

## **The Greatness of Love (Part 2)**

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Not too long ago someone came to me with a modest request. I was preoccupied and didn't want to be interrupted. I didn't want to enter into their circumstances because I was already overwhelmed with my own. You may not want to know this about me. . . but I'm pretty sure the 95% of you have experienced something similar. . . The longer we talked the more agitated I got. Internally an anger started to well up within me. Pretending to listen, my mind recalled past annoyances with this person. By the time that interaction was over my mind was racing with some rather unkind thoughts.

For better or for worse, I don't think this person had any idea what was happening with me internally. After all, I was hiding behind a mask (literally and figuratively). But how should I diagnose what happened there? One diagnosis is that the other person made me angry. The diagnosis from the passage we just read would be that my love for that person was deficient because "love is patient, love is kind. . . love is not provoked. . . lover doesn't hold grudges. . ."

Biblically speaking, it's not enough merely to give the appearance of loving others; we're supposed to love others from the heart. David's prayer in Psalm 19 was, "14 Let the words of my mouth **and the meditation of my heart** be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my Redeemer."

So today we are going to talk about the nature of love - *agape* love - in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Last week we talked about why it matters whether or not we love people. We discussed **the consequences of lovelessness** in verses 1-3. Lovelessness nullifies any influence we might have, any knowledge we might possess, and any sacrifices we might make. Without love, we are just more noise in an already-noisy culture; our knowledge and giftedness don't benefit us or anybody else. In the kingdom our talents and skills and expertise pale in comparison to character.

Before we consider these fifteen short statements in verses 4 through 7, I want to make three observations about this list.

**First**, Paul is describing actions, what love **does**. Paul uses fifteen **verbs** to describe what love **does**. Just like faith without works is dead, "love" without these actions isn't really love. This should keep us honest. Paul is saying that our actions are an accurate reflection of our love. This will keep us from thinking, "I'm really a loving person, but I can't help being arrogant at times because I'm actually superior to everyone around me." No, Paul says, showing arrogance and showing love are mutually exclusive.

**Second**, Paul wants us to know **what love is** and **what love isn't**. He mentions seven things love is and eight things love isn't. We need both, don't we? We see something similar in the ten commandments; seven out of ten are "Thou shalt nots" - negative commands. We need to know which virtues to cultivate, **and** we need to know which vices to avoid.

**Third**, Paul's description of love has quite a bit of overlap with his description of **the fruit of the Spirit** in Galatians 5. Both passages include love, joy/rejoicing, patience, and kindness. This overlap should remind us that the type of love Paul describes here is produced by the Holy Spirit. We don't just try hard to love; we allow the Holy Spirit to make us loving people.

Let's dig in. . . I've decided to group and discuss these statements under four headings that I think summarize most of what Paul is saying in these verses. (I won't make comments about every single statement, but I'll come close.)

***Love remains gracious.*** (1 Corinthians 13:4) The first two statements about love suggest a gracious, generous way of treating people.

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

**Love is patient.** The KJV translates the term "patience" quite literally as "long-suffering." If you're patient, you suffer a long time when people cause you trouble. Instead of having a short fuse, you put up with the irritations of others for a long time. You're not seething on the inside and looking patient on the outside; the Spirit actually gives you the capacity to be long suffering. In this way we imitate God who is "slow to anger" (Exodus 34:6) and "patient" toward us (2 Peter 3:9).

**Love is kind.** An active translation would be "love shows kindness" (as opposed to being insulting or cruel or condescending). We're told in numerous places that God is kind. In Romans 2:4, for example, we're told that "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (God's patience is also mentioned). God's kindness, not His wrath, is what leads us to repentance. When we see the infinite kindness and patience God has shown us, we are prompted to turn from our sin and move toward Him.

Love wants the best for the other person. And so if we love someone, we too will be long-suffering and we too will show kindness ***because that's what softens people's hearts and draws them to God.*** You know this firsthand: if you experience people as impatient and unkind, they have little or no influence in your life; they're like a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. If they are patient and kind - in other words, if they show you love - chances are you will listen to them, even if they are telling you hard truths, and they will draw you closer to God.

The second cluster of statements tells us that:

***Love renounces expressions of superiority (real or imagined).*** (1 Corinthians 13:4) In the second half of verse 4 Paul makes a couple of statements that should make us evaluate how we think about and talk about our strengths - those areas where we excel.

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

Why do you think Paul felt compelled to write that “**love does not brag** and **is not arrogant**”? Probably because some of the Corinthians (at least) had a problem with viewing themselves as superior to others, especially when it came to giftedness, knowledge, and sacrifice (the three things Paul mentioned in verses 1 through 3).

We all have strengths, so it’s likely that you are superior to others in some way:

- \* Maybe you are more knowledgeable than others about Scripture, current events, politics, your career, etc.
- \* Maybe you’ve got more life experience than most of your friends.
- \* Maybe you have exceptional relational skills.

Whether you’re actually superior in these ways or whether you only think you’re superior, the most natural thing in the world is to find ways to impress people, ways to make yourself look good.

In that context, Paul says, “**Love does not brag.**” A loving person seeks the good of others, and bragging does not accomplish that. If anything, boasting/bragging puts people off, drives them away, makes them less teachable and receptive to what you’re offering.

Similarly, love “**is not arrogant.**” The verb translated “is not arrogant” is found only seven times in the New Testament, and six of those are found in 1 Corinthians (4:6, 4:18, 4:19, 5:2, 8:1), suggesting that arrogance was a prominent problem in the church at Corinth. As you know, people are drawn toward humility, not arrogance. Arrogance is a type of lovelessness that nullifies our strengths, giftedness, and sacrifices.

The place to learn humility is from Jesus Himself. He was always the most gifted, brilliant, sacrificial person everywhere He went. He was always right in every debate. And yet He was always “humble in heart.”

The third cluster of statements tells us that:

***Love’s refuses to retaliate (internally or externally).*** (1 Corinthians 13:5-6) In verses 5 and 6 Paul seems to have in mind difficult relationships - one in which you’ve been offended or sinned against. As we talk about these verses bring to mind a relationship like that. The offense could be something trivial or something that’s consequential.

5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

In the middle of verse 5 Paul says that “[**Love**] **is not provoked.**” I talked about this a bit at the first of this message. If you love someone you aren’t provoked to anger (or irritation). Instead of looking for an excuse to “go off” on that person, you’re giving them the benefit of the doubt.

I know that there’s such a thing as “righteous indignation.” Jesus turned over tables in the temple (twice), and Jesus had harsh words for the Pharisees (Matthew 23). But the evidence suggests that for Jesus and for Paul righteous indignation was very rare; it

was like a garnish on the side of the plate, not the main dish. We need to avoid rationalizing our anger by calling it righteous; it might only be self-righteous.

As well, Paul also writes that “[**Love**] **does not take into account a wrong suffered.**” The ESV translates it, “. . . is not resentful.” Paul uses an accounting term here; he’s saying that love doesn’t have a ledger that keeps track of the ways people have wronged you because you have no desire to retaliate. In my experience, this is some of the most demanding heart-level work that we have to do if we want to love people well. This is where the “meditations of our hearts” need to be brought to our consciousness and submitted to the Lordship of Christ.

6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;

Paul still has in mind a difficult relationship when he writes that “[**Love**] **does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth.**” Negatively, if you love someone you don’t “rejoice in their unrighteousness”; in other words, you won’t “gloat over” their failures (so Thiselton, p. 1054) - either because their failure makes you look good by comparison or because their failure “gives you an opportunity to lecture them or rebuke them” about their wrongdoing. You find no joy in that.

Positively, love “rejoices with the truth.” You celebrate the truth, wherever you find it, even in the life of someone you don’t generally get along with. You love the truth more than putting others in their place. This is hard, but if you want the best for people you’ll rejoice when you see good in their lives.

Love refuses to retaliate against those who give us trouble. We don’t return evil for evil or insult for insult, but we give a blessing instead (1 Peter 3:9). Why? Because that’s how God has treated us in Christ.

Finally, the statements in verse 7 tell us that:

**Love keeps trusting God on behalf of others.** (*1 Corinthians 13:7*) Verse 7 reads this way in most translations:

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

This verse is somewhat confusing because it almost sounds contrary to other Scriptures. The idea, for example, that love “bears all things” almost sounds like Paul is saying that if you love someone you have no boundaries concerning their behavior; you just “take it” and bear whatever they do. But that type of response is at odds with numerous other Scriptures. Paul even told the Corinthians to discipline certain people in order to bring them back to a place of obedience and fellowship (see 5:1-2).

So what is Paul saying here? I think Paul is saying that love doesn’t place “limits” on what it will do for the benefit of others. Parents, for example, generally have this type of love their children. Instead of saying, “I am willing to sacrifice this much and no more,” they normally say, in effect, “I will do whatever it takes to see you mature and healthy and productive. I will walk with you if you get in trouble at school or with the law, I will

trust God to work in your life, I will never give up the hope that you will become the person God wants you to become. In short, I will endure whatever it takes to see you thrive.”

I think that’s what Paul is saying here in verse 7. Instead of giving up on people, we have a long-term commitment to their well-being. This involves staying in relationship and trusting God to work in their lives. In 2 Timothy 2:10 Paul wrote this about his commitment to the church:

10 For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory.

If you read the context of 2 Timothy 2 you’ll see that Paul willingly endured imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. Here in 1 Corinthians 13:7 Paul is urging this same type of “**no-limits love**” in the body of Christ.

The opposite would be a cynical, pessimistic attitude toward others which says, “I’m not going to put up with your weaknesses and sins (I’m not going to bear with you), I don’t believe that God can change your life, I have no hope you’ll ever be someone whose life counts, and therefore I’m giving up on you.” By contrast, love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. It could be called no-limits love.

Qualification: Having said all of that, I want to acknowledge that there are extreme cases, even in the body of Christ, where people become so toxic that the relationship needs to be put on hold (for a time at least). Sometimes a person can be so divisive that you need to “turn away” from him/her for the good of all (Romans 16:17-18). The norm is to do the hard work to reconcile relationships; but there are extreme cases in which other Scriptures need to be applied. [See *When to Walk Away* by Gary Thomas.]

**Conclusion.** How do we learn to love like Paul described? It begins by experiencing firsthand the type of love Paul describes. You experience this love through Jesus Christ. He embodied everything we’ve discussed today - humility, kindness, graciousness, generosity. He lived a sinless life, died on the cross as payment for our sins, and rose again on the third day. If you put your faith in Him, you enter into a covenant with God in which He removes your sins as far as the east is from the west; He remembers your sins no more. He pours out His love into your heart through the Holy Spirit. As you experience this love, showing this love becomes intuitive (not always easy, but intuitive because that’s what you’ve experienced).

Once you’ve experienced the love of God through Jesus, you’re now able to hear and begin to obey the three great love commands: Love God, love one another, and love your neighbor as yourself. That’s what we’re going to pursue in our 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting that begins next Sunday morning. The heart of a disciple is a heart of love - loving God, one another, and our neighbors. The Sunday messages and the daily meditations will focus on taking next steps in cultivating hearts that overflow with this type of love. Please sign up through the Church Center App or through the eBlast so

that we'll know you're participating; we'll send you the daily emails with meditations and a daily prayer guide.