

A More Excellent Way (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, July 2, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Matthew 16:24-26; 1 John 4:18-21; Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:9-21; John 15:4-5; John 14:6; Luke 6:22-26; John 12:32
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:12:28 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Love as God defines it is not a resource sitting inside us waiting to be unblocked. It is his own nature, and we love only as branches attached to a vine. Which means 1 Corinthians 13 is not a standard you pass — it is a description of the one you cling to.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ “Fill your own bucket first” assumes we have raw power to love on hand. Scripture says the opposite: we love because he first loved us.
- ◆ The people in view are not the easy ones. Jesus names enemies and those who persecute you, and notes that loving people who love you back is what everybody already does.
- ◆ Abhorring what is evil is part of the job description of love, not an exception to it.
- ◆ Paul says you can give away everything you own and hand over your body and still not have love. Costly is not the same as loving.
- ◆ Christianity is not moralism. The rally cry of dead religion is *do better*, and that is not where Jesus lands.
- ◆ Telling children both “Christianity is about being loving” and “you are wonderful exactly as you are” hands them a religion they do not need Christ for.

- ◆ The world knows that being called unloving is the accusation that lands hardest on a Christian. What love is gets adjudicated by Christ and the mature brethren, not by whoever is shouting.

► 1:12:28

Hope was working through 1 Corinthians, and this Sunday landed on chapter 13 — the love chapter, the one read at weddings. Matt opened by admitting he finds the subject genuinely hard to preach, for two reasons, and both reasons turned out to be the message.

Two reasons love is a hard subject

► 1:13:10

The first is that looking at love from God's side exposes his own faults to the point where it cuts. There is a generic version — goodwill toward your fellow man, wanting everyone to get along — and that is fine as far as it goes. Then you see what the glory we fall short of actually looks like, and it gets intense.

The second is that the word has been stretched until nobody is sure we are talking about the same thing. Matt was careful here: he was not simply attacking the culture's usage, he was saying he can no longer assume a shared definition when he opens his mouth.

The bucket you cannot fill

► 1:14:18

His test case was the bucket. Love yourself first, fill your own bucket, then love others out of the overflow — with the oxygen mask on the airplane as the stock illustration. Plenty of it makes sense. Do not run yourself ragged. And then there is this:

► 1:15:14

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?”

MATTHEW 16:24-26 ↗

There is real tension between those two pictures of self-preservation. If we hold onto Christ first, there are things we should expect to lose — not only our lives, but social capital, and opportunities we simply will not pursue.

Then the question Matt actually wanted asked: with what raw power are you filling your own bucket? “There’s a hidden assumption that we can just love — like that’s just a thing we can do.” It may even run the other way: filling your own bucket first can leave you hollow, and giving yourself away turns out to be the fulfilling thing.

► 1:17:29

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.”

1 JOHN 4:18-19 ↗

We love others because of Christ’s love for us — not because we have a pure, untapped capacity that needs its obstacles cleared away. And John will not let it stay abstract:
whoever does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.

Which people, exactly

► 1:19:19

Left to himself, Matt said, he would be generous with himself by picturing all the people who are easy to love. Jesus closes that door:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”

MATTHEW 5:43-48 ↗

Tax collectors were traitors, not just people who worked for the revenue service. And we are fluent in finding permission to write someone off. Matt pointed at the pile-on against the men in the submersible: they did something stupid, so hating them is fine; they are rich, so they can be discounted as people. “I’m probably pretty wealthy too by a lot of standards. But they’re way wealthier, so I can discount them.”

► 1:21:36

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... Repay no one evil for evil... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

ROMANS 12:9–21 ↗

Notice what is sitting right next to “let love be genuine.” Nobody blinks when someone at a small group says they want to grow in patience. Say instead that the Lord is teaching you to abhor what is evil and the room goes quiet — but it is the same request. Seeing as God sees is growth in godliness, and his love abhors evil.

The chapter itself

► 1:25:52

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal... if I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–3 ↗

That last line does a lot of work. You can liquidate everything you own and you can die for the faith without love, or Paul could not have set them side by side as separate things.

► 1:26:59

Then the list, which Matt read on himself in public. “Love is patient” — “he could just stop right there and I’m already shredded.” Patient and kind: “I feel like I’m kind, but I know that some people receive my kindness as aggression.” Not envious, not boastful, not arrogant or rude, not insisting on its own way, not irritable or resentful. “Did I get anyone else? Could be just me, and that’s fine if it’s just me.”

By the end of the chapter — faith, hope and love abide, and the greatest is love — the point has landed twice: how central love is, and how far short of it we are.

Christianity is not moralism

► 1:30:29

Here Matt pulled hard on the reins, because a message like this can curdle into *try harder*. “Christianity is centered around Jesus Christ, not the rally cry of dead religion, which is: do better. The finger-wagging ‘do better’ doesn’t come from Christ.” We cannot arrive at the throne of grace and say *I did it*.

He named the version of this we hand our children, and called it a nasty one-two combo. Part one: Christianity is all about being loving. Part two: you are wonderful, everything you do is wonderful, you are perfect just as you are. Put those together and a child can reasonably conclude he has already cleared the bar. “I’m glad y’all are going to church, you need that — but I’m good.” That is moralistic paganism with a church attached.

► 1:32:45

Jesus did not offer to explain the way, describe the truth and map out where life is kept for those who can work it out. He said “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” Not: copy me correctly and I will nod you in.

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches... apart from me you can do nothing.”

JOHN 15:4-5 ↗

He did not say *I am the perfect model, now copy me, you copycat vines*. A severed branch cannot try hard enough to bear fruit.

Read the list again, about him

► 1:34:06

So Matt went back through [1 Corinthians 13:4-7](#) a second time, with God as the subject rather than us. He is patient with you. He is kind to you. He does not boast over you about how much better he is, and he is not arrogant or rude about it. “He is not irritable when you walk in your failures.” He does not rejoice at your wrongdoing. Love bears all things — including you, when you feel like a sack of burdens he would rather set down.

Who gets to say what love is

► 1:39:53

If love is this important, then how it gets defined is not a small matter — and it has to be defined under Christ’s authority, because everyone else is using the word too. “Paul did not write that love affirms no matter what you say or do, or that love always agrees. He didn’t say love always avoids hurting people’s feelings or conflict in general.” The Greek behind *kind* does not mean always saying yes; *patient* does not mean silent. Love does not insist on its own way — but it does insist on Christ’s way, and that is not selfishness. Love can be firm and draw boundaries.

Matt told on his younger self here: high school, everyone knew he was the Christian, he was even talking about becoming a priest, and he carried an enormous burden to be Mr. Nice Personality — “the Church of Jehovah Sweet Pea.” The slogan that props it up is *preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words*. “Well, it is necessary, by the way.” Unbroken smiling does not explain Jesus to anyone; it mostly reads as a cult.

And wanting what is best for someone sits badly beside telling them they are perfect as they are. If they are already perfect, where is the room for the encounter with Christ that wrecked and rescued us? “We liked it when it happened to us. Why rob somebody of that?”

► 1:41:43

The pastoral concern underneath all of this was for the sensitive. The accusation that you are unloving is the one the world knows will land, because it calls into question something core to you. “There’s no need to destroy you if you destroy yourself. There’s no need to sideline you if you’ll do it voluntarily.”

► 1:42:43

He was specific about where this bites. People at work under pressure to put pronouns in a bio or an email signature, who feel they cannot do it. Being asked by a dearly loved one — someone he is still in relationship with — to officiate their gay wedding. “There’s no really sweet way of not agreeing where they won’t be hurt.” Adult faith often means situations with no win, where you will suffer something whichever way you move. The answer is not to find the magic tone. It is to be respectful, honor the person, tell the truth, and accept getting scathed.

Trying to be sweet enough to make everyone happy is what Matt called a Christ complex — doing his job for him. When he is lifted up, he draws people to himself. The world is not on your shoulders.

► 1:45:11

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.”

LUKE 6:22-23 ↗

Matt was honest that he is not there — he still bemoans those moments rather than leaping. He also liked the last clause, because it kills the idea that this is uniquely hard in the current year. They did it to the prophets. And the flip side is a warning:

woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. Universal approval, including a universal verdict that you are loving, is not a goal worth having.

► 1:48:26

That is not a license to become unrebukable. Matt described his own practice: bring mature brothers into a conflict, and afterward be honest with them about how he contributed to the mess, then submit to their feedback. Prioritize the Spirit's verdict and the mature brethren's verdict; de-prioritize whoever is screaming. "You don't ever want to get so hard-skinned that people can't hurt your feelings. That's not a good way to live." The body adjudicates what was and was not loving — by God's standard, not the world's.

A more excellent way

► 1:51:02

Matt closed by asking what, exactly, we are trying to sweeten people into. "There's only one — the risen Lord, the absolute center of our faith. He is the substance of our faith. Not being like him: him himself. And that is a more excellent way."

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- [Matthew 16:24–26](#)
- [1 John 4:18–19](#)
- [1 John 4:20–21](#)
- [Matthew 5:43–48](#)
- [Romans 12:9–21](#)
- [1 Corinthians 13:1–3](#)
- [1 Corinthians 13:4–13](#)
- [John 14:6](#)
- [John 15:4–5](#)
- [John 12:32](#)
- [Luke 6:22–23](#)
- [Luke 6:26](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where have you been running on the bucket theory — trying to fill yourself first so you have something to give — and what has that actually produced?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 twice: once about yourself, once about God. What changed between the two readings?
3. Who are you currently allowed, in your own mind, to write off? What is the excuse you use?
4. Matt said abhorring evil is part of love, not an exception to it. Where do you find that hard to hold together?
5. Think of a situation coming up this week where there is no sweet way to tell the truth. What will respectful honesty look like there, and who will you ask for feedback afterward?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lzQ_dATGdE&t=4348s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.