

Greater Than Everything
The Most Excellent Way
October 24, 2021

Good morning everyone!

I'm so glad you are here today as we begin this brand-new series *Greater Than Everything*.

And I'm going to kick this whole thing off by asking you a question.

You don't need to answer out loud, but I want you to think about it silently.

The question is ...

What one thing – if you could actually do it

...

... and not only *do* it ... but *keep* doing it over and over ...

... and not only *keep* doing it over and over ...

... but increasingly *do more and more* of it ...

What one thing – if you could actually do it ...

... would for sure change almost everything about your life in a positive way?

What one thing if you could do it ... and keep doing it ... and do more and more of it would

...

- Change your marriage
- Change your friendships
- Change your family
- Change your work environment

... for the better?

What one thing (the same "one thing") would also change ...

- Your outlook on life – the way you perceive your situation
- Your attitude – the way you react to your situation
- And maybe even change your physical health

... for the better?

Whatever *that* is – that "one thing" – whatever it is ...

I think you would have to say that it – that "one thing" – is greater than everything else.

And I think you would also have to say that “one thing” is worth pursuing above all else.

And that no matter what else you *had* to do or *chose* to do in life, that “one thing” would have to be at the center of it all and your highest priority.

What one thing – if you could actually do it – would change almost everything about your life in a positive way?

Now I’m sure you realize that there are an abundance of voices out there that will try to answer that question for you.

- “If you’ll just eat better and exercise more” ...
- “If you’ll just get your finances under control” ...

- “If you’ll just invest in our can’t-miss money-making system” ...
- “If you’ll just make peace with your past” ...
- “If you’ll just stand up for your rights and demand what’s rightfully yours” ...

“... *our* one thing (which should become *your* ‘one thing’) would for sure change almost everything about your life in a positive way. So, you should pursue it above all else.”

And many people do.

Now, if you’re not a Christian – and I know that we have more than a few who join us in person and online who are not yet followers of Jesus, and I’m glad you feel welcome enough to be with us ...

If you're not a Christian, you're probably thinking, "come on Rick, where this is all going so obvious."

"After all, this is a church service ... and you're a pastor ... so you're going to tell us that *your* one thing is better than all *those* other 'one things', and therefore *your* one thing should be *our* one thing ..."

"Where this is all going is that you're going to say, 'If you'll just get God in your life, if you'll just accept Christ, if you'll just follow Jesus ... then that would for sure change almost everything in a positive way.'"

And if that's what you're thinking, I can understand why because I do say quite often knowing Jesus *will* make your life better by making you better at life.

However, it's actually possible to "get God in your life" *without* the one thing that, yes, I do have in mind and, yes, I do want to suggest to you.

And not only is it possible, many people – many *Christians* – actually do!

They (we) "get and accept and follow God" *without* this "one thing" ...

- Which eventually (and always) leads to disastrous results both for us and everyone around us
- Which definitely *isn't* "changing almost everything about your life for the better."

So, you're right. I do want to suggest what your one thing should be.

But you're wrong. The one thing you could do

that would change almost everything for the better isn't "get God."

And, actually, it isn't even *my* one thing because I don't do it very well myself. It's not natural to me *at all*.

In fact, the only reason I'm talking about it today (and in the four weeks which follow) is that a couple of months ago, I had been praying about what should come after the *Apocalypse Now* series.

And I had nothing.

But one night I had a dream where it suddenly became very clear: "I want you to talk about this one thing. I want you to do a series on this one thing which is greater than everything."

That doesn't happen to me very often so, when it does, I take it pretty seriously because

I think God wants to say something very serious to you and to me.

The One Thing

So, the one thing I'm talking about and the one thing this series is about ...

- Isn't *my* one thing ... though I want it to be.
- And it's not even God ... though God, as we'll see, is pretty important in the process.
- And it's greater than everything else.
- And therefore, worth pursuing above all else.

... because if you actually do this one thing ... and *keep* doing it ... and do *more and more*

of it ...

... even if you're *not* a Christian ... even if you're an *atheist* ...

This one thing *will* absolutely change almost everything about your life for the better.

Because that's ... the Power. Of. Love.

You knew there had to be a reason why Richard got to sing another Huey Lewis song, right?

The one thing that will absolutely change almost everything about your life for the better ...

... if you can do it ... and keep on doing it ... and do it more and more ...

... is to love other people.

And when I say “other people” I mean ...

- People who are like you
- And people who are *unlike* you.
- People who like you
- And people who *don't* like you.

If you can grow in your ability to love others – meaning “everyone around you” – almost everything about your life will change for the better.

As we go through this series over the next five weeks, I think you'll see why that is true.

But for starters, think about this.

We have more and more of almost everything we *want*, but less and less of the one thing we truly *need* in order to fully

**flourish and to be fully human. And that's
love.**

And the consequences, at least to me, are terrifying.

I could be off on this ... maybe I'm not seeing it right ... but as I look at what's been happening even just in the past two years, what I see is that ...

- A lack of love is killing our culture.

We don't have "differences of opinion" anymore. Now, we have *culture wars*. We have *vaccine wars* and *masking wars*.

- A lack of love is killing our political system.

Those on the other side are no longer our *political opponents*. Now, they're our

adversaries and enemies.

- A lack of love between parents is killing our family structure.
- A lack of love among Christians is killing some churches and, in some cases, entire denominations.
- And a lack of love is killing some of us ... *literally.*

I'm sure you're aware of the vast amount of research which shows that infants who are deprived of human affection suffer tremendous negative consequences.

What happens is their bodies enter into a survival mode where vital, basic physiological functions are preserved at the cost of physical, mental, and social development.

The longer the child is in this survival mode, the more permanent and negative the effects will be.ⁱ

But it's not just babies who suffer from a lack of love.

Research also shows that *adults* who do not experience love and affection are more likely to experience depression and stress and, in general, worse health – including more secondary immune disorders.ⁱⁱ

Bottom line, living without love destroys both body and soul. It's deadly to our spirits, our emotions, and even our bodies.

So, I think that means it's pretty important ... maybe even greater than everything.

Jesus Says

Of course, just because *I* think that doesn't mean it's true. I'm not that smart.

More importantly, it's what Jesus and his very first followers taught.

If you've been around church for any length of time, I'm sure you've heard about the times when He was asked "what's the greatest commandment in the Law of Moses?"

And I'm sure you know that Jesus said that it's to "love God with all your heart, mind and soul and also, to love your neighbor as yourself."

And I'm sure you've heard that Jesus also said that if you only love those who love you, what good is that? So, love even your adversaries and your enemies.

And I'm sure you've heard that on the night he was betrayed and turned over to the Temple leaders – who would have him crucified by the Romans the next day ...

Jesus told his inner circle:

*"A new command I give you:
Love one another. As I have
loved you, so you must love
one another.*

And then he added:

*By this everyone will know
that you are my disciples, if
you love one another."*

John 13:34-35 (NIV)

Apparently, that message got across because you literally cannot read any of the writings of the earliest church leaders like Peter and John and James and Matthew and Paul ...

You can't read what they wrote without noticing the overwhelming emphasis on *loving others*. It comes up over and over again.

... which means, by the way, that if you ever wonder if Christianity is good for the world, this is your answer.

No other world religion measures the faith commitment of its followers by their *love for all people*.

No other world religion says "the evidence that proves you're a true believer is your love for ...

- People who are like you
- And people who are *unlike* you.
- People who like you

- And people who *don't* like you.

So, if you believe (as I do) that the world would be a much better place if everyone truly loved one another, don't ever doubt that Christianity at the core (which is defined by Jesus and his Apostles) is good for the world.

It truly is.

Of course, I know that some of you skeptics are thinking, "well, maybe that's true. But it doesn't mean that *Christians* are necessarily good for the world."

Point taken.

It's true that some of the most unloving people in the world unfortunately also happen to be Christians.

Now, when I say that, I don't mean to imply

that they – we – are intentionally hateful (at least not most of us).

What I mean is that they – we – just sort of skim over all the talk about loving others.

Not that we don't understand and appreciate the value and power of love. Not that we're unaware of what Jesus said about loving others.

It's just that there are so many other issues – legitimate spiritual issues – that concern us.

For instance ...

- Are we living in the biblical end times?
- How can I experience more of God's activity and presence in my life?
- What about my doubts? How do I

reconcile biblical creation with science?
Is Christianity just an invention of power-hungry men?

- Where is God in the middle of a pandemic? How should I deal with my fears and exhaustion?
- What should I think – and do – about all the cultural upheaval that’s going on?

If this is your church, you may recognize that I’ve done entire series on those questions over the past two years. (I hope you do!)

Furthermore, a lot of us who are Christians think that the ultimate goal of being a Christian (besides getting to go be with Jesus when we die – which we saw in our last series is NOT God’s end game for us; it’s way better)

...

A lot of us who are Christians believe that the ultimate goal of being a Christian is “holy living” which we define as ...

- “Not doing the sinful things that everyone else is doing”
- And, basically, staying as “clean” and “pure” as possible.

Now, please don't hear what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying that holiness is an unimportant thing. It *is* an important thing.

It's just not the *greatest* thing.

That's why the people Jesus had the greatest issue with were not the “unholy sinners” of his day.

The people Jesus had the greatest problem

with – and the harshest condemnation for – were the *super holy* religious people who *didn't love*.

For example, one time he was invited to the home of a wealthy religious leader by the name of Simon (who was part of a group called the Pharisees).

Luke, in his story of the life of Jesus, tells us that ...ⁱⁱⁱ

A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.

As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

Simon was taken aback by what he was seeing because, after all, Jesus – as a spiritual leader and teacher – was holy and this woman was not.

So, he thought ... “If this guy was legit, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is. And he would have nothing to do with her.”

But Jesus defended her. “She has been forgiven much which is why she loves much.”

And then he slams Simon in a very subtle way.

“But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Luke 7:47 (NIV)

In other words, “Simon, you’re so good at being good – you’re so focused on having so

little to be forgiven of ...

“You’re so good at *being* good that you’re *no* good at *doing* good to others; loving people just as they are ...

“... which is why when I came into your house, you didn’t give me water to wash my feet, nor did you give me a kiss and you didn’t put oil on my head” (all of which were the customary greeting in those days).

“Simon, you just don’t get it.”

And for those of us who are Christians ...

- It’s so easy to fall into the same trap as Simon did: to be so focused on being good that we’re no good at doing good and loving others.
- It’s so easy to skim over the main thing –

loving others – for other things which aren't *bad* things. They're just not the greatest thing.

Getting Personal

Of course, this is nothing new. Obviously, it's been this way since the time of Jesus.

And it was this way in one of the earliest churches that we know of – the cohort of Jesus followers in the first century city of Corinth.

If ever a group of people in that day and time had more and more of almost everything they *wanted*, it was them.

Not only was Corinth one of the wealthiest most connected and cosmopolitan cities of the Roman Empire, the followers of Jesus in Corinth were among the most spiritually blessed, spiritually knowledgeable and

spiritually gifted in the growing movement of Christianity.

In fact, the Apostle Paul had to write them a letter because their great abundance was becoming more of a hindrance than a help.

- They were fighting about which preacher was best.
- They were out of control and disorderly in their worship services.
- They were favoring the wealthy over the poor among them.
- They were taking each other to court instead of trying to work out their problems.

They were a mess. A Christian mess but still a mess.

And one point in his letter, Paul lays out this incredible metaphor of how all parts of the human body matter and work together as a way of explaining how everybody's giftedness matters to the church ...

... and how they need to stop putting the more "up front" people on a pedestal – as if they were better and more spiritual than everyone else.

I mean, it's just another example of the brilliance of the mind of Paul; of how wise and understanding he was.

And just when you think this is it – he has nailed it, Paul completely shifts his train of thought.

And he writes:

*And yet I will show you the
most excellent way. 1
Corinthians 12:31 (ESV)*

In other words, "I've tried to help you understand logically how things should work, but there's an even better way than thinking logically. Let me show you what it is."

And it's at this point that Paul pens what has to be one of the most widely recognized parts of the entire Bible.

Even people who know nothing about Jesus or Christianity and who have nothing to do with church recognize it.

Paul writes:

*If I speak in the tongues of
men and of angels, but do not
have love, I am only a
resounding gong or a
clanging cymbal.*

*If I have the gift of prophecy
and can fathom all mysteries
and all knowledge, and if I
have a faith that can move
mountains, but do not have
love, I am nothing.*

*If I give all I possess to the
poor and give over my body
to hardship that I may boast,
but do not have love, I gain
nothing. 1 Corinthians
13:1-3 (ESV)*

And then Paul goes on to describe what love really is; what love does and does not do.

And we're going to look at that in detail next week but, for today, I want you to see a couple of things in this part of his letter.

For one – and this one is pretty obvious, Paul takes pretty much everything we value not just as Christians but as humans and he takes it down from the pedestal on which we place it.

- Being super-gifted and talented
- Being really smart and wise
- Being really powerful (because of your faith or anything else)
- Being generous and sacrificial

All of these things – things that we all want, things that voices in our world tell us: “if you had this one thing, it would for sure change almost everything about your life in a positive way” ...

Paul says, “Ok, they’re obviously good, but

they're not worth very much – they're not that valuable – when compared to loving others."

The second thing I want you to notice is not as obvious ... and that is the way Paul phrases this entire section.

He could have written "if you" ...

If you speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, you are only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

If you can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge ...

If you have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, you are nothing.

If you give all you possess to the poor and give over your

*body to hardship, but do not
have love, you gain nothing.*

And it would have been very natural to do so based on how he had begun this section with "let me show you a more excellent way."

But he doesn't. Instead, he puts it in very personal terms: "if I."

Now, why would he do that?

I think it's because this was a lesson Paul had to learn in his own life.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if biblical archeologists one day discover that Paul had actually written this statement somewhere in a personal journal ...

... as a way to remind *himself* first and foremost that, in the end, it's about love.

And then, whenever he would look at that journal or whatever else they used back then, he would see that statement and think:

“Oh, yeah, don’t forget, Paul – you who are so spiritual and brilliant and powerful and self-sacrificing – don’t forget that without love for people, you are nothing.”

Not “your *giftedness* is nothing.”

No, “you, Paul, are nothing. You bring nothing of lasting value to the table.”

“Without love, you’re just a noisy bag of wind. You’re just an obnoxious, arrogant know-it-all. You’re just a show-off.”

Now, obviously, there’s no way to know if Paul had such a personal journal but there’s no doubt that he intentionally wrote this passage

from a deeply personal perspective.

And that makes sense because we know from the rest of the story that the whole idea of love being “the most excellent way” was not characteristic of Paul.

In fact, it was just the opposite.

Two years after the resurrection of Jesus a conflict arose in Jerusalem between one of the leaders of Christianity – a man by the name of Stephen, and a group of rabbinic scholars of whom Paul – who at this point is probably in his late 20s – is a member.^{iv}

Eventually, these scholars and their followers have Stephen arrested and sentenced to death by stoning.

And as the stoning is about to begin, the Temple leaders lay their coats at Paul’s feet.

And Paul watches with delight and approval as they do the deed.

At that point, Luke tells us ...

Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. Acts 8:3 (NIV)

But he's not content just to root out the "heresy" in Jerusalem. Paul wants to find Christians in other cities and do there what he has done in Jerusalem.

Luke writes:

Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. Acts 9:1 (NIV)

Actually, in the Greek, it says he is breathing *in* murderous threats.

It's as if the very oxygen that he needs to exist is the destruction of the Christian Church. It's as if Paul is living for the death of Christians.^v

Luke says ...

He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2 (NIV)

It is very clear that, at this point, Paul was not a man characterized and motivated by love. He was just the opposite: a persecutor and a violent man.

He was right and his enemies were wrong, so

it was OK to do whatever was necessary to put a stop to them

So, what happened? How does a guy go from "breathing out murderous threats" to the astounding conviction that he is nothing without love?

- What happened was Paul met Jesus on that road to Damascus.
- What happened was that Paul experienced Jesus' love for him instead of the judgement he deserved.

And that changed him.

Years later, after Paul become not the greatest persecutor of Christians and Christianity but it's greatest proponent ...

Years later, Paul wrote something in another

letter that I think explains what happened to him; what changed his whole perspective on the one thing that would make every aspect of his life better.

Paul was writing to other Jewish men and women about what God had done in sending Jesus ...

... and he wrote ...

*God demonstrates his own
love for us in this:*

In other words, God doesn't just talk about love; he puts on demonstration of it.

And this is the demonstration:

*While we were still sinners,
Christ died for us.
Romans 5:8 (NIV)*

And again, I think it's important to notice the

personal aspect of this statement.

Paul didn't write "while *you all* were still sinners, Jesus died for your sins."

Instead, he wrote "while we – me and you – were still sinners, Jesus went to the cross."

But when you remember that Paul was alive and living north of Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified, it's even more powerful than that.

What Paul is saying is that "while I was living in Tarsus, sinning, Jesus – at the very moment I was a sinner sinning, was dying for the sin that I was sinning."

This wasn't past tense or ancient history for Paul.

This was Paul realizing that because they lived at the same time, "while I was still a

sinner, actively sinning, Jesus was nailed to a cross for the sins I was committing at that very moment.”^{vi}

So, when Paul thought about the love of God being expressed in the sacrificial death of Jesus, it was intensely personal for him in a way that it almost can't be for you and me.

It was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him.

... which meant that when he learned from the other Apostles about the new command that Jesus had given ...

“As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

It was transformational for him. And he could never go back to what he was.

“Jesus loves me, and because of that, not only *should* I love other people; I *can* love other people.”

Friends, the one thing that will absolutely change almost everything about your life for the better ...

... if you can do it ... and keep on doing it ...
and do it more and more ...

... is to love other people.

And over the next few weeks, we're going to talk about how to do that in very practical ways but, for today, the thought I want to leave you with is what Paul discovered and what Jesus said.

And the way we say it around here all the time is “you cannot give away what you do not already have.”

You can only give to someone else what you yourself have already received.

And if you want to be better at loving ...

- People who are like you
- And people who are *unlike* you.
- People who like you
- And people who *don't* like you.

The place to start is to root yourself in the love of God.

Baptism

Now, as you can see, today we have our

baptism pool set up because there are a group of people who have realized that even though they are sinners, because God loves them, Jesus died for them.

And they have turned to him and received Him as their savior.

And therefore, they are going to do what Jesus said to do when that happens. They're going to be baptized.

<some of you can do that, too / some of you need to do that>

Here's what's going to happen once I stop talking in a few minutes.

Our band is going to come out and do a song that expresses God's invitation to all of us to come to Jesus and to believe in him and belong to him.

And during that song, if you need to be baptized, I want you to get up and go outside those doors and down the hallway where we have some really friendly folks who will provide everything you need to be baptized TODAY.

- Clothing & towels
- Makeup, deodorant, hair products, stuff that ladies sometimes need
- Safe place with people to watch over your stuff like cell phones, wallets, etc

We have tried to think of everything that might stand in the way of you saying "yes." We've tried to remove every obstacle we can, because it matters, it matters, that you do what Jesus told you to do.

So, if you want to respond today ... there's nothing to stop you.

- We have water
- We have staff and volunteers to help you
- We have a church full of people who want to support you.
- We even have that band that's going to come and get into place right now because we have a huge celebration that's going to happen here as people are baptized.

So, again, on this next song when everyone stands to sing, you make your way over to the door.

And when you get there, the people there will

help you get ready, and they'll bring you back in.

And we'll baptize you along with everyone else who responds while the band plays and we all sing together.

Now, a couple of things before we do that.

- First, we have some people already signed up and they're ready to go. They'll be standing for about half of the first song because we want everyone who is participating to do this together.
- Second, we're not going to baptize anyone younger than High School in this service unless you've already signed up. We've found it necessary to make sure one-on-one that our children especially understand what baptism is.

So, parents, this is not your cue to go fetch your kids out of Adventureland because you've always wanted them to be baptized and now is the time. That's not what this is, OK?

Ok, I think we're ready.

If you're a high school student or older and you feel a tug in your heart right now to say yes, let me assure you: that is the Holy Spirit of God calling you. It's the presence of God drawing you and calling you.

And you should respond.

Let's pray to that end.

Jesus, we give you this moment. Holy Spirit, we give you this time.

I pray that people would have freedom

to respond, to say, "Thank you God that You love me so much that You gave Jesus for me, and I can respond in this way."

We ask that in Jesus name, Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.iflscience.com/health-and-medicine/can-lack-love-be-deadly/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/affectionado/201308/what-lack-affection-can-do-you>

ⁱⁱⁱ What follows is my literary interpretation of Luke 7:36-47

^{iv} Acts 6:9 Note that Tarsus is in the region of Cicilia, meaning that these are "Paul's people"

^v Great quote from <https://vimeo.com/21094882>

^{vi} From Andy Stanley's observation in this message:

<https://sermons.love/andy-stanley/5357-andy-stanley-do-you-see-what-i-see.html>