

Love is...

- I. Expected of Believers
- II. Embodied in Jesus

*(1 Corinthians 13) 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. {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. {3} If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. {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. {8} Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. {9} For we know in part and we prophesy in part, {10} but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. {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. {12} Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. {13} And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Tell me, has there ever been a human emotion that has been defined in as many ways as the word “love” has? For example, maybe when you were in high school, you had a little Charlie Brown poster on your door that read, “Love is...allowing someone to sleep late.” Or maybe you seen the cartoon series that bears the title, “Love is...” For example, love is...never taking each other for granted. Or, love is...when he makes dinner and washes up. Or love is...his warm legs to put your cold feet on.

If you think about it, those aren't bad definitions—or they at least aren't bad examples—of what love is. And I expect, if I were to ask the people here today, we could come up with one or two hundred more definitions what Love is. But we're not here to take an opinion poll. Christian doctrine is not built on what human beings think. Rather, it's built on what God says in his holy and inspired word. And fortunately for us, God's word has an awful lot to say about this all-important virtue called Love. Today we turn to some of the most famous words ever written on the subject of love. In 1st Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul, writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, records for us but we might call “God’s definition of love.” And as we take a little closer look at these words, we'll see what

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We'll see that Love is...

- I. Something expected of believers. And love is...
- II. Something embodied in Jesus.

The words we have before us are part of a larger section in which the Apostle Paul is writing to the Corinthian Christians about spiritual gifts. The Corinthian congregation was a very gifted congregation. There were members who are speaking in tongues, members who were

receiving direct revelations from God, but the Corinthians were not always using those gifts in a way that was showing love for each other. That's why Saint Paul begins this section by pointing out that absolute necessity using gifts in a loving way. Paul says, in effect, without love, all the spiritual gifts in the world are good for nothing. How does Paul put it? *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. {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. {3} If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:1-3).* In other words, you and I could be the most gifted speaker in the world, we could be an amazingly talented manager people, we could know more Scripture than any Christian alive, and if we can't use those gifts in a way that expresses genuine love for our fellow man, and all those gifts are good for nothing.

Which leads us to the natural question, so if all our gifts are to be used in a loving manner, exactly what does that love look like? What are some characteristics of God-pleasing love? Before we look at these qualities of love, it's important to understand that these are all things that are...I. Expected of Believers.

What do I mean by that? Well, when you think about what God expects of us in terms of our behavior, when you think about God's over-arching command, his will for our lives, what do you think of? Well, Jesus summed up God's will for our life with two commands: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind."* And *"Love your neighbor as yourself."* What one word do both of those commandments have in common? That's right, love. Love is the essence of God's law. It's the standard to which God holds us as his people. In fact, isn't that what Jesus affirmed when he told his disciples on the night before he died, *"A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"* (John 13:34).

But you see, this is why, as Christians, we are so interested in finding out what God says love is supposed to look like—so that we can compare God's definition of love with what's going on in our lives to see how we measure up to God's standard. So let's do that now. Let's take a little closer look at what Paul says love is, and as we do, I want you to ask yourself, "How well does what Paul says here describe you and me?"

Now, as we go through this list, you'll notice that a lot of the qualities that Saint Paul ascribes to love are translated as adjectives. Right? "Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not rude," for example. Well, in the original language those are not adjectives, they are verbs. In other words, the Holy Spirit is emphasizing that love is not just a feeling, or a disposition, or an attitude. No, true love—the word here is agape love—true love is always something that is in action. It does things.

For example, Saint Paul says, *Love is patient*. A more literal translation would be "love suffers long". The King James version translated this as Love is long suffering. The Greek word here kind of paints the picture of having a long fuse. Rather than having a short fuse, or snapping at someone who doesn't do something the way or the in the time we want them to do it, God says that we should patiently endure them.

Paul goes on. *Love is kind*. Again, the emphasis here is that love does things that are kind and useful and beneficial to others. Love is an action.

From those two positive qualities of love, Paul moves to eight things that love doesn't do. Paul says, *Love does not envy*. Or another way to translate that would be, "Love is not jealous." Love does not covet what other people have or do.

*Love does not boast. It is not proud.* Those two kind of go together. God expects that his believers will not be puffed up egomaniacs. They will not be braggarts. They will not love to hear themselves speak.

*Love is not rude.* In other words, love does not do things that are inappropriate or shameful or will cause others to be offended. Love is considerate of other people's feelings.

Next, *Love is not self-seeking.* That one hits home, doesn't it? Love doesn't say, "Me first." "This is what I want." "How do I make sure I come out on top?"

And, *Love is not easily angered.* While this certainly means that we shouldn't be flying off the handle at the drop of a hat, or going into road rage, it also includes what we might call, "not being touchy." You know, having something constantly "set us off" or "push our buttons." Love is not easily angered.

In fact, as Paul puts it, *Love keeps no record of wrongs.* In the original language, this is a word used in the world of business and accounting. It's the idea of meticulously keeping track of all the debts that are owed to us. In our lives today, this word refers to keeping score of the things that people said or did to hurt us. It means hanging on to those sins and not letting go of them.

And the final kind of two-sided coin: *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* How often aren't we tempted to kind of laugh about things that are ungodly? Or take some kind of cruel pleasure in someone else's misfortune. But true Christian love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. The Greek there brings out the idea of joining with others and celebrating what is true and right and pure and admirable as St. Paul puts it in Philippians 4.

Finally, the Spirit concludes this section with a description of the unwavering nature of love. Paul writes, *Love always protects.* Love protects other people's reputation, for example. *Love always trusts.* That doesn't mean that loving people are necessarily gullible people. Rather, it means that love puts the best construction on what people say and do. Love trusts that God knows the truth. *Love always hopes.* Christian love, by its very nature, it's not pessimistic. It's optimistic. *And love always perseveres.* In other words, love does not easily give up, even if it means enduring some suffering for a long time—which kind of brings us full circle back to the beginning, namely, love is patient.

Now, at the beginning of this section, I asked you to ask yourself, how well do Paul's words describe you? Are you a loving person? Are you patient? Are you always kind to other people? Never held other people's words and actions against them? Do you sometimes lose your temper? I don't know about you, but when I read these words, I find it ironic that a section that so beautifully describes love can at the same time expose such ugliness in my heart and life. God's description of what love is just serves to highlight what I am not.

But if you think about it, isn't that what the law is designed to do? It reveals the truth. We said earlier that love is the essence of the law. And so even this description of what love is can serve as a mirror in which we see things about ourselves that we don't like, things that God hates. Things that deserve God's eternal punishment. And if that's where this sermon were to end, we would all walk away feeling pretty depressed, feeling that we've not lived up to God's expectation.

But here's the good news. That detailed description of what love is, it's not only what is...I. Expected of Believers. It's also what is...II. Embodied in Christ. What does that mean? And maybe more importantly, what does that matter? First, it means that all those qualities of love that we just ran through, all of them were perfectly displayed in the words and actions of Jesus Christ. In fact, you could go through this whole list and replace the word love with the word Jesus and you would have a 100% accurate statement. Isn't that correct? Jesus is patient.

Jesus is kind. Jesus is not self-seeking. And maybe the most important one of all, Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. That's the one that means the most to you and me, isn't it? All those examples of lovelessness that God's law exposed in my life, Jesus covered up with his blood. He's forgiven all or our sins. He's not holding any of them against us.

But here's the really amazing thing. Not only has Jesus erased our past offenses, he's given us his righteousness. Do you realize what that means? It means that the perfect patience, the perfect kindness, the perfect love that Jesus showed throughout his life—you get credit for that, through faith in Jesus. That means that when God looks at you, he sees Jesus. God says, "In my eyes, you are patient and kind and loving. You might say that's the "New You." It's your new identity in Christ. How does St Paul put it in 2nd Corinthians 5? *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come!* Isn't that what allows us to read through what God says that love is without getting bummed out? Miracle of miracles, God has declared us to be loving people. And it's his love for us, and his love in us, that equips us to let that love shine through in our words and actions. St John said it so well. *We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)*. May that love which Jesus has shown to us, ever serve as the model and the motivation for the love that we share with one another, all to God's glory. Amen.