

Growing Your Love!

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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Today is St. Valentine's Day. On February 14th, 270 AD St. Valentine gave his life to share the message of Christ. Today commemorates his martyrdom by the Roman government. Although little more is remembered, his life and death are linked with love in friendship, family and romance. Whatever the reason behind this linkage, St. Valentine's Day can be very helpful. It helps us act on what the Bible calls: "the most excellent way!"

Love is the most excellent way. Love is not the warm feeling you get when someone values you and shows you kindness. That is your reaction to love. Your reaction is important, and we'll discuss it later. However, love is not a feeling. It is actually a way. It is a course of thinking, doing and living. It is the most excellent way because it is the way of God.

In love, God made you. He made you something stunning. He made you so that when he looks at you with his soul-knowing eyes, he sees something of himself that is good, complex, emotional, and rational. If you look at yourself without a grateful feeling, you are not seeing what God made. The Bible says:

He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker. (Proverbs 17:5, NIV)

When I read *poor*, I don't think exclusively of money. I think of limitations. We can be poor in many ways. To look down at ourselves or at any else because of what we lack is an insult to God. Whatever personal deficits you see, God formed you to live as his glory and joy. God did not make you his clone. He didn't make you to be utterly the same. He made you with

similarities and differences. He made you to be his child rather than his clone. God created you as his unique child to lavish you with his love and in turn be blessed by your love.

John the Apostle writes:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:16, NIV)

By nature God is love. When you connect with God, you connect with love. You taste the most excellent way. In fact, to walk in love is to walk with God.

When the Apostle Paul penned 1 Corinthians 13, which is world-renown as the love chapter, he had been helping Christian believers connect with God. He was helping them identify the Spirit of God. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote about what the Spirit of God does with believers and how that reveals God's presence and will. He encouraged his readers to desire this work of the Holy Spirit, but then he wrote about the most excellent way. To walk with God is to walk the most excellent way. It is to walk in love of others. Listen to the Bible:

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:11-12, NIV)

Have you ever wanted to do something for someone? God wants to do something for individuals through you. When you act in love, you complete the desire God has in his heart. God lives and completes his love through you. Maybe it's a smile. Maybe it's a work of service. God completes his love through you.

I love this picture of a child and his father with a bowl on his head. In love, he is caring for his child, feeding him; and that child puts the bowl right on his head. In my case, the bowl was full of Wheaties and milk, and it went right on my lap... on Sunday morning, when I was wearing a suit, about to leave for worship. The most excellent way equals not the easiest way.

It's no accident that in 1 Corinthians the first words defining love read:

“Love is patient.” (1 Corinthians 13:4, NIV)

As a parent, it was my responsibility with milk-soaked pants and Wheaties on the floor to respond to my child in patient love. God is patient with us, and we walk the most excellent way when we are patient with others. Whether it is a small child crying “Do it again” for the twenty-first time and we are patiently filling her little cup-like heart with our attention or it's a waitress messing up our order and we're smiling with tenderness, love is patient.

In the Bible I cannot find a refrain that is recorded more often or sung more frequently. It appears 41 times. This refrain was sung in the tent-like tabernacle on the orders of King David. It was sung each morning and evening as sacrifices were made. It was sung by choirs as King Solomon dedicated the temple. In response the cloud-form presence of God filled the temple so the priests could not see or perform their duties. When all the Israelites saw fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they sang the refrain. King Jehoshaphat marched his army into battle against overwhelming odds. Ahead of his soldiers a choir marched and sang this refrain: ***His love endures forever.*** His love endures forever! His love endures forever!

This is the theme of God's people. This is the song that reveals our God, and it proclaims a patient love, a love that endures difficulty, a love that endures rejection, a love that endures pain, a love that overcomes unbelief. God's love endures forever. It is not irritable. It keeps no record of wrong. It covers over a multitude of sins. It does not give up.

God's love endures forever and it is kind. It cares. It blesses. It builds up. It acts for the benefit of others. Love has an attitude that hopes all things, believes all things and endures all things. It is the most excellent way.

The Apostle John wrote:

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10-11, NIV)

God's patient, enduring love caused him to act in kindness and generosity towards us.

He sacrificed for you and me. We are recipients of genuine, pure love.

How then do we grow such love?

Consider the heart diagram with the three arrows. Like muscle, the heart of love grows as we exercise it. The upward arrow is exercising love. It is upward because it requires effort. As we love we encounter resistance like gravity. We grow by acting with patience, kindness and because of the resistance, sacrifice. It is critical to love through actions. Without action and movement, a muscle shrinks. It grows weak. The Bible teaches us to love in word and deed. However, if all you do is exercise a muscle you will grow weak. Every muscle must be exercised and nourished. This is true with our hearts.

When you are loved and valued, when you experience patience and kindness, when you are released with forgiveness, you are empowered. You are energized. What are those energy drinks with sugar and caffeine that give people a jolt? Bolt? Vault? Receiving love is far healthier than an energy drink, and it goes beyond the caffeine-sugar buzz to a positive outlook.

The arrow at the top of the heart stands for *being loved*. Truthfully, you and I are deeply and passionately loved. I have a second picture to reveal this. It is a home of love. God designed us male and female to come together in love, bear children and raise them in love. Many of us know what it is to be raised in a home of healthy love. Some of us don't. However, God has loved each of us even if our families failed. God has given you life and sustained you. Your heart exists today because you're loved. Indeed, the Bible teaches:

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19, NIV)

However, we all know of children who have grown up in loving families but became black sheep. They rejected their family's love. Whether they feel unworthy or have been hurt, they are unable to ingest the love that was there. We sometimes see this with little ones. They fear the love and care of a nurse or even their mothers if they're pulling a splinter from the finger.

In order to grow our hearts of love, we must *receive love*. Let's look at the heart diagram again. *Receiving love* is the downward arrow. This is where we eat and digest the love of God. In the Bible people ate part of the sacrifice that cleansed them. They ate the Passover meal. Jesus called us to feed on his sacrifice, to eat the feast given with his life. Do you enjoy your forgiveness? If not, you haven't eaten. God has given us a banquet of love to eat. Do you relish your standing as his child and saint? If not, you haven't eaten. Do you taste God's love in the smile he has someone give you? Do you taste God's love, that is made complete, in the handshake, the hug, the patient answer, the word of encouragement, the card or treat that you were given, the answer to your prayer, the sermon, the Sunday School lesson, the listening ear? If not, you haven't eaten. You are refusing the food God is spreading before you.

Here are three questions:

1. *What all are you eating from the love feast God spreads for you today?*
2. *How are you exercising your heart today?*
3. *To whom are you being patient, kind, and forgiving today?*

If you are hurting, struggling or fearful, I and a team are part of God's love menu for you. We're here to help you eat the food God has prepared for you. Join us at the communion railing for prayer at the end of our worship time. You were created and redeemed to eat and walk the most excellent way!