

Love is Patient, Love is Kind

1 Corinthians 13

Turn to 1 Corinthians 13 please. We use the word “love” in a huge variety of ways. I think our society is fixated on romantic, sexual love. Romantic sexual love is from God, and a wonderful thing. Song of Songs celebrates that kind of love. We can also say “I love ice cream.” People come to me in parking lots and say “I love old trucks!” These all make sense to us.

1 Corinthians 13 talks about a different kind of love, what I will call “godly love.” There is no word in any language that means what the New Testament means by love. New Testament writers often used the Greek word *agapē* to mean this kind of love, but *agapē* did not mean in secular Greek what it means in the New Testament.

We know what love is from two stories. First a story about God: *This is love [says John]: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* That’s what love is. *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* That’s in 1 John 4.

This is love: what God did by handing over his Son for us, as a sacrifice for our sins. That action of God the Father is how we know “love.”

That’s the first story that teaches us love. Here’s the second story, again from 1 John: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.* In Paul’s words, *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.* The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

The two stories: One, God handed over his Son to be a sacrifice for our sins. Two, Christ laid down his life for us. That’s how we know what godly love is. No word in any language means that. We know what love is from those two foundational stories.

We use “love” to mean a feeling, an emotion. If someone says, “my heart is full of love for you,” we sort of know what they mean. We are free to use the word “love” that way, but do not confuse that with Christian love, with godly love. The only way we know about God’s love is from what he did for us. The only way we know about Christ’s love is from what he did for us.

You can be sure that when God’s Son died, there were a lot of things going on in God’s heart besides his affection for us. When Christ handed himself over for us, when he laid down his life, there were a lot of things going on in his heart besides his affection for us. Doesn’t matter. We know they loved us from what God did for us, and what Christ did for us. That’s godly love.

1 Corinthians 13 and the Corinthian Church

This chapter is not a hymn to love. Paul aims these words straight at the faults of the Corinthian congregation. If we read the opposite of this chapter, we get a good sense of that church.

If they could only speak with the tongues of men and of angels, they would be great in the kingdom of God. That's what they thought, and that's what Paul writes to correct. There were many of these kinds of gifts in that congregation, real gifts given by the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians loved these gifts, because the gift made the gifted person important, and that's exactly what they wanted. But there is no love in that.

Why Love is Important: Without Love we are Nothing - 1 Corinthians 13:1–3

If I speak in the tongues of men or 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.

Spiritual gifts and how they were used was a problem in Corinth, so verses 1–2 are aimed straight at the Corinthian church. If I don't have love, I myself have changed into something else. What's at stake here is not the gift, or the ministry, but the person, you or me. If I can say no end of wonderful things, but do not have love, I myself have become noisy, irritating metal. I have become a loud clanger.

If I have prophecy and knowledge and can perform miracles, but do not have love, I myself am nothing. We would call such a person a spiritual power-house. They would be invited to speak to large Christian audiences. Do we believe this? Do we think such a person is nothing?

In Matthew 7, Jesus said, *Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not in your name prophesy and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'*

Back to 1 Corinthians 13: *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.*

If the person who does these does not also love, they have gained nothing, no profit, no reward in this age or the next. Even great sacrifice, if there is no love, brings no credit from God. To summarize these three, without love I produce nothing, I am nothing, I gain nothing.

This opening paragraph gives us two different ideas about what a "spiritual" person is. Imagine one person who has remarkable spiritual gifts of speaking and knowledge and insight and miracles, and makes great personal sacrifices. But they do not treat others well. This Scripture is clear: in the kingdom of God, that person is a total loser.

The other person has none of the impressive stuff, none at all, but is always patient and kind toward people. In the kingdom of God that person is a winner. Jesus said, if you want to be great, be each other's servant.

Notice that Paul does not say, "If *you* speak in tongues but do not have love," he says, "If *I* speak in tongues but do not have love." He speaks indirectly to the Corinthians, not directly, so he does not offend them. He needs to get a message across, but he's doing it as kindly as he can.

What Love Is: Love is Patient, Love is Kind – 1 Corinthians 13:4–7

Godly love is not a feeling or an emotion. It is not expressed by saying, “I love you.” It is a way of treating people in all of life. And if we read all of 1 Corinthians, we’d see that Paul chose quite a few of these words to show what was rotten in Corinth.

Love is patient. Love is patient in suffering, patient toward people. Love is not in a hurry to end an unpleasant situation, it accepts the difficulty and lives well in it. Love endures poor treatment from others.

Love is kind. Patience is what we do not do, not quickly grumpy or irritable. Kind is what we do, quick to help and encourage. Kindness recognizes that everyone carries a heavy load.

These two, *love is patient, love is kind*, are like a heading and a summary. God is patient, God is kind, God is all of these things to us. We are patient and kind with each other and everyone because the only reason you and I are here at all is that God has been this to us.

Love does not envy. “Envy” and “jealousy” come from the same Greek word. In 1 Corinthians 3:3, Paul writes, “*You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you [envy and quarreling], are you not worldly?*”

Love is not upset by someone else’s good fortune. But remember, the question is not: do we long for their good fortune? The question is: how do we treat them? The longing is what it is; we all have selfish longings. How do we treat those who are fortunate?

Love does not boast, it is not proud. Pride was a particular problem in Corinth. The New Testament uses that Greek word seven times, and six of them are in 1 Corinthians.

We do enjoy our own accomplishments. Fine. But these do not colour how we treat others. Our conversations and our actions show interest in *their* accomplishments. *Love does not boast, it is not proud.* In all of these, our interest moves from ourselves to the other person.

Love is not rude. Love does not dishonour others, it does not act disgracefully. This could have in mind what Corinthian women were doing with their head coverings, or the rich who humiliated the poor at the Lord’s Supper, or the incestuous man in chapter 5. Love is always courteous and respectful. Courtesy is not a shallow replacement for love, it is often a deep expression of love. *Love is not rude*, it is courteous and respectful.

Love is not self-seeking. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul corrected the mature believers who knew that it was okay before God to eat meat that had previously been offered to an idol. It was fine that they ate that. The problem was that these mature believers ate this idol meat in front of new believers whose consciences still struggled with this. To the new believers, it felt like they were back worshipping that idol again.

Paul says to the mature ones, “*No one should seek their own good, but the good of others*” (10:24). *Love is not self-seeking.* This goes right to the heart of what love is.

Love reduces how I pay attention to *myself* and gives more attention to the *other* person. Love turns my focus from what's good for me to what's good for you. As the first paragraph said, without love we are nothing. This is not negotiable. *Love does not seek its own things, does not go around taking care of itself.*

Love is not easily angered. We do not read about anger in this Letter, but we read about quarrelling and divisions and jealousy and about people cheating each other in business and taking each other to court. There will certainly have been anger.

Love can get angry, people. Paul does not say, "love is never angered." Paul says, "*love is not easily angered.*" Love is not quick tempered, not short tempered, not irritable.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. This goes back to 1 Corinthians 6, where some in the church cheated others, and the others were taking the cheaters to court to get justice. Paul writes in chapter 6, *why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?*

Love keeps no record of wrongs. This is all because **God** is not easily angered, and in his treatment of us **God** keeps no record of our wrongs. What a thing! We can hardly imagine that!

Love keeps no record of wrongs. Hard to do. "Father, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Remember that the emphasis here is on how we treat people, how we speak and act to the people who wronged us. We speak to them and act toward them not to get even, but to show patience and kindness, courtesy and respect. In our hearts we let go of getting even.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Love never enjoys bad news, love never delights in someone else's failure, and especially, love is never a gossip. Love avoids talking about other people's bad news and failures. Instead, love rejoices when people do well, love rejoices when the good thing happens.

All of this talks about life in the believing congregation. It is not love for God, or love for the world, it is love for one another that's in view here.

Verse 7: *Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* I am using the ESV for this verse because it translates this line more traditionally and that's better here.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

The first and the last are almost identical: *Love bears all things, endures all things.* Love puts up with a lot. This gets lived out among us. People in our congregation know about this. You carry things, you put up with a lot, you endure things, because of the Lord's call to show love.

And that, my brothers and sisters, is what love is. And remember the first paragraph: without this we produce nothing, we are nothing, and we gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul wrote this to a church that did not love well. I don't know if we love well or not, but I know that we try to live this way. What we must grasp is that if they did not treat the people in their church this way, they were nothing. If we do not treat the people in our church this way, we are nothing, we produce nothing, we gain nothing.

We sometimes evaluate our lives before God on the basis of our private disciplines and experience and our private sins. There is less emphasis on these things in the Bible. The Lord will ask us mostly about this: were we patient, were we kind, and so on.

You people often live this out with energy and compassion. This matters to our God and our Lord more than anything else.

Why Love is Important, Again: It is Permanent – 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Love is important because it will last forever. The whole realm of spiritual gifts will pass away, gifts of prophecy and tongues and knowledge. The gifts are a part of this temporary age, they keep us on track but they are quite limited.

Paul is no enemy of spiritual gifts. He says in Corinthians that he himself speaks in tongues more than any of them, and he thinks they should seek the gift of prophecy so they can strengthen and encourage and comfort each other. How about that for prophecy: prophets speak to strengthen and encourage and comfort each other. But the whole gift thing is on the way out.

Gifts will all cease, they will be stilled, it will all pass away, because we won't need them. What will last is faith and hope and love. Faith – we will keep our trusting God and the Lord Jesus. Hope – we keep hanging on to what God has promised for the future. Love – we keep being patient and kind to each other along the way. And the most important of these last three is love.

So, says Paul, invest your life in something that lasts. Don't invest it in gifts prophecy and tongues and knowledge, though don't ignore those either, but use them in love!! Amen.

PRAYER: Father, we pray for ourselves what Paul prayed for the church at Philippi. May our love for each other abound more and more, with knowledge and insight, so that we will choose what is best. That way we will be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. If you answer this prayer, Father, we will be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, and we will bring praise and glory to you. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord make our love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else. May he strengthen our hearts so that we will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.