

## LOVE DEFINED

### 1 Corinthians 13

Online Sermon: [http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page\\_id=3567](http://www.mckeesfamily.com/?page_id=3567)

**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. 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.**

### 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, NIV

In first part of this sermon series we explored John Wesley's theory that the first three verses contain what for Paul must have been progressive, outward levels of spiritual maturity. We concluded that John Wesley has an interesting thesis that may have some merit. Even if you do not agree with him, Paul has listed some of the most impressive spiritual feats that any Christian could ever hope to obtain to prove a point. Even when we speak with the tongues of angels, attain all the knowledge of God that is humanly possible, have faith that can move a mountain, give we possess to the poor, or ultimately are willing to be put to death for righteousness sake; without love these outward signs of spiritual maturity are false and worthless to God. In today's sermon we are going to explore Paul's definition of love, what it is and what it is not.

#### What Love is and what it is Not

**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, 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. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.**

### 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, NIV

To interpret this passage correctly one must first understand some of the historical reasons why Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. Plagued with denominational politics, doctrinal disputes and liturgical preferences, one should not be surprised that this letter was addressed to the spiritual babies at the church of Corinth (3:1-2).<sup>1</sup> Living in one of the most prosperous cities in the ancient world, one that prided itself on their lavish lifestyles and tolerance to new ideas,

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 273.



had a profound affect on church unity. Divisive issues such as sexual immorality, civil litigation, marriage, idol meat consumption, hairstyles, proper behavior in community worship, and resurrection;<sup>2</sup> were tearing the church apart. To make matters worse factions formed that gave their allegiance to either Paul, Apollos, Cephas and perhaps Christ Himself. While Corinth could boast that they were materially rich, they remained spiritually immature because they had not learned what love is and how to put it into action.

If love is so “fundamental, irreplaceable and determinative for our life together as Christians,” the church of Corinth needed to know more clearly what love is.<sup>3</sup> So important is



love that Jesus summarized all of the commands by this single word (Matthew 22:37-40). Knowing that disciples of Christ are to be defined by their love (John 13:35) was not of much use to the church at Corinth when their definition of love remained severely tainted by their enormous wealth and interaction with the gods of the Roman empire. In verses four to seven Paul describes love with both positive and negative verbs. Paul uses the positive statements to help define what love is and then uses the negative ones to define what love is not.<sup>4</sup> Paul’s message is clear: no matter how outwardly successful a church may appear, without love its

foundation<sup>5</sup> will crumble as sand and be sifted and burned with the tares (Matthew 13:24-30). Let’s look at both the positive and negative verbs Paul uses to describe Christian love.

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Dieter Betz and Margaret M. Mitchell, “Corinthians, First Epistle to the,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1141.

<sup>3</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 229.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas J. Moo, “The Letters and Revelation,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 2350.

<sup>5</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 229.

**Verse 4: Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.**

Paul begins his definition by stating love is patient. Those who are patient forbear others by having a slowness to repay their offenses.<sup>6</sup> In chapters 12-14 we learn that the church was



struggling with jealousy, pride and selfishness as each member clamoured for honor and recognition.<sup>7</sup> Instead of being jealous and envious of the ministry success of others or proud and boastful of their own success, Paul tells the church that love is be concerned with giving itself, not asserting itself.<sup>8</sup> Jealousy and envy begin when admiration turns to resentment of what others have received or accomplished.<sup>9</sup> This attitude of self-importance and arrogance caused a great deal of conflict and adversity amongst the believers. In the face of this adversity and humiliation,<sup>10</sup> like Jesus, Paul encourages the church to not demand retribution but instead leave one's reputation and justice in the hands of God.<sup>11</sup>

When ill-treated one is to respond not with envy and the desire for retribution but instead with acts of kindness out of love for the other.

The wisdom contained in verse four is directly applicable to the members of today's churches. Who has not heard of church splits? Are not most of them either due to a lack of desire to forbear offenses due to the strife that comes from several leaders trying to climb the latter of importance? A study at the University of Arizona found that an average person speaks about 16,000 words per day.<sup>12</sup> A typical sentence has about 20 words.<sup>13</sup> So even if one is 99.87% accurate with their "love language," only one bad sentence slips off of their tongue,

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<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr, *I & II Corinthians*, vol. 7, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 230.

<sup>7</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 230.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 177.

<sup>9</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr, *I & II Corinthians*, vol. 7, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 230.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Martin McDonald, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Background Commentary: Acts-Philemon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Craig A. Bubeck, First Edition. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2004), 339.

<sup>11</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 230.

<sup>12</sup> Found on the web at <https://www.reference.com/world-view/many-words-speak-day-68b7ff8bd0b6943e>

<sup>13</sup> Found on the web at <https://strainindex.wordpress.com/2008/07/28/the-average-sentence-length/>

without forbearance they will cause church conflict on a daily basis! For our churches to survive, like those of Corinth, we need to learn God alone gets the credit for ministry success and God alone gets to judge and correct the body of Christ. This does not mean that church discipline is not to be carried out but merely that personal vengeance that comes from self-centeredness is not to be tolerated.

**Verse 5: It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.**

Love does not dishonor others by acting in a way that is rude or unbecoming of a Christian. The church of Corinth had many members who were narcissists, placing their own welfare above others. By insisting on changing the social customs of the church<sup>14</sup> for their own self-seeking gratitude, many at Corinth had become disgraceful, dishonorable and indecent in the way that they treated one another. To make matters worse, those who were wronged by these narcissists had become angry and kept a list of their perceived wrongs and failures. Whether one was in the camp of the self-seeking, instigators or in the camp of the record keeping of wrongs does not make any difference because for both it led to conflict, disagreements and bitterness towards each other. In response Paul tells the church that the motivation for their ministry service must be to love one another. For the narcissists of the church Paul states they are to learn how to serve out of love for others and not for the love of themselves. For the record keepers Paul warns them that keeping records of the quirks, foibles and failures<sup>15</sup> of others will only lead to anger, disrespect and conflict but never to fulfilling God's command to love.<sup>16</sup>



While verse five was written for a different culture and time period, it is a timeless truth that is applicable to most modern day churches. We have all seen the devastating effects that one or two self-seeking leaders can have on a church. When I first started ministry I remember hearing of a local church that had the best music and sermons around. Pastoring at a small church that was struggling to survive, I could not help but imagine what it would be like to share in some of their ministry success. A few years later I started hearing completely different stories about this once successful church. One day the pastor suggested a change in music format. The worship leader defiantly said no and reminded the pastor that she only answered to God. A huge fight broke out in the church with lines drawn and tempers flaring. A few years later I checked in on that church and they are still less than half the size

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<sup>14</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr, *I & II Corinthians*, vol. 7, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 231.

<sup>15</sup> David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians: Life in the Local Church*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 231.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 178.

and struggling with trust issues. The motivation to serve God is not for self-seeking reputation gains but has always been and will always be to glorify God the Father in heaven!

**Verse 6-7: Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.**

Love does not rejoice when evil reigns inside of the church. Glorifying evil to solidify one's own reputation and position of authority in the church is outright wrong. Lawlessness is



not justified on the grounds that “the end justifies the means.” Love is not indifferent to moral considerations but instead only glorifies when the truth is victorious. When a self-seeker is found to have done evil and have been disciplined by God, Paul warns the church of Corinth to not rejoice in their discipline but instead rejoice that the truth is now being embraced.

Paul concludes by telling the church true love protects by forbearing the offenses of others. When a self-seeker attacks you the response to them must be one

bathed in love. While we are not to sweep offenses under the rug, we are not to demean and tear down one another. In love meet with the person who has offended you and work out your differences. When meeting with that person trust that God can change the vilest of hearts. Never lose hope that those who are now sinning can repent and change. Ultimately, for Paul love knows that persevering through trials and tribulations is how a church spiritually grows in the faith. While this kind of love is not humanly possible, through Christ even the most malformed jars of clay can be reshaped and taught how to love.

### **Application**

In conclusion let's look at how to apply 1 Corinthians 13:1-7 to today's church setting. If you are a leader of the church and you find that topics or events that you bring up in a group setting, let's say a business meeting, are not being discussed by others but instead everyone embraces just your opinions; then this is a good sign that the church could be facing the same issues as Corinth did. To handle this situation, begin by examining your own heart. Are you a self-seeker? You can answer this question by reviewing the last few events of the church and ask: were the ideas that I had before the meeting the only ones adopted by the church or did other people give their opinions that ended up shaping those events? If the ideas were yours alone then start encouraging others to state and embrace their opinions into future events. If you are a member of the church and you feel uncomfortable speaking up because you have kept records of wrongs committed by others, then meet with them, work it out and forgive them. The next time you go to a meeting, speak your mind and have faith that God will change the hearts of others to enable them to embrace your ideas as well as theirs. Finally, remember ministry success is only approved by God when done in love.