
The Better Way

1 Corinthians 13:1-13²⁰

Russ Kennedy

Jesus said, “They will know you are my children by your love.” An old Christian chorus sings the same idea. One of the marks of being a Christian is that we love one another.

So why then are so many churches not only loveless but rife with active dislike and hatred?

This is not a new problem. It was a terrible problem in the church at Corinth. What was supposed to be used to serve, edify an minister to one another in love had become a vile battleground.

But then, the world also loves. So what makes Christian love different? Many Bible teachers say that the Greek word “agape” is used to refer to God’s love and God’s kind of love. Many statements are made in commentaries and books on Christian love that don’t bear up under scrutiny. There are three Greek words that get translated by the English word love. There is *eros* which we recognize as love associated with intimacy. There is *phileo* which is the love among family and friends. Then there is the word *agape*. This is used much in the New Testament. Let me lean on Dr. D.A. Carson who challenges the notion that *agape* is **the** word for a God-like love.

...the meaning of love described in this chapter is not intrinsic to the noun ἀγάπη (agapaō) or its cognate verb ἀγαπάω (agapaō). Of course, this verdict is contrary to popular opinion, which often suggests that this word is chosen in the Scriptures over other words for “love” because only this word group captures the determined love of God that seeks the other’s good. Linguistically that is not true... In John’s Gospel, we are twice told that the Father loves the Son: one passage using ἀγαπάω (agapaō) and the other φιλέω (phileō; John 3:35; 5:20 respectively). When he details that Demas has forsaken him because he loved this world, Paul does not think it inappropriate to use the verb ἀγαπάω (agapaō; 2 Tim. 4:10). These examples could be multiplied. My point is simply that there is nothing intrinsic to a particular word group that makes its version of love particularly divine. On the other hand, that is far from saying that there is nothing distinctive about God’s love or about Christian love. There is; but if we want to discover what that difference is, we shall find it less in a distinctive semantic range of a particular word group than in the descriptions and characteristics of love given in the Scriptures. (Carson, D.A. p.64)

So, it is not a “word” in the Scriptures that uniquely define Christian love. God’s kind of love is described as verbs: “God loved in such a way that He gave His only begotten

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Son..." as an example. Paul here is helping us to understand how Christian love interacts in the context of life and ministry. Real Christian love transforms you and all your relationships.

Love's Necessity (v. 1-3)

The Christian life and ministry must exhibit love.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

One writer reminds us that:

Love, then, is not a χάρισμα, (charisma) but an entire way of life without which, as we shall see, all χαρίσματα (charismata) must be judged utterly worthless. It is this way of life that gives meaning and depth to any spiritual gift God grants, but it can always be distinguished from them – as in 14:1, "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts." In Paul's epistle to the Galatians (5:22-23), love heads the list of virtues he calls "the fruit of the Spirit" – that "harmony of nine graces which make up a mature Christian character and provide conclusive evidence of the Spirit's indwelling presence." (Carson, p.57)

So what is a Christian like without love...

You are irritating (v. 1)

Paul is using as an illustration the irritating, toneless gongs used by the pagan priests...

The exercise of the gift of languages becomes a useless, irritating noise clamoring for its own attention. Love makes a gift useful and profitable to others.

You are nothing (v. 2)

Without love, though I may have the most powerful, public speaking gifts, I have no standing or status. Love, not abilities, gives Christians their status with one another.

You are profitless (v. 3)

Without love, though I may give the greatest sacrifice, even of my life, I am not profiting others or God.

Without love you are irritating, empty and useless. So, love is a necessity among Christians.

Love's Description (v. 4-7)

If love is necessary, then what is this necessary thing? How do we recognize it as something beyond words?

⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

These 4 verses are not a sentimental definition of love. They are a practical description of some aspects of love's character and conduct. It is meant as a powerful correction of the Corinthians. In the exercise of their ministry and gifts, they have behaved in the most unloving and loveless way. Paul is showing them the better way than they had taken. They needed a better way. Their way of life and ministry together had brought conflict and division and dreadfully sinful treatment of one another.

Note the structure of the text. The top and bottom are positive statements of love's character and conduct. The middle five are all negative. They describe what love is not. Why? Precisely because this is what the Corinthians are in all their lovelessness. So this text is strongly corrective.

The love hereby described is for all Christian relationships. This is how true love acts with others. It is love in our marriages and in our church. May these words rebuke us where needed and encourage us where warranted.

Paul is (at least indirectly) referring to jealousy, pride and selfishness in the church community at Corinth. Time and time again the same sins rear their heads: people resent others' success, blessings or gifts; dissatisfied with their own place and opportunities, they compete for more room, honour or recognition. Jesus, by contrast, quietly pursued the work to which he had been called; he rejoiced in the growth and success of others, encouraging them onward with sensitive wisdom, but never putting anyone down or ignoring anyone. He never needed to overplay his ministry or to blow his own trumpet. Exaggerated, let alone sensationalized, descriptions of the way God is using us betray a lack of confidence in our acceptance by God. Love does not boast. Indeed, Jesus never seemed at all interested in gaining recognition, let alone in demanding his rights. He left his reputation and his results completely in the hands of God. He was free not to insist on his own way, entrusting himself to 'him who judges justly', particularly when facing rejection and humiliation. (Prior, David. p. 230-231).

Love's Character (v. 4)

The way it is: patient and kind...

Love's Contrasts (v. 5-6)

The way it is not: selfish and prideful...

Love does not envy or boast.

Love does not crave the abilities and place of others in life and ministry. It is not loving to reach out and grasp for what someone else has or can do. Love does not covet another's spiritual gifts, abilities or experience. Love also does not attract attention or solicit the admiration of others.

Therefore, love is humble...

Love is not arrogant or rude.

Love does not treat other people as though they do not matter. It does not look down on others in any way. Christian love treats and talks to others with respect because of the Christian relationship.

Therefore, love is kind...

Love does not insist on its own way.

Love does not seek to uphold its own right opinions. It does not drive others to agree or acknowledge the rightfulness of your opinions, decisions or agendas. Love does not assert its own rights or demand submission from others.

Therefore, love prefers and defers to others...

Love is not irritable or resentful.

Love does not respond wrongly to small slights. IT does not keep record of wrongs done. Love has a short memory for wrongs and a long memory for good. Love does not keep grudges or resent others for their wrongs against you.

Therefore, love is gentle and quick to forgive...

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.

Love is not triumphalistic over others. This phrase is a bit difficult because "at wrongdoing" is placed in contrast with "the truth". So it seems that the Christians were rejoicing when others were harmed by lies, slander and criticism.

Several things to notice from this:

The heart is exposed by these words. The loveless heart is proud, arrogant, selfish, sensitive and triumphalistic.

All of these examples of lovelessness are in the context of broken relationships and conflict. This is the way we ought not respond to others who sin against us.

Love is persistently kind, generous, gracious, rejoicing in others gifts and abilities even with people who do not treat us well.

Love's Constancy (v. 7)

All things, from all others in difficult situations, love carries the day and will not fail.

Love bears up with people. It is willing to bear with others who may sin against us...

Love believes all. Loving people are poised to accept the truth, both from the Word and from people. Love is not cynical. Love does not expect the worst from people. Love is poised to assume and expect the best of people.

Love endures all... That is so easy to say and oh so hard to live. Real love is enduring, transcendent, hardy, strong – real love will trust God for the big picture and for the long run.

Challenging, isn't it? Is this me? Is this you? Is this us?

Love's Permanence (v. 8-12)

⁸ Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

Its Assertion (v. 8a)

Simple, clean, unmistakable truth. Love never ends. God never ends because the eternal, everlasting God is Himself, love. True relationships among God's people will forever exhibit love in ever growing and ever brighter ways.

Its Contrasts (v. 8b)

Now, let me say immediately that in my view these texts have been primarily used as proof texts in the debate over the permanence of certain gifts. I think this is unfortunate. The point here is that loves will never pass away. Love will never cease. The time and need for prophecies and languages and spiritual knowledge in this world will come to an end. They will stop because they will no longer be needed. Yes, these things will come to an end. And when they do, love will continue. Love truly is eternal.

Its Reason (v. 9-10)

Why will these come to an end? Because there is coming a day when perfection will have been reached. There will be a day when we will no longer see truth as in brass mirrors but we will know with full openness and transparency. There will be a day when what we thought was so high, deep, dazzling will be seen to have been good and useful child play speech when the full mature manhood of new heavens and new earth is reached.

I do not believe that this text is referring to the completion of the canon. It is at Jesus' Coming that we will be perfect, we will be full grown, we will see with utter clarity. Then prophetic speech, foreign languages, and special knowledge for Word and wisdom will all be ended. Until then, they may continue. Until then, properly understood

and Biblically practiced, these are useful and helpful gifts to the church. They can be very destructive when subverted and abused.

But the most egregious failure on both sides of this debate is to be unloving. How can we be arrogant, proud, irritable, unkind, ungracious, unloving with those who differ? Now remember, I am talking about Christians who differ. There are so called Charismatics who deny the Trinity and other essential doctrines who are not Christians. But even in this room there are people on opposite sides of this debate.

Why does Paul say this at all? Because many in the Corinthian church were pursuing these at the expense of love. Ministry in this world had displaced love in this world. Furthermore, they were speaking and acting as though

Its Illustrations (v. 11-12)

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. ¹² For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

First, Paul is simply saying that the Corinthians are childish. They are whining, crying, fighting over spiritual gifts. They are childish and immature. This is not new. This is not saying that the supernatural gifts were childlike speech and now he has arrived at mature speech. No, he is once again critiquing them in their way in ministry.

Verse 12 is the reason love is carefully kind and enduring. Now, we don't have the whole picture. We don't know exactly all of people's motivations. Now even Paul is not fully self-aware. But there will come a day will all will be open, all will be transparent, all will be fully known. All the threads in God's marvelous tapestry will be known and shown - until then, love endures.

Love's Priority (v. 13)

¹³ So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

A Simple Trinity

Faith, hope and love are core elements in Paul's theology... Christianity is about what we believe, what we anticipate and how we love...

A Stated Truth

Love is the greatest. For all the reasons given. God is love. God's love endures. And so must ours...

Reflect and Respond

1 Corinthians 13:1–13 In the New Living Translation...

¹ If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, but didn't love others, I would be nothing. ³ If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing.

⁴ Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵ or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. ⁶ It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷ Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

⁸ Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! ⁹ Now our knowledge is partial and incomplete, and even the gift of prophecy reveals only part of the whole picture! ¹⁰ But when the time of perfection comes, these partial things will become useless.

¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. ¹² Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.

¹³ Three things will last forever — faith, hope, and love — and the greatest of these is love.