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A More Excellent Way

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I Corinthians 13

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 my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. 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. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

“**F**aith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” And with those beautiful words, Paul tells you there is a more excellent way of living.

Don't you want that for yourself? Don't you want to live more excellently? Paul says you can. Paul says it's within your power to live an excellent life. Paul says it's right there within your grasp.

That means you can make this brand, new year of 2005 the most excellent year of your life.

It means you don't have to keep doing things the way you've always done them; there is a more excellent way.

It means you don't have to be tied to yesterday's habits, yesterday's mistakes, yesterday's sins; there is a more excellent way.

It means you don't have to stay stuck in the same old rut, playing over again all the same losing games, running around in the same old circles; there is a more excellent way.

Paul says the more excellent way begins with **faith**.

Now faith means a whole lot of different things to different people. So, Paul wants to make it perfectly clear what faith means to him: faith, Paul says, means making a commitment to Jesus Christ.

According to Paul, the only kind of faith that works is faith in Jesus Christ as your personal lord and savior.

Paul knew it was true back in his day, and it's still true today: there are a whole lot of other things you can choose to believe in -

- there are all sorts of religions out there,
- there are all kinds of lesser gods you can choose to worship,
- there are any number or self-help gurus waiting to take your

dollar and tell you how to live -

but according to Paul,

- there is only one way that really works,
- there is only one true faith,
- there is only one certain path.

And that one way, Paul says, is a commitment to Jesus Christ. It is the more excellent way, Paul says.

If you are going to follow the more excellent way,

- it's not good enough to say that Jesus was a good man, because everybody agrees that Jesus was a good man;
- it's not good enough to say that Jesus was a man of high ideals, because you know his ideals and expectations are way beyond any other man's,
- it's not good enough to say that Jesus was a great moral teacher, because the whole world has to agree that he held every person to the highest moral standards.

The more excellent way that Paul is talking about requires a personal faith that Jesus Christ is the son of God, your Lord and savior.

It is a faith that says no matter what happens to you, no matter the ups or downs, the disappointments or successes, the loves or the losses:

- if you have Jesus in your heart and in your soul;
- if Jesus is guiding your steps and prompting your words;
- if Jesus is using your hands to do his work -

then,

- no matter what happens,
 you know that something good is going to come your way,
- no matter what today looks like,
 you know that in the end, right will win,
- no matter if you fail,
 you know that ultimately, God will triumph.

Paul doesn't want you to think it's easy. Paul wants you to know this kind of faith takes hard work. This excellent faith isn't going to come by magic. It's something you discover on those dark and fear-filled nights.

It's something you learn when you open your Bible for study, and as you turn the pages looking for inspiration, you also open-up your mind for insight. It's something that grows in you when you allow your friends and loved ones to lend a helping hand, to give you encouragement, to shower you with forgiveness and acceptance.

It's something that grows as you experience sorrows and joys, triumphs and failures.

This more excellent kind of faith isn't just going to appear in your life over night, it's something that grows in your heart day-by-day, maturing over time, growing deeper as you conquer each day's troubles, and is proven through your actions.

Faith is more than just going through the motions, or following some age-old rituals, or performing some rites of passage. Faith is more than pious words and superficial actions.

Paul wants you to have a more excellent faith in Jesus Christ. He says it will be a faith that will get you through even your darkest moments,

- a faith that will foster trust in tomorrow even on the days when you're filled with despair,

- a faith that reaches down to lift you up when you have fallen down,
- a faith that breaks all the bonds that hold you and sets you free even when you are captive to some secret sin;
- it is a faith so energized that it will keep you going when you're exhausted and ready to give up.

Paul says the more excellent way requires **faith** in Jesus Christ. Paul says it also requires **hope**.

Some of you may remember years ago when Apollo 13 was on its way to the moon. You may not remember it, but you probably saw the movie. This group of astronauts were going to be the third group to walk on the moon. But some 150,000 miles away from the earth, there was an explosion on the spacecraft. Something went terribly wrong. The ship was damaged. Much of the oxygen supply was lost.

What they needed to do immediately was to turn that ship around and come back to earth. But, they couldn't make a U-turn in space. They couldn't turn around. They had to keep on going to the moon. They had to get in an orbit around the moon, swing around the dark side of the moon, and then, finally, head back home to the earth.

Nobody thought they had enough oxygen left on the ship to make the trip. And one of the astronauts asked this question: "Is there any hope?"

When your supply is about to run out, isn't that the question you ask? When you're facing face life's most difficult moments, isn't that the question you want answered? Is there any hope at all?

In your situation, in your particular problem, in your darkest denials - is there any hope for you? Paul says the more excellent way always has **hope**.

What is hope?

Back in 1963 my family took a vacation to Toronto. We drove all the way from southern Ohio, all the way to Niagara Falls, all the way across the cataract to a foreign country! It was my first trip outside of the USA. When we got to Toronto, one of the things we did was to go see the musical "South Pacific." The most memorable part of that play for me, as a ninth grade boy, was watching Betsy Palmer wash her hair on stage. Back then Betsy Palmer was a big star. I had seen her on television game shows all the time. And there she was, right in front of me, just a few rows down,

washing her hair and singing, *“I’m stuck like a dope with a thing called hope...”*

And I wondered, was Betsy right? Is that what hope does to you? Does it make you into a dope? Is hope just a sentiment for lonely lovers?

I always had trouble with that thing called hope. My mother always taught me, “be careful what you hope for.” My mother always said, “don’t get your hopes up.” I never wanted to hope for something only to get my hopes dashed.

A little boy was looking through the window of a pet shop, pining away for a puppy. “I’ll get you a puppy for your birthday,” his dad said, “which one do you want?”

The little boy looked over all the puppies and pointed one out. The one he pointed out was wagging its tail furiously. The little boy said, “Daddy, I want the one with the happy ending?”

Is that what hope is? It is a happy ending?

Paul wants you to know what real hope is.

It isn’t a clean start for soapy, wet dopes.

It isn’t a fresh start for star-crossed lovers.

It isn’t a guarantee of a wagging, happy ending.

Don’t restrict your hope to mundane things like that. Paul wants you to know what real hope is. He would want you to take a look at his own personal life as an example.

Paul had hope, even when the soldiers and preachers persecuted him.

He had hope for a peaceful tomorrow, even though his days were filled with pain from that thorn in his flesh that made him sick all the time.

He had hope on the day the sea swallowed his ship and all the world had given him up as drowned.

He had hope when he was arrested and beaten and imprisoned.

He had hope when he was called a liar and a thief and a charlatan.

When the world looked at Paul, it looked like Paul had a pretty rotten life. He didn’t know too many happy endings - but he always had hope.

He was able to keep on hoping, because he knew the secret. His hope wasn’t centered on what he was going to gain in this world. His hope didn’t depend on being popular or prosperous. His hope didn’t demand an easy road or a comfortable existence. His hope didn’t even count on winning the race. His hope was that Jesus Christ would take care of him.

For Paul, that was the secret to a good life. But it's a secret he wants to share with you. If your hope is centered on Jesus Christ, Paul says, then you have discovered a more excellent way of living.

If you want that more excellent way, you will have **faith**. You will live in **hope**. And, you will need **love**.

Jack Benny was married to Mary Livingston for forty-eight years. He made arrangements before his death that after he died, a red rose was to be delivered to Mary Livingston every day for the rest of her life.

Joe Dimaggio kept on sending roses to Marilyn Monroe's grave until he died.

The next holiday coming up is Valentine's Day. Hearts and cupids and boxes of chocolates are appearing in all the stores already. When next month comes, you'll be sending out your Valentine greetings, your flowers and candy, your cards and your kisses. You'll do all that in the name of love. You might even think that it proves you know what love is all about. Oh, this world would be a sadder place in which to live if it didn't include romantic love.

But that's not the kind of love Paul is talking about. He's talking about a different kind of love. He wants you to know the kind of love Jesus Christ had for you.

Jesus Christ has the kind of love that is strong enough that he climbed up on that cross to die for you. His love for you is so unwavering that he's willing to forgive all your sins. He loves you enough to keep on giving you another chance to change your life. He loves you enough to accept you the way you are. He loves you enough to wipe away your sins and give you the promise of life everlasting. He loves you enough to call you his sister or brother.

It's an excellent kind of love. You can love like that. You can be understanding. You can be thoughtful. You can be accepting. You can be forgiving. You can be considerate. You can be selfless. You can be kind.

Paul says that's the way you have to be.

Before you say or do anything, stop and ask yourself, "Is this a loving word for me to speak? Is this the loving thing for me to do?" If you do that, it will be excellent.

Paul says there is a more excellent way of living. It calls you to have a **faith** that is alive, and a **hope** that is vital, and a **love** that is willing to forgive and make new.

Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.