

## *The One Thing You Can't Do Without.*

### *"The More Excellent Way"*

*1 Corinthians 12:31b ESV.... And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

### *Preamble Questions & Comments:*

*Q.) If you were to ask the average Christian, "What is the greatest need of the church today what would be some answers you might hear?"*

No doubt the responses would vary to this question and a lot of the answers have merit and deserve much more space and time than our study will allow for but let us mention just a few.

- Some might say the church needs a face lift, in other words the church needs to look more appealing to the un-churched. This happens by being culturally relevant and contextualizing the gospel for those who may be from diverse backgrounds.*
- Others may point to the need to be more socially conscious by investing in relief work and mercy ministries.*
- Still others may feel we need a more powerful proclamation of Gods Word. What the church needs most is sound, orthodox, doctrine, not to mention gifted teachers and preachers expositing those truths to Gods people.*

In all of these examples there is tremendous worth, and the church would benefit greatly if any one of these values were augmented. Let's ask one more question.

*Q.) If you were to ask a non-Christian colleague at work or a fellow student at school "What's the number one problem with the church, what might be some of the replies?"*

### *Opening Illustration:*

I would like to suggest that the greatest need of the church is the number one problem with the church and it can be summed up in a word that is often taken for granted, "Love". Love is a small word in with which people have big ideas about and so it will take some time to unpack.

Amazon.com lists 593,810 book results for love. If you do a simple Google search using the word love you will get 1,890,000,000 results.

Love has been the inspiration behind some of the greatest works of literature and art throughout history. Thousands of songs have been written, and countless hearts smitten by this simple expression called, "love". Or have they?

Q.) What may be some of the ways people mishandle the word “love”?

### Introduction:

Love is one of the deepest human needs of all, yet ironically it is also perhaps the most misunderstood word. In the English language we have just this one word (love) to describe how we feel about so many things. For example we may say “I love my car, or I love my dog, or I love my house, or I love my spouse. Thus the word love becomes many different things to many different people depending on the context in which it used and to whom it is used by.

Explanation: So how are we as Christians to understand what the Bible means when it speaks of love? What does Gods Word mean when it says,

*1 John 4:16b ESV God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

This verse defines God as love. Consider the sun as an analogy. **The sun only shines, just as God only loves.** It is the nature of the sun to shine, to offer warmth and light. **And it is the nature of God to love.**

We must be careful when studying the word love, it is somewhat like taking apart a flower, part of the beauty is lost when the components are separated. So we don't want to take what is in itself beautiful and subject it to the lab of textual criticism for the sake of our own amusement.

It is important to note that the Greek language was not so impoverished as English on this point; the ancients did not experience the ambiguity that we do when they came in contact with the concept of love because they had four different words to emphasis the different aspects of human affection. Let's look at each briefly.

- 1.) *στοργη, storge:* natural affection
- 2.) *ερος, eros:* romantic love
- 3.) *φιλια, philia:* friendship, fondness, brotherly love
- 4.) *αγαπη, agape:* willful love capable of great grace, generosity and sacrifice.

When speaking of “eros” the ancient Greeks would not have had “*philia*” or “*agape*” in mind. In fact only “*philia*” and “*agape*” are found in the New Testament.

**Side Note:** The fourth and fifth century church theologian Jerome who translated the Bible from Greek to Latin around 382 to 385 ran into the same sort of problem English has with the word love. The Latin word for love is “*amor*” which did not render the Greek word “*agape*” sufficiently. So he used the Latin word for “charity” in order to capture the unconditional, sacrificial nature of “*agape*”. The word charity is still found in the King James Version which John Wycliffe translated into English around 1382 to 1384.

*Q.) Out of the four words for love here, which expression most represents what people in our culture mean when they are speaking of love?*

*Q.) What does this say about our culture?*

This leads us to our first point and that is,

### *A. Unconditional Love Is The Greatest Love.*

Agape (love) is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but interestingly the most common in the New Testament. As stated above agape never means romantic love (*eros*), and it does not mean close friendship or brotherly love for which *philia* is used.

It is here the problem lies. Many people and I dare say some Christians think of love as having nice feelings, warm affection, or desire. **When people say “I love you” they often mean, “I love me and want you.”** This of course is the antithesis of agape.

*Illustration:* I read a story this week of a young woman who came to her pastor desperate and despondent. She said, “There is a man who says he loves me so much he will kill himself if I don’t marry him. What should I do?” “Do nothing,” he replied. “That man doesn’t love you; he loves himself. Such a threat isn’t love it is pure selfishness.

Agape love is more concerned about giving than receiving so it may go without saying that the greatest love is unconditional love.

- *Matthew 22:34-40 ESV* But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. (35) And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. (36) “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (37) And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. (38) This is the great and first commandment. (39) And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (40) On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

The profound nature of what Jesus is saying is often over looked. Jesus’ reply really simplified things. From 613 rules and regulations known as the Old Testament Law, Jesus boils it all down to two great guidelines. We are to love God and love people, even our enemies and we are to do this unconditionally; ***there is no prerequisite people must meet in order to be recipients of our love.***

- *Luke 6:35 ESV* But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

*"You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." - Anne Lamott*

This is pure, unconditional, sacrificial service, this is agape. Think about it, love your enemies doesn't mean feel erotic about them, it doesn't mean you will have a wonderful warm and happy relationship with them, all these are impossibilities. What it does mean is to make an act of self sacrifice on their behalf. In other words love your enemies the way God loved His enemies. This leads us to our second point. First, *unconditional love is the greatest love* and second...

### *B. Jesus Christ Is The Fullest Expression Of The Greatest Love.*

- *Ephesians 2:3-5 ESV among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (4) But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, (5) even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—*

Essentially what this verse is saying is God loved us while we were His enemies and it is this great agape love that serves as the motive and means for our love.

- *1 Thessalonians 4:9 ESV for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,*

Perhaps the best way to define love is to see what it does. The most famous of all New Testament verses shows us what that love looks like.

- *John 3:16 ESV "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

*Conclusion:* Paul leading into his ever famous chapter on love says in chapter twelve,

- *1 Corinthians 12:31b ESV And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

The Greek word used here for excellent is *hyperbole*, which when literally translated means to throw beyond others. While Christ was on the cross he was showing us the more excellent way! He was going beyond all others! He exceeded all expectations of love and He was teaching us His church to do the same!

What all this tells us is that love is the one thing we can't do without!

### *1. Love Is The Greatest Need Of The Church.*