

The Excellent Way 1 Corinthians 13

A young man went off to college, and at every break, he would bring home a different girlfriend. His father was quietly amused.

But every time, his mother would say something. “Son, she’s beautiful, but isn’t she a little too serious?” Or with the next, “I don’t know, she’s so picky.” And with another, “She just strikes me as too quiet for you, my dear.”

At last, the young man brought home this splendid young woman. He had this sneaking suspicion that he had found someone a lot like his Mom, a suspicion confirmed by the fact that his mother was almost instantly thrilled with the girl.

It didn’t take long for his father to take the young man aside and say, “Son, I’ve always kept my opinion to myself. As long as you’re happy, I’ll love this girl. But I can’t put my finger on it: there’s something about her I just don’t like!”

Nothing inspires human beings more than love. Countless stories have been told; countless songs have been sung; countless poems and novels and screenplays have been written about love. For centuries on end, storytellers have attempted to define what love is; how to get it; how to keep it; and what you should do if you lose it. The singer-songwriters and authors of our culture are fairly uniform in the way they define love: it can be summarized as a feeling that sweeps you off your feet, and since these are the storytellers we listen to most of the time, we have come to accept that this is the ideal when it comes to romantic love. We have also come to accept what the same storytellers say about the downside of love—they say that this “knock-me-off-my-feet-type feeling” can disappear at a moment’s notice, and if the feeling is gone, then love is too. But is that what the Bible says about love?

What adds to the confusion about love is that “love” is one of those words that is elastic—it can stretch in many different ways, depending on the context. So far I’ve been talking largely about romantic love as our culture defines it. Something else is being expressed when a parent says, “I love my kids.” Same word, but there’s something else at work. Same thing when your friend says to you, “I love you, man.” And then the word can simply be used to mean we really enjoy something, like, “I love ice cream.” It can be hard to pin down. One thing I’m afraid of is that Christian people hear Jesus say things like “Love one another,” and because of confusion surrounding the word “love,” they get the wrong idea. They think, “I could never have warm, fuzzy feeling for that person.” But that misses the point.

When Jesus talks about love, He’s usually not talking about feelings—at least not in a romantic sense. When he talks about love, he’s talking about a conscious decision to look away from self and to look to the needs of others, and to work towards meeting those needs. And it should not surprise you that Saint Paul talks about love in the same way. Listen again to what Paul says love is (or is not): “Love is patient and kind; love does not

envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Now that is quite a list, and if you take it seriously, it will challenge the way you think about love; it may even shake up your whole understanding of it. I don’t hear much talk about love “rocking your world” or “blowing your mind” here. Instead, love is the will to do the right thing for someone else.

Love is a commitment to care—even when I don’t feel like it. As a follower of Jesus, I am to love people even though they are unlovable, unbearable and undesirable. Why? Because there are times when I am unlovable, unbearable, and undesirable—and God still loves me.

If you were wondering how you tap into this self-giving kind of love, this is how. Deepen your connection to a self-giving God. The most famous Bible verse of them all says it best: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God loved his creation so much, he sacrificed his own dear Son so that sin could be paid for and forgiven—parents, please imagine what it would be like to exchange the life of your child for anyone else’s (sounds impossible, doesn’t it?). That was God’s choice, and it shows just how valuable you are to him.

Jesus’ commitment to care for His creation led him to the cross, and Holy Scripture says two amazing things about that commitment. Number One: Jesus had moments, such as in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He didn’t feel like being horribly beaten and executed. And Number Two: He did it anyway. Hebrews 12: 2 says that Jesus, “for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame...” The joy set before Jesus was the joy of knowing that his death and resurrection were going to set things right. The joy set before Jesus was the joy of knowing that after going through cross and grave, he would have you.

Even though the storytellers of our culture can confuse us with their ideas about love, this is something they often get right. Think of all the great stories that involve sacrifice; stories in which the hero marches into certain doom; or who switches places with someone; who gives their own life so that many other lives can be saved. There is a deep link between love and sacrifice. Our hearts yearn to give and receive this. When it shows up in the stories we watch and read, they are echoes of what happened at the cross of Jesus. Jesus marched into certain doom for you. You should have been destroyed, but Jesus switched places with you. This is how you can know in the core of your being that you are loved by God.

It isn’t easy to love people—Jesus’ sacrifice makes that obvious. It isn’t easy to have the will to do the right thing for people who have hurt you or betrayed you. It isn’t easy, but it is possible. Jesus’ sacrificial love can flip your switch. And ask anyone who knows: receiving and giving the sacrificial love of Jesus is indeed the most excellent way to live.