

WHAT LOVE DOES (PART 3)

1 CORINTHIANS 13:6-7

One day Linus announced to Lucy that he was going to be a doctor. And Lucy, in her gentle manner, said, “YOU A DOCTOR! Ha! That’s a big laugh! You could never be a doctor! You know why? You don’t love mankind!” After contemplating this accusation for a moment, Linus replied, “I love *mankind*. It’s *people* I can’t stand” (Schulz, 11-12-59).

And that’s where the real rub is. We all love mankind. But mankind doesn’t have a face—a face that smirks or scowls. Mankind doesn’t have personality quirks and idiosyncrasies. Mankind doesn’t get on our nerves or under our skin. But people do. People can be careless and clumsy. People disappoint us and hurt us with a disturbing degree of frequency. People are not always easy to love.

Which is why it is one thing to *talk* about love, it is one thing to *know* that love is supposed to be the highest priority in our lives as Christians; it is one thing to be able to *define* love. But it is another thing to *actually* love. And that is true just as much in the church as anywhere else.

Someone said, “The church is like Noah’s ark. If it weren’t for the storm on the outside you couldn’t stand the stench on the inside” (Hendricks).

I grew up in a Baptist church, and I went to a Baptist seminary. One of the courses we were required to take in order to graduate was called “Baptist Life”. If it sounds dull, it’s because you don’t know much about Baptist history. If there were such a thing as a rating system for seminary courses that class would have been rated PG-13...for violence.

Well, maybe that’s a slight exaggeration, but I did suggest to my professor that they change the name of the course from “Baptist Life” to “Baptist Strife”. You wouldn’t believe all the disagreements and divisions, schisms and splits, fractures and fall-outs that have occurred in the past hundred years.

But by no means do Baptists have a corner on this kind of behavior. Several other denominations have been just as quarrelsome, and have been just as good as Baptists at parting ways.

There have been many attempts to determine how many Protestant denominations there are in the world today. Some have estimated that there are over 30,000, though that figure is disputed by others. But it is not hard to imagine several thousand denominations, most of which started as a group that split off from another group and started their own thing. I’m not suggesting that there are never legitimate reasons for doing that, but many of these splinter churches have begun because of unresolved conflict. I’m not so much talking about theological conflict, but conflict that comes from personality clashes, or power struggles, or differences of opinion over disputable matters.

And in such cases the reason these people have parted ways is because it’s much easier, when we have differences, to go our separate ways than to resolve them. Resolution takes work and effort and cooperation and patience and wisdom and humility and, most of all, love. And those things have all too often been in short supply in the church. Much easier to disagree, and then divide, disagree, and then divide until...well, until it becomes absurd.

There is a fellowship of believers in a Kenyan town called, “The Church of God.” That fellowship had some unresolved conflict and so it split, and the group that left started a new church which they called, “The *True* Church of God.” Eventually the people in that church could not see eye to eye on some issues and so some of them left and started

another new church, which they called, “The *Only* True Church of God.”

Sadly, in the two thousand year history of the church there has been a great tendency for us, as Christians, to focus on our differences. And the result of focusing on our differences is that we often fail to see each other as God sees us.

Instead we compare ourselves with each other. And when we compare ourselves with each other it almost always leads to pride or insecurity or jealousy or irritation. When we compare ourselves with each other we, inadvertently, view each other as rivals or threats or hindrances. We begin to think that we don’t need each other, or that things would be better if we didn’t have to be with each other, or that if only we didn’t have to deal with each other’s differences we’d be a lot more comfortable, there’d be a lot fewer problems, and we’d get a lot more done.

Which is why Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. He is writing to a church that was divided. There was competition and rivalry and pride and prejudice. There was a “me-first”, “how-can-I-get-the-upper-hand” kind of attitude.

After addressing these things Paul reveals the solution in chapter 13. The solution is love—loving each other with *agape* love, the love that has its source and origin in God, and the love that he has enabled us to express because of his Spirit who lives in us. For a congregation that prided itself on their spiritual gifts and faith and knowledge and service and sacrifice, Paul must have startled them when he said that they may have spiritual gifts that enable them to say and do extraordinary things; they may have faith and knowledge that astound people; they may make the most extreme sacrifices, but if these things are not motivated by love and exercised in love, they are absolutely worthless. It is *love* that gives value and substance to spiritual gifts and service and sacrifice.

We also learned that the word for love, *agape*, is not an *emotional* word but a *volitional* word—an act of the will. It refers to a deliberate choice and an enduring commitment to pursue the highest good of another. The focus of *agape* is the *person*. Not what the person says or does or doesn’t do. But who the person *is*...in God’s sight, and what the person is becoming. In fact, the goal of love is to help that person become everything God intended him/her to be. And love is the catalyst that assists in that process.

That’s the definition of *agape*. But, admittedly, it’s an abstract definition, and abstract definitions don’t always help us understand 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. **Verses 4-7.**

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Paul divides this paragraph into three sections. The first is two basic attitudes which constitute a summary statement of love. He expands this with eight things that love does not do and five things that love does.

In the last two weeks we have focused our attention on verses 4 and 5. This week, we are going to look at verses 6 and 7, which include the five things that love does. I’m going to read these two verses again in the *ESV*, since it is more faithful to the original language and I won’t have to do so much explaining why the *NIV* didn’t translate it quite right.

“[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (ESV).

Verse 6 begins with the last of eight things that love does *not* do. *“It does not rejoice at wrongdoing.”* Love doesn’t take pleasure in a person’s moral failure. It doesn’t enjoy hearing news about someone who has succumbed to temptation or fallen into sin. It doesn’t delight to hear a bad report about someone—that so and so is struggling, or so and so has fallen upon hard times.

That’s the premise of a lot of television programs. There’s an attempt to highlight someone’s sin or explore someone’s failure or exploit someone’s wrongdoing and present it in such a way that the audience is entertained by it or can take pleasure in it.

But when we take satisfaction in hearing about other people’s sins, it proves our lack of love for those people. People who love take sin very seriously and are sorrowful when other people fall into sin, or when evil befalls them.

It is likely that when Paul wrote these words he had in mind a particular situation he had addressed earlier in this letter. In chapter 5 Paul wrote to the church about a man in their fellowship who was having an incestuous relationship with his stepmother. And Paul rebuked the church not merely for tolerating the sin, but for being proud of themselves for being so tolerant.

Paul goes on to say that if they really loved the person who was living in sin, they would be filled with grief. Because sin is destroying him, sin is tarnishing the reputation of Jesus whom he confesses as Savior and Lord. Sin displeases and grieves our heavenly Father.

Grief over someone’s sin is the loving response, and is just the opposite of rejoicing over someone’s sin. If we really love someone we won’t take pleasure in a person’s moral failure. Instead, look at the last part of verse 6, *“[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.”*

I don’t think Paul’s use of the word, “truth,” here, is a reference to doctrine or propositional truth. The context indicates that he is talking about a person’s moral conduct and behavior. *Truth*, then, would be a synonym for moral integrity, holiness, or a life that is congruent with the gospel message. In other words, love rejoices when someone is living as God intended him/her to live.

And that word, *rejoices*, in the original language, conveys an intense and expressive kind of joy. What is more, the word *agape*, which is the New Testament term for the highest expression of love, in its most fundamental sense, means “to acclaim.” It has the idea of congratulating or applauding or celebrating. That’s what love is and does. It celebrates what God has done, is doing, and is going to do in the lives of his children. It gets excited for what is happening to them as they are living as God intended.

Lucas and Grace happened to be staying at our house when both True and Echo learned to walk, two years apart. Do you know what we, their parents and grandparents, did when we saw them take their first steps? Why, we just ignored them and went on with business as usual. After all, every kid learns to walk. What’s the big deal? Especially because True was so tentative and awkward. Echo’s legs were so wobbly and she was so unsteady.

Not on your life! All of us stopped what we were doing, ran into the living room, and got on our knees close to where the action was. And we were laughing ...and applauding...and saying, “Good job! Way to go! You’re doing great!” We got out our cameras and started filming. We held out our hands and begged him or her to walk to “me”. And when they did we would hug them and kiss them and tell them how proud of

them we were.

Why? Because we love them. And when you love someone things like that are a big deal.

It is the same in the Christian life with our brothers and sisters in Christ, or our spiritual children in Christ. It's a big deal when they walk in the way and on the path God intended them to walk. It's a big deal when they move forward and make progress, not because it's so rare or unusual, but because we love them, and they and their walk are precious to us. It is something to celebrate and applaud.

Paul goes on in **verse 7**, "*Love bears all things.*" The word "bears" literally means "covers" in the Greek language. It was the word that was used of a *roof* for a house. Love acts as a covering for a person. It protects from exposure or harm or shame or anything that would have a detrimental effect. It guards a person's reputation, it defends his/her honor.

A four-year old boy named Billy was asked what love means. He said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You know that your name is safe in their mouth." That's insightful. Love protects the honor and dignity of a person. Love doesn't allow that person's name to be trashed or their reputation to be tarnished.

Again, love is concerned with the other person's well-being. It is interested in promoting his/her well-being at whatever cost, in whatever circumstances. And it will go to great lengths to protect that person so they can become everything God intended.

An article in National Geographic told the story about a forest fire in Yellowstone National Park. After the fire, forest rangers began their trek up a mountain to assess the inferno's damage. One ranger found a bird literally petrified in ashes, perched statuesquely on the ground at the base of a tree. Sickened by the eerie sight, he knocked over the bird with a stick. When he struck it, three tiny chicks scurried from under their dead mother's wings.

The loving mother, keenly aware of impending disaster, had carried her offspring to the base of the tree and had gathered them under her wings, instinctively knowing that the toxic smoke would rise. She could have flown to safety but she refused to abandon her babies. When the blaze had arrived and the heat had singed her small body, the mother had remained steadfast. Because she had been willing to die, those under the cover of her wings would live.

Of course, Jesus is the supreme example of one who did this. When he died on the cross he bore our sins in his body, and his shed blood covered our sins and protected us from the unspeakable torments of hell. And we are told throughout Scripture that it was *love* that compelled him to do this.

"*Love believes all things.*" Please don't interpret this to mean that love believes everything it hears or that love is gullible. This simply means that love is optimistic, not pessimistic. Love has confidence in what God is able to do in a person, no matter how many times they've failed, or how stuck they are, or how hard their heart seems to be.

I received a text this week from someone I love very much, whose heart, just a few months ago, seemed impenetrable, who was living in willful sin, and who didn't give a rip about Jesus. He writes, "God has taken me on an epic journey. Turning back and really following Jesus with my own faith for the first time has been awesome and humbling. God has shown me his love in such a way that I want to run toward him with all my soul. Thank you for praying for me. Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for loving me with

Jesus love.”

I want to be clear that when Paul says, “love believes all things,” he is not saying that we are optimistic in a person’s ability to change or reform himself, or to soften her own heart. It means that we have confidence in what *God* is able to do in a person. He is the one who opens blind eyes, softens hard hearts, and transforms sinners into saints. And it’s all because of his love and mercy.

But there is something else about this statement that is very practical. Love believes the best about our brothers and sisters in Christ. That means giving a person the benefit of the doubt ought to be our reaction about any brother and sister when we hear something that is concerning or distressing. That doesn’t mean we shut our ears to the truth when it is negative, or that we cannot be convinced that a person is guilty when the facts are presented. But love considers someone innocent until proven otherwise. It is not cynical or suspicious or pessimistic.

One of the most striking examples of love I have ever witnessed comes from a man in this church. There have been occasions in the course of my relationship with him when I have seen him be misunderstood, criticized, and his motives grossly misinterpreted, and not only have I never heard him speak evil of those persons, but I have always heard him give them the benefit of the doubt. He always says, “Well, I know he/she loves the Lord.”

And sometimes I want to say, “Yeah but, look what they...” But you couldn’t convince him otherwise. He believes the best about the other person, and trusts what God is doing in their lives.

What a contrast to Job’s friends. After Satan was allowed to destroy Job’s family, his possessions, his servants, and his health, he sat in a pile of ashes, utterly devastated by all that had happened.

His “friends” tried to console him at first, but as they sat in silence they became more and more agitated for what they perceived to be Job’s stubbornness. That’s because they made an assumption that Job was suffering because he had been sinning in secret and God was punishing him. And most of the book contains the dialogue of conversations between Job and these friends, some of which get very heated because they have jumped to the conclusion that he is guilty.

That’s not love. Love doesn’t jump to conclusions without the facts. Love gives the benefit of the doubt. Love always trusts.

“Love hopes all things.” The word “hope” means to look forward with confidence to that which is good and beneficial. And the good and beneficial is whatever God wants to do in the person.

By the way, what God wants to do in a person, which is always for their best and always so they can reach their highest potential, may be different than what we hope for. For example, sometimes we hope that our loved ones will be immediately relieved of their painful circumstances. But God often uses painful circumstances to do his deepest and most enduring work in people’s lives. And so real love for a person is putting them in God’s hands and allowing him to do his work in their lives. Because if God is at work in their lives it’s going to turn out good. And we are assured that he who began that good work will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ.

“Love endures all things.” It never gives up on people, no matter what they do or how bad off they are.

Love holds fast to those it loves. It stands against overwhelming opposition and

refuses to let go of the person. It wraps itself around that person assisting him/her to become everything God intended him/her to be.

Along the road was a piece of iron. And there came an axe who said, "I'll make something of that piece of iron." Along came a saw and said, "I'll make something of that piece of iron." Along came a hammer and said, "I'll make something of that piece of iron."

The hammer tried first. It came down full force upon that piece of iron, and the head of the hammer flew off, and the piece of iron remained intact.

The saw said, "Watch me." And it came down with a mighty sweep, and it bent the teeth of that saw, and the piece of iron remained intact.

The axe said, "Let me try." And the axe came down with a mighty blow and it dented the blade of that axe, and the piece of iron remained intact.

Along came a little flame of fire, and said, "I'll make something of that piece of iron."

"Hah!" said the others. "What can you make?"

And the little flame came to that piece of iron and simply wrapped itself around it and stayed there...and stayed there...and stayed there and didn't let go. And after a while that piece of iron became red and molten and moldable, and its shape began to change, and it became something different than it was before.

My friends, the God who wrapped himself around us and made us who we are has entrusted us with the responsibility of wrapping ourselves around one another with his love (the flame) so that he can mold them into what he wants them to be. His love in us and expressed through us is an element that transforms people, and helps them to become all that God intended them to become.

I want to repeat what I said at the end of last week's message. What Paul has described in verses 4-7 is not a natural love. It is thoroughly supernatural. It emanates from the heart of God. And the only way to have it is to have his heart, and the only way to exercise it is to let him exercise it through you.

In other words, your hope of possessing this love is to trust Jesus, the author of this love, to give it to you. You must be filled with his Holy Spirit. You must let him control you. You must let him fill you with his love. And you must let his love overflow through you to others.