

A Portrait of Love



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *1 Corinthians 13; Matt. 24:12; Gal. 5:22, 23; 1 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 4:8.*

Memory Text: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (*1 Corinthians 13:13, NIV*).

Love can conquer all. That’s why Paul had so much to say about it. The word family of *agapaō*—the most common Greek word in the New Testament to express the concept of love—occurs more than 135 times in his letters. This represents almost half of all occurrences in the New Testament. This should tell us something about the central theme of Paul’s letters to the Corinthian church.

There are many remarkable passages about love in the New Testament—Romans 8:35–39, 1 Corinthians 2:9, 1 Corinthians 8:3, Galatians 2:20, Colossians 1:13, 1 Thessalonians 3:12, and more—but nothing compares to 1 Corinthians 13.

Last week, we saw that without love, all things, even spiritual gifts, are worthless. This week, we will look more deeply into 1 Corinthians 13 and its marvelous portrait of love.

As we will see, love is not so much an emotion as an attitude, an attitude that must be expressed in life, in deeds, and in words; otherwise, it means nothing.

What love really is, and does, has been fully revealed in the life of Jesus.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 15.

The Essentialness of Love

Last week we touched on the theme of love as seen in 1 Corinthians 13. We need to explore Paul’s words here in even more depth.

Read 1 Corinthians 13. Summarize what he is telling us about love.

Paul is not saying that tongues (*1 Cor. 13:1*), prophecy, understanding, knowledge, faith (*1 Cor. 13:2*), and benevolence (*1 Cor. 13:3*) are useless. They are useless only if not driven by love.

The kind of love Paul is talking about is not expressed in such sentences as “I love strawberries” or “I love my friends” or even “I love my spouse and children.” Neither is he talking about the kind of love that one sees in movies. And no, it is not erotic love, although this passage has been commonly used in wedding sermons.

This love cannot be reduced to affection, or charity, or virtue, or benevolence. Yet, they all represent it to a lesser or greater degree. This love is a special grace bestowed upon us by the Spirit. Indeed, love in 1 Corinthians 13 is the Spirit-given motivation that leads us to act with affection, charity, virtue, and benevolence. It is a total commitment of our actions, feelings, and thoughts toward Christ and our neighbors.

Read Matthew 24:12. What warning does Jesus give us here?

That is why *agapē* love is so essential and necessary. In the power of Christ, we cannot let love grow cold in our homes, churches, and neighborhoods. We have the example of Christ on the cross, dying for us. What better and more powerful expression of this kind of love could there be? Though of course we could never equally express that kind of love, by God’s grace we should strive to reveal it in our own lives to whatever degree we can.

What are some times when, indeed, an expression of this kind of love could have made a powerfully positive impression on someone who needed this love more than anything else?

What Love Does

First Corinthians 13:4–7 is the heart of the chapter. Paul focuses on the features of love—showing what love is and what it is not, or what love does and does not do. He personifies love so that we can have a glimpse of how a person filled with Spirit-driven love behaves. In his portrayal of love, Paul uses a series of verbs. For him, love is more about actions than about feelings or emotions.

What, then, does love do?

1. Shows patience (*makrothymeō*). *Makrothymeō* means to show patience, even amid challenging circumstances. Patience also highlights the ability to be forbearing with one another (*Eph. 4:2*).

2. Shows kindness (*chrēsteuomai*). *Chrēsteuomai* occurs only here in the New Testament, but other words from the same root are common elsewhere. In the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), words from this root occur frequently in the Psalms to refer to God’s kindness associated with His mercy (*Ps. 145:9*). By saying that love shows kindness, Paul meant that one’s love for others must emulate God’s compassion and mercy toward us.

3. Rejoices (*synchairō*) in the truth. *Synchairō* denotes the ability to experience joy alongside another person (*Luke 1:58; Luke 15:6, 9; 1 Cor. 12:26; Phil. 2:17, 18*).

4. Bears (*stegō*) all things. Scholars debate whether *stegō* means “to cover,” namely, to keep something confidential (which also has a sense of protection), or “to endure,” with a sense of resilience. The concept of endurance clearly occurs in 1 Corinthians 9:12, leading most interpreters and Bible translators to take the second option as more likely.

5. Believes (*pisteuō*) all things. *Pisteuō* comes from the same root as the Greek term for faith (*pistis*). In the context of 1 Corinthians 13, believing all things means giving one another the benefit of the doubt.

6. Hopes (*elpizō*) all things. In the New Testament, the verb *elpizō* always refers to the belief or expectation that something good will occur.

7. Endures (*hypomenō*) all things. Likely, there is no difference between the verbs *stegō* and *hypomenō* in 1 Corinthians 13:7. They are synonyms, meaning here endurance amid hardship. Paul uses *hypomenō* at the end of the verse to avoid the repetition of *stegō*. By repeating the same concept even with a different word, he draws attention to believing and hoping as the focal point. In other words, love endures by believing and hoping.

Compare 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 to Galatians 5:22, 23. What ideas in common do you see between the two passages? How can we manifest this kind of love in our own lives?

What Love Does Not Do

Read again 1 Corinthians 13:4–7. Why does Paul mention negative rather than only positive characteristics of love?

Yesterday, we focused on seven things love does; today, we will look into eight things it does not do. Love . . .

1. Does not envy (*zeloō*). *Zeloō* can be used positively as in “desire [*zeloō*] the higher gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31, *ESV*), “desire [*zeloō*] the spiritual gifts” (1 Cor. 14:1, *ESV*), and “desire [*zeloō*] to prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:39, *ESV*). Here, though, as in Acts 7:9, it is negative. It is OK to desire spiritual gifts but not to envy gifted persons. This causes division (1 Cor. 3:3).

2. Does not boast (*perpereuomai*). The verb *perpereuomai* conveys the idea of arrogance and desire for praise from others. Love, however, is not self-focused like that. This is even clearer in what follows.

3. Does not puff up (*physioō*). The verb *physioō* occurs in 1 Corinthians 8:1 in Paul’s remarkable statement, “‘Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (*ESV*). It refers to a person inflated with self-importance.

4. Does not behave rudely (*aschēmoneo*). The verb *aschēmoneo* may have an ample range of meanings. By and large, though, it means acting contrary to social and moral standards in a dishonorable, shameful, indecent, or improper manner. Paul likely is referring to the arrogant and rude behavior of the “strong” party toward the “weak” members in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:10, 1 Corinthians 8).

5. Does not seek (*zēteō*) its own [rights]. This is similar to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:24: “No one is to seek his own right, but rather that of others” (author’s translation). Love gives up its own rights for the sake of others (see Lesson 5). In a setting in which everyone seeks each other’s rights, all benefit.

6. Does not get easily irritated (*paroxynō*). The verb *paroxynō* suggests an inward state of arousal pointing to someone easily provoked to anger. This means that love is not short-tempered or touchy.

7. Does not keep records (*logizomai*) of wrongs. The verb *logizomai* has an accounting sense here, meaning that love does not take one’s wrongs into account. In other words, love also means to forgive.

8. Does not delight (*chairō*) in wrongdoing. Love not only keeps no record of someone else’s wrongs but takes no pleasure in them. When we truly love others, we do not rejoice at their mistakes but, instead, seek to help them.

A Portrait of Jesus

As we read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, we may feel frustrated at realizing that, to a lesser or greater degree, we fall short of displaying all those features of love. Likely, Paul had the person of Jesus in mind when writing 1 Corinthians 13. Indeed, only Christ perfectly revealed all those characteristics of love. Thus, ultimately, Paul’s portrayal of love is a portrait of Jesus.

Read John 13:1, 34; John 15:9, 12; 1 Timothy 1:14; 2 Timothy 1:7, 13; 1 John 3:16; and 1 John 4:7–12, 19–21. What can we learn about love from these passages?

God is love (*1 John 4:8*). He loves us so much that He gave His only Son (*John 3:16*). Jesus is the full expression of this love (*Heb. 1:3*). If we want to know how love expresses itself, we must take a long look at Jesus. If we pay close attention to the portrayal of Jesus in the New Testament, we will realize that all the positive features of love in 1 Corinthians 13 are seen in Him.

Jesus is patient. “But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience [*makrothymia*]” (*1 Tim. 1:16, NIV*).

Jesus is kind. The Bible says that “the Lord is kind” (*1 Pet. 2:3, LEB*). The word “Lord” in this passage refers to Jesus. The term “kind” renders the Greek word *chrēstos*, which comes from the same root as the verb *chrēsteuomai* (“to show kindness”) in 1 Corinthians 13:4.

Jesus rejoices in the truth. Jesus experienced joy as He followed the will of the Father and felt His love for Him (*John 15:9–11, John 17:12–14*).

Jesus bears/endures all things. Hebrews 12:2, 3 says that Jesus “endured the cross. . . [He] endured such hostility from sinners against Himself” (*NKJV*). Nobody has endured so much as Jesus (*Phil. 2:8*). He did this for the joy set before Him!

Jesus believes all things. When Ananias questioned the genuineness of Paul’s conversion (*Acts 9:13, 14*), Jesus answered, “He is a chosen instrument of mine” (*Acts 9:15, ESV*). Jesus sees people not only as they are but as they will become through His power.

What are other ways that Jesus reveals to us what true love really is?

Faith, Hope, and Love

Thus far, we have learned that love is patient, kind, joyful, resilient, believing, hopeful, and enduring (or perseverant) because Jesus is all these things. Once we see these qualities in Jesus, the next step is to imitate Him. That was Paul's wish for the Corinthians. However, if we remove the "not" in the eight negative features of love, "we get a pretty good description of the Corinthians' conduct within their church circle: envious, boasting, arrogant, rude, self-seeking, easily offended, and looking to see what others were doing wrong. Paul is tailoring the verbs he uses here to the Corinthian situation."—Verlyn D. Verbrugge, "1 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans–Galatians*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), p. 372.

The Corinthians had much to learn. So do we. After describing what love does and does not do, Paul concludes his section by emphasizing the everlasting nature of love so as to stimulate the practice of genuine love.

One day, prophecies will no longer be necessary; we will speak only one language; and flawed human knowledge will be replaced by a brand-new knowledge of God (*1 Cor. 13:12*). The gifts of the Spirit will cease only when the purpose for which they exist has reached its fulfillment (*1 Cor. 13:10*). "But love will last forever!" (*1 Cor. 13:8, NLT*).

Likewise, when Christ returns, faith will give place to sight (*2 Cor. 5:7*), and that which we have long hoped for will be reality (*Rom. 8:24*). And, most of all, love will endure as an emblem of the character of our triune God. Yet, there is a sense in which faith and hope will also last forever. Faith as the experience of salvation (*Rom. 4:3*), and hope as the desire and expectation of new delights and knowledge in the new earth, will mark the experience of the redeemed forever. Yet love, God's love, will eternally prevail.

Very soon, we will see our Lord face-to-face (*1 Cor. 13:12*). Until that day comes, we are supposed to define our lives with these three virtues: faith, hope, and love. This triad is representative of the fullness of Christian life through the Spirit. That is why it was often referred to among Christians (*Rom. 5:1–5; Gal. 5:5, 6; Eph. 1:15, 18; 4:1–5*). Love, however, is the greatest; after all, it is the only virtue used to describe the very nature of God Himself (*1 John 4:8*).

Dwell on the statement "God is love." How are we supposed to understand exactly what that means? And though we can grasp the idea only in part, why is that phrase such good news for us?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Need of Love,” pp. 545, 546, *The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 28, 1888.

“No matter how high the profession, he whose heart is not filled with love for God and his fellow men is not a true disciple of Christ. Though he should possess great faith and have power even to work miracles, yet without love his faith would be worthless. He might display great liberality; but should he, from some other motive than genuine love, bestow all his goods to feed the poor, the act would not commend him to the favor of God. In his zeal he might even meet a martyr’s death, yet if not actuated by love, he would be regarded by God as a deluded enthusiast or an ambitious hypocrite.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 318, 319.

“We have an abundance of sermonizing. What is most needed . . . is love for perishing souls, that love which comes in rich currents from the throne of God. True Christianity diffuses love through the whole being. It touches every vital part, the brain, the heart, the helping hands, the feet, enabling men to stand firmly where God requires them to stand, so that they will not make crooked paths for their feet, lest the lame be turned out of the way. The burning, consuming love of Christ for perishing souls is the life of the whole system of Christianity.”—Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up*, p. 134.

“Only the love that flows from the heart of Christ can heal. Only he in whom that love flows, even as the sap in the tree or the blood in the body, can restore the wounded soul.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 114.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Do you think Paul’s list of positive features of love is exhaustive? If not, what other elements would you add to the list?
- 2 What do you think Paul meant by the command “Pursue love” (1 Cor. 14:1, NKJV)? What does this have to do with what he says in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7?
- 3 Which characteristic of love do you most need to put into practice in your daily life? Which ones are more necessary in your local church? By the way, why does Paul compare love with such gifts as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge (1 Cor. 13:8)?
- 4 Paul hints that love is the ultimate solution for the lack of unity among members in Corinth. Why? How does this apply to our churches today?

Meeting the General

The names of the author, characters, and location have been withheld.

I started my morning with a much longer prayer time than usual. After meeting many difficulties in applying for residency in a veiled country, my wife and I were told that it might be possible for us to apply that day for a six-month temporary residence card if we presented ourselves at the immigration office.

Our situation was uniquely complicated. We knew that a technicality on my wife's passport would likely deny any request she made for residency. Our stay in the country was at risk. I didn't know where to turn except for God's direct intervention.

At the immigration office, we carefully filled out the paperwork and waited nervously. The woman behind the window who finally called our number was efficient. She quickly processed my request but hesitated when she picked up my wife's passport. As we feared, none of my explanations satisfied her questions. She waved us away with a mumbled, "You go see a general."

My heart pounding, I breathed a quick prayer. Someone showed us to an office at the end of a long hall, where a young man sat behind a large desk. He smiled and confirmed, "I am the general." As he took our passports, he cheerfully told us he was studying English and hoping to serve soon in the United Nations. He didn't ask why we'd been sent to him.

After a few minutes of paperwork, he stood and announced, "It's all done. Come back tomorrow for your residence cards." Even amid my surprise and relief, I felt a nudge by the Holy Spirit. I quickly wrote down my number on a piece of paper and handed it to him, telling him that if he ever wanted to meet and practice English, I would gladly visit.

Later that day, he messaged that he had finished our residency cards early, and we could come pick them up. The relief that had replaced our frustration and worry gave way to amazement. God had smoothed the way—and so quickly! Moreover, we soon realized He had even more in mind than our problems.

The general and I have kept in touch. We talk often and have met several times. We enjoy conversations about life and the values we share. As his English improves, our friendship grows, and God's opportunities unfold before me.

But those are small benefits next to the privilege of watching God use every circumstance to accomplish His purpose. We had approached Him with our great need because we were blocked by the challenges of doing His work, and in answering our prayer, He connected us to the very purpose of our work.

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