

Introduction

I'd like to begin by asking you a critical question. What is the highest good? There is a Latin term for that, "summum bonum." That term is used in philosophy to describe the ultimate importance, the singular end that human beings ought to pursue. It's the one good that is considered to contain all other goods. But what is it?

Over the centuries individuals and groups have given two basic answers to that: happiness and virtue. Some say happiness is the highest good. Others say it's virtue or duty.

But Paul disagrees. He tells us in the chapter from which I'm preaching, 1 Corinthians 13, what it really is. It's agape love. Let's examine what he says about that in verses 1-3.

Insight #2

Paul gives us two insights in these verses. We discussed the first last week. We can be gifted and giving, as verses 1-3 define it, but not have agape love. Now let's discuss the second.

Suppose I asked you to compile a list of the ten best Christians in the last one hundred years. By best, I mean the ones who pleased God the most and are thus the greatest in His kingdom. Who would be on your list and why? I mentioned four Christians last week who'd be on my list and here's why they would. It's because they were exceptionally gifted or giving: Billy Graham – unsurpassed eloquence. Oswald Chambers – vast knowledge. Mother Teresa – historic giving to the poor. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer – courageous martyrdom.

That's what I used to think pleases God the most – the gifted and giving doing great things for Him. Paul makes three claims in verses 1-3 though that make me realize now that it isn't.

First, if I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but don't have agape love, I've become a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Paul's alluding to how pagan Corinthians worshipped two of their goddesses,

Dionysus and Cybele. Their worship was uproarious and chaotic and involved the loud banging of gongs and cymbals. Tony Campolo is one of the most sought after Christian speakers in America. But if he doesn't have agape love, his discourse pleases God as little as harsh noise does.

Paul's second claim is this. If I prophesy, know all mysteries and all knowledge, and have mountain-moving faith in God, but don't have agape love, I'm nothing. C.S. Lewis was one of the premier thinkers in church history. His insights about the universe and life in it are penetrating and profound. But if he didn't have agape love, he was nothing.

Paul makes a third claim. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and am martyred for God, but don't have agape love, what I've done profits me nothing. Most of us think being martyred for God assures Christians a high place in heaven. But if they don't have agape love, being martyred makes no difference at all in that regard.

Those are Paul's claims in verses 1-3 and I'd like to show you how radical they are by fleshing them out. I mentioned Mother Teresa before because giving to the poor makes most of us think of her. Over the last years of her life, Gallup polls consistently found that she was the person that Americans admired the most. In 1999, another poll found that she was the "most admired person of the 20th century." The world, in other words, holds her in the highest possible regard because of her giving to the poor. But notice what Paul says. If she didn't have agape love, then God doesn't. I'm not saying she didn't. But if she didn't, her lifetime of service didn't please Him and she's one of the least in His kingdom.

That illustrates the second insight Paul gives us in verses 1-3. We can be exceptionally gifted and giving but we're nothing if we don't have agape love. By "nothing," I mean we don't please God and are thus one of the least in His kingdom. But there's a flip side to that. Just reverse the insight. We can be ungifted and unable to give much but we're something if we have agape love. By something, I mean that we please and delight God and are thus, one of the greatest in His kingdom.

You can see that agape love really is the highest good and the

standard by which God judges us. Mother Teresa grasped that as well as anyone ever has and I quote her: **“At the moment of death, we will not be judged by the *amount of work* we have done but by the *weight of the love* we have put into our work.”** Paul concurs.

Implication #2

That then is the second insight he gives us in verses 1-3 and its implication is clear. We should pursue agape love. We should seek it more urgently and devotedly than anything else in life.

You might think that’s a given, that most professed followers of Jesus do that. But just look around you, at their attitudes and reactions to others, and you’ll realize they don’t.

The president of one of America’s finest Christian colleges devoted one of his periodic mail-outs to this question, “Why are Christians so mean to one another so often?” He wrote in it, **“As a leader of a Christian organization, I feel the brunt of just this kind of meanness within the Christian community, a mean-spirited suspicion and judgment that mirror the broader culture.”** That is a common point of agreement among Christian leaders. One denominational leader, for instance, told another that when he leaves his position, he’s going to write a book titled *Why Are Christians So Mean?*

Those leaders may be whining but they aren’t exaggerating. Ask yourself these questions. Are the majority of professing Christians I know any less touchy than the non-Christians I know? Any better able to absorb insults, injuries, and slights without getting offended or depressed? Any more likely to yield their rights for the sake of others. Or any of the other 15 things that verses 4-7 mention. If we’re objective and perceptive enough, the answer is almost surely “No.”

But why is that? It’s because they aren’t pursuing agape love. They aren’t urgently and devotedly seeking it. They’d have it if they were.

Now that we know what we should do, pursue agape love, let’s examine how. We pursue it by doing two things.

Develop a Vision

First, we develop a vision for agape love. By vision, I mean a perception of its value. Developing that is a two-step process.

The first is to learn what agape love is. I defined it generally last week – in the host-parasite metaphor. I'll also define it particularly the next few weeks, in verses 4-7, by explaining each of the 15 ways that it manifests itself. So, you can learn what it is by reviewing what I said last week and coming, listening, and learning the next few weeks.

The second step is to imagine what life would be like if others and we had agape love. We get alone with God and picture what the effect of each of those 15 ways would be on others and us. We thoughtfully ask and answer this question, "**What would the lives of others be like if I . . . ?**" We'd fill in the blank here with each of the 15 ways. We'd do the same with this question, "**What would my life be like if others . . . ?**" We can refer to our own experiences in answering those.

Take #12, for instance, in verse 7. Love "**bears all things.**" As we'll see in several weeks, that means it absorbs insults, injuries, and slights without getting offended or depressed. It isn't touchy in other words. So we ask and answer two questions in that regard. What would the lives of others be like if I weren't touchy? What would my life be like if others weren't touchy? We can refer to our own experiences in doing so. Pastors have a lot of those. A pastor friend of mine once told me that a woman left his church because "**You're friendlier to others than you are to me.**" He then declared, "Think what life would be like if people weren't so touchy." Well, I've actually done that and guess what I found. It'd be wonderful, far better than it is now.

That then is the first thing we do to pursue agape love. We develop a vision for it, perceive its value. That's first because of what it does. It forms and sustains in us the intent to pursue it. Like all worthwhile pursuits, seeking agape love makes continuing demands on us that only burning desire is willing to meet. Well, vision creates and maintains that burning desire. Only those with vision, therefore, will pursue it.

Carry Out the Means

We pursue agape love by doing a second thing. We carry out the means to having it. Every vision, whether it's learning a language or building a porch, has means that are known to be effective in achieving it. Well, 1 John 4:16-21 tells us what the means to having agape love is.

In verses 18-21, John discusses having agape love for others. He also tells us in verse 16 what we have to do to have it, "**abide in love,**" that is, God's love. That's the means for having agape love for others. It's to abide in God's love for us.

This chapter teaches us one of the most vital truths that we will ever learn. Agape love is primarily about being not doing. It's love itself, not loving behavior, that we're after. If all we do is try to love, try to do those 15 things in verses 4-7, we'll surely fail and become angry and hopeless in the process. Just "acting lovingly" is one of the greatest burdens we can carry through life. I know because I've done it.

But I now know better. Agape love is first and foremost something we are, not something we do. As Paul makes crystal clear in Galatians 5:22, it's a fruit of the Holy Spirit. That means it's a condition or state of being that the Holy Spirit supernaturally creates, sustains, and continually perfects within us. That condition or state of being in turn enables us to act lovingly, to actually do those 15 things in verses 4-7.

The Holy Spirit can make us loving though only if we do what John says in verse 16 – abide in God's love. That's our part in the process. That's the means to the end. We must abide in God's love for us. We abide in God's love for us by doing four things.

First, we understand God's love for us as thoroughly as we can. We accomplish that by studying and learning everything the Bible teaches about that. I'd like to help you do that by giving you a handout. It explains God's love in detail and at the end, gives you Bible passages about it to study. The handout is on the table in the narthex. I'd also recommend a book by Brennan Manning titled *Abba's Child*. It's about God's abba or daddy love for us and is simple and easy to read.

Second, we persistently engage God's loving presence as we move through our daily lives. We bring what we've learned about His love for us as consistently before our minds as we can. I saw a mother in the park, for instance, subtly breast-feeding her baby. I immediately thought about Isaiah 49:15 and mulled its message over in my mind. God loves me far more than that mother does her nursing child.

Third, we regularly engage God's loving presence in times of solitude and silence. We get alone with God and begin by "centering down." We let go of all competing distractions until we are truly present where we are. We do that by relaxing our body and quieting our mind. Once we've centered down, we then enter into what Teresa of Avila called "the prayer of quiet." We quiet all of our physical and psychological senses and behold God. We simply bask in the warmth of His presence and sense His nearness to us. If you'd like to learn more about that, I recommend chapter 14 in Richard Foster's book titled *Prayer* and chapter 11 in Brennan Manning's book titled *The Signature of Jesus*.

And finally, fourth, we try to act lovingly. Even though agape love is a state of being, we should do the best we can in action. So, in conjunction with the three things I just explained, we try the best we can to live out verses 4-7. Verse 7, for instance, says that love believes all things. That means that it thinks the best about people. So, I've established a hard and fast rule in my life that I try to follow. Absent exceptional circumstances, I always give people the benefit of the doubt until I know otherwise. I try best I can, in other words, to live out verses 4-7.

Conclusion

I'd sum up what I've said today this way. You have your one life on earth before you. In that one life, what is the noblest object of your pursuit? What is the one thing more than any other that you should seek? What is the highest good? It's agape love. So, urgently and devotedly pursue it!