

Paul understood love to be the critical issue in things of the Spirit (*pneumatika*, 12:1). There is no legitimate or effectual use of the Spirit's gifts apart from love, even as love gives life and power to every dimension of the Christian's existence. The reason this is so is that Christians have become partakers in the divine nature as those who share in the life of the triune God – the God who Himself is love (cf. Colossians 2:6-12, 3:1-4; 2 Peter 1:2-4; 1 John 4:8-16). And being sharers in God's life, Christians are also sharers in His love. They not only live *in* His love, they live *out* His love: Love defines their authentic humanity as image-sons, and therefore conformity to their authentic selves (i.e., a life defined by *righteousness*) consists in a life of love (cf. John 15:1-17 with 1 John 2:1-11, 3:1-24, 4:7-21).

Love authenticates and empowers the Spirit's gifts in the saints, but only because it authenticates and empowers the totality of their lives as those born of the Spirit. (So Paul's repeated phrase, "*have love*," in 13:1-3 suggests both aspects of love: love as an endowment of the Spirit and as the essence of life in the Spirit.) In every way, love is the issue in the consideration of the things of the Spirit.

Paul demonstrated by his four examples that the Church's gifts and their function and efficacy are utterly dependent on love. In the absence of love, Christ's saints are nothing (13:2) and their use of the Spirit's endowments is empty (13:1) and without spiritual profit or benefit (13:3). Everything in the Christian life depends on love, and this means that Christ's saints need to know *what* it is and *how* it is. Christians can neither know themselves rightly nor fulfill their identity and calling as members of Christ's body and as witnesses to the world unless and until they discern love in truth and give themselves to live it out.

- d. A person's relationship with love begins with recognizing it for what it really is, but this requires that love be defined in terms of God Himself. In his fallen state, man can neither discern love truly nor live it out. People have a conception and practice of love, *but one that exists in the context of the essential lovelessness of their alienation and self-isolation*. Love presupposes a right relation with another being (or oneself, in the case of self-love), and no such relation exists for fallen man. As they are in themselves, people pursue and embrace "love" and its practice, but according to their own innate self-referential, self-centric perspective. They "love," but in a natural way suited to their natural state.

This condition didn't define the Corinthians, for they were a community born of the Spirit. Moreover, there's no doubt Paul instructed them in love and its ways during his extended ministry among them. He had taught and modeled to the Corinthians the life of love; the problem was that they had lost sight of his instruction and allowed themselves to slip back into their natural way of thinking about love and its operations. The Corinthians were functioning as naturally-minded people, and they were bringing this mindset to the matter of love. Their fleshly perspective and preoccupation left them concerned only with the Spirit's gifts and the way they manifest themselves; it didn't occur to them that love provided the answer to their questions.

Paul understood what was going on at Corinth and recognized the need to remind the saints there of what love really is and the way it expresses itself. Thus his inspiring, *positive* treatment of love had an important *negative* purpose: Paul's goal was not to exalt love for its own sake, let alone to paint an idealistic portrait of love as a natural human virtue (a notion readily embraced by people and eminently suited to the aesthetics and idealism of a wedding ceremony); his purpose was to confront, reprimand and provide the corrective for the Corinthian divisions and factions to which their view of spiritual gifts was contributing.

Paul intended that his depiction of love would inspire his Corinthian readers, but by setting in front of them the "more excellent way" appointed for them as images and unto which the Spirit had equipped and empowered them. Their inspiration was to spring from the divine nature and quality of love, not a natural notion of it as a natural virtue. Authentic love is *in* God and flows to men *from* Him as they share in His life, and this is the perspective from which Paul's depiction must be read. To not do so insures that his words will be humanized and love's divine excellencies transformed into a cheap and profane imitation.

- e. In working through Paul's list of love's qualities (13:4-7), some have tried to organize them and even assign a hierarchy to them. One reasonable arrangement is to partition them in terms of what love is like versus how it behaves; that is, love's *active* qualities versus its *passive* ones. This arrangement doesn't provide any profound insight, but it is helpful in that it highlights the fact that love conducts itself (positively and negatively) according to the truth of what it is. Thus one could argue that love's essential (passive) qualities are primary since its practical (active) ones flow from them, but, in the end, they're really two sides of the same coin: Love *does* what love *is*, and love *is* what it *does* (just as God's being is the essence of His work and His work gives substance to His being).

Paul, then, begins with the fact that love is **patient**. Starting from the premise that love is a divine quality which becomes "human" only as human beings share in God's own life, it is evident that Paul was speaking of a patience that transcends the human trait which one finds among men in their natural state. In other words, if this patience is a quality of love and only those who've been born of God love, it follows that such patience exists only in the realm of the community of the Spirit. *There must, therefore, be a fundamental and substantial distinction between patience as Paul identified it and as it exists naturally among humans.*

And the basis for determining that distinction is a comparison of God's patience and natural human patience. Paul's verb is sometimes rendered "long-suffering," and its basic sense is a slowness to become negatively impassioned, whether that passion takes the form of frustration, agitation, anger, wrath, etc. Both the verb and noun forms are used of men as well as God, so that the best course is to examine how this term speaks to God's patience. This usage occurs five times in the New Testament in relation to God (Luke 18:7; Romans 2:4, 9:22; 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 3:9-15) and once with respect to Christ Himself (1 Timothy 1:16).

The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) also employs this term numerous times in speaking of God, *but exclusively in relation to His own articulation and explanation of His name as Israel's covenant God* (cf. Exodus 33:12-34:7 with Numbers 14:1-19; Nehemiah 9:5-17; Psalm 86:14-15, 103:7-8, 145:1-8; also Joel 2:12-13; Jonah 4:1-2; Nahum 1:1-3). True, the Septuagint is not inspired, but what matters is that this Greek term signifies God's *patience*, which God Himself treats as a core aspect of His self-disclosure to His covenant people.

Specifically, God's patience as a feature of His self-disclosure to Israel (His "name") speaks to His unwavering commitment to the Abrahamic people by virtue of His commitment to His covenant with Abraham.

God's "name" speaks to His essential nature and character, and naming Himself *patient* serves to highlight His commitment to carry out His purposes for His creation. That purpose is the restoration of all things to Himself in and through the Abrahamic people, and ultimately the singular Seed of Abraham.

- Thus God's patience is *purposeful*; He was patient with Abraham's descendents, not because it's merely His nature to be so or because of self-restraint, but in view of the goal He had for the nation to be the agent for bringing His blessing to all the earth's families. In a word, God's patience with Israel was unto the appointed day of Christ's coming and His fulfillment of His calling as the Seed of Abraham and true Israelite.
- This means that God's patience is also *gospel-oriented*. He bears with men – both during the time of the preparatory salvation history and now in the age of fulfillment – in view of the consummate realization of His purpose to sum up all things in the created order in Jesus Christ.

Paul's second descriptor closely parallels his first one: Love is **kind**. This verb occurs nowhere else in the Scripture, but its noun and adjective cognates are common in both the New Testament and Septuagint. As with patience, this kindness is most often associated in the Scriptures with God, and it is typically rendered by some form of the English word *good*.

- First and foremost, the Septuagint uses this term to describe God Himself (Psalm 25:8, 34:8, 52:9, 86:5, 100:5, 119:68, 145:9).
- But it also assigns (or relates) this quality of goodness to God's covenant faithfulness (His *hesed*, often rendered "lovingkindness") (cf. Psalm 25:7, 69:16, 106:1 and 109:21 with Jeremiah 33:11).
- In the New Testament, God's children are said to share in this quality which He possesses (cf. Luke 6:35 with Romans 2:4, 3:12). And they share in this quality by being sharers in Him. Outside of Him and His work in the human heart, "there is none who is good" (Psalm 14:1-3).

The biblical quality of kindness (goodness) is consistent with patience in yet another way that is critically important: *It, too, speaks to God's purposes for His creation – His purposes which are proclaimed in the gospel.*

- God's goodness determines and is present in all His works and all His ways with His creation (Psalm 31:19, 65:9-11, 68:9-10, 85:12, 104:27-28, 119:68, 145:5-17).
- These good works and ways have their grand expression in His great restorative accomplishment in His Son (Ephesians 2:4-7; Titus 3:4-7).
- So also God's goodness leads men to repentance (Romans 2:4; 1 Peter 1:22-2:3) and sustains them in their faith (Romans 11:22).

God's patience is purposeful and gospel-oriented, and so is His goodness.

Finally, as expressions of love, kindness and patience are reciprocal and mutually-dependent. The meaning of the two terms makes this evident, but Paul also suggested it by the way he juxtaposed his two clauses ("Love is patient, love is kind") as precise mirror images of one another. The two clauses are grammatically identical, but their syntax is reversed: The first has the form *subject-verb* while the second has the form *verb-subject*. Paul's construction thus serves two related purposes: It makes the verbal ideas the focal point of the two clauses and it also sets them in intimate relation to one another. The meaning of the two verbs only punctuates the reciprocal relationship between them.

- **Patience** speaks to the idea of bearing with another individual in his deficiencies, especially in terms of personal failures and wrongfulness. Moreover, patience implies an active quality and not merely a passive one. That is, the patient person (in the biblical sense) doesn't passively "put up with" the sin and failures of others; he actively – and purposefully – refuses to treat those persons as they deserve. In the language of the psalmist – and speaking of God's patience in contradistinction to human "patience," God "*has not dealt with us according to our sins or repaid us according to our iniquities...*" (Psalm 103:10-14; cf. Isaiah 55:1-9).
- Patience is purposeful, and therefore has a crucial counterpart. Patience refuses to treat a person as he deserves, but its refusal isn't a "blind eye"; it has a goal, and that goal is the person's true good (which is precisely what love is concerned with). *Patience refuses for the sake of kindness' provision: Kindness* involves treating others as they don't deserve.

Patience and kindness are thus symbiotic and synergistic partners, working together negatively (restraint) and positively (bestowal) as instruments of love unto the true good of the other, *which is the forming of Christ in him*. Individually and together, patience and kindness are purposeful servants of the gospel.