

# The Most Excellent Way

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024

What is the Most Excellent Way? If I have not love I am nothing. But if I have love and nothing else, I have everything.

Child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce D. Perry has helped children faced with unimaginable horror: genocide survivors, murder witnesses, kidnapped teenagers, and victims of family violence. In the classic *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*, Dr. Perry tells their stories of trauma and transformation and shares their lessons of courage, humanity, and hope.

Dr Perry in his book tells the story of Mama P. He describes her like this quoting from his book:

“Mama P. was a large,...”<sup>1</sup>

1 Cor.12:31b – 13:8

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

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

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.

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

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”

The first thing to know about love is firstly God is love. (1 John 4:8). In Ex.34:6 the Lord meets Moses on Mount Sinai and passes in front of Moses and proclaims:

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, **abounding in love** and faithfulness...”

Our God is a God of love who is abounding in love. What does that abounding love of God look like? Paul gives a description of this love and therefore a description of God in 1 Cor.13 which we will unpack over the next 13 weeks. In this series we aim to answer the question – What is Love and how do I grow in love? The goal is to not only learn more information but transformation, to grow in love.

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<sup>1</sup> — The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook -- What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing by Bruce D Perry, Maia Szalavitz  
<https://amzn.eu/023hj1x>

Mama P for me in the story above models this beautiful love as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. TPT puts verse 7 this way which beautifully describes what Mama P models: "Love is a safe place of shelter, for it never stops believing the best for others. Love never takes failure as defeat, for it never gives up. Love never stops loving."

Dr Perry tells another story about a 4 year old girl Laura who weighed just 26 pounds despite a high calorie diet and a tube inserted through her nose for weeks. She had years of appointments with gastroenterologists, nutritionists and other medical specialists searching for the problem with her body. She had endless lab reports, chromosome tests, hormone levels and biopsies. Eventually Dr Perry as a psychiatrist was reluctantly called in. When he learned about Laura and her mother he suspected the problem was not her gastrointestinal system but a problem with her brain. He discovered Laura's problem was that she had been neglected to be held, rocked, played with and physically nurtured. Her mother loved her but had never learned from her own brutal upbringing how to express love with a baby through physical contact. Love must be communicated and expressed or it has no effect. For Laura, this lack of stimulation was devastating and her body responded with a hormonal dysregulation that hindered normal growth despite receiving adequate nutrition. She was an example of "failure to thrive", a child who has reduced levels of growth hormone and so the body was treating the nutrition as waste and it was the lack of expressed love, the lack of physical stimulation that had programmed her body to do so. Without expressed LOVE CHILDREN LITERALLY DO NOT GROW. Maybe this helps us to understand a spiritual failure to THRIVE today, resulting from disconnected people not receiving and expressing LOVE which stunts growth and health and leads to failure to THRIVE.

Laura was not receiving the physical nurturing her body needed to know that she was "wanted" and that it was safe to grow. Dr Perry had an idea. He had one person in mind who could help Laura and her mother. Mama P. So he asked Mama P if Laura and her mother could come and stay with her to learn how to express LOVE to her child with physical connection and communication. Mama P said YES! Keeping in mind that Laura weighed just 26 pounds and for 4 years had every kind of test possible and 4 years of efforts by medical experts and specialists to try and get her to put on weight. She never gained an ounce. Look at the results of expressed LOVE modelled by Mama P.

"For the first month with Mama P, Laura consumed the exact same number of calories she had in the prior month in the hospital, during which her weight had barely been maintained at twenty-six pounds. In Mama P's nurturing environment, however, Laura gained ten pounds in one month, growing from twenty-six to thirty-six pounds! Her weight increased by 35 percent on the same number of calories that had previously not been enough to prevent weight loss, because she was now receiving the physical nurturing her brain needed to release the appropriate hormones required for growth."

"Virginia and Laura lived with Mama P. for about a year. Afterwards, the two women remained tight friends, and Virginia moved into Mama's neighborhood so that she could remain in close touch. Laura became a bright little girl, similar to her mother in that she tended to be emotionally distant, but with a powerful moral compass; they both had strong positive values. When Virginia had a second child, she knew how to care for him

appropriately, right from the start, and he suffered no growth problems. Virginia went on to college and both of her children are doing well in school. They have friends, an invested church community and, of course, Mama P. just down the street.”<sup>2</sup>— The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook by Bruce D Perry.<sup>3</sup>

1 Cor.14:1 MSG

“Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does.”

For Robert and Laura, their life literally depended on love. But so do you and every other person on the planet. Your life and quality of life and growth depends on LOVE. John Stott asked : “What are we made for? He answers,

*“As fish are made for water, humans are made for love.”*

**Vincent Van Gogh said**

*“I feel that there is nothing more truly artistic than to love people.”*

In order to have healthy growth, humans must swim in an ocean of love. Disconnected from love, they are like a fish out of water and fail to thrive and begin to die slowly.

Pauls says in 1 Cor. 12:31

“And yet I will show you the most excellent way.”

Love, Paul will show in the next famous chapter is the most excellent way. If you want to be the most excellent person here is the way. If you want to be the most excellent at what you do whether that is a teacher, a mother, a father, a husband/wife, an entrepreneur, a politician, a preacher, an evangelist or whatever you do here is the most excellent way. It is the way of love.

A 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic poet wrote:

“Not when I breathe, but when I love, I live.”

**Charles Dickens says**

“A loving heart is the truest wisdom.”

Love has existed for eternity past because our eternal God is love. Love is powerful and has impacted and transformed lives from the Creation of mankind.

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<sup>2</sup> — The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook -- What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing by Bruce D Perry, Maia Szalavitz <https://amzn.eu/9PVnqLa>

<sup>3</sup> The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook -- What Traumatized Children Can Teach Us About Loss, Love, and Healing by Bruce D Perry, Maia Szalavitz <https://amzn.eu/eReZ6X8>

Love is still impacting and transforming lives today. On Songs of Praise last Sunday Kirk Mallaburn tells his story of having an encounter with the God of love which turned his life around from following a life of crime and drugs. Let's watch one minute of his story speaking to the Rev Kate Bottley.

<https://www.facebook.com/bbcsop/videos/1101117664559393/>

"I kept asking myself why someone like that would love on me. Six foot two. Tattoos. And from that moment on I knew Jesus was real." Kirk experienced the love of God through the love of one of his followers and it impacted him greatly. Love impacts and transforms life.

1 Cor.13 has been called the "greatest, strongest, deepest, thing Paul ever wrote." (Adolf von Harnack 1908.) It is poetic in its style and carries the marks of a lyrical composition ... a hymn of love. The language of 1 Cor.13 has found its way into marriage liturgy, sermons, hymns and is one of the most profound descriptions of love ever written.

Jonathan Edwards in 1765 urges,

"Be exhorted, then, as the great thing, to cherish sincere love or Christian charity in the heart. It is that which you must have; and there is nothing that will help your case without it..... Charity or Christian love, which is here spoken of, is the summary of the Christian spirit" (Edwards [1989] p. 184).

Love is the summary of the Christian spirit. Imagine a community of people saturated in God. A community saturated in God would be a community saturated in love because God is love. Imagine the beauty of that community that loved and served each other. What would you have? Duncan Campbell who witnessed revival in the Western Isles of Scotland between 1949 and 1952 described revival simply as 'a community saturated with God.' This has been said to be one of the best definitions of revival. Revival then is a people saturated with love, love for God and love for people.

In His book "The Greatest is Love" W. Graham Scroggie says:

"Love is the Law of Life.

It is the basal principle of spiritual health; the supreme constructive force of life; the maker of character, the revealer of truth, the secret of development, and the pledge of fulfilment."<sup>4</sup>

In the first 3 verses of 1 Cor. 13 Pauls teaches if a person does not have love he has nothing; and that if a person has love, whatever else he may lack, he has what matters most. Love is what matters most.

So ""Go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does." 1 Cor.14:1 MSG

And not only that, Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was he answered in Matt.22:36-40

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<sup>4</sup> "The Greatest is Love" W. Graham Scroggie p18.

Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Love is what matters most. We know that God is love and Jesus came to earth as a man to reveal God to the world and he came as an exact representation of the God of love. In Jesus then we see the purest and finest example of what love looks like. W. Graham Scroggie describes it beautifully in his book “The Greatest is Love” and then says<sup>5</sup>

*“Now the business of our lives is to have these things fitted into our character. That is the supreme work to which we need to address ourselves in this world, to learn to love.*

*But how can we learn so great a lesson?*

*Only by practice.*

*Looking at pictures does not make a man an artist; and listening to music does not make one a musician; the paints must be mixed, and the instruments must be played.*

*In like manner **we can love in no other way than by loving.**”*

In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul will show what are the ingredients of love, he will show the colours which together make the bright warm light of love.

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<sup>5</sup> *“I have said that this portrait of love is not the work of an artist, but of a photographer; it is a portrait of Christ. He is the great example of longsuffering, infinitely patient because eternal. His habit of life is summarised in the testimony that “He went about doing good.” He never desired to possess any good for Himself alone; neither did He ever begrudge others any good which they possessed. He envied not. The greatness of Christ consisted quite as much in what he suppressed as in what He exhibited, as in the veiling of His glory, and in His restraint in working miracles. There was no “showing off.” He displayed no vanity, conceit, pride, or contempt of others. There was perfect seemliness in all He did; a perfect fitness of things. Though the most approachable of men, there was never any lack of dignity or self-possession. He did the right thing always, in the right way, and at the right time. He was the very negation of selfishness. He lived for others. He was never exasperated at wrong done to Himself; and there was much. He was never vindictive. He never retaliated. He had the Divine power of forgetfulness of wrongs done to Himself. He yearned over the erring and sinful, and shielded them from those who would make capital of their sin. He patiently bore the wrong done to Him by honour and love withheld; and at the same time He put His shoulder under the load which others were carrying, and helped them to carry it. He never misjudged, because He judged not by the outward appearance. He saw faith wherever it existed, and believed wherever belief was possible. He never abandoned any soul, but hoped for, and won the prodigal, the harlot, and the thief. He calmly endured all opposition and persecution, and prayed on the Cross for His enemies. Now the business of our lives is to have these things fitted into our character. That is the supreme work to which we need to address ourselves in this world, to learn to love. But how can we learn so great a lesson? Only by practice. Looking at pictures does not make a man an artist; and listening to music does not make one a musician; the paints must be mixed, and the instruments must be played. In like manner **we can love in no other way than by loving.**” W.Graham Scroggie “The Greatest is Love” p50-52*

In these ingredients that we will unpack over the next 13 weeks we will learn what love is and what it looks like. We will see these colours displayed in the life of Jesus and aspects of God's character and nature. We will get a better understanding of the colours and bright warm light of love that we are called to live by.

Paul gives some examples in his first 3 verses. He lists speaking skills, prophetic powers to understand deep mysteries and divine revelations, incredible faith for miracles, spectacular charitable and philanthropic generosity and heroic acts of bodily deprivation, hardship and self-sacrifice. He lists some incredible qualities. Qualities that elsewhere in the New Testament are taught as good and admirable. But Paul is teaching as good as these things are, they have no value before God unless they are motivated and compelled by love. Unless these qualities are saturated in love and their goal is love they have no value.

Motive here is the key. Because people could desire to speak well for their own good or their own benefit. People could desire gifts and miracles and power for the wrong reasons. People can even be sacrificial and not realise it's for their own gain and not for others.

Love must be the core and heart of who we are and all we do. It must take the centre stage in our lives, homes, and church community. Love should be the defining characteristic by which Jesus followers are known:

"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. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34-35

If it does not, we are in danger of being a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. These are noises that disturb rather than please. They are not pleasant noises but annoying noises. Without love, your communication becomes more irritating than pleasing and upbuilding. Without love, Paul says that even faith miracles and prophetic powers to understand deep mysteries and divine revelations, if they are not motivated and rooted in love, I am nothing.

Wow! These are very strong words Paul. Without love I am nothing! And why am I nothing without love?

"Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."

1 John 4:8.

Without Love I am nothing because without love I do not know God because God is love. Not knowing God is another way of saying in a relationship with Him as a child. Without love I have no real knowledge of God, because God is love and therefore Paul describes that as being nothing. Nothing is inauthentic. Without love I am nothing or inauthentic. Not the real deal. Authentic Christianity, authentic disciples of Jesus are known by love, filled with love, and compelled by love. Without love, there is no authentic Christian being. There is no authentic spirituality. Paul is not teaching that the gifts are not important. He believes they are important but only bear true fruit when they are practiced by someone motivated by love and love is the driving force.

Not only am I nothing without love but I gain nothing without love. We gain nothing from self-sacrifice that is not motivated by love. We gain nothing spiritually or eternally in terms of reward because we have not done it in love.

How do we distinguish authentic Christian love from other types of love? Paul goes on to answer this question in the poem of love which follows which we will attempt to unpack in the next 13 weeks. The teaching of Paul will show the qualities that Christian love repeatedly practices. He will show the habitual practices or virtues that will be evident in the authentic Christian life. As this love grows in each member, family and church community we will see transformation into a culture of love that affects our attitudes and behaviour.

How do we grow in love? Jerry Bridges in his book “The Discipline of Grace” says:

“But spiritual transformation is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Master Sculptor... The Holy Spirit’s work in transforming us more and more into the likeness of Christ is called sanctification. Our involvement and cooperation with Him in His work is what I call the pursuit of holiness...The pursuit of holiness requires sustained and vigorous effort...At the same time however the pursuit of holiness must be anchored in the grace of God.”<sup>6</sup>

So how do we grow in love? We need transformation from the inside out by the Holy Spirit to transform us to be more and more like Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit in order to bear the fruit of the Spirit in us but we must also make every effort. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit through our choices and decisions and priorities. This is the working together of grace and personal vigorous effort to love.

It is understanding love must not be based on our feelings or emotions but a choice and decision to obey the command to love God with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength and this means choosing to love whether I feel like it or not. The way we walk in love is through dying to self daily. We are even instructed to love our enemies so obviously that does not depend on feelings of love or admiration.

Love cannot be worked up on its own but is the fruit of the Spirit of God entering our very souls and transforming them from the inside out so that love is in the control centre of our beings. 1 John 4:7 “...whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”

Love finds its joy in giving not in getting.

“Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier.”  
**Mother Teresa**

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<sup>6</sup> “The Discipline of Grace” Jerry Bridges p 11-12

