

A More Excellent Way

15 June 2025

Leaders' Guide

Leaders' note: There are 6 questions here, probably too many for a single discussion. It will be worth your while in preparation to read through the questions and, based on your knowledge of your group, pick a few upon which to focus.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13

1. Where does this beautiful hymn on Divine Love (agape) fit in Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians? Why is that important?

Chapters 12 to 14 are Paul's guidance to the Corinthian Christians around the appropriate and effective use of the Spiritual Gifts. The more excellent way of love is in the middle of that teaching because without love the gifts will be misused (as was happening in Corinth) and very much diminished in their effectiveness and, conversely, this kind of love is not possible without the aid of the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

2. In vss 4-7 Paul provides a description of love. Has anyone ever felt this way about anyone? This highlights a difference between how we tend to think about love in our world and how people in Biblical times saw love. What is that difference and why is it important?

I am assuming that nobody has felt this kind of love. In the contemporary western world love is understood to be a feeling. The roots of that understanding can be traced back quite a long way, and you can see variations of it in chivalric understandings of love in the middle ages and much more directly in the Romantic period of the 19th century. In the Bible, however, love, especially God's love is understood as a choice, or more precisely a series of many choices. These choices certainly are not foreign to our feelings and they have a significant impact on our feelings but it is more choice than feeling and the choice influences our feelings rather than our feelings directing our choices. This matters because if we wait to feel all of the descriptions of love in our verses here, it will never happen. We have to learn how to make the loving choices for this love to become a part of who we are and how we relate to our God and each other.

3. If we are willing to concede that agape love is a choice that impacts our feelings rather than a feeling that determines our choices, when is the time to make the loving choice?

Perhaps the most important time to make the loving choice is precisely when we are tempted to the opposite. This can be opened up to free discussion. I would be curious to know your group's thoughts.

4. In the sermon some time was given to conversation about the kinds of things that contribute to the temptation not to make the loving choice. Discuss at least some of these in turn: *Impatience, unkindness, envy, boasting & arrogance, rudeness,*

resentfulness. There will always be more than one factor & they will be both external and internal. Why does it matter to understand this better?

There is no “right” answer to this question and it is worth the time to learn to look at things like this. One of the reasons this is important is that our feelings - particularly our negative feelings - often will present as inevitable. If we take that at face value we end up becoming subject to our feelings and they have a much greater authority on our lives (and the lives of those around us) than they should. When we learn to discern some of the factors that contribute to our unloving temptations we can become better equipped to deal with them and be able to make the loving choice with greater clarity.

- 5. Choosing to love this way over and over, often in the face of episodic or even habitual unloving behaviour and words, is an impossible task. That is why this discussion on love is in the midst of a discussion on the Holy Spirit and why after Jesus instituted the new law of love he followed up by promising to send the “helper” (John 14:15-17). How does the Spirit help us to love as we are called to love?**

“The Spirit is there to heal our hurts when we become aware of them, to lead us to repentance where we must do so, to empower us to forgive those who have caused us pain, to lay down our self-centeredness on the altar of the glorious liberty of the Gospel, and so on.” The “and so on” indicates that there are no doubt many other ways the Spirit can and will help us to love aright. If you have time and inclination feel free to explore this further.

- 6. It was pointed out in the sermon that this description of love bears significant similarities to the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. What conclusion did James draw from that similarity?**

“That suggests to me that as we commit to making the loving choice over and over again, not only will the Spirit empower us to choose, but will treat those choices like seeds out of which the Spirit’s mature fruit will grow. And when the fruit does mature and ripen, it will have become our character.”