



The Way Most Excellent

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1st Corinthians 12:27-13:8

There are many competing agendas around and among us. We all have our pet issues, pet peeves, pet ideas, and favored routines. We have different ideas of entertainment, enjoyment, relaxation, and fun. We have competing priorities. We have different strengths, and different weaknesses. Our desires, our likes, our dislikes, our tastes vary from person to person. When we focus on how different each one of us is, it may be very hard to consider that we can or even should attempt to become one body, united in Christ Jesus. After all, if God made us all so distinctively, why should we consider even the possibility of joining together in one united body?

At the beginning on this passage, Paul points to a strange-seeming hierarchy. If we look at our churches, very few of us qualify for entry onto the list he mentions. Within that hierarchy, Paul then places emphasis on portions of the list that seem altogether contrary to the way we would order them. You might have noticed that altogether missing from his list are pastors, deacons, and musicians. The closest we have to apostles are missionaries. The closest to prophets are preachers. All too often we lock our teachers away in seminaries and fill Bible study classes with whomever we can talk into taking the responsibility. In churches with a prevalence of ecstatic gifts, tongues are at the top of the list; where they are not prevalent, we place administrators at the top. We give priority to the way our larger society assigns value to others. We value the showy gifts and reward what the world rewards.

Paul says our priorities and concept of importance are all messed up. We should be looking to those who advance the reign and message of Christ as the preeminent among us, but we value instead those who make us feel comfortable, secure, safe, content, and entertained. Our society prizes and rewards the entertainers, as do we. Our society prizes and values those who lead and maintain its structures, as do we. Our society pays only lip service to honor those who educate and challenge us, and the church places little real value on education in matters of eternal significance.

We could stop there with Paul's critique of our value system in the church at large and have much to say to ourselves. We could rehash all the ways our priorities are not aligned with the priorities of God. Even Paul, however, said that such would simply be a distraction from the deeper issue. Sure, we could all do better in aligning our priorities closer to those of Christ Jesus. We would still be arguing over which one of us or which group among us is of greater importance. In so doing, we would fail to reach the true priorities of the gospel message.

Pitting ourselves against each other just misses the point. There is another way. It has nothing to do with my priorities, my desires, my ideas, preferences, or personal issues. It has to do with love.

As long as we seek to determine differing levels of value and importance among ourselves, we miss the focus of the gospel. It is the way of the world around us. It is not the way of God. If God were to measure us according to our worth, none of us would stand. We measure ourselves against one another, only in the way of a herd or pack of animals, struggling for supremacy or a secure social station. God measures us in a wholly different way. He measures us within the scope of his love.

Love is not about measuring the quality of our actions. Love is not about pitting one against another. Love is not about making comparisons among people. Love is not about determining one's relative worth within a group or between different groups. Love is never about us versus them.

Comparing people, dividing them in groups, classifying and categorizing them most often is actually some form of violence. To some degree, it is setting others aside as being somehow of less worth than ourselves. Rather than being individuals, they become categories. Rather than being loved for who they are, we relegate them to some category of otherness. Once classified, we need no longer deal with them. We need no longer attend to their individual contributions, assess their worth, or determine how we might need to interact and respect them on an equal footing with ourselves. We can ignore them. We can set them aside. We can get back to the business of living without bothering any longer with their needs.

Love is altogether different. It demands that we give others the focus of our attention. It takes self out of the way. According to love, others are never disqualified for lack of worth or belonging to the wrong category or class. There are no Dalits or Untouchables in love. There are no Brahmins, either. All have equal worth.

We went to see the movie “Not Today”¹ this week. It just opened in Charlotte, the eighth city in the US for human trafficking. “Not Today” is a powerful documentary about a young man’s journey of discovery as he finds himself working to rescue a girl unknowingly sold by her father into slavery. Annika is sold because the father believes it is the only way to feed her, swallowing the lie that she will be cared for and educated. She is purchased because she is considered a non-person, a piece of property, a tool to be used, something less than fully human, a Dalit, an Untouchable in India.

Those who traffick in Annika and others like her justify their actions by downplaying or ignoring the worth and personhood of their victims. They may abuse them as slaves in factories, houses, brick kilns, brothels, or farms. They are considered property, purchased or taken from the dregs of society into a life of abuse, condemned to be used by others who place personal profit ahead of humanity.

They are not loved. They are used. They are not seen as people, they are seen as being of lesser importance. They are enslaved; harnessed for profit; forced to fulfill the desires of others with no thought to their own needs; dehumanized; devalued; and demeaned.

Love is a wholly different way of looking at others. Paul is not concerned with some emotional attraction to another person. That is some form of infatuation or lust. The love of which Paul writes is a category of caring for the other person as being of worth, the same worth as the lover. It is a category of attitude and action that demeans no one, but recognizes the value God gives to each and all.

In this love, there are no categories of otherness. There are no classes of people, castes of Dalit, or Untouchables from India. There are no definitions for people who are unfit to be called human or unworthy of our attention and care. Each and every one is deemed worthy. There are no higher castes of people with greater value than any other, for God’s love in Christ Jesus is poured out for one and all with no kind of distinction to be made. Male, female, Greek, Jew, slave, free, wealthy, poor, dark, or light, each one is fully loved and offered the fullness of God’s grace without measure.

There are no Dalits in the gospel. Love demands that all be considered of equal worth. Does my life give evidence that I make no distinctions regarding the worth of others? That is the gospel’s way most excellent. It calls me to lay all sense of comparison aside, treating others the way God treats each one of us, worthy simply because of love. All are equally worthy of love. It’s time to live that way.

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¹ <http://www.nottodaythemovie.com/themovie>.