

THE GREATER GIFT

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Cor 13).

If you have attended more than one wedding, you have probably heard these words about love. And for a good reason. These are beautiful words that fit perfectly in the ceremony which brings two people to a lifetime together. These words are a reminder of how two people should treat one another—with patience and kindness, to not be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

These words on love come to us from the thirteenth chapter of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians. As perfect as these words are for the romantic love that two people can share, that is not at all what Paul intended them for.

To better understand what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words, we need to back up to Chapter 12—our reading for today.

The ancient Christian church in Corinth was a church that all Christians should love. We should love it not because it was a perfect example of the body of Christ in this world, but because it was so magnificently imperfect. If you are ever feeling down about your own church, if you are despondent about the way that people in the church are getting along (or not getting along), if you disagree with the preacher's sermons, then you only need read about the church in Corinth and your spirits will be lifted. In fact, they will soar.

It is like whenever I am feeling out of sorts with my family, I can just turn on the TV and switch channels until I locate some family-based reality show. I can watch for a few minutes and I realize that, hey, my family has nothing on those people.

Or, if I begin to feel that my house is getting cluttered, then I only need watch a few minutes of Hoarders and suddenly my place looks like the epitome of Scandinavian minimalism.

Furthermore, when we read about all the troubles at Corinth, we are reminded that, just as I deeply as we love our own families, it is obvious that Paul loved this particular church family.

The Apostle Paul, following his conversion to Christ, spent the last part of his life founding worshipping communities throughout the Mediterranean world.

We read in the Book of Acts (Chapter 18) that after spending time in Athens, Paul traveled south to Corinth where he became acquainted with Aquila and Pricilla, a Jewish couple who had been expelled from Rome. Paul remained with them in Corinth for eighteen months. At first, he would spend each Sabbath in the synagogue teaching the people about Jesus. However, the Jews soon banned him from the synagogue and so he turned his ministry to the Gentiles in Corinth. The church that he assembled was comprised of Jews and non-Jews alike.

After establishing the church and moving on the next mission field, Paul continued to keep in touch with the folk in Corinth. He learned of the church's growing pangs as the people sought to interweave their new faith with their old lives. There were, understandably, various hurdles and conflicts among the people—how to worship, what to eat, how to treat one another, and more. Paul addresses these issues in the two letters to Corinth that we have today.

Biblical scholars are not exactly sure what these issues were that plagued the church. There appear to have been rival loyalties to different evangelists, including Paul. Imagine that if half of you declared, "Sherard is not MY minister. My minister is (fill in the blank with your favorite tv preacher)." You can see how this might be divisive.

There was also an issue of a certain laxity in morality. There was the question of what qualified as spiritual wisdom; there were the issues of eating food that had previously been consecrated to pagan idols, issues surrounding baptism and the Lord's Supper and the resurrection. And, also, speaking in tongues.

Despite these issues in the church that he founded, Paul still loved this congregation. As we can read in this letter, he loves them like a father loves a child (Chapter 4).

Paul could easily have written off this dysfunctional church as a lost cause. He could have explained, "In my missionary career, I planted a number of churches. But not every church works out." But he does not say this. He remains in touch with the church. He pours his heart into the letters that he sends them.

In Chapter 12, Paul addresses the gifts that can be found among the people of this congregation. These are God-given gifts and talents. He points out that each person possesses such gifts and these gifts are to be used for the common good.

In Chapter 12, Paul explains to the congregation that despite their festering conflicts, that in the name of Jesus, they are part of one body, the body of Christ.

To illustrate this image, Paul talks about our own bodies. The body, he says, is made of up many parts. We are not all just a foot, or a hand, or an eye. We are all of these, and more. If one of these things is lost, then its function is lost as well. Without a nose, there is no sense of smell. Without ears, there is no ability to hear. God arranged the body so that each member is to be equally valued.

Paul is telling the people in this fractious church that each of them together are part of God's perfect plan. Each has a place, a calling. Each, individually, are part of a greater body. *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*

It is not difficult to understand what Paul is telling that church. We are familiar with the language. We know how different people have different gifts. We celebrate this in our own congregation. Some are officers, some are teachers, some are good at finances, some are good at fixing things, some make scrumptious desserts. This diversity makes us a stronger body.

Up to this point, this is a decidedly Christian sermon about how Christians should treat one another inside the walls of the church. Yes, we should treat one another as equals. Yes, those with power should not lord that power over the weaker members to get their way. We should respect the gifts of each person and value them. In this way of living we can envision a type of Christian utopia, a perfect community in which we may live.

However, if we limit this vision to just the church then we are not following Paul's intent. Paul meant for the Christians in Corinth to take this mode of life beyond the walls of their community and out into the world. The language he used about the parts of the body working together were actually counter-cultural to the ways of thinking in the Roman world. Writers of his day promoted the idea that in each system there were those who were naturally gifted to be heads, or leaders. They were the ones who should lead and everyone else should respect and follow them. It was argued that this was the natural order of things. Some parts are superior and some are inferior. Each has its place.

What Paul writes to Corinth is counter to this Roman understanding. God does not view any of us better or more valued than the rest.

Paul concludes Chapter 12 with a series of questions. Paul asks, *Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?* The answer to each of these is, of course, no. Not everyone is an apostle or a teacher. And we wouldn't want them to be. We are better when different people are able to use their different gifts.

Then, the very last statement Paul makes in this chapter is this, *But strive for the greater gifts*. That is just a bit odd, isn't it. If we all have God-given gifts, and if they are all equally important, then how do we strive for something greater? What could be greater? The answer is love. That is the greatest gift. It is a gift of the Spirit. It is a gift of God. In the following chapter, Paul calls all Christians to *strive for the greater gifts*. These greater gifts are simply love—not the romantic love between two people, but a greater love, the love of God. Romantic love is wonderful, but a greater love is the love we have for our neighbors, God's love expressed through acts of compassion, through *works of love*. This love is not envious or boastful. This love is patient and kind. It does not try and get its own way. It rejoices in the truth.

This is the love that marks the Christian community. This is the love that we want to define us. This is the love of God.

Amen.