

## WHAT LOVE DOES

### 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7

When we were in Turkey a couple of weeks ago I'm pretty sure the word I used most during that trip was "love". To Lucas and Grace I said, "I love your home; I love the view from your home; I love your friends on your team." About the things we saw and did, I said, "I love this food; I love the local bazaar." "I love the history of this city; I love the architecture; and I love these shops." And to our grandchildren, True and Echo, I said, at least a hundred times, "I love *you* so much."

Which raises the question, what *is* love? The answer to that question is not as easy or simple as one might think. That's because in the English language we use the word so frequently, to describe a wide range of feelings, about a variety of things. Obviously, my love for Turkish food is not the same as my love for True and Echo. It's not even close.

Now, to be sure, English speaking Americans have learned to distinguish between different degrees of love. But even so, I'm not sure we fully understand what love *really* means. I've asked many married or soon-to-be married couples to define love and have heard responses that are extremely diverse. Some describe it as a euphoric feeling; some as a physical attraction; others describe it as intense affection; still others as an enduring commitment.

None of those answers are wrong, because, in our culture, we use the word "love" to describe all of those things. But each of those things is very different from the others, which means that the word love *can* be confusing, because we cannot always be sure we know what someone means when they use the word.

Having said that I want to assert that we, as Christians, *cannot* be confused about the meaning of love. It is imperative that we understand it, because if you could distill the Christian life into its most essential component—it would be *love*. Love is the basic motive and the basic ethic of the Christian faith. Just before He left the earth our Lord said to His disciples, "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another*" (John 13:34). He went on to say, "*It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another*" (13:35). Love is *the* defining characteristic—the identifying mark of the child of God.

Love is such a priority in the Christian life that, as we learned last week in the first three verses of 1 Corinthians 13, without love the things we say and do are worthless, from God's perspective. Paul says that we may have spiritual gifts that enable us to speak with supernatural eloquence; we may have knowledge and skills and abilities that astound people; we may make the most extreme personal sacrifices, but if these things are not motivated by love and exercised in love, they don't have any value or substance.

The word Paul uses for love in 1 Corinthians 13 is familiar to many of you. It is the Greek word **agape**—a word that, in secular Greek literature, was a drab, common, infrequently used word. But the New Testament writers picked it up and invested it with unique and supernatural meaning (Hendricks). It came to mean the highest expression of love that is possible. In fact, it is the word used to describe *God's* love for us.

Unlike our English word for love, unlike other Greek words for love, **agape** does not have any reference to the way one *feels* about something or someone. It is not an emotional word; it is a *volitional* word. It is an *act* of the will. It is a deliberate choice and an enduring commitment to pursue the highest good of another.

That's a definition of **agape**. The problem is, it's an abstract definition. Which means that while you can grasp it intellectually, you may not have a clue as to what it looks like in real life.

That's why in verses 4-7 Paul tells us what love is by describing what love does. He says in **verses 4-7**. <sup>4</sup> *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* <sup>5</sup> *It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* <sup>6</sup> *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* <sup>7</sup> *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

Remember, Paul was writing to a strife torn congregation. He was writing to people who were behaving rudely and inconsiderately; people who were trying to get the spiritual upper hand; people who were being arrogant and condescending. That's why Paul didn't give them an abstract definition of love. He wants them to know what love looks like in real life.

So he divides this paragraph into three sections. The first is two basic attitudes which constitute a summary statement of love. This is expanded with eight things that love does *not* do and then five things that love does.

He says first, "*Love is patient...*"

This is a word that almost exclusively, in the New Testament, refers to patience with *people*, not patience in circumstances. And it is significant that Paul would start with this virtue, because it implies that the people with whom we relate are flawed. It implies that the people with whom we relate disappoint us and fail us. It implies that their progress in the Christian life is not as rapid as we would like, and it implies that their slow progress affects us personally. Why else would we need patience?

In the ancient world this was a word that was used of a man who was wronged and who not only refused to *retaliate*, but refused to *give up* on the person who committed the offense. And not just once, but even when that offense was committed over and over. This is patience that persists. So the KJV's rendering of "long-suffering" is appropriate.

"One of Abraham Lincoln's earliest political enemies was Edwin M. Stanton. He called Lincoln a 'low cunning clown' and 'the original gorilla'. 'It was ridiculous for people to go to Africa', he would say, 'when they could easily find [a gorilla] in Springfield, Illinois.' Lincoln never responded to the slander, but when, as president, he needed a secretary of war, he chose Stanton. When his incredulous friends asked why, Lincoln replied, 'Because he is the best man'.

"Years later, as the slain president's body lay in state, Stanton looked into the coffin and said through his tears, 'There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.' His animosity was finally broken by Lincoln's long-suffering, non-retaliatory spirit. Patient love won out" (Blomberg, p.339).

Someone who loves refuses to give up on people, even if they fail and disappoint and hurt again and again.

Do you have anyone in your life about whom you've thrown up your hands and said, "Hey, forget you! I've had enough!?" Anyone whom you've written off and determined that you're not going to have anything to do with anymore?

That's *not* a loving response, and it's not a Christian's option. Real love is patient. Real love perseveres. Think of Jesus with His disciples. Think of Jesus with you! Love doesn't give up.

That's because *agape* love enables us to see the big picture, just like God sees the big picture. We don't just see today's problems and failures, we see tomorrow's possibilities and we are willing to stick it out, and be committed, and do whatever we can for that person until those possibilities are realized.

Agape love enables us not just to see the person for what he is right now—with all his baggage and all his problems, we see down the road to what he is becoming, and we help him get there. We are committed to the process.

Love is patient.

But Paul also says, "...love is **kind**." Sometimes we think of kindness as a disposition. We often equate it with being *nice*. But that is not what this word means. Kindness is the counterpart to patience. Whereas patience has to do with our *reaction* to people, more specifically being *non-reactive*, kindness has to do with being *proactive*. It is *active goodwill*, and I want to emphasize the word *active*. This phrase would better be translated, "Love shows kindness." So the noun form of this word is often translated *generosity*. It has reference to being thoughtful, considerate, and helpful.

A good illustration of "kindness" is what Jesus was like when He encountered the woman at the well in Samaria. This was a woman, we find out in the story, who didn't have a good reputation. She was immoral. She was an outcast. Any "honorable" person in that day would have kept his distance and shunned her. Yet Jesus initiated a conversation with her. And he wouldn't let the conversation stay on a superficial level. He gently and yet persistently excavated the soil of her heart and conscience until not only did she see her need for the Savior, but she was ready to put all her trust in Him.

Jesus demonstrated *active goodwill*. He was fully engaged with her, fully attentive to her in order to meet her deepest needs. His love for this woman was expressed in His kindness. And we, who have His Spirit living in us, can and ought to do the same.

Paul goes on in verse 4 to begin listing eight things love does not do. "[Love] does not envy."

The word Paul uses literally means, "burning" or "boiling". The phrase would probably best be translated, "Love does not boil with envy."

Think of this statement in light of the status-seeking Corinthian culture and how it had infiltrated the church. People were envious of those who had the more dramatic spiritual gifts because those gifts made the people who possessed them *seem* more spiritual or important. Which, of course, is nonsense.

Jealousy, at its very core, is the opposite of love. If love wants to elevate another, jealousy wants to bring that person down. It has two forms. One says, "I want what someone else has." The other, which is even more sinister, says, "I wish they didn't have what they have."

There is a legend that the devil was once crossing the Libyan Desert and came across a group of his minions who were attempting to seduce a holy hermit. The demons were trying everything. They were directing at him the hot blast of sensual lust, but the hermit stood firm. They tried to fill his mind with fears and doubts, they tried to convince him that it was ridiculous to serve God, but the hermit was unmoved.

Satan watched his demons attacking this holy man, and finally he stepped in. He said, "Look, you are dealing with a special kind of saint here, and ordinary temptations are not going to work."

And so, the story goes, Satan leaned over to the holy man and whispered in his ear, “Your best friend has just been made Bishop of Alexandria.” And the legend says that a look of malignant jealousy crossed the holy man’s face.

The reason that story has been carried on for decades is that all of us realize there is a great deal of truth in it. Men and women who appear to have a spirituality that is unassailable often fall before the green eyed monster of jealousy (Haddon Robinson).

A friend tells you about a promotion he got that you thought you were getting, and outwardly you’re smiling, while inwardly jealousy has its teeth upon your soul. Another woman is complemented for her charm and beauty, and outwardly you’re agreeing, but inwardly you’re wishing it was you they were speaking of and not her. Your kids are struggling at school and your neighbor’s kids are getting straight A’s, and when he’s telling you about it, you pretend to be happy, but inwardly you’re all churned up.

That churning on our insides is what Paul meant when he used the word, “boil with envy.”

Why do we get jealous? The simple answer is: We get jealous because we’re focused on ourselves. We get jealous when we are pre-occupied with our own desires and what we think are our rights. We get jealous when we feel inferior, and we believe the lie that if only I had what that person has, or if only that person didn’t have it, or if only I could remove that person who does have it from my life, I would be more important, and others would think more highly of me.

But love is not jealous because love doesn’t focus on oneself. Love doesn’t focus on a person’s status or position or things or money. Love focuses on the other person’s soul, and it wants that soul to prosper, to succeed, to thrive. Love wants that person to be more prosperous, more successful, and more blessed than even oneself.

Paul goes on to say in verse 4, “[love] does not boast.” A good translation of this word is “windbag.” It refers to somebody who can’t stop bragging about his accomplishments, achievements, credentials, or whatever else might make him *seem* important or impressive.

If jealousy is what we feel toward those whom we feel have something better than we have; boasting is what we do when we want to make others think that we’re better than we are, or that we have something better than them. But just like jealousy, it focuses on the differences between ourselves and others.

A person boasts when he feels he is more talented, more beautiful, more gifted, richer, stronger, and smarter and he wants to convince people that these things make him superior to others. Boasting is his way of measuring himself against others, and declaring that he is better than them.

Of course, we know that most often the reason someone boasts is that he really feels *inferior* to others, and boasting is his way of trying to compensate for those feelings. He tries to convince others that he is impressive, even though he really feels unimpressive. He talks big because he feels small.

However, once again, the reason boasting is incompatible with love is that it is self-focused. It’s not interested in the other person. It is trying to get the other person to be interested in me.

It’s okay to want to be liked or admired. But when I am determined to convince someone how good I am, how smart I am, how talented I am, or how many important people I know, what I want from them is their approval. I’m interested in their vote; not in them.

But real love is just the opposite. It doesn't care about getting the other person's vote, it cares about the other person's well-being. It's interested in elevating the other person and pursuing their good.

William Carey is considered the father of modern missions. He was a brilliant missionary statesman and strategist. In England, before he went to India as a missionary, he was a cobbler—a repairer of shoes. But after arriving in India he learned 34 different languages and India has the Bible today because of the work of William Carey.

But when he went to India he was not accepted by many of the ex-pat British citizens that were living there, many of whom came from the nobility.

One evening Mr. Carey went to a dinner party, and one of the men sitting next to him decided to put him down. In a loud voice he said, "Mr. Carey I understand that you spent a large part of your life as a shoemaker."

William Carey said, "No sir, that's not accurate. I did not have enough ability to *make* shoes...I simply repaired them." That response indicated something about his view of himself. He was not concerned with impressing British nobility. He lived before God, and what God thought about him was enough. (H. Robinson).

Paul goes on to say, "*Love is not proud.*"

The word proud literally means inflated, so it is rightly translated in the Old KJV, "puffed up". Do you remember the illustration I gave when we were studying this word, *pride*, in 1 Peter 5 a few weeks ago? I asked you what letter of the alphabet a bicycle tire pump looks like. It looks like the letter "I". I asked you to take the handle of that letter "I" and start pumping, which gives you the definition of pride. Pride is an over-inflated "I"—an overinflated ego.

People who are proud are not proud *because* they are rich, or good looking, or talented, or intelligent. They are proud because they view those assets and gifts as things that make them better than others. Again, it's a means of comparison. And when we compare ourselves with others we cannot love, because we're focused on our differences, not the person.

The U.S. Constitution says "all men are created equal." It doesn't say that all men are created the same. We *are* different. We have different capabilities, different IQ's, different skills, different gifts. We have different levels of income and different resources. That's okay. But for the Christian it is never okay to look down on someone who has less of these things than you have. In so doing, you're not only disdainful of them, you're insulting the God who made them and gave them what they have.

Love doesn't focus on differences. Love focuses on persons. And because of that it is able to celebrate the differences in persons as the unique and special way God created them.

I want to stop there for today. We'll talk about the other things love does and does not do next week, Lord willing. But it's possible that some of you have heard this explanation of verse 4, and instead of feeling encouraged you're feeling discouraged, because when you put these descriptions of what love is and does next to your own life you realize you don't measure up.

If truth be told, you are *impatient*. You give up on people too quickly or too easily.

Or maybe you don't show kindness. Instead of being thoughtful, considerate, and helpful, you're aloof, indifferent, or abrupt with people.

Or perhaps you struggle with jealousy. Maybe you like to boast. Or maybe you have an over-inflated ego.

May I give you hope? The love Paul has been describing is *agape*, and *agape* is God's love. It is thoroughly supernatural. It emanates from the heart of God. And the only way to have it is to get it from Him; the only way to exercise it is to let Him exercise it through you.

In other words, your hope of possessing this love is just the same as your hope for eternal life. It rests in Jesus. But the good thing is that if you have put your faith and trust in Jesus, and you have been born again, then His Spirit lives in you. Which means you have 24/7 access to His love. You can get it from Him at any time, for any person, for every situation if you simply go to Him, ask Him for it, and trust Him to give it to you.

But you've got to get it from Him. You cannot manufacture or generate this kind of love yourself. It's not human; it's divine. And you've got to get it from the Source. And fortunately that Source lives in you.

So if you are a genuine follower of Jesus and your marriage is in a shambles, or you have relationships that are strained, or people from whom you are alienated, or former friends or family members that you want nothing to do with, and you are at least partly to blame because of your impatience, your lack of kindness, your jealousy, or your pride, you're not taking advantage of what God has made possible for you. And you are settling for far less than what God has offered you.

Part of what God did for you when He saved you is give you a capacity to love with His love. To love the most difficult people in the most difficult circumstances. To look outside yourself and your own interests and desires, and focus on others. You can do it because the Spirit of God—the Spirit of Jesus—who perfectly loved in every way that Paul described here, lives in you and wants to love through you.

## What Love Does 1 Corinthians 13:4

**Main Idea:** Love expresses itself in patience, kindness, happiness for and humility toward others

### What love is (the meaning of agape)

- It is not an \_\_\_\_\_ word; it is a \_\_\_\_\_ word
- It is an act of the \_\_\_\_\_
- It is a deliberate \_\_\_\_\_ and an enduring \_\_\_\_\_ to pursue the highest \_\_\_\_\_ of another

### What love does

#### Two summary statements

##### Love is patient

Patience is not just the refusal to **retaliate**, but the refusal to **give up** on those who fail, disappoint, offend, or hurt us

##### Love is kind

Kindness is active **goodwill**

Kindness has reference to being **thoughtful**, **considerate**, and **helpful**

#### Three negative statements

Love does not envy (“boiling”)

Love does not boast (“windbag”)

Love is not proud (“inflated”)

#### Success and failure in love’s expression

## Application Questions

### 1 Corinthians 13:4

In verse 4a Paul is describing patience with people, not patience in circumstances. The need for patience implies that people can get on your nerves or underneath your skin.

Are there people in your life right now for whom you need patience? Why?

What would patience look like in your relationship with those people? Be specific

Will you pray right now, and each day this week, that God will give you his love for those people, so that you can express his love toward them? Pray that God will fill you with his Spirit. Remember, patience is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

In verse 4b Paul is describing active benevolence toward people (kindness). This means being thoughtful, attentive, engaged, and helpful, even to those who might naturally rub you the wrong way.

How can you show kindness this week to a person in your life who naturally rubs you the wrong way?

Will you pray right now, and each day this week, that God will give you opportunity to show kindness to that person, so that you can express his love toward him or her? Pray that God will fill you with his Spirit. Remember, kindness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

In verse 4c Paul says that love does not boil with envy.

Are you envious of anyone? If so, why are you envious?

Will you confess that envy, right now, to the Lord, and ask him to replace it with his love for that person?