

A BETTER WAY IN A BITTER WORLD
Ecclesiastes 9:17-18; 1 Corinthians 12:31b - 13:13

(Read 1 Corinthians 12:31b - 13:13)

Intro: It seems like society is getting angrier and angrier. Road rage has been a problem for decades as people resort to violence to express their frustration rather than realizing that there are far more worthy hills to die on than that which parking place they want. People are just mad!

Politics is another obvious target for this. After our last very rancorous presidential campaign and election in 2016, which, as it is every time, right before the holidays, there were numerous news reports about how families were either not having holiday dinners together, or at least laying out ground rules about staying away from the subject of whose candidate had won and whose had lost. Families were often bitterly split over politics. It was, and continues to be, a travesty.

We are living in a society, at least here in America, where it is increasingly difficult to be able to agree to disagree and still love each other. We are growing deeper and deeper into a culture of incivility.

In World War Two the Battle of the Coral Sea between the Japanese and U.S. navies was a turning point of the war. It was also the first time that there was a large scale battle (it was a 4 day engagement) where naval vessels never actually sighted each other or fired upon each other. It was fought from a distance by the planes from each navy's aircraft carriers. Much blood was shed and many lives, planes, and ships lost in a horrific battle that was fought from a distance. Incivility is a problem from a distance too, thanks to technology.

I know I always refer to the social media, but it is unavoidable and it is a key reason for the spread of vitriol and anger. There is a simple reason for it. You see, it's easy to lob mortar rounds of hatefulness from the safety of one's remote electronic devise. Brad Paisley sings a hilarious song about an overweight guy who is 5'3" and lives with his parents and drives a Hyundai and works at the Pizza Pit. In the video, he even wears socks with his sandals as he goes on a pizza delivery. But the chorus repeats over and over, that he is **much cooler online**. Online he's 6'5" and drives a Maserati and has six pack abs and many other wildly imaginative visions of what this computer geek thinks is cool. It's just easy to be cool and handsome and hot online. It's also really easy to mean online. I've covered it before, but I'm amazed by the fights I've seen between former friends as they debate everything from child rearing to politics to fashion sense.

The conventional wisdom is that it will get better when we have a new president or a new party in power, or if people just get enlightened. I disagree, and it's not because I'm a nithering nabob of negativity – it's because humanity will not make this issue better. Incivility is not something that is easily overcome. There is too much hurt inflicted by angry and thoughtless words and actions to be healed by simple human changes.

What will make an impact on this bitter world is the better way we read about from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. Love is the answer. But it's not the kind of love the world thinks of – it's the love Jesus affirmed in the Great Commandment when he said *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.* Matthew 22:37-39. He went on to say, *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* Matthew 22:40. That imperative is just as important today as people verbally shred one another on a regular basis. What grieves me is that far too often it's been people who call themselves followers of Jesus who can be just as uncivil as any other. This must not be. We need to reverse the trend. We need to be pictures of the love and patience of Jesus as we seek to restore a hateful world.

Let's look at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13, especially in verses 4-8. These might be familiar words but, it's obvious we need a refresher, so that . . .

We can show the world a better way

- As I have pointed out many times in this series and more, Paul is talking about the love of God that he expects us to have as well. It is agape love, the love of the undeserving. We'll look at it step by step.
- Love is patient. Petersen says Love never gives up. When we are tempted to roll our eyes and throw up our hands in frustration at humanity's penchant for angry rhetoric, we need to be patient instead. We live in an instant society where people want immediate results. The patient love Paul describes bites it's tongue rather than responding to unreasonable words and it doesn't "horn swear" at the person in front of you who deigns to take one second too many to pull out when the light changes at the intersection.

- Love is kind. The opposite of this is meanness. Kindness is always better. Meanness gets no one nowhere fast. Kindness turns away anger, meanness stokes it up. The way of Jesus is kindness.
- Love does not envy. Petersen says “Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have.” To always covet what others possess is an infinitely frustrating way to live and when one persists in envy, happiness will be illusive in the very least. The truth is, love rejoices in the progress and victories of others.
- Love does not boast. Peterson says Love doesn’t strut. Indeed, what is attractive about a braggart? Nothing at all. In fact, my observation of boastful people is that they are terribly lonely yet they drive people away in their quest to impress them. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1 and again in 2 Corinthians 10 "*Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.*", and he is quoting the Prophet Jeremiah. What is boasting in the Lord? Well, that would be exalting God. That’s good.
- Love is not proud. The previous one plays right into this. Peterson says Love doesn’t have a swelled head. It’s not puffed up. The better way is to never think you are better than you are. This isn’t to hang your head, it’s only to realize who you are. What is that? A loved and coveted child of the living God for whom Jesus died. Let’s not strut.
- Love does not dishonor others. I think this is one of the key aspects of agape love that Christ Followers must always remember. Name calling or belittling a person’s appearance or size is soooooo Junior High. Yet it seems that much of public discourse has reverted to that and its embarrassing and so wrong.
- Love isn’t self-seeking. This has been the American way for far too long. It must never be the Christian way. The way of Jesus is to put others first.
- Love is not easily angered. I’m going to say something about the epidemic of anger in a little bit, but let me just say here, love keeps its temper in check. Paul tells the Ephesians, *In your anger do not sin.* Ephesians 4:26. Notice he doesn’t say, don’t get angry, he says, control it.
- Love doesn’t keep a record of wrongs. It doesn’t keep score. It never says “Yeah? Well how about when you did this, or did that?!” I mean, after all, if God did that for us, we would be finished – ETERNALLY! When we are tempted to do this, we Christ Followers need to slip into Disney movie mode and “Let it go!”.
- Love doesn’t delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. In the same way we are not to envy, and, in fact, even rejoice in what others have, we rejoice in truth. And we certainly NEVER rejoice in any kind of evil. Even that evil perpetrated on those who might be considered enemies. Jesus even told us to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). The way of love is a way of truth.
- Love always protects. Love will defend a person’s reputation. Love will stop gossip in its tracks. Love will defend the abused. Love will be courageous in standing for truth. Love will take a bullet. Love protects.
- Love trusts. I think this is one of the worst characteristics of our uncivil society. Our lack of trust. I know we will get burned too often by trusting, but the benefits far outweigh the risks. Christ Followers at the very least must trust one another. This is huge for working toward holiness together. Let’s trust.
- Love hopes. Christ Followers, of all people, should be hopeful. If a Christian is acting or complaining that all is lost, and the Church is dying you can certainly find their salvation is questionable. Jesus said the gates of hell would not prevail against his Church (Matthew 16:18) and that is a promise we can take to the bank. It also allows us to be, of all people, hopeful. And that is why . . .
- Love always perseveres. Peterson says it keeps going to the end. When you have the hope we have in the powerful God we serve, we have the strength to hang on indefinitely. It’s not our strength we have, but the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in us. And that is why . . .
- Love never fails. It just doesn’t. It’s failsafe. God’s love is eternal and he expects his kids to persist in loving without conditions or limitations. Is it easy? NOPE! But you can do it.
- Love is a better way in a bitter world. Paul takes his love treatise to the end by proclaiming truthfully that of all things, love is the greatest thing. Let’s persist in Love.
- Finally a word about anger. John writes . . .

Perfect love casts out fear

- Specifically he said *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* 1 John 4:18. A bit ago we saw that love is not

easily angered. Anger is a huge issue in this society. It accounts for many crimes of passion whether it be road rage or gun violence. The issue is not the weapon, the issue is lack of control.

- In our Conquer Series video one of the counselors pointed out that the true issue with men who struggle with anger, is the issue of fear. Men lash out in anger because of fear. It has completely changed my perspective on anger. I am able to have much more compassion for a person who has anger issues when I realize that their struggle is with some deep-seated fear that causes them to respond with violent words or actions. Responding with love rather than corresponding anger is a far better way to deescalate a situation. Love conquers fear. Is it easy? NOPE! But love conquers fear.

Conclusion: Only love will bring us together. Only love will unite humanity. There is a lot of bitterness in this world. Love is the answer. Not the love the world thinks of, but the love of God. Love is the only remedy for the incivility of society. It's a better way in a bitter world. Amen.