

Title: The Most Excellent Way

Text: 1 Corinthians 13

Theme: God's Love

Series: 1 Corinthians #64

Prop Stmt Love from God is the most excellent way because it is the most amazing way.

Read Text: 1 Cor. 12.31b-13.13 (repeat 12.31b)

When Tiger Woods burst on the PGA scene, it appeared as if he was going to completely dominate the world of golf for the next twenty years. I believe it was Jack Nicklaus who said of him, "He plays the game at a level that the rest of us can only dream about." He has since come back to earth though he probably remains the most popular personality on the tour. As I stand on a hill and scan the chapter before us, I humbly confess that the Apostle Paul describes a quality, a characteristic that the rest of us for the most part can only dream about.

Love, or inferior reflections of it, continues to be the theme of so many songs. The number of love songs is virtually impossible to count. But, it is of no matter, because 1 Corinthians 13 blows them all away. This chapter describes a quality, a deep personal characteristic that is more power than it is emotion. This priceless treasure, this fathomless mine, this vast ocean, this expansive sky is love. But, wait a minute! This is not love as you are used to. This is not "I love what you do to me baby" love. This is not, "I love this game" or "I'm in love" or "I'm lovin' it" or any other cheap imitation that is hawked on a street corner or iconed by a marketing blitz.

### 1) **Love on the streets**

Love as it is commonly understood – I love you because you help me become more than what I am. One of the results of our sin-nature is that we are selfish creatures. We usually look at life and relationships on the basis of: what's in it for me? Love, as we know it, is an intense commitment to the most practical source of personal self-enhancement. I know that does not sound very romantic, but we function with a basic approach to life that is marked by self-protection, self-preservation and self-promotion. Therefore, if a girl finds a guy who will provide protection to her and a sense of being loved and valued and wanted, then she may for those reasons "love" him or at least think that she loves him, when perhaps she initially loves what he provides for her. The guy, on the other hand may long to be desired, seen as a hero, (self-promotion) and he loves this response that he is receiving from this girl. They are "in love." There is a strong attraction, even a bonding that takes place with this love. There is a mutual giving and receiving. This love is a powerful force that can draw two people together. Love like this, is of a higher quality than the "lust" that is often mislabeled as love.

The ancient word for a lust-type of love is "eros." This is a love that is marked by longing, craving, desire, possession, and control. It is a passion that is devoid of reason, discretion and wisdom. "I want this, and nothing is going to stand in my way." It is the

heart of a crack-addict whose is driven to get high. Eros is; you give; I take. Ancient religions and contemporary pagans try to make eros some sort of a mystical journey whose promised pleasures and ecstasies connect you with the gods. Usually, however, you just get STD's. Eros describes the relationship of a smoker to his cigarette. You light it up, use it up and throw it away. Eros, is a word that is never used for love in the NT.

Phileo is. Phileo is a very common word in the NT for love. It describes the love that exists in a family and among friends. This type of a love is a beautiful love. It is a word that is even used in John 11.3 to describe the affection and care that Christ had for one of his friends – Lazarus. This type of love is actually very broad in its meaning. But for the most part, the reference point, or the source of this love is the natural love that people have for those who are connected to them in family, or in similar interests. Phileo describes this general attractiveness that people can share.

When you live in a world that is characterized by eros, phileo looks very, very good. For example, at work you may be viewed as the cigarette that others are trying to smoke. You live surrounded by people who only view you as someone they can light up, use up and then discard. Have you ever walked into a furniture store and felt like a piece of flesh in a school of piranhas? If you live, always having to protect yourself from being smoked up and used up, then phileo is a breath of fresh air.

But, when Paul speaks about love in 1 Cor. 13, he does not use the word phileo. He uses another word. It is the word agape. While this word was used in ancient Greek literature, it is a word that is hijacked by God and given full expression on the pages of the NT, but the concept was already established very clearly in the OT.

## **2) Love in the OT**

Many of us live with at least some notion, perhaps vague, but a notion nonetheless that God loves us. Throughout much of human history, the idea that a deity loves a human is nothing short of bizarre. Look at the pictures of idols. For the most part, these are not happy beings. Look at how their followers worshipped. Baal worshippers beat themselves silly in order to appease his wrath. Molech was represented as an animalistic image whose belly was a fire pit and whose outstretched arms would hold a baby before that little one would roll screaming into the flames to help bring a moment of satisfaction to this angry, demanding god. The Egyptian and Canaanite world was full of angry insatiable gods whose frightened followers lived on a treadmill of sacrifices in an impossible attempt of staying one step ahead of judgment. Love? Are you kidding me? You did not love your god, and your god most certainly did not love you. You were petrified of your god. Your fickle and silent god could at any moment erupt in anger or spew out wrath in a jealous fit. The rules, actually more like guidelines, had little basis in true logic.

It is into this dark, dark and frustrating world that God elects and God chooses for Himself a people. Notice how God describes the basis or the motivation of His choosing the Israelites as His own.

Deut. 7.7-9 “The LORD did not **set his affection** on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was **because the LORD loved you** and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, **keeping his covenant of love** to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.” What do you see?

- A. **God loves because He chooses to love.**
- B. **God loves not because we have anything to give.**

Some people have the erroneous view that God in the OT wore his angry eyes, and was always looking to throw his wrath around, while the God in the NT had a change of heart and was only loving and gentle. That is certainly not the case. Remember, the entire culture feared and trembled before their deities because their gods were by definition, unsatisfied and demanding beings.

God, because He chose to love Israel, rescued them from Pharaoh. He picked slaves! He chose a bunch uneducated, unimpressive shepherds who were living like the scum of the earth. To these people God revealed Himself. And how did He reveal Himself? He revealed Himself as Holy, Righteous, True, Faithful and Love! When God gave the law to these people, the entire nation gathered at the base of Mt. Sinai to ratify this covenant. Moses read it and the people said, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey.” This is from Exodus 24. In verse 9 we read:

“Moses, and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.” (“The fact that God did not lay a hand on them – to kill them – shows that they saw something that they never expected to see and live. Some Christian interpreters have taken this to refer to a glorious appearance of the preincarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity. They saw the brilliance of this manifestation – but not the detail. Later, Moses will still ask to see God’s glory – the real presence behind the phenomena.” – note in NET bible)

God chose to set His love upon these people and the giving of the law to them was done in the context of love and fellowship. This was unheard of in the ancient world.

- C. **God’s love was faithful, even when His children weren’t.**

The OT painting of God’s love is not complete without dipping our brush in the colors of the prophets. Hosea’s life, marriage and sermons are an incredible portrayal of the

faithfulness of God's love in the midst of rejection. But, Hosea is not the only prophet to paint the love of God in such long-suffering terms.

Ezekiel 16 (read and explain)

This is agape. It is a love that is rooted in the very character of God Himself. It is a commitment, a conviction, an uncompromising devotion to give of your self for the benefit of another, even if that person cannot ever give back to you and even if no one else will ever know. It is the cigarette willing to be smoked. And yet, this love of God does not function all by itself. God's love is never exercised in a way that compromises His holiness, righteousness or truth. But like righteousness, faith, holiness and truth, this kind of love clearly has its source from God. Love like this has the breath of God upon it.

This love in the OT was seen in history in God's relationship to Israel. It was seen in an analogy in Ezekiel's sermons and Hosea's marriage. But nothing could prepare us for what how this love was set on display through Christ on a cross.

### 3) Love on the cross

For God so loved the world He gave His one and only Son. He gave. He gave Him up to be rejected. He gave Him over to be tortured, humiliated, used up, completely spent, to have his very life bled from Him. He gave, not because we could in return give anything back to God that would make Him a better God, or make Him feel better about Himself or in any way add to His infinite greatness and glory. He gave because He chose to give. He chose to elect us, redeem us and save us. He gave the greatest that He had to people who had nothing to give back with. He gave to those who could not reciprocate with any gift. We are the children at Christmas who surrounded with presents have no gift to respond with.

What love is this that gives, so freely? While I, the guilty one goes free? What love is this that gives to one who could never repay and knowing that I could never repay, gives anyway? What love is this that gives so freely to one who does not deserve it, and knowing that I will never deserve it, gives anyway? What loves is this that has at its disposal all power in heaven and earth, and chooses to not exercise that power for my just judgment, but instead bridles that power and surrenders that power to His love for me, the sinner so that in His death, my sin could be punished?

Alas, I knew not what I did  
But now my tears are vain;  
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?  
For I the Lord have slain.  
A second look he gave which said  
"I freely all forgive;  
This blood is for thy ransom paid  
I died that thou mayest live."

Thus while his death my sin displays  
    In all its blackest hue;  
Such is the mystery of grace,  
    It seals my pardon too.  
With pleasing grief and mournful joy  
    My spirit now is filled;  
That I should such a life destroy  
    Yet live by him I killed. (John Newton)

So, when the Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth, and the Spirit of God directs Paul to pen these words not only for them, but also for us, we read, “And now I will show you the most excellent way.” This, my brothers and sisters is our calling. The bar is set at the level of the cross. When Paul speaks of the most excellent way, he chooses a word with which he dips into the ocean of God’s heart and sets before us this rich, humanly impossible standard. How can I love like this? I calculate the odds of a return on my investment of words and deeds. This is impossible. God, let me speak. Let me move audiences with the force of my words and the passionate inflection of my voice. I can sway them to tears and actions. I can paint pictures with phrases that will describe concepts with rich hues and vibrant, dancing colors. I can even sound like an angel if I need to. Or, let me explain rich doctrinal truths and unravel the mysteries of Daniel and Revelation. Let me show a God-confidence that is not deterred or distracted in the face of an unrelenting head-wind. Let me stare down every obstacle and overcome every mountain and will my way to the goal and if I have to, carry everyone with me on my shoulders. Let me give away my money and run into a burning fire and use my body as a firewall to protect a helpless child. But, you want me to give without thinking what I will get in return. You will want me to give to benefit others who can bring no benefit to me. How can I do that?

I need a Savior! I need the gospel, not only to save me, but to help me live. I need this love in my veins.

#### **4) Love in our veins**

You can only have this love in your veins if the cross is in your heart.