

Love That Is Better Than Life

Loving the Way Jesus Loves

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:4

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If you had known Elizabeth Payson Prentiss she would have told you that her earthly sufferings were painful and prolonged. She would have told you that she struggled nearly her whole life with insomnia and with severe headaches that left her exhausted and made it difficult for her to enjoy her daily work. She also would have told you that she had suffered great loss. On one occasion in short succession the death of two of her children. She would have told you that afterwards in her grief that she almost destroyed her health all together and that in her distress she cried out—this is exactly what she said, “Our home is broken up, our lives wrecked, our hopes shattered, our dreams dissolved. I don’t think I can stand living for another moment.”

But if you had known Elizabeth Payson Prentiss, she also would have told you that she never lost her hope in the love of God. In fact, it was during those days of deep distress that she began to write a hymn asking Jesus for more of his love.

“More love to thee, oh Christ,” she prayed, “More love to thee.”

And as she wrote her hymn she spoke frankly of earthly sufferings and asked God that her sorrow and her grief would do its work in her life producing even more love for him.

You see, Elizabeth Payson Prentiss had found a love that is better than life.

Later she testified, “To love Christ more is the deepest need and constant cry of my soul. Out in the woods and on my bed and out driving when I am happy and busy or when I am sad and idle, the whisper keeps going up for more love, more love, more love.”

Where can a suffering soul find more love, more love for Christ, more love for other people?

Well, we are finding more love together in 1 Corinthians 13. I invite you to turn there again this morning. It is on page 960 in the church Bible. It is the love chapter of the Bible in which the apostle writes to a gifted yet a divided church teaching them how to love.

And the apostle began, some of you may remember this from a week ago or some of you may be now just joining us for the first time. Paul began by proving the absolute indispensability of love. No matter how gifted you are, no matter what you have done for God, you are nothing without love. Loveless prophecy, loveless theology, loveless faith, loveless social work, even loveless martyrdom, these things are all empty. They are nothing, because we are nothing without love.

John Chrysostom would go even farther than that. He preached on this passage to his congregation in Constantinople. This was back in the fourth century. He said, "If I have no love, I am not just useless, I am a positive nuisance."

The problem is that most of us are a lot less loving than we think we are, certainly less loving than we ought to be.

If we want to avoid making a nuisance of ourselves, therefore, we need to learn how to love.

And 1 Corinthians 13 helps us with that by sketching the character of love. It says, and I begin this week reading at verse four:

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.¹

Now, the literary technique Paul uses in these verses is called personification. He takes the idea of love and he describes it in very personal terms as if love were a person. But, of course, love is a person, because Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the love of God. And, therefore, everything that these verses say about love is characteristic of his person and his work.

His love is patient and kind. His love is not arrogant or irritable or any of the rest of it. And so if we want to know what this love chapter looks like when it is lived out, all we need to do is look at the life of Jesus. And one way for us to do that is simply to illustrate the love chapter from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ taking each phrase, each thing that is said about love and looking at it from the perspective of his life.

That is the perspective I want to take as we work our way through 1 Corinthians 13. I want to trace the course of his earthly life and his sufferings and his death for sinners and his glorious resurrection, the whole scope of his saving work and in following that chronology of Jesus and his love, I won't always be following the exact order of 1 Corinthians 13. I think that is appropriate to do. This chapter is really a portrait of love. It is not a biography. It is a kind of composite picture of love and to see that picture as clearly as possible, I want to connect every word to something in the life of Christ and

¹ 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

then go beyond that and make the connection to our own lives, because the love that Jesus has shown to us is the love he is calling us to show to others.

And so this morning we begin with what may seem to some to be a very slender virtue. The Scripture says that “Love is...” And you will see this in verse four, “kind.”

Now most people appreciate kindness, especially when a kindness is shown to them, but we may not take kindness very seriously. We think of it as something fairly insignificant, sharing your candy with someone, perhaps, helping a little old lady across the street. We talk about kindness to animals or showing kindness to strangers, that sort of thing.

But if we think that kindness is something small and simple, then we must not really understand the biblical meaning of this word. And we certainly must not understand the extraordinary kindness of God, because when we study what the Bible says on this subject, we soon discover that kindness is a high calling and really that the whole story of salvation can be understood as a gracious outworking of God’s kindness to us in Jesus Christ.

Now the word that Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians for kindness is unique. The only place it appears in the Bible or in other ancient literature apart from later Christian writing that seems to have been borrowing it from Paul, is in this place right here in 1 Corinthians 13:4.

That apostle did have a way with words as you may know and he wasn’t afraid to invent a new word if he needed one and so he invented this verb for kindness. And it is a verb. Rather than saying, “Love is kind,” we could really say this, “Love shows kindness.”

I think this may be a good place to mention a very important feature of this chapter. The words used here to describe love are not nouns, but verbs, at least 15 of them in the chapter. And so when Paul says that love is this and isn’t that, he is not giving us an abstract or philosophical definition of love, nor is he merely describing a feeling that we have in our hearts. He is talking about something we do. Love as an action, not merely as an emotion.

I think this helps us very, very practically in the Christian life. It helps us understand the biblical doctrine of love in a practical way, because many Christians—and maybe you have felt this way yourself at times—worry that they do not feel a particular way towards God.

I know I am supposed to love God, we say, but I don’t always feel very loving. Something must be wrong with me. I claim to follow God, but sometimes I am not even sure that I love him.

And we begin to wonder how we can get more of that loving feeling for God.

Well, what would 1 Corinthians... how can 1 Corinthians help us? Well, the love chapter teaches us that love is as love does. That is not to say that love is not something we feel or that we should ever stop asking the Holy Spirit to fill our lives with a warmer affection for God, but when it come to love, what we do for God is every b it as important as what we say about God and even what we feel in our hearts.

And the apostle John said, “ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”²

And the apostle Paul looked at love a very similar way. he believed in loving by doing, not just talking or feeling. Love is the way that we live for God even when we do not happen to feel particularly loving.

Now when Paul took kindness and turned it into a verb he started with a noun that does come up very frequently in the New Testament. It is the ordinary word for kindness, *χρηστος* (khrase-tos'). It is the word we see in Galatians five, for example, where the apostle is talking about the fruit of the Spirit and he includes kindness as part of that fruit. It is one of the ordinary virtues of the Christian life. It is to be generous, thoughtful, helpful, useful.

To show that kindness is a verb, Gordon Fee defines it as “active goodness on behalf of others.”

That is a good way of putting it. Kindness is active goodness exercised on behalf of other people.

Another commentator says that a kind person is “disposed to be useful, ready to enhance the life of another person.”

Now, some commentators connect kindness here to patience. If you look again at verse four you will see that love is patient and kind and we will get to patience in due course. But perhaps these words should be taken together. And so they say that Paul may have in mind here kindness particularly towards enemies, for people who have treated us badly.

In his exposition of the passage, John Chrysostom asked how we should respond to the angry resentments and vengeful passions of people who do us wrong. You may have a person like that in your life right now. How should you respond?

Well, Chrysostom said, “Not only by enduring,” that is where the patience comes in, putting up with it, “but also,” he said, “by soothing and comforting, by kindness so that we can cure the sore and heal the wound of a broken relationship.”

Well, the best way for us to learn this kind of kindness, I think is to see it worked out in the character of our God.

² 1 John 3:18.

Perhaps you notice the title for this message, “Love that is better than life.” If you were listening carefully you heard that in the call to worship this morning from Psalm 63. That is what David said. He was talking about how thirsty his soul was for God. He felt like a dying man out in an arid desert and yet he was praising the Lord and as he began to do that he explained why it was that God deserved his worship.

He said, “Because Your lovingkindness is better than life.”³

Well, that idea of loving kindness in the Old Testament has to do with the faithfulness of God, his covenant love, his faithfulness to keep all of his promises of salvation. I mean, delivering his people from Egypt and building up a kingdom and bringing back his people from Babylon. All of those things are placed under the category in the Old Testament of the loving kindness of God.

We turn to the New Testament we find very similar language used and I want to ask you to turn to one place in particular, the book of Titus chapter three and you will find that on page 999 in the church Bible.

Each week I want to take a certain aspect of the love that is described in 1 Corinthians. I want to show you that love in the life of Christ. Usually we will be turning to the gospels, but I want to, as we start with kindness, I want to use that as a way, really, of talking about the whole story of salvation and that is what the apostle does here in Titus chapter three, beginning to read at verse four.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.⁴

You see from these verses kindness is not to be underestimated because in these verses Paul starts with kindness and then he starts talking about the implications of that kindness are in the life of Christ. And by the time he is done, I mean, he has just laid out for you the whole story of salvation. You could teach a whole series of sermons just on these verses. You could lay out all of the great doctrines of salvation. I just want to do that very, very briefly this morning. And the point is this is all a demonstration of God’s kindness. Don’t think of kindness as something small, because here the Bible takes everything that God has done for your salvation and puts it under the category of the great loving kindness of God.

What kind of kindness is it?

³ Psalm 63:3.

⁴ Titus 3:4-7.

Well, the kindness of God is a saving love. That is what it says at the beginning of verse five. Verse four talks about God's loving kindness appearing, referring, I think, to the coming of Christ into the world. And what did Jesus come to do? He saved us. This is his saving love. It is his kindness. It is, perhaps, the most general term that you can use to describe the work of Christ on behalf of his people. It is this idea of saving, of delivering, of rescuing. That is what Jesus does. He delivers us from sin. He saves us from death. He rescues us from the pains of hell, because that is truly what our sins deserve, nothing less than eternal damnation. And yet God is so kind that he rescues us from an eternity in hell.

This kindness is also merciful love. We will see in verse five it is shown to people who don't even deserve it. It is not because of works that we have done in our own righteousness. No, it is because of God's mercy. It is because of his favor. It is because of his grace.

We do not save ourselves. We cannot qualify for heaven by our unrighteousness.

Leo Tolstoy was right when he said that he had not fulfilled even one thousandth of God's commandments, not because he didn't try to, but because he wasn't able to. And this is our problem as well. We do not and cannot do all of the righteous things we know we ought to do. We hardly even meet our own standards, let alone God's standards. And if he saves us, therefore, it is only because of his kind and loving mercy.

His kindness is also a life changing love. Notice verse five. It speaks of the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration, another biblical, theological term. It is talking about the inward work of the Holy Spirit that makes you a new person. It is the new birth. That is what is meant here by a generation that is a regeneration, the Holy Spirit coming in to the life of a lifeless sinner with a new and everlasting life. It is called here the washing of regeneration. It reminds us that when the kindness of God comes into your life, it takes away all your sins. It comes with cleansing power.

I wonder if you have taken your sins to the cross of Christ so that all of them can be forgiven, they can, all the guilt of all those sins can be washed away. This is the work that the Holy Spirit does. It is part of the kindness of God.

The work of the Holy Spirit doesn't stop there. No, he makes you a new person. He takes control and then that changes the rest of your life. Regeneration here, the new spiritual birth is followed by renewal. That is ongoing, the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. God first making us and then remaking us as completely new people. We are not what we once were. Praise God. And we will not remain what we are because God's renewing work in our lives continues.

I was at presbytery this week. I over heard a father say that he felt like his son's body had been overtaken by aliens because all of the sudden the boy was more respectful. And

he went on to describe this: more obedient, more contrite, more disciplined, more compassionate, more teachable. I mean, everything a father hopes for in a son.

The father realized, suddenly, that he was right. His son had, indeed been taken over by an alien and supernatural power. It was the work of the Holy Spirit that takes control of your life. It changes everything. It is the life changing kindness of God.

Are you beginning to see how kind God is? Have you experienced this in your own life, this kind of saving work, this life changing gracious kindness? It is also a generous love. In kindness, God sent us the Holy Spirit and notice in verse six how it is described.

“...whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.”⁵

I won't go into it, but you see here the triune work of God, don't you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit there, kindness working together for our salvation. And here is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the generous gift, really, the best of all gifts and Jesus talked about it that way, because when God gives you his Spirit he himself is coming into your life. He is giving you the gift of himself. And when God pours out this gift, it is not just a trickle, it is a mighty fountain.

Oh, there is so much more we could say about the loving kindness of God. Paul goes on to talk about it in verse seven. He mentions the doctrine of justification that we are justified by God's grace. He talks about the doctrine of adoption. We become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. And, of course, heirs, that is a gift that is given to children. God declares in our justification that we are righteous. But then the righteous judge becomes our Father. He welcomes us into his own home as his sons and daughters. It all comes with his grace.

I was reading this summer in some of the works of Henry Boardman who was a pastor of this church for more than 40 years in the 19th century. I love what he says about adoption. He says, “Adoption is the highest proof of love which one can bestow upon another except dying for him and Christ,” Boardman went on to say, “has done both for us.”

That is the testimony that Paul was giving here in Titus. He is talking about the justifying grace of God, the adopting grace of God. He is talking about the sacrificial death of Christ, all of these wonderful gifts of God's kindness. And it is an eternal gift. His kindness is an eternal love because part of this inheritance—you see this in verse seven—is nothing less than eternal life. The loving kindness of God never come to an end. But God keeps, if this is the definition for it, acting his goodness on our behalf forever and ever.

Well, once we experience that kind of kindness, we can never think of this kindness as something small and insignificant. No, loving kindness, this kind of loving kindness is better than life itself. I mean, wouldn't you rather die than just go on unforgiven in your

⁵ Titus 3:6.

sins? Wouldn't you rather die than have the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in your life? If you couldn't have that, why would... why even go on living?

And, best of all, this loving kindness of God extends on into eternity. It really is better than life because when God saves you in your love, you will live forever.

I wonder. Have you experienced the kindness of God? Are you able to say this morning as part of your testimony, "Yes, I have experienced this kindness. I am the recipient of the kindness of almighty God. My sins are forgiven. I am a son or a daughter of the most high God. I have the promise of eternal life. I am a personal recipient of the loving kindness of almighty God"?

Well, if you are able to offer that kind of testimony, you have a calling and that is to show his kindness to others. This is really the point that is made both in 1 Corinthians 13 and also in Titus.

Why in Corinthians does Paul tell us that love is kind? He is not just defining love for us. He is telling us how to live. And that is true here, as well, in Titus chapter three.

I haven't said much here about the context, but it is very important and it helps us in a practical way. Paul is writing to Titus because about loving kindness because he wants Titus to be able to help the people in his church learn how to love.

Titus was the pastor in Crete and the Cretans were not very kind. You can tell this because is said to them in verse two. They are reminded, this is Titus chapter three verse two, not to say bad things about people or to get into arguments. I mean, why say that to people unless that is the problem that they have.

And it is not surprising, because when you look at verse three you see the way used to live. They were, this is the end of the verse, "passing their days in malice and envy. They were hated by others and hating one another."

And, you know, we ourselves could make the same confession. We ought to, because we have the same spiritual need. By nature we are not lovers, but haters.

This is why we need this gospel message of the kindness of God. His saving kindness.

But notice what the apostle does here. He wants to teach people how to love. He doesn't just give them a list of dos and don'ts, although he does do some of that. But he begins by telling people the story of Jesus and his love, the life changing kindness of God in Christ.

And when that story of love becomes your own testimony through faith in Christ, then you can live with the same kind of love, loving the way that Jesus loves.

You see, knowing, for example, the kindness of God, that aspect of God's love, his loving kindness, knowing that helps you being showing that.

So let me just ask as we close, by way of application. How... what kind of kindness should we be showing? Well, we should be showing the same kind of kindness that God shows. And what kind of kindness is that? It is a saving kindness. Not that we could ever be anyone's Savior, of course, it would be folly to do that, though some people try. But there is one thing we can do and that is introduce people to the one who is the Savior.

Is there a greater kindness that we can ever show to another human being than to speak to them about the saving work of Jesus Christ?

This is the best way to be kind to your neighbor is invite them to church where they can hear the gospel. Speak with them about spiritual things. As you have the opportunity, give some testimony of the saving love of Jesus Christ.

This is the best of all kindnesses. It may be a saving kindness by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The kindness we are called to show is also a merciful kindness. It goes to people who don't deserve it. It is very easy to divide the world between people who deserve kindness and those how don't, who deserve your time and who don't, who deserve your affection or your care or your love and who don't.

You know, if God looked at the world that way, none of us would ever be saved because none of us deserve his kindness and yet God has poured out his kindness upon the undeserving and now it is our privilege to show that kind of kindness to others, including people who have been unkind to us.

You know, when the Bible tells us to be kind to our enemies, as it often does, it almost always tells us in a very specific way to do them some kind of good. Not just to put up with people, but actually to treat them kindly.

Now don't wait for someone else to be nice to you before you are nice to them, but treat them as kindly as God has treated you.

What else can I say about this kindness that God is calling us to show other people? Well, it ought to be generous. We ought to be giving more, not less, spending more time with people in need, not less. We ought to be moving towards those who are sick and homeless, to needy children, to people in prison, all of the kinds of ministries we are hoping to share with you next week in our ministry fair, giving you an opportunity to practice the kindness of God in your own life.

Now, of course, there are times when mercy itself would teach us to say no to a request for help that will not really help. And instead of always thinking how can I get out of doing this, our first instinct ought to be to see if there is a way for us to help. That is what

a kind person does. And sometimes kindness may even be life changing, particularly when we show people spiritual kindness.

We usually think of kindness in practical terms, material things that we can do for people. I have given a few examples of that sort of thing, but, you know, Jonathan Edwards when he was teaching his way through 1 Corinthians 13 said that we ought to try to show kindness to people's souls. And perhaps that is where the place where we ought to put the emphasis. And Edwards had a long list of ways that we can do that. We can give people the knowledge of the great things of religion, he said. We can counsel. We can warn. We can stir people up to do their duty. We can reprove them when they are not doing their duty, particularly fellow believers. We can set a good example, Edwards said, and that is the most needful things of all. And, he said, most commonly, the most effective for promoting the good of their souls.

And so as you think about what it means to show kindness, think of all the practical and every day and earthly things, but also think of the opportunities you may have to do good to someone's soul.

Now our kindness could never be eternal, of course, the way that God's is, but even that can be applied, in a way, in the Christian life and simply by doing this, to never stop showing kindness. If we keep being kind, it will change the world.

People usually think of kindness as something small, but what would happen in this city, what would happen in this world if every believer made a personal commitment to loving kindness, the biblical way, God's kind of kindness. You start showing that kind of kindness, the lost are found, the dying are delivered, the undeserving receive grace, the loveless and the unlovable are loved with an everlasting love. And those are the things that change the world.

Tertullian writing in the early centuries of the Christian Church tells us that pagans sometimes called Christians Chrestiani, rather than Christiani. And you hear the difference between those two words, Chrestiani and Christiani? The difference was not merely something that they heard. That wasn't the only reason for the confusion. Chrestiani means Christians. Chrestiani comes from the Greek word for kindness. And the point of Tertullian's comment was this, that even when believers were not yet known as the Christ people and people didn't know anything about Christ, they were already known as the kindness people. And this is our calling today as well, to make kindness synonymous with Christianity.

Sometimes people say they will know we are Christians by our love. Here is another way to say that. They will know we are Christians by our kindness.

And, Father, as we show that kind of kindness, may it be that they would come to know you as the God of love. Father, work into our lives a deeper commitment to simple kindness so that we may live with the love that Jesus has shown to us. And we pray this in his name. Amen.

We close our worship with hymn number 183. You will find it is a wonderful testimony to, very explicitly, the loving kindness of God. But you may also find it is a hymn you do not know so well and so I invite you to remain seated for the stanza. [?] will sing, lead us in worship by singing and then we will stand to sing stanzas two through five of hymn 183.