

December 30, 2018
Rick Myatt

DON'T BE A CAR ALARM
1 Corinthians 13:1-3

After today there is only one day left in 2018. Can you believe that? After tomorrow we begin a whole new year. This, of course, raises the question of what we're going to do in this shiny new year. It doesn't have any dents in it yet. There have been no failures and no disappointments, so it holds all kinds of possibilities. We get to start over fresh. That's why this time of year people start making lists of resolutions, things that they are going to do differently than they did last year. But we all know how that goes, don't we? For many of us this year's list of resolutions will have a strong resemblance to last year's list, because most of those resolutions didn't make it to spring. A lot of them didn't make it out of January.

I'm a bit ashamed to admit our car is dirty. I'm ashamed because every time we get a new car I love how shiny and clean it looks, and I vow to myself that I'm going to be more diligent about keeping this one looking clean and shiny like that. We've had this car for a year and a half. We bought it as a used car, but it was in great condition, and it still looks very good. But it's been way too long since I had it washed. Somehow I'm not keeping my vow to myself. It looks good enough. It doesn't look like a dusty piece of junk. But it could look better if it were clean, and I insisted I was going to keep it that way. What happened? Stuff happens. Life gets busy and washing the car can always be put off. And of course it seems like just when I decide to get the car washed they predict it's going to rain. So I put it off.

Something like that will happen to the majority of resolutions made as we enter a new year. I still think the end of an old year and the beginning of a new one is an appropriate time to take stock, to look forward, to set some goals. Unfortunately if you make a long list of things you want to do in 2019, your list likely won't last long until you tear it up and throw it away. It is hard for us to focus on a laundry list of things to do better.

So this morning I want to issue a challenge to myself and to all of you as well. I want to challenge you first to do something great in 2019. Don't settle for just surviving the year. Aim at doing some amazing. Seek to do something that is worth doing, and doing well. Do something that will be astounding. Second, I want to challenge you to narrow your focus. Pick one thing that will make this year a banner year for you because you zeroed in on and pursued this goal for the entire

year. Pursue the goal relentlessly, tirelessly, with dogged determination. For that is what it will take to keep from flaming out.

It probably won't surprise you to learn that I have something in mind. As I thought about this year and prayed about it, asking God what he wants me to do in the new year, this is what came into my head. I'll tell you right up front, this is not something that will make you famous. It is not something that will cause people to see how amazing you are and to applaud you. In fact, it will mostly go unnoticed. Well, unnoticed by the people in this world. It will be noticed in heaven. What came to mind as I considered this question does not involve great position, large sums of money, big noticeable events, extraordinary ability or attention grabbing achievement. All of us can and should pursue this goal. It requires no special ability, talent or position. It is something God has said he wants us to do more than anything else. We will see what this thing is in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

PREMISE: THE GREAT THING GOD WANTS US TO DO IS LOVE

The Corinthian church was home to a lot of controversy and dissension. One aspect of that dissension is discussed in chapters 12-14. If you've read the Gospels and observed some of the disagreements Jesus' original disciples had, the problem in Corinth will sound familiar. The disciples repeatedly had arguments about which of them was the most important, which should have had the highest position, and which of them was the greatest. What was happening in Corinth was somewhat like that. They were arguing over which of them was the most spiritual, thus the greatest, and which of them had the most important abilities or gifts. Thus, which of them mattered the most and ought to be given the greatest respect.

Paul spent 3 chapters trying to straighten them out. Right in the middle of that discussion is chapter 13 and it is one for the ages. It is a powerful explanation of what matters most. If the Corinthians applied this one chapter the entire controversy that was happening in Corinth would instantly go away. At the beginning of this chapter Paul wrote, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal."

People today get caught up in arguing over the whole "speaking in tongues" thing, which was one of the main sources of controversy in Corinth as well. But understand what Paul was saying. Maybe you have that gift that you think is so important. Or maybe you have an even more mind boggling gift. Maybe God enabled you to speak the language of angels. Do angels have their own language? If so, then I'm sure it is beautiful, even angelic. But that's not the point here. I do

not think Paul was revealing or teaching that angels have their own language. If you observe the pattern in these verses you will see that in each verse Paul gives one "If" statement then follows it with another that he carries to an extreme that isn't reality based.

So in verse 1 there is speaking the tongues of men, followed by the extreme of speaking some supposed angelic language. In verse 2 it is having the gift of prophecy followed by knowing all mysteries. In other words, it is knowing everything, which is impossible for all except God himself. The last verse mentions giving everything you have to the poor, an act of great faith, devotion and love. But then it follows with an enigmatic statement that probably is about giving oneself up to martyrdom, to be burned at the stake.

Don't get so caught up in the imagery that you miss the point. The point is Paul is talking about doing amazing things. What if in this year you had the gift of prophecy. Imagine how people would be astounded if you could accurately tell them what would happen in their lives weeks or months before it occurred. They'd probably start asking you about which team would win the Super Bowl or what the winning numbers in the lottery would be. Being able to foretell events would be a profoundly impressive ability. Or imagine that you gave everything you had to help the poor. That would be dramatic, and people would be aware that you are doing or have done something profound, something that is bigger than they and is beyond them.

So Paul says essentially, "Go ahead and dream big. Think of some astounding, attention getting, dramatic thing you might try to do in the coming new year. Maybe it is some religious act so impressive it blows away every Christian you know. Or maybe it is having some success in the entertainment industry so you become famous and rich. Go ahead, think of what is the most dramatic, impressive thing you could accomplish in the coming year." Then he brings down the hammer and says, "If you could do that and even more, even things you can't imagine they are so far out there, but you do it without love, then you are a big fat zero. You are like a clanging cymbal."

That last image is not a criticism of drummers and their use of cymbals. It is a result of Paul trying to think of one of the most irritating sounds he could imagine. Cymbals are fine as part of a band, but imagine a child getting hold of a pair of cymbals and just banging them together incessantly. Yeah, that is not pleasant. Suppose you are on a much needed vacation in a place you love, a place where you

relax more than anywhere else in the world. Maybe it's in the mountains somewhere in Colorado or Montana, or maybe it's at some beach in Bora Bora or Hawaii. You are at peace, totally relaxed, drinking in the serene beauty, and then a landscape crew shows up and fires up their leaf blowers. They are only a few decibels short of the ear splitting din of a jet engine taking off. Paul says, "If you could do that incredible thing that would impress everyone, but you do it without love, you're nothing but an aggravating, grating leaf blower." You're a car alarm that goes off in the middle of the night and just keeps on blaring. That is what you amount to without love.

Let's be real clear about this. No matter what seemingly great thing you do, even if it appears to be pious and holy like giving everything you have to help the poor, but you do it to prove how amazing you are, you do it with an eye to impressing other people, you are not acting in love. You are about self, not about love, and that makes you nothing more than the midnight car alarm. No matter how impressive, how amazing the things you accomplish seem to be, if they are not purely about loving people they amount to a huge pile of nothing. So as you think about what you hope to do with the new year that is almost upon us there are really 2 questions you need to answer. The first is, what do you hope to do in 2019, and second, more important, why do you want to do it? If the answer is anything other than "love" you might as well not bother. Even if you accomplish whatever it is, if it is not about loving people then in the end you will have accomplished the same thing as if you dedicate the entire year to doing absolutely nothing. Yeah my goal for this year is to become the ultimate couch potato. You might as well aim at that as do anything not motivated by love.

This, of course, is not the only place where we see this emphasis on love. In Matthew 22:37-39 when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, in other words what the most important thing to do was, 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." So first, love God, and second, love others.

In fact, in Matthew 25:40 Jesus said at the day of judgment God will say, "Truly, I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." In verse 45 he went on to say whatever we did not do for others we did not do for him. So this is a profound statement. A key way we express love to God is to love the people he brings into our lives. In fact, the way we treat them is how he sees us treating him!

Right now we have some very nice neighbors. But not everyone in the neighborhood is exactly warm and fuzzy. There's one guy who has a couple of unappealing traits. First, he is kind of a know it all who is anxious to impart his profound knowledge and wisdom on pretty much everything, and second he is something of a busybody. We know of one family that sold their house and moved out of the neighborhood because though they loved the rest of the neighborhood they couldn't bear living next to this guy. There's another guy who is unsmiling and cold pretty much all the time. I have not had any big conflicts with either of these guys, but to tell you the truth, my natural tendency is to just avoid them. Both are a problem waiting to happen, and others have had problems with them. But here's a convicting thought. Jesus said what I do to them I do to him. I have a very hard time seeing either of them as Jesus, because Jesus was very different than both of them. Yet Jesus said the most important thing I do in life is to love God, and a key way to do that is by relating to these men as if they were Jesus. Um, yeah, let me get back to you on that one. It's a work in progress.

I got a good laugh recently when Anna told us that she was driving with Cara and Ella in the back seat. She pulled up to an intersection where she was going to turn right. There was a car in front of her in the right turn lane, but the driver was a bit tentative and was not going. Little 3 year old Ella called out from the back seat, "Come on, Dude. Get going!" Where do you suppose that came from? That's a learned behavior. Where do you think she learned it? She's heard that from Mom and Dad. She's also heard things like that from Yapaw. Recently I was coming to an intersection where I was going to turn right onto El Camino Real. There was a lady in a car in front of me also about to turn right. The light was red, but there was a green light on the left turn lane on El Camino, so there were no cars interfering with her ability to easily go. But she just sat there, doing nothing. I instructed her. "Go ahead lady, it's clear." She did nothing. I tried again, "Go ahead lady." Nothing. I encouraged her 4 times, and she didn't move. Finally, she apparently decided she should go for she started to creep forward, but just then the light changed, and the cars on El Camino started across, so she had to stop. The cars went through, there were a couple more rather far off down the road, but both were slowing and signaling they were going to turn right. She didn't budge even as they turned off. Now my tone was even more strident. "Lady, what is wrong with you? Do you need an engraved invitation to finally go? 'The City of Carlsbad cordially invites you to make a right turn onto El Camino Real.'" My impatience with that woman made me think about what I would say if I knew that Jesus was the person

driving the car. Well, if Jesus was driving the car he would have done a lot better so I wouldn't have had to get impatient. Actually I had to admit to myself that my attitude and words would be very different.

My concern here is not what we say to drivers in other cars who can't hear what we're saying. The concern is about how we treat other people. It is about treating them with the same respect, love, gentleness, patience and kindness that we would extend to Jesus himself. That is what God wants us to do more than anything else in 2019. In John 13:34-35 Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The defining mark of a follower of Jesus is love. So let's make that the defining mark of 2019.

WHAT WILL IT MEAN FOR US TO LOVE?

To begin with, love is not a feeling. Our society gets sold that piece of scam especially by the entertainment industry on a continual basis. They keep beating that drum incessantly. And it resonates with something in us. Think of a person you know who is just plain difficult. Perhaps it is a relative, or friend, co-worker or neighbor. Maybe this person is obnoxious, or overbearing, or controlling, or demanding or maybe just downright unpleasant. You know you are supposed to love this person, but you don't like them. You don't like to be around them. You may decide to love that person, may even act in loving and kind ways, but inside you have disdain for them. So you feel guilty, thinking you are not loving them. If you feel distaste for the person that doesn't feel like love.

But let's give that some thought. Jesus *commanded* us to love others. In fact, the Bible commands it a lot. Can you command someone to feel something? You can command all you want, but feelings don't seem to respond to commands. If I commanded you to feel happy this morning, could you respond to that command? Probably not. You either feel happy or you don't. When I was in college for a few months I dated a girl that I really liked. But one day she told me she liked me a lot and enjoyed the time we spent together, but she didn't feel anything more for me than a friend. In other words, she had no romantic feeling toward me, and thus wanted to move on to greener pastures. I didn't like that at the time. It hurt. But as I thought about it I realized there was certainly nothing I could do about it, and not much she could do about it either. She didn't feel what she didn't feel. Today, and for the past 40 years I have been really glad she didn't feel what she didn't feel, because she disappeared from my life and that eventually led me to the greatest gift and blessing on this earth, and that's Laurie.

The logic is clear. God commands us to love. You cannot command someone to feel something. Therefore, love cannot be a feeling, unless God is clueless and doesn't understand us. I feel safe in ruling out that last possibility. Well if love is not a feeling, what is it? At its root it is a choice and a commitment. It is a decision to seek the good of another person. At its highest form it is a one way street. It is a choice and commitment to seek the good of another person regardless of what that other individual does. The person may be undeserving, ungrateful, even selfish and mean, but the lover can still choose to love and give. This is how God loves us. He has chosen to love us even when we were still rebelling against him. And even when we are in a relationship with him when we are fickle and unfaithful to him, he still loves. That's because love is not dependent on its object, but just on the person loving.

We see this exemplified in the way parents love their children. Recently Toby and Anna went through a few days when both of them were sick. Anna had a sinus infection, and before she got over that she added a cold to the mix. Toby had either a really bad cold or a mild case of flu. They both were feeling awful. During that stretch they did not say to their kids, "Okay, mommy and daddy are sick, so it's your turn to take care of us. And we need you to be nice to us. No tantrums, no disobedience, no crying if you don't get your way. If you can't be considerate to us then we're not going to change your diapers or feed you." No, they just soldiered on, being parents, even if the kids were selfish and inconsiderate as kids can be, even if they had a tantrum, still they cared for them when what they needed was to be in bed. They did that because they love their kids, and nothing, not illness, not misbehavior or anything else, could stop them from loving those kids.

If you read on in 1 Corinthians 13 you will see Paul's familiar magnificent description of love. In verses 4-8 he wrote, "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails." What do you notice about that list? It is all about what love does. There is nothing about how love feels. You don't see, "Love feels affectionate, love feels attracted to a person, love feels all tingly inside." No, love acts with patience, kindness, humility, unselfishness.

This means it is possible to be very clear about how ugly a person might be, how difficult they are, and to feel even dislike for the person, but to still choose to love them. It is always easier to love a person when that person has at least some

positive qualities or when you have some feelings for them. But one can love regardless of feelings. One can still choose to be patient, kind, giving, humble, caring. And that's what it means to love someone.

The greatest act of love creation will ever see was Jesus Christ entering this world, living as a human, then dying to rescue us. Every other love pales in comparison to that act. But we should learn from it. One lesson we should learn is that love always involves sacrifice. At its core love must say no to self and choose to put another person first. Whenever we love we are sacrificing something. It may be comfort, ease, personal gain, personal desires or even safety and security, it may mean we will get hurt as Jesus did or we will lose something precious. But love always involves sacrifice in one way or another.

On June 17, 2017 the Navy destroyer USS Fitzgerald collided with a container ship 56 miles off the coast of Japan. Crew member Gary Leo Rehm, Jr., a 37 year old Fire Controlman 1st Class, immediately went into action. The ship was struck below the waterline and one of the compartments flooded. A number of the crew were caught in the flooding compartment. Rehm repeatedly dove under water and pulled out shipmates. He put himself in peril in order to rescue more than a dozen men. 7 sailors died aboard the Fitzgerald, among them Gary Rehm, who sacrificed himself to save others. His uncle said that he called the sailors on that ship his kids. He quoted Gary saying, "If my kids die, then I'm going to die." His uncle went on to say, "He was always ready to help anybody who needed it. He was just that kind of guy." Everyone who knew him said that the rescue was consistent with the way Gary always lived. A close friend said, "The rescue was Gary to a T. He never thought about himself."

As you look toward this next year, who are you going to love? In short the answer should be "everyone." We should aim at treating everyone with love, kindness, respect and patience, humbly seeking to serve, to give to bless. We should see our role in every relationship as being there to love and serve, since God is taking care of us. But we should also recognize there are people we should love extraordinarily. Those are people God brings into our path, beginning with our spouses, our children, our parents. There will be people God puts on your mind or your heart and says, "Go out of your way to love this person."

HOW CAN WE LOVE LIKE GOD WANTS US TO LOVE?

The problem is if we could muster all our strength, steel our resolve and grit our teeth enough to love the way Jesus called us to love, then God would not have needed to send his Son into the world. He would have just told us to try harder. Galatians 5:14 says, “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” If we could love the way we’re supposed to we would actually fulfill the whole law and earn God’s acceptance.

1 Corinthians 13:8 consists of 3 simple words that doom our efforts to do that. “Love never fails.” So if I always love, I’ll never fail. Yeah, that’s not happening. Love never fails, but I do. No matter how determined I am to love heroically in the coming year, I will fail, and it will happen more than once. I’m going to need something more than sheer determination and strength of will to make 2019 the year I am more than the midnight car alarm because I choose to love in all I do.

BE ROOTED IN GOD’S LOVE

Here’s a reminder of something you already know. We cannot give others something we don’t have. Suppose you come to me with a brilliant new business opportunity that is guaranteed to become a cash cow, but you need capital to get started. So you ask me for \$1 million. I can tell you without any hesitation that no matter how incredible the opportunity might be, I will not give the million to you. That’s because I don’t have \$1 million. I can’t give you what I don’t have.

The kind of love I’m talking about today is really the kind of love that God has. It is perfect and it never fails. I don’t naturally have that kind of love and neither do you. So how are we going to give it to someone else? We have to get it from God.

That means we have to live each day rooted in the knowledge and the experience of God’s love. We have to be secure and safe in the knowledge that nothing can ever block the flow of God’s love into our lives, nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Nothing we do or anyone else does will ever stop us from being inundated with God’s love every moment of every day. The more we live consciously aware of that, thankful for that gift that we do not deserve, the more we will have hearts filled with his love that can overflow to other people.

Because God will provide for us, instead of gritting our teeth and trying harder not to be controlled by our inherent selfishness and actually love others, we can ask God. Ask him to fill us with his love, to give us the ability to love as he loves. That is a prayer he will answer.

BELIEVE GOD IS TAKING CARE OF US

Often what keeps us from loving as God calls us is fear. We are afraid of being hurt. We are afraid of being walked on or taken advantage of. We are afraid of being used. We are afraid we won't get the love and respect that we think we need. We are afraid of being vulnerable. We are afraid that we won't have the resources necessary to truly love a person.

You've heard it from me so much you're probably sick and tired of it. But here it is: what God supplies is enough. Philippians 4:19 says, "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." How great are the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus? They are infinitely great. That is a treasure trove of riches that can never be exhausted. And that verse says that God will meet your needs according to that infinite, eternal stockpile.

We give lip service to that one, but often don't really believe it. Instead we retreat to the bunker and focus on protecting ourselves, trying to just get by in this world without getting hurt too badly. To me, one of the most realistic, horrifying, gripping movie scenes ever made was in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*. It was the scene that depicted the amphibious landings on Omaha Beach in World War II. Shells are bursting all around, bullets are flying, men are being killed, bodies blown apart. Those poor men had to run out of those landing craft into the water and onto the beach in the face of withering fire with absolutely no protection. They could crawl behind beach obstacles, dig into the sand, look for some shred of protection from the deadly hail of lead and shrapnel.

That's kind of like us. We're in a spiritual war and the bullets are flying all around us. People are going down right and left and it feels like we are exposed, vulnerable, lacking any protection. But imagine that scene on Omaha Beach. What if somehow a soldier had some sort of armor that covered his entire being rendering him totally impervious to the incoming fire and artillery shells. What confidence he would have. He could calmly stride onto that beach heading toward enemy lines with no concern whatsoever.

Jesus said he would never leave us. He said he has power over all authority. He will provide for us and he will protect us. He is our armor. So we can stride into every situation seeking to give up self and to serve, love, bless and give to other people without fear, because God will supply all we need. What he supplies will be enough.

Because love inevitably involves sacrifice, to love always means putting something at risk. We might get hurt, we might lose something. But if we are rock solid confident that God is going to provide what we need, if he is going to protect us, then we will take the risk and love, no matter what it might cost.

REMEMBER WHO WE ARE

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ you are a child of God. That is a privilege, a gift of immeasurable value. But you also have another position in this world. 1 Peter 2:9 says, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” What an exalted, special position you have. But I want you to notice especially that you are a royal priesthood.

You are a priest! You’ve been ordained. You are ordained by God himself! But what is the job of a priest? Ancient Jewish priests did 2 things. First they represented people to God, by making sacrifices on their behalf before God. Second, they represented God to the people. As a priest you fulfill that first part of the job by praying for people. But there is that second part of the job. Peter said it involves declaring the praises of him who called you out of darkness. You are to represent God to people. This is what you are on earth to do.

I saw something in a football game a couple of months back that I have seen happen way too often. The team that was behind got the ball with a little less than 2 minutes to play. They had a chance to drive down the field and win the game. They started moving the ball, then at the end of a second down play one of their players, a wide receiver, took issue with the defensive back who was guarding him. They’d been battling all day and he was fed up. The DB did something right at the end of the play that he didn’t like, so he retaliated. After the play was over he slammed the DB as hard as he could and was about to keep going after him when a ref arrived and intervened. The ref stopped him, but he also threw a penalty flag for his retaliation after the whistle. It was a 15 yard penalty for unnecessary roughness. His team went from what would have been a 3rd and 5 situation to 3rd and 20. They didn’t make the first down and lost the game. The coach had some choice words for that receiver. He lost sight of who he was and what the goal was. Instead of it being about the team winning, it became about that one player venting his frustration and getting even. He cost his team the chance to win the game.

How easy it is for us to forget what who we are and what we are about. We are God’s priests. When we act in ways that are unloving, unkind, impatient, harsh,

and selfish, we say to the world, “God is unloving, unkind, impatient, harsh and selfish.” We trash his reputation. What a horrible thing to do.

People are going to provoke us at times. Even those closest to us at times might behave in ways that are less than what we wish for. They be thoughtless, maybe so pre-occupied with the demands in their life that they forget about us. They might use a tone of voice that cuts to our core, or perhaps flash an expression at us that we hate. Or maybe they’ll be downright unkind. That’s when we need to remember who we are. We are priests, here to show the world how God loves. That person’s character and action are not the point. They become a target of our love not because they deserve it, but because it is our mission to demonstrate that our God is a God of limitless, unconditional love. We don’t love that person for their own sake, but for God’s sake.

CHOOSE LOVE

I was astounded to see that the weekends leading up to Christmas the Hallmark Channel was the most watched channel. At least they claimed that was true. I found that astounding. They only have one story. They change the actors and vary a few details, but the stories basically are the same and are totally predictable. So why do people keep watching them year after year? Because we want to see love stories. There is an insatiable human hunger to see love depicted.

God wants our lives to be better than the Hallmark Channel. He wants us to be a living depiction of heroic, undying, self sacrificing love. Decide to obey God and honor him, and make the commitment to love, no matter what other people do. Even if they aren’t loving or even kind, even if they are disobeying God, choose to love. Rely on God’s love for and ask him to give you the ability to love with his love. Make the decision to do what will make your life count so you don’t become a noisy, annoying car alarm.