

Love Is...

1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13

Key Verse: 13:4

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

Chapter 13 has been called the best love poem that was ever written. Many people love this chapter and have memorized it, without knowing the meaning. If there were a Nobel prize for literature in Paul's time, he would surely have received it. Paul could write so well because he had experienced the love of Christ personally. Man's root problem is a sin problem that breaks our love relationships with God and with others. When we are loved and love others, we are happy. We are all pursuing true love. Yet many do not know what true love is. This passage teaches us the true love that we must pursue. In 12:31b Paul says, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." This is the way of love. When we have this love, our souls are fully satisfied and we can be a blessing. Let's see what this love is.

In Greek there are three words for love: eros, phileo and agape. Eros is physical or romantic love. Phileo is brotherly love. Agape is God's love which is selfless, sacrificial and unconditional. In this passage, when Paul used the word "love," he used the word "agape." Paul is describing the love of God in Christ. In this love poem, Paul explains why we need this kind of love (1-3), what love is (4-7), and the characteristics of love (8-13).

I. Without love I am nothing (1-3)

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In verses 1-3, Paul explains why we need love by using the phrase "If I" four times. Look at verse 1. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal." Here, Paul first mentions speaking in tongues of men and of angels. This speech may be as fluid as liquid silver, perfect in meter and diction, pace and orchestration. We want to speak like this. But without love, it is like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. The empty can makes the loudest noise. Words without love can come from an evil stepmother. She may say the right thing, but without love it hurts the children. On the other hand, one's speech may be choppy, and one's vocabulary poor, yet when he or she speaks in love people accept it-even rebuking words. When we have love we can be good coworkers and good Bible teachers. We want to teach well with correct words. But people really want love rather than correct words. Here we learn that love is everything; fluent speech is a bonus.

Look at verse 2. "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 have not love, I am nothing." One may have tremendous spiritual insight that comes from the gift of prophecy and be able to explain difficult passages of Scripture and how they might apply to our own times. But without love, this can be exercised with a critical spirit to the harm of others. In this uncertain world, if we can foretell what will happen in the future, it is very helpful and assuring. In our information generation, if we can fathom all knowledge like Solomon, how wonderful in doing God's work. However, if we have not love, we are nothing. In verse 2, the gift of faith is special faith that can do miracles. We need this kind of faith when we want to register our Bible students for the summer conference. But without love it is nothing.

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Look at verse 3. "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." To help poor people is beautiful. It requires sacrifice. Some people sacrifice with a life-giving spirit to help the poor. But without love, it is nothing. They may be recognized by people. But to God, it is nothing. God sees our inner motive in giving something to the poor. When we observe verses 1-3, we learn that the motive in exercising spiritual gifts is important. It must be love. We absolutely need love when using spiritual gifts. We cannot see love with our eyes. We can see the effects of tongues, prophecy and faith, but we cannot see love. So we easily ignore love, or treat it lightly. However, love is like life. Life is invisible, but it is essential for our body. If we do not have life in our body, it is nothing but a dead corpse. In the same way, when we do not have love, our spiritual service is nothing. So we must earnestly pray that God may give us true love in whatever we do, such as delivering messages, teaching the Bible, giving to the poor, or sacrificing ourselves and our families for God's work. Whatever we do, we need true love.

II. What love is (4-7)

Then, what is true love? In verses 4-7, Paul tells us what true love is.

First, love is patient. Look at verse 4a. "Love is patient..." It seems very odd to us that true love is patience. Here, to be patient does not mean merely tolerating another's existence as time passes by. It means to bear one's weaknesses and sins to the end without judging, without giving up, and having hope for them to grow. It is not easy to be patient. When we raise children or disciples, at first we have hope for them to grow. But in time we find their weaknesses. We become impatient, saying, "This person is useless. I cannot bear him anymore." We become critical

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and condemning and give up. Impatience produces negative emotions. Impatience is the enemy of raising disciples or rearing children. Therefore, love is patient. Love is willing to bear pain in hope. In order to help someone else, we need love that is patient. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and something we must learn (Gal 5:22). Sometimes, I feel I cannot bear with others. Then, I remember God's patience with me. As a young man I was full of eros and did wicked things to my own detriment and that of others. I looked useless in my own eyes. But God's servants prayed for me and taught the word of God patiently, in great hope that I would grow to maturity. When I remember God's patience through his servants, I can be patient with others.

God is so patient. Romans 2:4 says, "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience...." God forebears all of our wrongdoing in the hope that we will come to our senses and repent. Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son. His father knew he would squander his property and cause trouble. But his father let him go, shedding many tears. In his pain, the father did not forget his son. He waited for him to return. We can imagine how painful the father's heart was as he waited for his son. But he never stopped loving his son, and he never lost hope. Because he waited patiently, when his son came back, he could accept him as he was and restore him. Jesus patiently bore with all kinds of people while on earth. Jesus was patient all the way to the cross, where he bore the sins of the world in his body. Despite the unbearable pain, Jesus prayed for those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34a). Jesus patiently bore our sins and purchased forgiveness for us on the cross. We need this patience to raise children and disciples.

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Second, love is kind. Look at verse 4a. "...love is kind." Many people think that kindness is an attribute of character. They reason that some are born kind, and others are born mean. However, kindness is not part of one's character. Kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul was once a mean person, persecuting Christians. But when the Holy Spirit worked in him, he became a kind person. So he said in Galatians 2:7, "...but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children." Jesus was kind to his disciples; Jesus was never critical or legalistic. So he said in Matthew 11:29, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Let's learn of Jesus to be kind and gentle.

Third, love is not... (4b-5). Let's read verses 4b-5. "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." Here, "envy" is the same as "jealousy." It is interesting that both jealousy and love have zeal. But the emphasis is different. Love has zeal for others. Jealousy has zeal for oneself. Love comes from considering others better than oneself, praying for them, and serving them, thinking, "He is better than me in some sense. I respect him." But one who is jealous thinks, "I must always be better than you in every way." If someone else seems to be doing well, the jealous cannot bear it. If someone else is praised, the jealous begins to hyperventilate. That is not love. When we have love, we can recognize others' strong points, and accept them, and be happy together with them.

Pride is an attitude of heart that exalts oneself inordinately over others. Boasting is the expression of this pride. The boastful begin their conversations with "I," and end with "me." They boast about themselves by boasting about their spouses, children, education, social status, bank account, car, computer, and even their pets.

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The Corinthians boasted about their spiritual gifts. They reminded others of what they had done again and again until others were sick to their stomachs. Love is not proud.

Love is not rude. To be rude is to be ill-mannered; disagreeable or discourteous in word or action. Rude people despise others and speak harshly, even to those who are kind to them. Love is not rude. Love is not self-seeking. Love thinks about others' interests more than oneself. Love is not easily angered. Some people have a habit of blowing up at others and later say, "Oh, it is my character." But love is not easily angered. The problem is not one of temper, but of love.

Love keeps no record of wrongs. Sinful man wants to remember every harm done to him in detail, nursing his wounds and scars, with a desire to avenge. Some people seem to exist for the sake of taking vengeance. It is a temptation, in order to win an argument, to recall the mistakes and sins of others, especially between husbands and wives. Keeping a record of wrongs poisons relationships and one's own soul even more. Usually people are quick to forget grace, and slow to forget the wrongs done by others. So there is a saying, "Inscribe wrongs on stone; inscribe grace on water." However, love keeps no record of wrongs. What if God kept our record of wrongs and reminded us of each one again and again, every day. No one could survive. Amazingly, God forgives us, erasing all of our wrongs, and remembers them no more (Jer 31:34). Let's accept this love of God in our hearts and love others, keeping no record of wrongs.

Fourth, "love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (6). Some may misunderstand that love condones evil. Mafia member may claim that they love their crime family by risking their own lives to kill competing mafia family

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members. This is not love because it is focused on evil-doing. True love is holy love. True love is grounded in the truth. Romans 12:9 says, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

Fifth, love always... (7). Look at verse 7. "It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." When Jesus called his disciples they were vulnerable and weak in many ways. But under Jesus' protection they could grow as men of God (Mk 2:23-26; Jn 17:15). Love always protects.

Love always trusts. Trust is fundamental to a healthy relationship with others. Everyone wants to be trusted. But we must learn how to trust others first. We can see a good example in Barnabas. When Saul was suddenly converted, no one trusted him, wondering whether he had really changed. But Barnabas trusted Paul. When Barnabas needed a Bible teacher, he went to Tarsus and brought Paul back to Antioch to help him. Through Barnabas' trust, Paul became a pillar of God's history. Love always trusts. When a husband and wife love each other, they always trust each other.

Love always hopes. At first when we begin to serve a disciple, we can have hope. However, when we find their weakness, we easily lose hope. But love always hopes in spite of the loved one's shortcomings. Love never changes and never gives up hope for them. When Jesus called Peter, Jesus had hope for him to become a rock (Jn 1:42). Peter made many mistakes, even critical mistakes—denying Jesus three times during his passion. But Jesus never gave up hope for him. Jesus prayed that Peter would repent and strengthen his brothers (Lk 22:32). Yet, after Jesus' resurrection, Peter tried to go back to his old fishing job, forgetting his mission. Jesus visited Peter and served him with a delicious breakfast and

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restored his love relationship with him. Jesus embraced his disciples as they were, and had hope for them to become shepherds (Jn 21). Love always hopes. When we have hope we can persevere through all kinds of disappointments, failures and sufferings.

III. Love never fails (8-13)

Verse 8a says, "Love never fails." This means that love is everlasting, in comparison to the spiritual gifts which are temporal. Prophecies, tongues and knowledge will cease, be stilled and pass away. They are only parts of the whole. They are faint glimpses, and imperfect, partial images. Verse 10 says that perfection is coming. This means that Christ is coming to restore God's perfect reign. Christ is coming in power and glory and will transform all of his people to bear the image of God perfectly.

Look at verse 11. "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 childish ways behind me." "When I was a child" means that when he did not know the love of God, he was immature and self-centered. Those who do not have love are like children no matter how old their bodies may be. Such people are emotional and boast about themselves. Whatever they say, think or reason is childish. "A man" refers to one who knows true love and practices it. Such a person is spiritually mature. An unselfish life is always concerned for others and is willing to sacrifice for others with simplicity and purity. So we can say a mature person is childlike. However an immature person is childish. One does not become spiritually mature merely through the passing of time. One becomes spiritually mature by learning the love of Jesus and practicing it. When the love of Jesus touched Paul, he realized what

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true love is. He became ashamed of his childish way of life and he put it behind him. When he tried to imitate Jesus' love he could grow as a mother-like shepherd.

Verse 12a says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face." Now we have a very limited and impartial understanding of God and his kingdom. Now we are like people looking into one of the ancient bronze mirrors which yield a very poor reflection. But when Christ comes we shall see him face to face. This means that we will know him as he truly is. We will also know ourselves as he truly knows us. We will have a perfect love relationship with Christ and our Heavenly Father which lasts forever. There is no more need for prophecies, tongues or partial knowledge. Yet love remains. Love is eternal. Love that begins to blossom in our hearts as we live in this world will still be growing and bearing fruit into eternity. Love has everlasting value. Look at verse 13. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." We know that faith and hope are very precious. Yet love is even more precious. Love is the foundation of faith and hope.

The fundamental problem of human beings is sin that breaks our love relationships. We long most for the true love that relates us perfectly to God and to others. Many people are miserable, not because the price of gas is nearly \$5 a gallon, but because they do not know true love. Love is everything to us. When we know God's love and practice it, we are fully satisfied and happy. This love lasts forever. So we must desire this love more than anything. Let's pray to learn the love of God and practice it. Then we can be truly happy and build up the body of Christ.