

The More Excellent Way!

I Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Paul ended chapter 12 with these words:

“And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

“still more excellent”

u`perbolh, - strictly *throwing beyond*;

adverbially **kaqv u`perbolh,n** with a basic meaning *to an extreme degree*, taking its specific sense from the context; *exceedingly, in the extreme, altogether* ([RO 7.13](#)); *far surpassing, very much better* ([1C 12.31](#))

A more excellent way = a better way of living in this world.

[A far exceeding extreme] way of living in this world.

Do you desire to live your life in a far exceeding extreme sort of way?

Pause for a moment and ask yourself, “What changes am I seeking to make in my life?”

Now, as we go through the passage today, ask yourself, “Are the changes that I am seeking in line with the more excellent way that Paul is encouraging?”

What exactly is this far exceeding extreme way of life anyway?

Read I Corinthians 12:31b-13:13.

1. The Far Exceeding extreme way is NOT.

vv. 1-3.

In these first three verses Paul describes a way of life that he expects his readers to identify with. He expects them to resonate in their hearts with his picture of greatness. Only, instead of being in awe of these things, Paul is not impressed in the least. The ability to perform these acts falls way short the far exceeding, extreme way of life.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels,
but
have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

The tongues of men is surely a reference to the spiritual gift of tongues. In this gift, God communicates the truth to an individual. And as this person then speaks that truth to others, he is able to do so in a language that he does not understand. This occurred at Pentecost, when the disciples began speaking the truth of the resurrected Jesus to people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world.

To say the least, this is a pretty awesome gift. One which I would have loved to possess at least once in my life. Robin and I spent a summer in Bolivia before we got married. Most Bolivians do not speak English. But we were told that we would have a translator with us at all times. No problem right? We were divided into a small team of 4 people. One of our 4 was fluent in Spanish. The only problem was that when we were placed in a school to share the gospel, we were immediately divided into 4 groups. There I was. And there Robin was. Each of

us separately talking with about 10 students. Needless to say, I wanted the gift of tongues. And I can tell you that I was NOT given the gift of tongues. So, having the gift of speaking the truth flawlessly in another language sounds awesome. Some in the Corinthian Church possessed this gift. Undoubtedly, they would have felt pretty important.

Knowing exactly what Paul means when he says, “and of angels” is a bit tricky. Most of us have not spoken with an angel, at least not knowingly. And in the Bible, when an angel speaks, it is assumed that he speaks in the language of the person to whom he is speaking. Some think that Paul is speaking of literal tongues of angels. I am not convinced.

I agree with Calvin that Paul is using hyperbolic language. “When he speaks of the tongue of angels, he uses hyperbolic expression to denote what is singular, or distinguished.” Calvin

Together, the tongues of men and angels refers to language that is most exalted. We might say that a person is “golden tongued” or that “he speaks heavenly” or “divinely”. I might paraphrase Paul like this, “If I were able to speak in the most eloquent speech that language has to offer.” “If I spoke so wonderfully that audiences hung on my every word. And it was obvious to everyone that I could speak this way due to the working of the Holy Spirit.”

Would you not think that having this sort of giftedness would be a part of the more excellent way? Answer: Nope!

The way of love far exceeds being heavenly tongued in greatness. And without love, this sort of giftedness is emptied of any true value.

2 And
 if I have prophetic powers,
 and
 understand all mysteries
 and
 all knowledge,
 and
 if I have all faith,
 so as to remove mountains,
 but have not love, I am nothing.

Prophetic powers should most likely be combined with “understanding all mysteries” and “all knowledge”. The prophet received revelation from God. And in receiving this revelation he was able to understand the mysteries of redemption. And to have true knowledge of God and of salvation.

Again, there have been times when I have wanted the power of prophecy. You are talking with that unbeliever you are frustrated because you do not have the right things to say in the moment. You feel your inability to know exactly what that person needs to hear at that moment. Or maybe, you are trying to give someone counsel as to their future. And you are worried that you might give them the exact opposite counsel than they really need. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have some direct word from God to give perfect counsel?

There is no doubt that to have God directly impart knowledge to you would be pretty awesome! To be able to have personal insight into the mysteries of our redemption sounds wonderful.

And then to also have the ability to have such faith that miracles would flow through your hands on a regular basis. Healing and casting out demons and even raising people from the dead. Removing mountains is doing the impossible. And these abilities are not simply expressions of human ability. They are only performed through special endowments of the Holy Spirit.

If one of you possessed these gifts it would be “jaw-dropping” to the rest of us. We would undoubtedly consider the one exercising these gifts to be incredibly important. But Paul minimizes the importance of such amazing works.

I always thought that the more excellent way simply involved having a proper motivation while doing the wonderful acts. But although proper motivation is important, I believe Paul is contrasting the more excellent way with the exercising these gifts.

Next, Paul moves away from what we would call “Spiritual gifts” to what I would call “demonstrations of extreme devotion.”

³ If I give away all I have,
and
if I deliver up my body to be burned,
but
have not love,
I gain nothing.

Jesus once challenged a man to sell everything that he had, and to come and follow him. That man went away saddened because he could not bring himself to value Jesus more than everything that he owned.

But what if that man had on the spot sold all that he owned, and then took the money and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the poor?

We remember the negative example of Ananias and Saphira who held back a portion. But during the early days of the Church some had sold everything. And there have been great saints throughout the history of the Church who truly “left it all” to follow Jesus.

It is right to admire such people. It is difficult to imagine someone doing this and NOT having love in their hearts. Again, I am not certain that it is possible. But, I do believe that even the person who exercises this sort of devotion, and love, does not necessarily possess the “far exceeding extreme love” that Paul is encouraging.”

The last contrast that Paul makes is “to deliver up my body to be burned.” This is a reference to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they were willing to die in the fiery furnace rather than bow to the king. Martyrdom is the supreme sacrifice, or so one would think. But Paul thinks that there is a far exceeding extreme sort of love to which he wants the Corinthians to aspire.

To make the statement that martyrdom, in and of itself, will gain you nothing is quite a statement.

2. The Far Exceeding Extreme Way is.

Now, before I walk through the list describing this far exceeding extreme way of love, I want to make a few comments on the list as a whole.

If I were going to define love, I most likely would begin with the golden rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

I would speak about love being an action, a choice, to do good for another. I would then give examples where others have modeled such acts of love.

But that is NOT what Paul does. Paul's list does not contradict other more positive descriptions of love found in other places in Scripture. But positive acts of doing good to others is not Paul's emphasis here. Instead, he emphasizes a far exceeding extreme way of love.

It is the type of love that Jesus commanded in the Sermon on the Mount: Love your enemies. But who would think that the command to "love your enemies" would be relevant in the Church. The Church is supposed to be a place where everyone is doing good to one another, loving one another. Why would Paul need to apply Jesus' command to the Christians at Corinth?

Because Christians don't always act like Christ. Christians often fail to love other Christians. And it is right to challenge Christians to generally be more loving: meaning do more good things for one another... be considerate of one another...

But Paul does not take this approach. He takes the "love your enemies" approach. Let me try to illustrate this:

You are sitting in Church and you hear the pastor challenge you to share what God has given you with someone else in the Church who has need. You are moved by the message and genuinely desire to be a blessing to someone else. And even though it was a sacrifice, you give a substantial gift to someone else in the body. I think we would all call this an act of love. It is a good gift.

Now, suppose you see the person who received that gift walking down the street with some friends. You walk up to them and say "hi". But instead of greeting you, the person completely ignores you and keeps on walking. How do you respond? How should you respond?

Well, that depends. Are you fine with your initial act of love having been enough? Do you think that your obligation to love has ended?

Or are you wanting to find a more excellent way? A way that is far exceeding extreme?

Paul's list is not a complete list of all the ways that we can love. In many ways it assumes that you have already been wronged in some way.

4 Love is
patient
and
kind;

I really like the NKJ version of this verse. It reads, "Love suffers long and is kind."

Love is not simply kind in a vacuum. It is in the context of suffering long. When you are being wronged against, love continues to be kind. When you experience someone else's lack of love, and it hurts, and it lasts a long time, the far exceeding extreme love continues to be kind.

What if the person who you already don't like all that much happens to be more gifted than you? How does the far exceeding extreme love react?

love does not
envy
or
boast;

God, in his wonderful wisdom, chose to unequally distribute the gifts of the Spirit. More than gaining greater gifts for yourself, God is more interested in whether or not you love.

What is the loving thing to do when you perceive that your gifts are not as great as the person next to you? It is not to look at them with jealousy. But rather to be thankful for the person who has greater gifts than you. When you can genuinely be happy for the person who is more gifted than you, you are beginning to walk the more excellent path.

At the same time, if you perceive that you have been gifted more than the person next to you, do not let it go to your head. Do not consider it a reason for bragging of your own importance. Do not think that the gifts have been given to you because you were actually "greater" than the person not given so many gifts.

How rare is it for someone to be truly gifted but yet is not impressed with themselves. The far exceeding extreme love does not demand that all people have the same gifts. God purposely distributes the gifts unequally so that his people will have an opportunity to NOT envy and NOT boast.

it is not
arrogant
5 or
rude.

Arrogance thinks of oneself better than is merited. Arrogance inflates our own accomplishments, while minimizing the accomplishments of others. Arrogance does not acknowledge privilege. Privilege is not a bad thing. Jesus is not against privilege. But when he gives privilege, he also raises the bar. His words are simple: to whom much is given, much is required.

Greater privilege, greater giftedness, should not result in greater arrogance. It should result in greater service. Jesus had more privilege than anyone, and rightly so. But he did not hold onto his position selfishly. He took the very form of a servant. This is why he is the pioneer of our faith.

An arrogant person inflates his own importance, while deflating the importance of others. And this leads him to be rude.

This is a big one in our society. How often do people think that they have a right to be rude because they are promoting a cause that matters to them or pointing out some sin in others?

To not extend common courtesy to someone, even if they are your arch enemy, is wrong, but it is the norm today. It doesn't matter if it is social media, or protesting in the streets, or tweeting, or a hearing of our attorney general, the norm is the same. Because I disagree with you, I have the right to be rude towards you.

But if you want to walk in the far exceeding extreme path of love, then you will not speak or act in rude ways, even to people that you vehemently disagree with, or who have been rude to you.

It does not
insist on its own way;

The Greek is simply: seeks not its own

Philippians 2:4 ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

But here, Paul simply says, “love seeks not its own.”

We all have experienced “not getting our own way.” It really doesn’t feel good.

The natural reaction to not getting our way is to pout. And then, it is to be more assertive the next time. It is to find ways to make sure that you get your own way in the future.

But the far exceeding extreme way of love will continue to sacrifice one’s own interests for the good of others, even those that they might disagree with, or who have more gifts than them, or who seem to get their way all the time anyway.

Are you starting to get the picture of just how radical is this “most excellent way”?

it is not
irritable
or
resentful;

The word for irritable is in the passive tense. It is to be provoked. What causes us to be provoked or upset? It is when someone does something towards us that is not kind or loving. It is one thing to be generally nice to people. But the far exceeding extreme way of love involves not being sharp and angry in response to the sins and rudeness of others.

Don’t miss just how provocative, in a good way, is Paul’s statement.

It is more important to Paul, and to God, that you are not provoked than it is that you have the gift of prophecy or tongues or even miracles.

Which ability would you rather have? The gift of miracles. Or the grace to not be provoked.

Paul says, there is no contest.

Which is more valuable? The ability to move mountains, or that you are not resentful to your fellow brothers and sisters?

Look at the end of verse 5.

ESV = resentful

Other translations:

reckons evil

- keeps a record of evil
- records evils done
- thinks evil “of someone”

In other words, in life, not in sports of course, the far exceeding extreme way of love does not keep score.

You may be an extremely conscious sort of person. You work very hard to be respectful of others in all your words and actions. And so, you naturally think that you have a right to expect the same from others. You remember each and every one of the wrongs that others have committed against you. You hold onto them. And your general demeanor towards them is to think poorly of them, at least, until they make up for the wrongs that they have done.

The far exceeding extreme way of love purposely forgets the score.

Do we really believe this in our hearts?

Are you keeping score right now against someone? But although this love does not keep score, neither does it love evil.

⁶ it does not
 rejoice at wrongdoing,
 but
 rejoices with the truth.

The far exceeding extreme way of love is never happy when evil is done. There is a true sadness when brothers treat each other sinfully. Can you have a heart that does not keep score and yet is always saddened by sin?

Can you have a heart that always is happy when someone embraces the truth, even if it is someone who has previously wronged you?

Love delights even when enemies embrace the truth.

⁷ Love bears all things,
 believes all things,
 hopes all things,
 endures all things.

We have come to Paul's summary statement. And in this statement, as much as any, you can see Paul's emphasis.

Paul uses what we call a chiasm. The two outer statements are related and the two inner statements. Picture a sideways V.

Bearing and enduring are very similar concepts, as are believing and hoping.

If I were to tell you that Robin and I bear with one another, you would not think it sounded very loving, or romantic for that matter.

But one of the most beautiful ways that we express this far exceeding extreme love for one another is to do just that: bear with one another; endure one another in the countless little ways that we provoke one another.

Paul could have challenged the Corinthians to quit being selfish. But his emphasis is more on the commitment to continue bearing with and enduring the faults of others in the Church. This is so wonderfully pastoral.

Many times, I find that people want the church to fix others in the Church. They will come to me with ways in which the church needs fixing. I may agree with them, but fixing

others is not the solution people need to hear. At least, not at first. We need to learn from Paul.

Every fault, every problem, every disagreement, is an opportunity to extend the far exceeding extreme way of love. What if God simply wants to gain glory for himself by giving you an opportunity to extend this sort of love?

It is this same sort of love that drives us to “believe all things and hope all things.” This means that in the face of the sin of your fellow brother or sister, truly radical love will cause you to continue believing the best of them and hoping for true and genuine change.

Is there a limit to this?

My practical mind would argue yes. A person can only take so much until they break. But Paul is clear, the far exceeding extreme love never breaks.

“Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice shame on me.” is not the attitude Paul is encouraging.

“... the Christian man will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness and easy temper, than to wrong his brother by unfriendly suspicion.” Calvin

3. The far exceeding extreme way of love is never-ending.

⁸ Love never ends.

Literally, love never falls or fails.

Love survives everything else.

Love continues when nothing else does.

Love will outlast whatever it is that threatens it.

No other gift of God has this ability.

The gifts of God are not themselves expressions of the character of God.

Everything that we have been saying about this far exceeding extreme way of love, Jesus demonstrated in his life and death.

There is not one person who has ever been redeemed who has not been the recipient of this sort of love.

Jesus has been long-suffering with you. Jesus has purposely chosen to not crush you in your sin, but to extend great kindness towards you. Jesus did not insist on his own will, but surrendered it to the will of the Father in the garden so you could be redeemed. You have given Jesus cause repeatedly to be provoked. And he has a great memory. But instead he has chosen to forget the score. At the same time, can you ever imagine Jesus being fine with evil in your heart.

Absolutely not! He always delights every time you embrace the truth. His hope for you is not in you. His hope for you is bound up in his undying love for you.

Do you recognize how very much you have been loved with this far exceeding extreme love? Only as you receive and embrace this love will it also be reflected in you how you treat others. Love produces love. Only radical love produces radical love.

So, the point in the Gospel is not for people to go around exercising gifts. The point is for people to exercise the far exceeding extreme love describe here and perfectly shown in Jesus.

We have been taking a bath in the most excellent way.

But in verse 8 we are reminded that Paul was really only going down a rabbit trail.

The exhortation to far exceeding extreme love was given because Christians were more impressed with spiritual gifts than they were with love and unity.

So, as if Paul has not already made his point clear, he compares the gifts to love in one additional way: as to their permanence.

As for prophecies,
 they will pass away;
as for tongues,
 they will cease;
as for knowledge,
 it will pass away.
9 For we know in part
 and
 we propheesy in part,
10 but
 when the perfect comes,
 the partial will pass away.
11 When I was a child,
 I spoke like a child,
 I thought like a child,
 I reasoned like a child.
 When I became a man,
 I gave up childish ways.
12 For now we see in a mirror dimly,
 but then face to face.
 Now I know in part;
 then I shall know fully,
 even as I have been fully known.
13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
 but
 the greatest of these is love.

These verses are really a continuation of Paul's statement "Love never fails. Love never ends." Gifts will end. Love will not. When we are spending eternity in the New Heavens and New Earth, love will have conquered and love will endure.

But what we will not be able to express then, that we can now, is the sort of love that continues in the face of evil. In eternity, people will no longer offend you. They will not be sinning against you. Love will surely continue, but it will look different there.

This is not really Paul's point. Instead, he continues his comparison of love to the gifts. And what is absolutely sure is that the gifts will cease.

When will these gifts cease? Simple: when the perfect comes. (v. 10) But what does Paul mean by this?

Options:

1. When Jesus returns at the end of history. (When the Perfect One comes)

There is good reason to think this may be Paul's intent.

When Jesus returns perfection will come:

- We will see Jesus face to face, and so will be entirely transformed into his image.
- We will also know Jesus perfectly. Although we may be knowing him more and more throughout eternity, none of our knowledge will be mixed with lies. We will know, as we are known.
- Our love for Jesus, and for one another will be entirely perfect.

But there are some difficulties with this option.

When Paul says that faith, hope and love abide, it is difficult to see how faith and hope abide into eternity.

2 Corinthians 5:7 ⁷ for we walk by faith, not by sight.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Both faith and hope abide throughout this life, but it is difficult to see how they continue in eternity, when we are experiencing the fullness of our inheritance. We have what we have hoped for. And we see the One in whom we have believed. Maybe these continue somewhat changed. But it isn't clear how they do.

Also, would Paul make such a big deal about the miraculous gifts ending at the return of Christ? Possibly. But it is also possible that they might end at some time before Jesus' return. His words leave that door open.

2. The perfect is the completion of the NT – and the Bible.

This was the option of most of the Reformers. It is difficult to defend. Most commentators today reject this view.

Why?

Paul could have made his point clear if he wanted. How difficult would it have been for him to say, "At some point in the near future, God will have completed the Bible. And when he does, then these miraculous gifts of revelation will cease." He doesn't.

And he uses language that not only expresses the perfection of the objective Word of God, but also expresses the perfection of knowing that Word in our hearts, and even living it out in our lives.

Paul speaks of knowing “in part” in comparison with knowing “fully”. Few would argue that the Church knows fully. I would not be struggling to grasp Paul’s meaning here if I already knew fully.

I do not think Paul is only referring to the completion of the Bible.

3. I sort of want to accept the best of options 1 and 2.

I do believe that the completion of the Bible is one key step in the fulfillment of Paul’s words. And, even though we have not reached the day when we know as we are fully known, it makes good sense that God would have stopped giving new revelation.

It is the completion of the Bible that makes the ongoing pursuit of the perfect even possible. As long as we are looking for new revelations from God, we will always be thinking that there is some new word that we are lacking.

Instead, in the Bible, the completed Bible, we know that we have all that is necessary for our faith and for true godliness. There is no new word that we need. When Paul reaches the end of his earthly life, it is very helpful to see his letter to his disciple Timothy.

First, he directs Timothy, not to new revelations, but to the Scriptures.

2 Timothy 3:16 - 17 ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God¹ may be competent, equipped for every good work.

There is no mention of the necessity of new prophecies. Instead, there is a focus on the Scriptures. (I realize that the canon was not yet completed.) But the encouragement to find all that you need in the Scriptures is clear.

And Paul immediately flows into the necessity of the ongoing ministry of preaching the Word.

2 Timothy 4:1-5 I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound¹ teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. ⁵ As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

Already, even before the final completion of the canon of Scripture, Paul is making a case for the sufficiency of Scripture for the people of God.

Does Paul give us a clear cut time when the miraculous “word gifts” would cease?

I don’t think so.

But looking back upon the working out of history, I do believe completion of the canon of Scripture is one step in the coming of the perfect.

Sure, the Church continues to know “in part”. And sure, the Church is clearly not perfect. But it is not due to some sort of imperfection in the revelation that God has given to us.

What is lacking is in us.

We don’t need more revelation.

We need more of the revelation in our hearts.

We don’t need the Holy Spirit to speak more truth to be written down in Scripture.

We need the Holy Spirit to take that Word and apply it to our hearts – so that we will live according to the Most Excellent Way.

The perfect is Jesus.

Jesus has already come.

Jesus will one day come.

But Jesus is now coming every time he takes the truth of the Scriptures and makes them real in our own lives.

Your path to the far exceeding extreme form of love is not found through new revelation. It is found in the Holy Spirit taking the completed revelation already given and writing it on your own heart.

Jeremiah 31:33 ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.

1. The far exceeding extreme way is not found in the gaining of more gifts.
2. The far exceeding extreme way is lived in the face of evil.
3. The far exceeding extreme way is laid out for us in the words already given.

Christian imitate your Savior until he comes.