

Love is Selfless

Loving the Way Jesus Loves

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Bible Text: 1 Corinthians 13:5; Mathew 26:36-42

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It was a moment of brutal and unexpected honesty. A person who shall remain nameless—ok, it was my brother-in-law Jeff—was in a worship service singing as loudly as he could. And yet he began to sense that people around him were looking at him somewhat strangely. Something must be wrong. It wasn't his singing voice which is pleasing and tuneful, but his lyrics. Everyone else we singing the classic hymn by Adelaide Pollard, *Have Thine Own Way, Lord, Have Thine Own Way*. But Jeff was using a different and maybe a more honest pronoun. "Have mine own way, Lord." He was singing with all his might, "Have mine own way."

And with apologies to Walt Whitman, this the song of myself that so many selfish sinners love to sing even if we try usually not to sing it in church.

Honestly, there are times in life when we would rather have things our way than God's Way. I mean, given the choice, wouldn't you prefer to take complete control of your looks, for example, or your grades or your paycheck or whatever situation in life is giving you the most trouble right now.

If our hearts could rewrite the hymnal maybe our song would go something like this.

Have mine own way, Lord,
Have mine own way.
Let me be in charge here,
At least for today.
I really don't need you,
Say what you will.
I have got my own plan, Lord,
You can just chill.

Well, there are many things wrong with this selfish, self centered way that most of us usually live, but the main problem is this. It is all contrary to love, which the Bible says does not insist on its own way.

And, once again, I think, we are confronted with the fact that our own attitudes and actions so often are exactly the opposite of what they ought to be. This is why 1 Corinthians 13 is such a challenge for us and such a conviction. The things that it tells us that love does are all things that it is difficult, if not impossible for us to do. And all of the things it tells us that love does not do are things that it is very easy for us to do. And this must be because we love ourselves the most, more than others, more, even than God.

David Garlands comments on 1 Corinthians 13 is helpful, I think. He observes, as he looks at this list of things that love does and love does not do, that each thing that love does is something in which the self does not dominate. But each thing that love does not do is something in which the self does dominate. And so if we find it hard to do what the love chapter tells us to do and love others, it is a clear sign that our lives must be dominated by selfish affection.

Now there is a sense, of course, in which we are supposed to love ourselves, a limited sense. You will remember that Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves and that assumes some kind of instinctive care for one's self. But Jesus doesn't want us to limit our love to the horizon of our own self interest. Instead he insists that we be intentional about loving others and about resisting any temptation to put ourselves first.

Here is one of the most important ways to love others, by not insisting on having our own way. And, frankly, the Corinthians struggled with that.

This is one of the areas where we see, I think, very clearly, the way in which the Bible speaks to us by speaking to others.

So let's take a careful look at what is said in 1 Corinthians 13:5. You will see it in the bulletin this morning. Love does not insist on its own way. Or, as some translations have it, love is not self seeking. That is another way to translate the verse. Love does not pursue its own ambitions. It does not seek its own advantage at the expense of others. This is what is meant by not seeking our own.

Maybe this is a good place to distinguish among several different kinds of love, all of which we encounter in the vocabulary of the New Testament. We mainly have one word for love in English. It was a little different in Greek.

You had $\epsilon\rho\varsigma$ (eh`-ros). That is the love of desire, not a selfless love, but a desire that longs to have something from another person. That explains why mythology usually depicts $\epsilon\rho\varsigma$ (eh`-ros) or cupid as we sometimes call him as a hunter with a bow and arrows. It wants to track something down and get it.

$\phi\iota\lambda\epsilon\omega$ (fil-eh'-o) or brotherly love is—and we ought to know this in Philadelphia of all cities—is a brotherly affection. It is a family love. It is a love based on some personal connection, the ties that we have to family members, to church members, to citizens of the same city.

But now the specific kind of love that Paul addresses for us in 1 Corinthians 13 is ἀγάπη (ag-ah'-pay), also called in older English, charity. ἀγάπη (ag-ah'-pay) is a uniquely Christ centered kind of love. Its affection is not based on romantic attachment like εἶδος (eh'-ros) or family connection like φιλέω (fil-eh'-o), but it has a purely selfless desire to bless other people. And this as the place, as I say, where the Corinthians were struggling. They had trouble loving one another with this kind of selfless love.

This became evident in their theological disagreements, like their argument over idolatry. It was evident in the way they celebrated the Lord's supper with some people barging ahead rather than waiting for their brothers and sisters. It was happening in their worship services.

Some people kept on talking and talking when it actually was someone else's turn to speak.

And so Paul said to the Corinthians, this is back in chapter 10, "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor."¹

And that vocabulary is the same vocabulary that he uses in 1 Corinthians 13. He has already addressed the issue, but in 1 Corinthians 13 the apostle makes it clear. The issue here is a failure to love. It always matters more than who goes first or who gets the last word or who is right and who is wrong is whether we love others.

By setting this bad example for us, I think, the Corinthians actually give us some very good ways to test our own affections.

When I am in an argument am I willing to let someone else be right? When resources are limited, is it my habit to stand back so that someone else can go first? Am I able to shut up and listen? There is a good testing question for each of us.

And, unfortunately, most of us have as much trouble with these things as the Corinthians did. Selfishness is very deeply ingrained into our culture. In fact, some people would argue that self love is a virtue, that putting your own needs first is actually a sign of mental health. In the words of one influential psychologist, our highest calling in life—are you ready for it—is to take loving care of ourselves. That is the highest thing, the supreme thing.

This love for ourselves is that one life long love affair that most of us have trouble ever leaving behind. You see it in the way people pursue their careers even at the expense of other people. You see it in the way people treat their families, neglecting their children or maybe driving them, abandoning their spouses, putting old people away. See, these are the kinds of things that you do if you love yourself most of all.

I don't think anyone has ever said it any better than the actress Shirley McLain who told

¹ 1 Corinthians 10:24.

the *Washington Post* that the only sustaining love involvement is with yourself. When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you have been, where you are going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your children, your pain, your happiness, when you look at all of that closely, what you really find is that the only person you really go to bed with is your self. The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity.

And she ends by saying, “That is what I have been trying to do all my life.”

Well, the apostle Paul had a different perspective. He was trying to do something else with this life. We see that not just in 1 Corinthians 13, but we see it very clearly in 2 Timothy chapter three where the apostle Paul says that people falling in love with themselves is one of the clear signs of the coming judgment. And so Paul tried to live a different way. He explained to the Corinthians back at the end of chapter 10.

“I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”²

This was the key to Paul’s philosophy of ministry. It was really the secret of his success in evangelism. He was not living for himself, but for others and so rather than promoting his own interest, he was always seeking to advance the gospel. And Paul ended that explanation of what he was trying to do with this life by saying this.

“Be imitators of me, as I am [or to the extent that I am an imitator] of Christ.”³

And that brings us back to the saving work and the perfect example of Jesus whose life is love itself.

We have been seeing that as we have been looking at 1 Corinthians 13. You have this beautiful portrait of love and it comes to living color when you see that portrait in the light of the gospel account of Jesus and his ministry. His love is the most patient, the most kind. It is the least boastful, the least irritable of all possible loves. And it is also the least selfish of all loves and the most insistent on seeking the good of others.

And so as we think of this theme of the selflessness of love, let’s consider the ministry of Jesus Christ. He did not insist on his own way, but went the way that would lead to our salvation. And if you ask me at what point in the ministry of Christ do we see this most clearly it would be very hard to answer. In fact, in Philippians two when the apostle Paul was telling the Philippians not to seek their own interests only, but also to look out for the interests of others, he presented Jesus as the supreme example and illustration of that and he had to trace the whole course of his earthly ministry in order to demonstrate that true. And so Paul talked about the way that Jesus as the Son of God let go of his grasp on all the glories of heaven and the way that he came to earth to become a man on the way that

² 1 Corinthians 10:33.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:1.

the Lord became the servant and the way that he went all the way to death, even to death on a cross to do that.

You look at all of that. All of that demonstrates this principle of not having one's own way, of not living for one's self, but living for others. Jesus did that at every point of his life.

And now having said that, I think there is one particular moment in the biblical gospels when Jesus faced a very deliberate decision as to whether he would go his own way or he would go the Father's way and when he made the choice that only love would make.

And so will you turn with me, please, to Matthew chapter 26. It is on page 832 of the church Bible. And will you stand with me on holy ground and see the choice that Jesus made in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Matthew chapter 26. It was the night before Jesus died, that same night when he shared the last supper with his disciples, that night when he washed the disciples feet, when he prayed that very hopeful prayer for the purity and unity of the church, the night on which very soon he would be betrayed unto death.

But before he went through with suffering and dying on the cross, he had a choice to make. And so Matthew tells us that—this is beginning in verse—that Jesus and his disciples went to a place called Gethsemane, a garden on the Mount of Olives that overlooked the city of Jerusalem.

And when they reached that secret garden, a place that they loved to go, Jesus and his disciples were gathered for prayer and Jesus said to them, this is the end of verse 36:

“Sit here, while I go over there and pray.”⁴

And then he went a little farther. He took Peter and James and John with him. And it was no ordinary prayer meeting. Soon Jesus, this is the end of verse 37, began to be sorrowful and troubled, words that indicate very extreme emotion.

He said to those disciples who were close beside him. “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”⁵

And in those moments of prayer as Jesus was confronted with the terrible suffering that awaited him, we catch, at least, a little glimpse of how much it cost our Lord to save us.

Jesus was facing the prospect of death by crucifixion, by definition an excruciating way to die. And even more, the psychic pain of separation from the Father. Soon he would take upon himself the weight of the guilt of all of our sins. And when he did so, the

⁴ Matthew 26:36.

⁵ Matthew 26:38.

Father would do something that he had never done from all eternity. He would forsake the Son. He would curse the son. He would damn the Son to death.

As the purity Richard Baxter said, “Our Savior’s agony was not merely from the fear of death, but from the deep sense of God’s wrath against sin which he, as our sacrifice, was to bear in greater pain than mere dying.”

So when Jesus said that this soul was sorrowful to the point of death, he was not exaggerating. Indeed, Luke tells us in his account of these same events that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. Here is a man who is sorrowful even to the very point of death.

And while he was under this supreme suffering Jesus did what he had come to the garden to do and prayed.

Going a little farther, verse 39. He fell on his face and prayed saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”⁶

We do not know all of the reasons why Jesus asked his Father for some alternative to the cross, but I think the word “cup” gives us a clue. There were two very different kinds of cups mentioned in the Old Testament. There was a cup of blessing.

Think of Psalm 23. “My cup runneth over.”⁷

Or Psalm 116. We lift up the cup of salvation.

But there was another cup. It was the cup of the wrath of God. It was a cup we were reading about in the responsive reading, Psalm 75 verse eight. It is a cup of wrath poured out in judgment on the nations. Isaiah prophesied about this and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It was the cup that Jesus would drink. It was the bitter brew of the judgment of God.

And it is not surprising therefore that Jesus asked if there might be some alternative, some other cup. He was alone. His disciples could not even stay up with him for a single hour to pray. He was afraid, not sinfully afraid, of course, but naturally afraid to the pains of death and the suffering that would come from bearing the wrath of God against sin, the physical pains of crucifixion would be as bad for him as they would be for anyone. But the spiritual, the psychological terror would be much worse. Soon Jesus would be abandoned by the Father himself who would see our sin upon the cross and turn away.

You see, at that moment, as Jesus was wrestling with all of these things, he could have insisted on his own way. And you might say, at least as far as his human will was concerned, that given the choice, he would have preferred not to bear the weight of our sin, not to suffer the wrath of God, not to be crucified on the cross.

⁶ Mathew 26:39.

⁷ Psalm 23:5.

Nevertheless, the suffering Son surrendered his will to the Father demonstrating for us the submission of love.

And you will notice Jesus did this by praying the same way that he taught us to pray. Did you notice that? Jesus said, “They will be done.” That is the Lord’s prayer and that is the way he prays here, not once or twice, but three times.

Verse 39.

“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”⁸

The wording of verse 42, similar, but not identical.

“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”⁹

And later, verse 44, Matthew tells us that “he went away and prayed for the third time saying the same words again.”¹⁰

You see, the repetition of this petition it makes it clear that Jesus really and truly did not wish to die. As far as his human will was concerned, he would have preferred some other way of salvation, but there was no other way. The only way to atone for sin was through a perfect offering of blood atonement for sin. Only Jesus was perfect and sinless that he could offer that and it had to be a sacrifice in blood. This was the wages of sin that is death.

And so it was that Jesus surrendered to his Father’s will, not insisting on his own way, but resolving this struggle of his human will in favor of the Father’s pleasure. We see that very clearly, I think, in the progression of the prayer. There is not just repetition here, but actually a progression. Look again at verse 39.

“If it be possible...”¹¹

But notice verse 42, the second time:

“If this cannot pass...”¹²

Do you sense the way that Jesus is coming to his point of clarity, the way that even in prayer he is coming to that point of decision? And I believe the “if” in verse 42 is not conditional. You know, sometimes if actually means since.

⁸ Matthew 26:39.

⁹ Matthew 26:42.

¹⁰ Matthew 26:44.

¹¹ Mathew 26:39.

¹² Matthew 26:42.

So if a parent says to a child, “It is time for bed,” and the child says, “if it is time for bed, will you read me a story,” that is not really a conditional if. It really means since. Since it is, unfortunately, time for bed, will you, at least, read me a story. And that is the way if sometimes works in a sentence.

So it was in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said to his Father, in effect, “Since this cup cannot pass unless I drink it..”

You see, since there cannot be atonement for sin, since there cannot be a turning away of the wrath of God unless this cup of wrath is something that I drink, then your will be done.

And Jesus moved from exploring the possibilities in verse 39 to seeing that there was only one thing to be done in verse 42. And as we listen to this, how remarkable it is. Here we are overhearing the prayer of Jesus himself, the night before he did the saving work that he did on the cross and it is our privilege to stand in that garden and to overhear him as he prays and we are not standing here simply as disinterested observers. No, our salvation is hanging in the balance. Jesus never would have made it to Calvary unless first he made it through Gethsemane. And if he never made it to Calvary we would never make it to glory.

See, all of these things are hanging in the balance and that explains why Jesus prayed the way that he did. He was committed to doing whatever it would take to save us. Why? Because he loves us.

You see, that is the conclusion you reach when you look at Matthew 26 and think about what Paul says in Corinthians. What is it that enables us not to insist on our own way? It is love that enables. And so when we see Jesus choosing to do his Father’s will, we know that he must be acting out of love. This is the thing that gives up its own rights, that is willing to set aside its own plans, that is willing to part with its own comforts and desires, that is willing even to offer its very life. And that is love, love like the love of Jesus.

And now Jesus himself empowers us to live with that kind of love, a not insisting on my own way kind of love, a putting other people first kind of love.

John Calvin said, “It is very clear that he lives the best and holiest life who lives and strives for himself as little as he can.”

I wonder. Are you living that best and holiest of lives in which you are striving for your self as little as you possibly can? Sadly, that kind of living is all too rare. Most of us strive for ourselves as much as we can get away, think about ourselves almost every waking moment and seek our own advantage whenever we can get it. And that is as true in the Church as it is anywhere.

You think of Paul’s lament in Philippians chapter two. He was commending the ministry of young pastor Timothy and he had to admit:

For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.¹³

And to show how limited our love is, C S Lewis liked to quote the shortest review that he had ever seen a critic give a work of literature. William Morris, the pre-Raphaelite poet wrote a poem with the grand title *Love is Enough*. And one critic responded in just two words. “It isn’t.”

It isn’t enough.

And the point was that our merely human love is never enough. People fall out of love every day. We find it hard to keep loving people who do not love us back. We get worn out trying to love people with critical needs. And even when we do sincerely try to love others, self love keeps getting in the way.

I was trying to think of an analogy for that. Maybe our self love is like an oversized sofa bed that is too large for a studio apartment. You rearrange the furniture one way and it doesn’t fit. Or you rearrange it another way, it doesn’t fit that way either. Eventually you realize the sofa bed is just too big for that space.

And so it is with our self love. Oh, we try to love people this way and we try to love people that way. We try to put them first, but there is always so much of us that keeps getting in the way.

What we need is more of the love of Jesus. Isn’t it true? We can only give others what we ourselves have received? And so praise God that we are the recipients of an extravagant affection. The Son of God did choose not to do his will, but the Father’s will and he chose that all the way to salvation. And now he enables and empowers us to love others.

Indeed, this is what it means to love.

We have this whole portrait of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Here is what it really boils down to. To love is to be toward others the way that God in Christ has been toward us.

Jesus said this repeatedly in the gospel.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”¹⁴

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”¹⁵

¹³ Philippians 2:20-21.

¹⁴ John 15:12.

¹⁵ John 13:34.

Jesus called this a new commandment. He wasn't trying to say that God had never told his people to love before, but he was saying that here is now a new power and enablement for love, the power that comes from the person of Jesus and from his work.

Jesus has died on the cross to pay the penalty for all of our selfish sins. He has come back from the grave with the power of new spiritual life and by his crucifixion and resurrection the Spirit of Jesus gives us the power to love.

What does that mean in a practical way? Loving the way Jesus loves means being less insistent on having our own way and more consistent in putting other people first. And what countless opportunities we have to do that every day.

Roommates can do it by deciding—an this is such a simple thing—by deciding what to leave in the refrigerator for others or what not to leave out in the kitchen or the living room. It is in the simple things of daily life.

Children can do this. You want to learn how to put others first, let a brother or sister go first. Let your friend choose to decide what to play next rather than having an argument about it. Stop doing whatever you are doing right away and go and do whatever it is that your mom or dad wants you to do instead.

Husbands and wives can show this kind of love, rearranging their schedules to help one another. At the end of a long day at work or perhaps a long day at home, is your first and primary thought what your spouse can do for you? Or is the next thing for you to find out what you can do for your spouse.

We practice the same kind of love in the church or, at least, we ought to. We may well have our own ideas about what ought to happen in ministry, but is there enough love in us to recognize when we need to stop pushing and pushing and let someone else solve a problem their way instead of our way, not insisting on our own way, certainly, has implications for what we do with our money and our property.

And I say that not just because this is stewardship Sunday, but also because one legitimate way to translate 1 Corinthians 13:5 is like this.

“Love does not seek its own things.”

And yet that is exactly what most of us have, so many of our own things, the things that we have been seeking all our lives.

I said it before in the living church. Never before have so many Christians have had so much money and yet given so little. What does that stinginess represent? It represents a failure to love, because the less that we insist on having our own way and the more we keep putting other people first, the more natural it will be to spend less on ourselves and more on the ministry of the kingdom of God, more for the poor, more of the work of the church in the city and around the world.

“It is the spirit of charity,” said Jonathan Edwards, “to forgo and part with our own things for the sake of others.”

Then not insisting on our own way has implications for the way we use our time. That is the most precious resource we have. You look back on your schedule the week before. Look ahead to your schedule the coming week. And ask yourself this question.

How much of my time is dedicated to my goals and ambitions and how much of it have I set aside to do something for someone else simply because I love that person more than I love myself?

Well, as we try to love the way Jesus loves, not insisting on having our own way, it will help us to pray the way that Jesus prayed, not my will be done, but thy will be done.

And this was the kind of prayer that led Adelaide Pollard to write her famous hymn of surrender to God, *Have Thine Own Way*. And Pollard, it was the year was 1902 and Pollard who had a sincere desire to go and serve the Lord in Africa. She was trying to raise financial support so she could do that very thing. But found herself over a period of time unable to raise sufficient funds.

All of her plans for serving the Lord her way were coming to ruin and yet one night she was going to church and attending a prayer meeting and she heard an old woman from the church pray very wisely. The woman said, “It really doesn’t matter what you do with us, Lord. Just have your own way with our lives.”

And that night Pollard went home and wrote the words:

Have thine own way, Lord,
Have thine own way,
Hold over my being absolute sway.
And fill me with your Spirit
Till all shall see,
Christ only always living in me.

And I believe that is the heart’s desire of anyone who wants to love the way that Jesus loves that our lives would be submitted to the sovereignty of God and that his love would fill us so that when people see us what they would see is the love of Jesus shining through.

But that will never happen if we keep insisting on our own way. It will only happen if we surrender to the will of the Father.

And so we do that now, Father, in prayer. We pray that you would give us, as we have often prayed in these recent weeks, more of the love of Jesus. And to do that, Lord, we see we need to have more of the surrender of Jesus to your plan for us. And out of that

humility to put other people first the way that Jesus did when he did the work of our salvation. It is in his name that we pray. Amen.