the world and still be the loneliest man, and that is the most bitter type of loneliness... my fame kept me from the one thing we all need, a loving, ongoing relationship."³

What is the greatest thing in the world? To love and be loved by God, and then letting that love spill over into every other relationship we have.

When our lives come to an end, and they will, and someone has to write our Eulogy, I pray the one thought that immediately comes to mind is this, "They really knew how to love."

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

³ Bible in One Year with Nicky Gumbel, March 2, 2022 devotional.