

***The Most Excellent Way***

May 1, 2014

Holy Spirit, we welcome you to our study of Scripture today: Welcome *Abba* Father, and welcome Lord Jesus—lover of our souls—the Divine Trinity!

♥**LOVE’S call:** God has always sought us for relationship; but we can’t go to the place of God’s love pursuing us until we have first dealt with our many sins—our immorality and idolatry. We may see ourselves as pretty good—not perfect—but pretty good. But when we think that way, we will tend to see God through fractured lenses. We will see either:

1. a fatherly god of strict moral conduct, or
2. a helpful god of useful principles

—instead of **GOD** who loves the unlovable, and therefore made a way! God is in lower case in statements 1. and 2., because neither represents true God, but distorted no-gods. To those who reject God’s truth and his love—through his Son—his wrath that will ultimately abide on them becomes as equal to his love that pursued them, for God’s wrath and his righteousness are both represented as being revealed from God. Before we responded to God’s love, this is how God saw us: in the depth of our sin, our idolatry, and our adulterous ways.

The Book of Hosea is the picture of an adulterous wife who, married to the prophet of God, continuously went out in search of her lovers. And this is a picture of ourselves in relation to God which we want to grasp. Instead of immediately plunging into the Roman Road of the Gospel, in Romans 1:28-2:4 Paul describes our human state of depravity and sinfulness. And he shows us that God’s wrath is as ‘right’ as his Righteousness:

*“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup>They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; **they invent ways of doing evil**; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup>they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup>**Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.***

*<sup>2:1</sup>“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, **because you who pass judgment do the same things.** <sup>2</sup>Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. <sup>3</sup>So, when you, a mere man (woman), pass judgment on them **and yet do the same things,** do you think you will escape God’s judgment? <sup>4</sup>Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?”*

“*Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God*” implies an existing knowledge of God. It is when the truth of God starts to assert itself—to convict of sin—making us feel guilty, that we refuse to retain it—we suppress it. And this is accomplished either by further immoralities or flat denial. This passage warns that if we fail to retain the knowledge of God we have, that he will give us over to a depraved mind, doing what ought not to be done. Hal Lindsey explains: “In the eyes of unbelieving man, God is never fair in what he does.” This is critical, because while we were in the midst of our sin and unbelief, Jesus did not wait for us to repent before loving us and dying for us. Romans 5:8 “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”

**When we see ourselves the way that God sees us**, then is when our holy, passionate, pursuing God can enter. We have to become needy, undone by who we are and overwhelmed by *Who* God is. Then we’re no longer the sum of our sin, but the object of our forgiving God—desperately loved! Charles Spurgeon: “O Jesus, despised and rejected of men, how could You die for men who treated You so ill? Herein is love amazing, love divine, yea, love beyond degree.”

#### ♥LOVE’S cost:

“It all happened in a moment, a most remarkable moment!” says Max Lucado. “As moments go, that one appeared no different than any other. If you could somehow pick it up off the timeline and examine it, it would be exactly like the ones that have passed while you have read these words—it came and it went. It was preceded and succeeded by others just like it. It was one of the countless moments that have marked time since eternity became measurable. But in reality that particular moment was like none other, for through that segment of time a spectacular thing occurred—God became a man!

“While the creatures of earth walked unaware, divinity arrived. Heaven opened herself and placed her most precious one in a human womb. The Omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He, who had been spirit, became pierceable. He, who was larger than the universe, became an embryo. And he, who sustains the world with a word, chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl—God as a fetus—Holiness sleeping in a womb. The Creator of life being created!”

And Jesus—fully God and fully man—came to die; and die he did! In the Old Testament directions for choosing and preparing the Passover Lamb, after being selected, it was to be taken into the home and loved and made part of the family—a beloved pet—for four days before it was sacrificed. It was to become “a little pet lamb” (Greek *arnios*), and then it was to be sacrificed for their sins.

There would be a cost! And there was tremendous cost to the Father: Jesus was His One and Only *Beloved* Son; *Worthy* the Lamb that was slain! So, the Lord Jesus Christ was the Promise God gave to his people of Messiah, and Savior, and the Holy Spirit was a Promise from the Father through the Son to us, and Scripture says that we are the children of Promise God gave to His Son!

In Galatians 4:22-23 Paul quotes the Old Testament to explain that we are children of promise:

*“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was **born as the result of a promise.**”*

*24“These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. This is Hagar. 25Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. 26But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”*

SKIP to verse 28 **“Now you, brothers (sisters), like Isaac, are children of promise.”**

Remember the children’s chorus by Bill and Gloria Gaither called *I am a Promise?*

“I am a Promise, I am a possibility;  
I am a Promise with a capital P.  
I am a great big bundle of Potentiality.  
And I am learning to hear God’s voice,  
And I am trying to make the right choice.

I am a Promise to be...anything God wants me to be.

And the song goes on: I can go anywhere that He wants me to go; I can be anything that He wants me to be; I can climb the high mountains; I can cross the wide sea; I’m a great big promise you see!” We are a Promise—Galatians 5:6 *“For in Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is **faith expressing itself through love.**”*

Ephesians 2:4 *“But because of His great love for us....”* Henry van Dyke: “The triumph of His truth, the spread of His gospel, the victory of His redeeming love over the darkness of sin—those are our triumphs and joys.” For those who’ve received God’s gift of His Son—the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross—we’ve entered into God’s love, agape’. And because we have been “so” loved, we must pass it on! But our best love—phileo and storge’—won’t do it.

We are to love God and then we are to love others with God’s **Preeminent love!** It is the central theme in the New Testament, which commands us 55 times to love. Matthew 22:36-40 tells us that love for God and our neighbor is the priority commandment. And three times in Paul’s writings and once in Peter’s writings we are encouraged to grow and develop in our ability to love.

Paul in Philippians 1:9 “*And this is my prayer: that your **love may abound** more and more in knowledge and depth of insight....*”

Paul in Colossians 2:2-3 “*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and **united in love**, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*”

Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 “*Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to **love each other**. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more.*”

1 Peter 1:22 “*Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, **love one another deeply**, from the heart.*”

Flanked by 1 Corinthians 12:31b “*...And now I will show you **the most excellent way***” and 1 Corinthians 14:1a “*Follow the way of love...*” is 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul outlined just how it is that we’re to love others. How love is defined: **Love is patient; love is kind**—operating in that order—after extreme patience, then lavishly kind. And then he told what love is not. As we’ve learned before, one way God’s Word teaches us what is the right path is to outline the wrong path.

John Wesley called **1 Corinthians 13**—Paul’s treatise on love—“the greatest chapter in the entire Bible.” In fact it is the portion of Scripture which inspired Scottish evangelist Henry Drummond to write his famous book: *The Greatest Thing in the World*. The power and priority of agape’—God’s love—is vividly expressed in the first three verses: In short, if we do not have it, we **are becoming nothing**, we **are nothing** and we **will profit nothing**.

1 Corinthians 13 is vitally and strategically located in Scripture:

Chapter 12: Spiritual gifts are bestowed

Chapter 14: Spiritual gifts are exercised

AND tucked in between is Paul’s warning and codicil, because love alone can safeguard the use of our spiritual gifts and natural abilities. If all we have is performance without love, we are empty. These first three verses represent what the church—at Corinth and today—was, and should not have been; it is a description of gifts without love.

In verses 1-3 attention was given to a number of tremendous qualities—eloquence, inspiration, insight, knowledge, faith, service and sacrifice. And all these were said to be possessed by someone who did not have love. These are like seven zeros (0000000). Without anything in front of them they are worthless—they are just the accumulation of zeros. But love is like the number one, and when we put the number **1** in front of the zeros, the things that were nothing without it, now all of a sudden, have tremendous value.

This portion of Scripture is a picture—not the dream of an artist, but the work of a photographer. Jesus Christ is the *One* sitting for a picture of love—agape’. Scripture says that God is love, and Jesus is God, so Jesus is love. You can substitute Jesus for the word love every time it appears in chapter 13 and it fits perfectly. And Jesus is the only word you could substitute.

♥**LOVE’S indictment:**

- Three times in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 it says, “*but have not love*” (NIV). Here Scripture describes what we will be like if we don’t have love.
- Four times in those same verses “*If I*” (NIV) introduces us to the things in life that are empty without love. “*If I speak.... If I have the gift.... If I have a faith.... If I give all....*”
- And three times in these verses, there is a concluding statement describing what it is we have, if we don’t have love: verse 1: “*...I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal;*” verse 2: “*...I am nothing;*” and verse 3: “*...I gain nothing.*”

Paul uses three illustrations to make his point:

1. Well-chosen and well-spoken words without love are nothing. It won’t matter how skilled and eloquent, words are worth nothing without love. The Greeks in Corinth prided themselves on their oratory, on their ability to stand and make great speeches, but they were sorely depleted in love.
2. Spiritual ‘gifting’, combined with knowledge and understanding, with even great faith thrown in are worth nothing if not exhibited in love.
3. And finally, the giving of all that we have—even to our very lives—will gain us nothing without God’s love.

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul is saying that if we do not have love in our lives, no matter what gifts we do have, we are **becoming nothing**, we **are nothing** and we will **profit nothing** at all. We will be worthless in the work of God without agape’—the sacrificial love that comes from God alone! Psalm 36:7 “*How priceless is your unfailing love!*”

*Bartlett’s Quotations* offers us 1,300 different interpretations of the meaning of love by poets, philosophers and authors. Is it possible that Christians have adopted the world’s concept of love? If we are trying to obey God’s command to love and using a worldly wise definition, we are just not going to be able to do it. 1 Corinthians 12:31 “*But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.*” We must learn and practice and employ the most excellent way to love—God’s way using God’s love—agape’!