

WHAT LOVE IS LIKE

by David Bast

WHAT LOVE
IS LIKE

WHAT LOVE IS LIKE

© 1996 by David Bast

Published by Words of Hope, 700 Ball Ave., N.E.
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-1308

E-Mail: woh@xc.org
Worldwide Web: <http://woh.org>

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 and 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NRSV) are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), copyright 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the King James Version (KJV).

Cover Design: Ragont Design

Cover Photo: *Jesus Washing Peter's Feet*, Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893), Tate Gallery, London/ET Archive/SuperStock

Words of Hope's mission is to proclaim Jesus Christ by radio and literature in the languages of the world's peoples, seeking with our partners in ministry to win the uncommitted everywhere to faith in Christ and to encourage Christians in the life of discipleship.

Contents

	Preface	7
1.	A More Excellent Way	9
2.	How to Succeed in Life	17
3.	Love Is Patient	25
4.	Love Is Kind	33
5.	Love Is Humble	41
6.	Love Is Sacrificial	48
7.	Love Is Triumphant	56
8.	Love Is Trusting	64
9.	Love Is Lasting	72
10.	A New Target	81

Preface

If I could describe the thesis of this book in just one sentence, it would be this: Love is not a feeling, it is a way of behaving. What matters most, if we want to know real love, is not just what we tell others—the way we speak to them—but the way we treat them. It's not just the moods, emotions, drives, and compulsions we experience, it's how we act upon these feelings. Or sometimes, how we restrain ourselves from acting. That's what defines love. Love, as someone has pointed out, is a verb.

This is also the thesis of one of the most familiar and popular chapters in the Bible: 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter. Paul, the writer of this famous love song, says the most important thing to know about love is what it *does*.

I have followed Paul's teaching about love in these expositions, which try to explain each of the actions and attitudes that characterize the deepest kind of love. I have been helped immeasurably in my own understanding of these things by Professor Lewis Smedes' wise and insightful book, *Love Within Limits*, to which I refer in several of the studies. Readers who are interested in going deeper into the subject (and into 1 Corinthians 13) should turn to that book.

Having spent some time in this rich and rewarding chapter, I think I do understand the meaning of love better. Now, if I could only start to live it more. . . .

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. 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. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13

1

A More Excellent Way

... And I will show you a still more excellent way.

1 Corinthians 12:31

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love” says an old pop song. That is certainly true, especially if you understand what love actually is.

I suppose out of all the subjects in the world, more songs have been written about love than anything else. (War might be a close second; what does that suggest to you about human nature?) You could probably think of half a dozen love songs without even trying. “Love makes the world go round.” “All you need is love.” “What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” We sing about love so much because we sense its importance. We long to experience it. Yet we are so often disappointed in our search for it.

But what exactly is love? We extol it. We fall into it and out of it. We search for it, are disappointed in it, and seek it yet again. But what is this thing we call love? Is it a feeling? Is it an experience? Is it a power? If the songs are right, it must be all those things and more. It must be the key to life, the secret of happiness, the one thing everybody needs and wants, the

magic force that makes the world a better place and our lives more worth living.

I want to spend some time looking at what 1 Corinthians 13 has to say about this wonderful, elusive thing called love. After all, the songs and poems are right—love is the greatest power in the universe. It is our deepest need. It is the thing that can make our lives complete and whole. It is the only way to real happiness.

The Words of Love

In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul has been talking to the Corinthian church about the gifts God bestows on Christians through his Holy Spirit. Some of these gifts are supernatural, such as speaking in different tongues or healing or working miracles. Others are more normal abilities that are given to people to use in service for God, things like teaching or preaching or administration or even just general helping. But none of these gifts, from the spectacular to the mundane, can compare with the best gift of all. “I will show you a still more excellent way” writes the apostle (1 Cor. 12:31). The highest and greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is not the power to work miracles or to win multitudes or to lead great movements; it is the power to love.

To love, though, in a particular way. As soon as we begin to study the Bible’s teaching about love, we confront a problem of vocabulary. The New Testament, as you may know, was written in Greek, and Greek has several words for love, each of which refers to a different kind of love. Maybe you have never thought about this, but we do experience love in different forms. There is romantic love, for example—the passionate, physical love that attracts men and women to one another. The

Greek word for that is *eros* (from which we get “erotic”), and this is the love most of the songs are about.

But there is also the affection of friendship. There is the deep love of family, of parents and children and brothers and sisters—the loving bonds of kinship. And there is the love we feel for things that are beautiful or good. The Greeks referred to such loves with the word *philos*. This word has survived in English in several compounds. “Philanthropy” means the love of human beings that causes one to be generous toward them. “Philharmonic” is the love of beautiful sound. “Philadelphia” is the city of brotherly love, named hopefully by its Quaker founders, who I suspect would be rather disappointed if they could see how far their city (and all others) fails to live up to its name.

But when the New Testament writers came to the subject of love, they found that none of the available words was just right. The love they wanted to talk about was different from all these other kinds of love. *Eros* and *philos* can and do take many different forms. But the one thing they all have in common is an element of need. All human love is, to some degree, need-love. The love between men and women needs to be reciprocated; for love to satisfy, lovers must be loved in return. The love of a mother for her child can be sacrificial, causing her to give up a great deal for her child’s well being, but she still needs something back from the child. She wants her sacrifices to be honored and appreciated and rewarded by her child’s virtuous life. Love for our friends or our pastimes or our favorite things is rewarded by the pleasure they bring us.

When the apostle Paul writes about a more excellent way, he is talking about love on an altogether different plane, a love so different that it needed a new word to describe it. The word he and the other New Testament writers chose was *agape*.

What Love Is

Love in this new Christian sense—agape-love—differs from all forms of human love because it is not need-love at all. It is gift-love, grace-love.

If this love is so radically different, an obvious question is, “Where did it come from?” How do we even know about it, if our human love is of an altogether different sort? The answer is that this love comes from God and we know about it from the Bible. Agape is the way God loves; it is the name his love takes. When the Bible, in a famous text, states that “God is love,” what it literally says is, “God is *agape*” (1 John 4:7). Agape is the ultimate form of love because it is the love God has for us, the love we experience from him. Agape is also Christian love—the love we extend to others—because when we have experienced God’s undeserved love for ourselves, we also are empowered to begin to love others in the same way. Here is the full passage from 1 John 4 in which God is defined as love:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

(1 John 4:7,11, NRSV)

Knowing that agape-love is God’s love, we can learn some things about this love by studying the way he loves. Here are four important characteristics:

1. *God’s love is disinterested, not self-interested.* *Disinterested* does not mean the same thing as *uninterested*. If you are uninterested, you are bored, turned off, unwilling to get involved. If you are self-interested, you are involved for selfish reasons. But if you are *dis*-interested, you are acting for no

reason other than to help. God's love is like that. It is selfless, disinterested love. It is not calculating, not an investment looking for a return. God loves just to love, not to get anything for himself. Indeed, how could he? God's love cannot be need-love because God has no needs. He is perfect and complete in himself. He did not have to create anyone. He does not have to redeem anyone. Even our praise and thanks, our worship and adoration (all of which he welcomes) are not necessary to him. They do not add to his wholeness or his completeness or his perfect pleasure in himself. God's love is, in the purest sense, altruistic; caused only by the needs of those he loves, never by any of his own. It is *agape*.

2. *God's love is giving, not taking.* Agape is measured by what it gives, not what it gets, a point that is made in the Bible's most important and perhaps most famous verse—

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

(John 3:16)

Here is another verse from the pen of the same apostle:

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

(1 John 4:9-10, NRSV)

It's nice when someone tells you how much he loves you, but the real measure of love is how much he is willing to sacrifice to help you when you need it. God loves us so much he gave his only Son to die as the atoning sacrifice for our sins to enable all who believe in him to have eternal life. If you want

to know where the ultimate measure of love is found, look at the cross of Christ.

3. *God's love is generated by its subject, not its object.* God's love is not produced by attractive qualities he sees in those whom he loves. It is produced entirely from within himself. In this too, it differs radically from natural human love. We love what is lovable. We are attracted to the attractive, whether people or things. But agape is love for the unlovely. "God shows his love for us in that *while we were yet sinners* Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

4. *God's love is a decision, not a feeling.* God loves for one reason and one reason only: because he chooses to love. His love is an act of will that produces actions of grace toward those who do not deserve them. God does not fall in love, swept along helplessly by a wave of feeling. God is loving because he has decided to love. And that, I think, is the single most awe-inspiring truth in the whole universe.

Why Love?

Now all of this may be quite new to you, and it is perhaps difficult to understand. Agape is not the kind of love we're used to. It is not natural. It is not what we instinctively feel. This really is not what all the songs are singing about. It is a selfless, sacrificial kind of love that does not look for any reward but simply acts to meet the needs of others. It is a conscious decision to do good to others even if there is no emotional return for us. It is a love that specifically focuses on those who are not worthy of it, and have nothing to commend themselves to us. To love with this kind of love does not do anything for us—except that it makes us like the Lord Jesus, like God himself.

Maybe in light of all this, you are asking, Who needs this sort of love? The short answer is: We do. You do. I do—I *really* do. I don't know about you, but if God's love is not agape, if it is not love for the unlovely and the undeserving, I have no hope at all.

And the longer answer to the question of who needs agape is: The world does. Human love is wonderful and it is good, make no mistake about it. Romantic love, affection, friendship—these are all great things. God made them and we enjoy and appreciate them. But these kinds of love are not enough. Romance will not solve the deep problems that confront us in society, or even in our own families. Appeals to friendship are not going to turn centuries-old enemies into brothers and sisters. Natural feelings will not feed the hungry, shelter and clothe the poor, befriend the lonely, bring reconciliation between races and tribes and nations—or between quarreling next-door neighbors. Only the power of God's sacrificial love flowing first into us and transforming us, and then flowing through us out into the world, can really make a difference.

Are you a Christian? Do you know the agape of God? What the world really needs now is that love acting through you.

Study Questions

- 1. What does it say about God that the greatest gift the Holy Spirit can give us is not anything supernatural or extraordinary, but the power to love?*
- 2. How is agape distinct from other kinds of love?*
- 3. Is agape-love possible for such sinful and imperfect people as ourselves? If so, name some concrete ways.*

2

How to Succeed in Life

If I . . . have not love, I am nothing . . . I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3

Everyone wants to succeed in life. But how can you tell if you have really been successful?

Let me ask you a question. If you had the choice of being either a success or a failure in life, which would you choose? That is not very difficult, is it? I would not be crawling too far out on a limb if I predicted that most people would prefer to be successful; it is difficult to conceive of anybody in his right mind who would not rather have success than failure.

But here is another question that isn't so easy. How do you know if and when you have been successful? In other words, how can you determine what constitutes success? What measuring stick do you hold up against your life to gauge how successful you have managed to become? These deeper questions are the ones Paul raises in the opening paragraph of his famous love chapter. I invite you to take some time to think about them too.

How Do You Spell Success?

There is an advertisement for an antacid tablet that asks, “How do you spell ‘relief’?” and then answers by spelling out the name of the product. Well, let me ask you this: How do you spell success? For many people, success is spelled “m-o-n-e-y.” Frank Sinatra has a large building filled with costly playthings behind his southern California mansion. On the wall hangs a sign proclaiming, “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

The easiest and quickest way of sizing people up is to ask how much they have, both of money and the things money buys. Think of the fascination we have with the salaries of high-priced actors and entertainers, professional athletes or top executives. Think of the way we view people who walk by us dressed in expensive clothing or drive past in a luxury automobile. Think of the energy and effort we expend trying to make more and get more.

But is it true that if you are rich your life is therefore successful? Howard Hughes was once the richest man on earth, and yet his last years were spent in a bizarre private world that was the product of his own paranoid fear of contamination by contact with the outside. His appearance became that of a crazed hermit, with sunken cheeks, yellow skin and bloodshot eyes, stringy hair, and long, claw-like fingernails. At the end, in one of the supreme ironies of our time, Howard Hughes died of malnutrition. The world’s richest man starved to death in a hotel penthouse suite high atop his empire. Would you call that success?

Or is success measured by how much you achieve? We often talk about “climbing the ladder” of success. The idea is that when and if you make it to the top of your company, or profession, or sport, or school, or whatever, then you can know you are successful. If you are the best at what you do, if others

point to you as the model of what an entrepreneur or a doctor or a coach or a minister or a teacher or a mother should be, then surely you qualify as successful. Don't you?

But the world is full of people who seem to have arrived at the top and still are not happy or satisfied. Some time ago a survey among successful individuals from a variety of fields revealed that many of them felt they did not belong where they were. Do you know what the number one fear of those successful people was? It was to be found out as a phony. What most worried these people was that everyone would discover how little they deserved to be where they were. If getting to the top defines success, why doesn't it feel more like it?

Here is one more possibility that you might think I would advocate. Is success measured by how religious you are? This test is not nearly as common as it once was, but it is still strong in some places and in some cultures. You might think that those who have the most visible religion, the most verbal piety and faith, the most scrupulous morals are really the most successful, at least in God's sight. But be careful here. Piety and morality are fine things, but religion alone, or religion as we generally think of it, is not the measure of success in life, not even with God. Remember that Jesus saved his harshest criticism for those of his contemporaries who were the most religious—the scribes and the Pharisees. He condemned them not so much for what they did as for what they failed to do, and one crucial omission in their lives turned all their piety into something offensive to God. It was their failure to love.

Love Defines Success

So let's consider the question from a different perspective. Instead of thinking of the different ways we define success,

let's ask how God defines it. God is really the one who has the authority to decide what constitutes a successful human life.

The quality of a person's life is not determined by popular opinion or majority vote; God's is the only opinion that matters. After all, he is the Creator. He made us, he designed both us (our complete human nature) and our environment (the world in which we live), and he alone knows exactly what we were meant to be and do. Whether the world thinks you are a success or a failure doesn't matter in the least. It doesn't even matter what you think about yourself. The only definition of success that matters is God's, and he measures success not by how much money you make or by what you accomplish in the eyes of others; he measures success by how much you love. Whatever else may be lacking in your life, if love is present, you are a success. Whatever else may be present in your life, if love is lacking, you are a failure.

This is what Paul says over and over again:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging symbol. And if I have prophetic powers, if I have faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I have and my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing.

“Without love, I am nothing. I have nothing. I gain nothing.” These three verses can be summed up in just three words: *Love matters most*. The Corinthian Christians placed great emphasis upon the Holy Spirit's ministry, but in their immaturity they believed the spectacular gifts were the most important ones. They thought that the really successful Christian would be the one who spoke in tongues the most, or who prophesied, or who worked wonders (see 1 Cor. 12: 29-30). No, says Paul, it's not

that way at all. The fruit of the Spirit is more important than the gifts of the Spirit, and love is most important of all. It is “the more excellent way.” Love matters most.

The apostle mentions a number of things that might be considered great, but which are nullified by the absence of love. All other gifts and abilities are negated, every other form of success is rendered null and void, where love is lacking. Without love, eloquence—even Spirit-inspired eloquence—is pointless. Without love, knowledge—even knowledge of the Bible and the secret things of God—is meaningless. Without love, power—even power which comes from stupendous faith—is worthless. Without love, zeal—even a martyr’s zeal for a cause—is useless. As the great theologian Karl Barth observed, all of these accomplishments without love are like a string of zeroes with no number in front: however long they are—and you can write zeroes down till you fill the page—unless there is something in front of them, they still add up to nothing.

Indeed, we could go a step further and say that when love is missing, all those otherwise wonderful gifts become deadly threats. Eloquence without love leads to demagoguery; the world’s most dangerous and destructive tyrants—people like Lenin and Hitler—have been mesmerizing speakers. Knowledge without love produces arrogance; everyone knows brilliant people who are unbearable because they despise those whom they consider to be beneath them. Power without love creates tyranny; the history of our own twentieth century bears terrible witness to this truth. And zeal without love results in fanaticism, another commodity with which our world is currently overstocked. So love is the key. Love is the definition and measure of success.

Good News And Bad News

The insight that God, whose judgment is the only one that matters, defines success in life not by how much you have accumulated, nor by what you have achieved, nor by whether you are well known and admired, but by the way that you love, comes as both good news and bad news. It's bad news for proud and ambitious people, because it suggests that much of their time has been misspent and much of their energy misdirected. It's bad news for rich people, unless they belong to that small minority of the wealthy who have learned to use their resources primarily to help others rather than to indulge themselves. It's bad news for gifted people, at least for those who think that possessing higher-than-average ability is enough to make them better-than-average human beings.

However, this is good news if you believe the gospel. The gospel promises love, this love, to all who would have it. The means of living a tremendously successful life are readily available to anyone. A life of love is neither a hopeless ideal nor an impossible burden, because it is a gift and a power, made real for those who believe in Jesus Christ. Success doesn't depend on whether you have a little or a lot of anything. You don't have to be someone famous in order to be great. In fact, on the day of judgment, when God finally reveals the truth about who has lived successfully, the greatest people will most likely be folks no one has ever heard of.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis's imaginary tour of heaven, there is a powerful scene in which the narrator (Lewis himself) witnesses an approaching festive procession in honor of one of the redeemed—a lady of surpassing majesty and beauty. Lewis asks George MacDonald, his heavenly tour guide, about her identity:

“Is it? . . . is it?” I whispered to my guide.

“Not at all,” said he. “It’s someone ye’ll never have heard of. Her name on earth was Sarah Smith and she lived at Golders Green.”

“She seems to be . . . well, a person of particular importance?”

“Aye. She is one of the great ones. Ye have heard that fame in this country and fame on Earth are two quite different things.”

The Bible says that the first shall be last and the last first. All that really matters in order to be a resounding success is whether you have opened your heart to God’s love in Christ, and then offered your life in living out this love for others.

Study Questions

1. *What qualities are necessary, in your opinion, for a person to be considered successful?*
2. *“It doesn’t matter what you think about yourself. The only definition of success that matters is God’s. . . .” Do you agree?*
3. *Is there a price to pay for living a life that is successful in God’s eyes?*

3

Love Is Patient

*Love is patient. . . . Love bears all things
. . . . endures all things.*

1 Corinthians 13:4,7

Is there a limit to how much we should love? Are there things love shouldn't put up with?

“**L**ove is patient,” says Paul in 1 Corinthians 13. “Love bears all things . . . endures all things.” This chapter tells us all about love; not ordinary human love but the Christlike love that is selfless and sacrificial and reaches out to the needs of others without thought of its own reward. This love is the most important thing in the whole world. It’s the most desperately needed thing in the whole world. It’s not even too much to say that this love is the key to life itself.

When people puzzle over the deep mysteries of the universe, the deepest one of all is the question of why. Why does anything exist at all? The Bible’s answer, in a word, is love. God’s love is the power that called the universe into being. God’s love is the power that supports and carries the whole creation along and keeps it going. God’s love is the reason you and I were made and why you are still alive to draw

breath at this very moment. Love “bears all things” in the most literal sense. It holds up the universe.

Despite the fact, though, that it’s something we probably think about every day, we still often misunderstand the nature of true love. Most of us tend to think of love primarily as an emotion. It is feeling a certain way about a thing or a person. Love is something that just happens to us, and there isn’t much we can do about it. We either love or we don’t. After all, we think, you can’t control your heart. We often talk about “falling in love” as if love were an accident that happens involuntarily, like falling in a lake.

In ancient mythology, love (at least love of the romantic variety) was the province of Venus’s son Cupid. He’s represented as a naughty, blindfolded little boy, shooting his arrows randomly at human targets who have nothing whatsoever to say about it. Nobody believes in the old mythology, of course, but a great many people accept the view of love that it represents. Many still think that love is all a matter of feelings, and therefore that our loves and our hates, our likes and our dislikes, are all beyond our control, beyond even our understanding.

What Love Is Like

But when the Bible comes to talk about love, it doesn’t talk about feelings at all. First Corinthians 13 opens with a paragraph stressing the surpassing value of love, and then it gets down to the business of defining love by describing in detail the way it behaves.

One of America’s newest fictional heroes is the amazing Forrest Gump, a simple man who gets through life with the help of wise sayings he learned from his mother. To those who accuse him of being stupid, Forrest responds, “Mama says,

‘Stupid is as stupid does.’” The Bible says the same about love: “Love is as love does.” A loving person is one who does loving things. This is what love is like:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

(1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Let’s look at these specific actions of love one at a time, beginning with the first one: Love is patient. “Love,” Paul says a little later, “endures all things.”

Patience in the New Testament sense means having and exercising the power to endure. Patience, to use a beautiful old synonym, is “longsuffering.” The root meaning of the New Testament word, as one ancient writer explained it, was “to have a wide and big soul” (St. John Chrysostom). In other words, it means to have the inner strength to choose to stay with someone when it would be much easier to leave him.

That’s exactly what love is like. If you tried to come up with examples of patience from everyday life, you would probably think of an activity that required hours of quiet perseverance—a fisherman hunched motionless over his line in the water, a woman focused intently on fine needlework, somebody sitting at a table endlessly flipping up cards in a game of Solitaire (or “Patience,” as the British call it).

But the patience of love is not persistence in an activity. It is persistence in caring for a person despite the pain she may cause. Patience is, quite literally, *longsuffering*; *suffering*, because you will be hurt and disappointed by the failures of those you love, and *long*, because, despite the pain, you persist

in loving. You refuse to give up. You won't turn away. You don't quit and go look for someone who is easier to care about.

Forbearing and Forgiving

There is a wonderful passage from another of Paul's letters that sheds light on love's patient endurance:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you.

...

(Colossians 3:12,13)

The meaning of patience is well expressed in the statement that we are to be *forbearing* and *forgiving* toward each other. The basic idea in forbearance is to put up with things that are off-putting, to bear with people, to overlook minor offenses, to tolerate each other's flaws and faults and failures, to live with imperfections, to accept the aggravation that comes when someone irritates or annoys you.

Have you noticed how very little forbearance we see these days? People can't seem to put up with anything from each other. Several years ago my brother was living in New York City, and as he walked to work one morning in the middle of Manhattan, he turned a corner and came upon an appalling scene. A man lay sprawled in the middle of the street, bleeding to death. He wasn't the victim of a traffic accident. Just moments before he had entered the intersection to cross the street. A vehicle was partially blocking the crosswalk, forcing him to go out of his way around it and as he did so, he shouted an angry word and banged on it with his hand, whereupon the driver jumped out and in the ensuing argument stabbed the man

to death. Admittedly, that is a shocking example, but it is the sort of thing that seems to be happening more and more often.

People hate each other, curse each other, scream at each other, sue each other, strike each other, sometimes even kill each other, often for the smallest of reasons. In a world where the favorite refrain seems to be, “I don’t have to put up with that!” where insults, real or imagined, and mistakes and offenses both small and large are destroying relationships as never before, the love that bears all things and endures all things is a radical alternative. In a culture filled with thin skins and short fuses, longsuffering begins to look more and more like a strength, not a weakness.

The only way to be able to love patiently is to practice forgiveness as well as forbearance. “Forbearing one another,” Paul says, “and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.” Christian love requires people to practice indiscriminate forgiveness. According to the Bible, it doesn’t seem to matter what the complaint or offense is, we’re just supposed to forgive. This is stated in the broadest possible terms: If *anyone* has *anything* against another, then forgive—no matter who offended whom, or how, or why. Nothing is said about getting an apology first or making sure that forgiveness is deserved or being careful not to let yourself get taken advantage of. We’re told simply to forbear and to forgive.

Why Be Patient?

Love is patient. And patience means continuing to put up with pain caused by the actions of those we love. It means practicing forbearance toward people when they’re difficult to live with. It means ignoring the little wrongs and forgiving the big ones.

Loving like this doesn't come easy. In fact, in a way it doesn't even sound healthy. It is possible, in fact, to put up with wrong for too long. There are times when people do harm both to themselves and to those they love by allowing or even enabling destructive behavior to go on unchecked. We do have to recognize that there is a limit to love's patience. The call to love patiently doesn't mean we turn into doormats who never say no.

Patience means suffering with and for those whom we love. It means enduring many things, even enduring all things without giving up, but it does not mean enduring all things for all time. Patience means suffering long. It does not mean suffering forever. Loving as God loves means we must also care about other things like justice and truth, and at some point—and only love knows when—patience must give way to judgment.

But the question remains: Why go on forbearing and forgiving as long as we do? Why the *long-suffering*? The answer, as always, is because this is the way God loves us. Listen again, “Forbearing one another and . . . forgiving each other; *as the Lord has forgiven you.*”

Do you realize how patient God is? The psalmist wrote that the Lord is “slow to anger” (Ps. 103:8). God knows what it is to put up with a lot, to bear patiently with those who are offending him. That's what he does with us. In fact, this is one of the main reasons why the world still continues, despite all the evil in it.

Perhaps you've wondered why, if God is so good and so powerful, he keeps putting up with so much wrong every day. Why doesn't he just put a stop to it all? Well, one answer is because he keeps putting up with us. Doing away with all the suffering in the world would involve doing away with every

person who helps to contribute to it. “The next time you’re tempted to ask, ‘Why didn’t God stop this tragedy from happening?’” said a wise Christian writer named Dorothy Sayers, “you might just as well ask, ‘Why didn’t God strike me dead last week before I did that hurtful thing?’” The reason he didn’t is because God is longsuffering toward his wayward creatures.

And he is this way for a specific reason. The Bible says, “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you [is patient toward you], not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). “Do you not know,” Paul writes in another place, “that God’s patience is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

God, you see, is patient with a purpose. He is not simply putting up with everything indefinitely. There will be a limit also to his patience. Some day he too will say, “That’s enough!” Only perfect love knows when, and after that will come the judgment.

Patience is actually the time love gives to change, to repent, to believe, and to become new creatures in Christ. For us, today is the day of salvation, not tomorrow. By God’s wonderful patience, you are still alive at this moment, and one reason you are is so that you may turn to Jesus Christ in repentance. Whether you’ve done that a thousand times before or never once, do it right now.

Study Questions

1. *Is it possible to practice indiscriminate forgiveness?*
2. *How can a person forgive indiscriminately without seeming to be taken advantage of?*
3. *What are some ways we can determine when patience must give way to judgment? How can we be faithful Christians in such an instance?*
4. *How does Paul's explanation that "God's patience is meant to lead you to repentance" affect the way you live?*

4

Love Is Kind

Love is . . . kind . . . it is not irritable or resentful.

1 Corinthians 13:4,5

“Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” goes a movie cliché. It would be more accurate, though, to say: “Love means not doing things for which you have to be sorry.”

What is love like? It is so simple, really. When you get right down to it, love is not all about flowery words and phrases, sentimental songs, or passionate feelings. What it really involves is how you treat people. In fact, if love is not practical—that is to say, “put into practice”—then it is not anything. Love means doing good to people; love means doing to others what you would want them to do to you. Or, as the apostle Paul states so simply in his great chapter about love, “Love is kind.”

The Kindness of Love

When the Bible says that love is *kind*, it uses a word that refers to the ordinary, simple, down-to-earth, everyday acts of goodness people can do for one another. This is how love actually behaves, we are told. Love does not abuse or take advantage of others. It does not use people for its own pleasure

or satisfaction. It does not take people for granted or ignore their needs. It is not selfish or demanding or complaining or belittling of others. Love does good to others. It patiently serves. It goes out of its way to help. All of this is involved in the simple phrase, "Love is kind."

The kindness of love does not necessarily consist in grand gestures or extravagant sacrifices. While it certainly is an act of love to sacrifice one's life for another (as Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends"), love is also kind in the little ways. The state where I live, Michigan, has a huge suspension bridge spanning the Straits of Mackinac, linking its lower and upper peninsulas. I read a story some time ago about a man who travels across that bridge frequently and who, whenever he stops to pay the toll for the crossing, gives twice the amount in order to cover the charge for the vehicle behind him as well. That's a small act of kindness. It's not going to change anyone's life, but it will undoubtedly brighten someone's day. And in its own humble way, that is a good illustration of the way love behaves. Love is helpful even when that costs something. Love meets needs, small ones as well as big ones. Love gives without expecting to be paid back.

Love's kindness can also be so utterly astounding it takes our breath away and leaves us groping for words to describe it. Several years ago I visited Mother Teresa's House of the Dying in Calcutta. This is the place where she began her life of service to the abandoned poor of that vast Indian city. We arrived at the hospice just as the last rays of the setting sun bathed the building in an orange glow. Outside was a crowded street, filled with noise and confusion and squalor. Inside there was light and order and purposeful activity. The main room of the hospice was large and open, with a bare concrete floor and

green, painted walls. A center aisle running the room's length was bordered on either side by a raised platform lined with cots. On each cot lay a man. These were the poorest of the poor, people with no place else to go, with no families to care for them, no one who wanted them; people whose bodies had been broken by disease or worn out by hard labor. Mother Teresa and her sisters of charity took them in. They bathed and fed and comforted them.

I stood and watched as the sisters and other volunteers moved among the rows of cots or sat patiently alongside one. What they were doing was not complicated or hard to understand. Hard to believe, yes. Hard even to imagine such a place unless you had seen it. But not hard to understand.

They were not offering medical treatment; most of the people were too far gone for that. They were just offering love: bathing, feeding, cleaning, speaking to, and soothing the sick and dying. That's what love is. Whether in trivial ways or ways that are unutterably profound, love is kind. Love helps where there is a need. Love simply does good to others.

The Ways of Love's Kindness

Wouldn't it be wonderful if our love were more kind? I don't mean that everyone should turn into a Mother Teresa overnight. That is not likely to happen, although it would certainly make the world a better place. But it should be possible for all of us, for ordinary men and women, adults and children, to behave with more kindness toward those whom we love—not to mention strangers and others. Wouldn't it be great if rather than hurting people, we helped them instead? If we offered less abuse and cruelty, and more simple service?

One obstacle to kindness lies in the very nature of our love. I referred earlier to the difference between *eros* and *agape*. The

problem with our natural human love, our *eros*, is that it is a love that needs and demands satisfaction. Because it is based on the desire to take and possess, *eros* is often irritable and resentful, especially when it does not get its way, and it is not always distinguished for its kindness. But *agape*, the New Testament word for Christian love (the love that springs from and is patterned upon Christ's love for us), is giving love. *Agape* is love that does not arise out of our own needs. It simply serves, and that is why it is always kind. Marriages begin with *eros* (most of the time) but they can only really survive where there is *agape* as well.

The kindness with which love behaves must also be extended to more than just our lovers, families, and friends. In one of his hardest sayings, Jesus told his disciples to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:44-45, NIV).

At first this sounds like nonsense. Enemies by definition are those whom we hate. How can anyone love someone they hate? Moreover, enemies are those people who make it their business to try to hurt us. The thing to do to them, as everyone knows, is to hurt back, or better yet, hurt first. Yet look again at what Jesus says:

I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

(Matthew 5:39-42)

These are indeed hard sayings. But it helps us to understand them a little better, even if not to practice them, by remembering that Jesus is talking about the kind of love that consists more in how we treat people than how we feel about them. He is not telling us that we have to somehow find it in our hearts to have cordial and warm feelings toward those who are cruel or evil or who are treating us unfairly; what he says is that we have to be good to them. We have to be kind.

Turning the other cheek means that in the face of insults we must behave with restraint and forgiveness instead of trying to retaliate. Going the extra mile means that when someone demands something from us we should respond with generosity rather than resentment. The natural human instinct is to offer payment in kind: hatred for hatred, love for love, kindness for kindness, injury for injury. “You scratch my back,” we say, “and I’ll scratch yours. Treat me right and I’ll be your friend, but cross me and I’ll make you regret it.” That is the natural human way. It makes sense to us.

Jesus’ way is the way of love. It says to repay evil with good and to be kind even when we are dealing with enemies who are unkind. By the world’s way of reasoning, it does not make sense at all.

The Kindness of the Lord

But it does make sense if you remember what God is like. Here again, when it comes to love, he is way ahead of us. Love those who hate you . . . do good to those who do you ill . . . offer kindness to the undeserving and unappreciative people who will just take advantage of you while laughing at your gullibility—a loser’s strategy? Well, God has done it all. In fact, that is what he does every day. It is exactly the way God has decided to treat people.

The Bible says this about him: “The LORD is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The LORD is good to all; and his compassion is over all that he has made. The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings” (Ps. 145:8-9,17). In Luke’s gospel Jesus repeats the command to love our enemies, and adds this: “. . . love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be [children] of the Most High; for *he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish*” (Luke 6:35).

I wonder whether you have ever thought about God’s utterly astonishing kindness. “He is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.” Has something like this ever happened to you? You do something nice for someone, going out of your way to help when you do not have to, just out of the goodness of your heart. But the person for whom you have done this favor is oblivious to you. She is so thoughtless she does not even say thank you, or worse, so self-absorbed she does not think any thanks are due. She just expects you to go on serving her forever. How does that make you feel? What do you do the next time your help is needed?

But that is just how it is with God! The vast majority of people take his good gifts each day without so much as a “thank you.” They live with their backs to him; withholding their worship which is his due, bestowing their love upon lesser things, never thinking about him, never calling upon him except in desperation, never even using his name except to make jokes or to curse, and all the while eating his food, breathing his air, basking in his sunshine, enjoying all the gifts of God’s good creation.

Yet God is kind. He goes on helping and giving and loving. Do you know about God’s ultimate act of kindness? It

happened when he gave his Son Jesus Christ to die in the place of sinful people, so that whoever believes in him will have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Yes, even “the ungrateful and the selfish.”

When I think about that, it makes my heart leap, because I know that is the kind of person I am deep down. If God is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish, then I have hope that he will be kind to me. It is easy to think that if God really knew what we were like, he could not love us. But, of course, he does know—and he does love!

You cannot qualify yourself for God’s kindness; it is unmerited. You cannot earn it; it is free. You cannot deserve it; it is a gift to the undeserving. But you can respond to it, you can accept it intentionally, you can return your thanks for it, you can offer your worship. Most important of all, you can give your life to the Lord Jesus Christ, and begin to practice love’s kindness yourself. Then you will be a child of the Most High, and you will love the way your heavenly Father does.

5

Love Is Humble

Love is not . . . boastful; it is not arrogant or rude.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

Humility—it is an attractive quality in anyone, but it is especially becoming in those who love.

Love, the love God both shows toward us and inspires in us, is humble. In saying that, I do not mean that love is lowly or ordinary or simple or humdrum. On the contrary, love is as glorious and exalted as God himself. When I say love is humble, I mean to express something about the way love behaves. For this is another of love's actions as explained in the love chapter.

The Things Love Does Not Do

The opening words of this passage describe some of love's behaviors. Love is patient; love is able to put up with suffering and wrong for a long time without giving up. Love is kind; love actively seeks to do good to others in ways both small and great.

But the behavior of love can be described negatively as well as positively. If there are certain things love does, certain acts which define it, there are other things love does not do. And so Paul specifies not only some of the ways of love, but also love's non-ways, the kinds of action love rejects. Here are three of them: "Love is not . . . *boastful*; it is not *arrogant* or *rude*."

Boasting . . . arrogance . . . rudeness—those are three very unpleasant qualities. We are quick to recognize and dislike them in others, if not always in ourselves. What do they involve? *Boasting* is trying to enhance my reputation by drawing attention to my exploits or possessions. It is a public relations campaign in which the same person (me) is both agent and client. Boasting is usually a sign of insecurity. Those who brag about how great they are, are generally those trying hardest to convince themselves. The word Paul uses here for boasting means “to behave as a windbag.” Most of us have run into people like that. They are like Macbeth’s opinion of life: “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Crude and obvious boasting is difficult for anyone to take for very long. But a lot of boasting is more subtle than that. The real reason people boast is because they want others to admire them, and a more sophisticated way of gaining admiration is by accumulating expensive things as status symbols. After all, you do not have to obviously draw attention to yourself and go on and on about how great and important you are if you can send the same message by the kind of clothes you wear, or the car you drive, or the trinkets and toys and gadgets you display.

I was in an overseas airport not long ago waiting for my flight home, and with time on my hands, I wandered into the duty-free shop. I decided to entertain myself by looking for the most outrageously overpriced item I could find. The eventual winner was a pair of designer sunglasses for \$750. “Why would anyone pay \$750 for sunglasses?” you ask. In order to show that they are the kind of person who spends \$750 for sunglasses! That’s how clever boosters boast.

Next is *arrogance*; our catalogue of terms also says that love is not arrogant. Arrogant people are “puffed up” (the literal translation of Paul’s word), puffed up with an overinflated

sense of their own importance and value. There is a fish in the ocean called a blowfish that has the capacity to suddenly expand its body to several times its normal size. It looks very impressive and frightening. The blowfish often overawes bigger and stronger fish, but it is actually quite weak.

Arrogant people are just like that. They think they are bigger and more important than anyone else. Because of that, they try to use other people. They are pushy and grasping and controlling and bossy. They get where they want to go by climbing over the backs of their neighbors. The arrogant do not have friends; they only have rivals—or servants. An arrogant person evaluates others on the basis of what they can do for him. Those who are arrogant never serve others; they only use others to serve them and make them feel more important. But agape is the opposite of all this. Love is not arrogant.

Nor is it *rude*. Rudeness, the third negative term in Paul's list, refers to behavior that is disgraceful or indecent. The kind of rudeness Paul's talking about is more than just thoughtlessness or neglect toward other people. It is to treat them in an offensive and insulting manner. But this is not to say that rudeness is always deliberate and calculated. Often rude people do not realize what they are doing because they do not care enough about others to even recognize how they are treating them. Rudeness is the way you behave toward those whom you dismiss as unimportant. When you are rude to someone, you are saying, in effect, "You don't matter. You're beneath me. You're too insignificant for me to care about the way I treat you."

Spiritual Pride

So these are the non-ways of love: love is neither boastful nor arrogant nor rude. Each of these three ugly behaviors is, in

its own way, a symptom of pride, which is another word that needs some explaining. When I talk about pride in the spiritual sense, I don't mean the self-respect that all healthy individuals have, or the desire to do and be the best that you can, or the joyful gratitude you feel for positive accomplishments. It is right, not wrong, to take pride in your work or to be proud of your heritage or to feel pride when your children excel.

But spiritual pride is different. It is a disease of the soul. Indeed, it is *the* disease of the soul, a deadly disease that afflicts everyone. Spiritual pride is a curving in on oneself, a way of putting one's self at the center of life. Spiritual pride leads us to replace God with self as the most important thing in life. Spiritual pride is to proper self-regard as a malignant cancer is to healthy tissue. It is ego run amok, self-respect turned to self-infatuation and self-worship. It is the most basic sin, the one that gives rise to all the others.

And it is spiritual pride that triggers each of the things love does not do. Spiritual pride makes us boastful—when I replace God with myself, my soul becomes hollow, and I try to fill the echoing emptiness with the admiration bought by my attempts to impress others. Pride makes us arrogant—if I think I am the center of the world, then everyone else must serve me, revolving around me like planets around the sun. Pride makes us rude—if I am convinced that I am really more important than anyone else, then I will not care how I treat them.

Love's Humility

But in contrast to all this, love is humble. Once again we need to understand what a Bible word really means. In biblical terms, to be humble is not to be convinced you are worthless or unimportant, nor does it require you to deny real gifts. Humility is not a handsome man trying to convince himself he is ugly or

a brilliant woman pretending she is stupid. No, spiritual humility is the opposite of spiritual pride. It is recognizing our dependence. It is consciously giving to God his proper place at the center of all things and over all things, so that I see myself as his dependent creature, neither more nor less important than every other member of his human family. Love is humble, not proud, when it recognizes the equal worth of everyone and seeks to serve everyone.

Christians reject the pride that uses people and the rudeness that ignores and belittles them because we believe that every human being is a creature made in the image of God, and as such must be well treated, served with dignity and respect. Humble love causes us to help everyone and not to see anyone as “beneath” us or not important enough for us to care about. In fact, Christian love reaches out especially to help those whom the world so often considers unworthy of protection and help: the weak and the poor, the stranger, the immigrant, the unborn, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, the unattractive and unwanted.

The Mind of Christ

The truth is, if we’re ever going to love at all, we need a heart transplant—or perhaps I should say, a mind transplant. We need to change our self-centered minds for the mind of Christ.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in

human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

(Philippians 2:3-8, NIV)

Jesus Christ is the greatest example of humble love there ever has been. Though he was in very nature God, he did not consider his divine status something to be grasped and held onto tightly, but he freely gave it up. He made himself nothing, taking the form and nature of a servant. Christ gave up the glory of heaven to assume the humiliation of life on earth as a man. And as a man he humbled himself still more, stripping himself of every shred of respect, descending lower and lower into humiliation and pain and suffering, even to death on a cross.

Maybe you have heard the little phrase “RHIP—Rank Hath Its Privileges.” Among us, having power usually means getting whatever we want for ourselves. But with God it is different. With God, having the highest rank means stooping to the lowest depths. His infinite power only gave him the “right” to make an infinite sacrifice of love. The only privilege Jesus exercised in his life was the privilege of giving up everything, even life itself, for the sake of those he loved. This is what it means to be God. To be God means to love. It means to give, and to suffer, and to serve, and to serve through suffering.

Do you know this love of God in Jesus Christ? You can. You can open your heart to it right now, at this very moment, by asking God to reveal himself to you and pour his love into you. If you do, it will change you. It will change the way you think. It will change the way you act. It will change the way you live. It will teach you the humility of love.

Study Questions

1. *How is spiritual pride different from simply feeling proud of something?*
2. *What makes humility a strength?*
3. *In what specific ways would practicing the humility of love change you personally?*

6

Love Is Sacrificial

*Love does not insist on its own way.
1 Corinthians 13:5*

In a world that says, “I want it *my* way,” lovers must learn to say, “Not my way, but yours.”

I continue to be impressed by the way the great love song of the Bible explains what love *is* by describing what love *does*. Here is love’s definition: “Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. . .” (13:4-5). This last line is the phrase I want to focus on next: “Love does not insist on its own way.”

Among the many behaviors of love, the things love does and does not do—love’s ways and non-ways—the most fundamental is self-sacrifice. Love’s way is not to insist on its own way. Or to say it positively: Love is sacrificial.

Have It My Way?

It is human nature to want to have our own way with things. In our culture, the refrain “I did it my way” signals a kind of personal vindication. It is the ultimate victory cry of the individual, and those of us who are products of western culture (especially Americans) are individuals above all else:

individuals who want both to do things our way and have things our way (a fact, incidentally, that advertisers well know and exploit systematically). Our greatest goals are to be independent and self-sufficient. We are looking for freedom from constraint, especially the constraint of those who might attempt to impose their will upon us by telling us what to do. What we want more than anything in life is to have the ability to control our own destiny. That is why most people would like to be rich. They think that possessing a lot of money will enable them to have everything their own way and on their own terms.

But all of these desires conflict with agape, with love in its biblical meaning. Love contradicts individualism. You cannot love by yourself, all alone; you need another. As soon as you love, you cease to be an individual because love forces you to move outside yourself and turn away from the pursuit of your own self-interest in order to give yourself to others. Love also destroys independence. As you begin to love, you are no longer free from obligations; instead, your life becomes inextricably linked to other lives. Love overturns self-determination by causing you to offer yourself for another person and to put their needs before your own wants. You no longer make decisions based on self. In a world that says, "I want it my way," agape says, "No, not my way but yours"; "Not my will, but your will be done."

Not My Will But Yours Be Done

That last phrase can't help but strike a responsive chord in anyone familiar with the Bible. It was spoken late at night, the last night of Jesus' earthly life, and he was praying alone in a place called Gethsemane, a sort of garden or olive grove just outside Jerusalem's walls. Jesus was alone because his closest friends, whom he had asked to stay with him in his hour of

crisis, had all fallen asleep. Soon, he knew, they would scatter and flee, leaving him to face his enemies all alone. Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, and he was suffering.

“And being in anguish [literally, in agony],” says the New Testament writer, “he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Jesus knew he was about to die. He would, in fact, be dead before the sun that was shortly to rise had set again. His death would come by crucifixion, in the cruelest, most painful and most humiliating possible manner, but it was not fear of death or the anticipation of pain or even simple loneliness that caused Jesus such suffering that night as he prayed in the garden. No, his struggle was over something he called his “Father’s cup.” “Father,” Jesus prayed, “if you are willing, take this cup from me.” In the Old Testament, God’s cup was a symbol for his wrath, the combination of his righteous hatred of all sin and his necessary determination to punish it. When Jesus prayed and struggled to accept the cup of God’s judgment upon sin, it was because he knew that when he died on the cross he would be accepting that judgment upon himself.

Who can conceive of this? Who can imagine what it meant that God should be forsaken by himself in order to punish human sin, that God would bear the weight of his own wrath in order to satisfy it and be able in righteousness to forgive sinners? All of this is what is meant by the cup of which Jesus spoke. This is what was passing through his soul as he knelt in Gethsemane, and you and I cannot begin to guess at the anguish he experienced there in what was only the beginning of his sufferings. Then, while on his knees, in the midst of this agony, he said simply, “Father, not my will but yours be done.” Those are the words of perfect love.

Love's Sacrifice

Sacrifice is not a particularly appealing idea. I don't suppose anyone relishes the thought of loss that it necessarily entails. To sacrifice means to give something up, something of value and importance. We would naturally prefer to eat our cake and have it too. We would like, if we could, to get and keep everything we want without having to surrender anything in exchange.

But we also recognize that in a world where everyone cannot always have his own way, sacrifice is sometimes a necessity. For instance, both sides have to sacrifice some of their demands in order to reach an agreement in a contract negotiation. A child has to sacrifice half her candy bar to her sister in order to satisfy the demands of parental justice. Workers sacrifice some of their benefits to enable the company to stay in business so they can all keep their jobs. All of us know about those kinds of sacrifices, and when we are called upon, we make them; reluctantly, no doubt, sometimes grudgingly, but we make them.

But love's sacrifice is different. It isn't compromise. It is pure sacrifice. To sacrifice in love does not mean giving something up in order to get something back. It does not involve giving up part of what you want so that you can keep the rest. It does not consist in taking turns: "I'll sacrifice for you this time and then you sacrifice for me next time." No, love is not concerned with striking a balance or equality of results or making sure everybody gets his fair share. Love does not keep track of those kinds of things. It does not keep a tally of who has done what for whom.

Love simply gives. It gives itself. It spends itself. It sacrifices itself. Love does not insist on its own way because it is mainly concerned with finding the best way for others.

Not Our Way But His

But I can think of at least two problems connected with sacrificial love. Let's say for the sake of argument that I am prepared to always give up my rights and consistently sacrifice myself in order to serve another. That will certainly be hard, but I wonder if it is even right. Is it good for all the sacrificing to be in just one direction? Wouldn't it be just as bad for a person to always get his way as to *never* get it? And, of course, the answer is yes. A relationship cannot be healthy if it is all give and no take.

But in agape, in Christlike love, a relationship is never just two-sided. When it comes to Christian love, for me to not insist on having my own way does not mean that instead you will always have your way. In genuine love, I can only give you your way if that is also the right way. With agape, the issue is not whether we follow my way or allow you to have yours. The issue is to find the right way, the Lord's way.

What Christians learn to seek in every relationship, in every decision, is not that *our* will be done but that *his* will is done. For me as a Christian, this is true whether or not you share my faith. I must seek the Lord's way and the Lord's will for everyone. Sacrificial love will not always give in to every demand placed upon it, because it will always try to satisfy God's demands in any situation, including his demands for justice and for doing what is right.

I have been helped a great deal in trying to understand how agape acts in real life by a book called *Love Within Limits*. It was written by one of my former teachers, a very wise Christian named Lewis Smedes, who says this about love and justice:

Love as the self-giving power of a just God *seeks* justice. . .
. Anyone who says that lovers need not care about justice is

talking nonsense. . . . God's love song tells us that love does not move us to seek justice for *ourselves*. This is the catch. Love will drive us to move heaven and earth to seek justice for others . . . but love does not move us a millimeter to seek justice for ourselves.

— Lewis Smedes, *Love Within Limits*, p. 37

My other question has to do with the basic fairness of it all. One-sided sacrifice does not seem very fair. Of course, if two people in a relationship are both committed to agape, there will not be a problem. They will try to outdo each other in sacrifice. But as Christians we are not expected merely to love those who love us in return. The nature of Christian love demands that we offer it with no expectations of getting anything back, and moreover, that we offer it especially to the very people who are incapable of returning it, to the unlovely and the unlovable, to the selfish and the ungrateful. It seems inevitable that we will be taken advantage of, that our rights will be abused and we will be treated unfairly. That is a given if we try to love.

But consider this: Is being treated fairly what you most want in life? Is justice what you most would like to have for yourself? Do you really want to get just what is coming to you, everything you deserve? I know I don't. When I look at the Bible, and then look honestly at my own life and character, I know that if I got just what I deserved, I would get death, the wages of sin. If all I have ever done were weighed accurately on the scales of God's justice, the debit side would hang far lower than the credit side.

Strict fairness calls for judgment for me, and for you, and for everyone else on earth. What I am hoping for myself is not justice but mercy, and if that is what you are hoping for too, doesn't it seem rather petty to be always clamoring for your

rights, demanding what is coming to you and worrying that you are not being treated fairly?

The great thing about God's love is that he does freely offer mercy to all who put their trust in Jesus Christ, and beyond that, he promises us that he will worry about the question of ultimate fairness for everyone. You and I do not have to be overly concerned about justice in one sense—at least not for ourselves—because God has promised that he will look after it and make sure no one is cheated in the end. So we are set free to love. It's a wonderful kind of freedom.

7

Love Is Triumphant

[Love] . . . keeps no record of wrongs.

1 Corinthians 13:5 NIV

It does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.

1 Corinthians 13:6

The Germans call it “Schadenfreude.” You might not know the term, but I think you know the feeling.

What is love like? Self-sacrificial, self-giving agape is the love God shows for us in Jesus Christ, and it is also the love Christians try to show to others as the surest indication that we really do know Jesus Christ and our lives have been changed as a result of having experienced his love ourselves. So let’s run through the list once more:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, 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. Love never fails. . .

(1 Corinthians 13:4-8, NIV)

One of love’s characteristic actions is expressed in these words: “Love keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not rejoice

at wrong, but rejoices in the right.” Love never delights in evil, but only in what is right and true and good.

Rejoicing At Evil?

But does anyone, apart from a handful of obviously sick individuals, actually rejoice at evil? At first thought, you might not imagine that anyone could. Who could take delight in suffering, in the needless hurt that evil inflicts? And indeed, we do not rejoice when evil happens to us. No one is happy about experiencing pain himself. Nor do many of us take delight when bad things happen to good people. We hear about a natural disaster like an earthquake or a flood that kills thousands in a faraway place and we think, “How terrible!” We read about a fatal accident that destroys a family and we feel a momentary sympathy. We shake our heads that life can be so sad. “That is too bad,” we say to ourselves, before moving on to the sports or television page.

But human nature is a very complicated, sometimes twisted, thing. Sympathy is not the only thing people feel when they hear news of tragedy striking or sorrow befalling others. When a terrorist bomb exploded in Oklahoma City, killing more than 160, including many children, a city, a state, and a nation were stunned, shocked, appalled. But not everyone. There were some who, while they probably did not welcome the thought of the innocent people who died, nevertheless so hated the government that they took a certain satisfaction in this monstrous act against it. The fact is, people do rejoice at evil—when it befalls their enemies. A suicide bomber blows up a bus in Jerusalem, and there is dancing in the streets in Gaza. An apocalyptic cult releases deadly poison gas in a crowded Tokyo train station, and its followers delight in this demonstration of their power.

The Germans call it *Schadenfreude*. It is a wonderful word for a terrible thing. It means literally “joy in calamity.” *Schadenfreude* is the perverse pleasure we take in the misfortunes of others, the dark glee we feel when an enemy stumbles and falls, the secret enjoyment we get when the fortunes of someone we dislike take a sudden turn for the worse.

Maybe you are thinking, “I’m not that way. I don’t wish ill of anyone. I try to get along with everybody.” But let’s be honest with ourselves. No, you have probably never wished for somebody’s death or openly celebrated a horrible act of evil, but think about some lesser, everyday examples.

A tree falls on the new car of your unfriendly neighbor, the one he has just been showing off and bragging about to everyone. Aren’t you tempted to laugh? A rich man in your community becomes crippled with an incurable disease. Isn’t there a certain grim satisfaction that he will not be able to fully enjoy the money you never had? Your rival has been bettering you in competition until an injury stops him. Your toughest business competitor experiences a sudden reversal that helps you immensely. A pastor in another church, a man you have secretly envied because he is more successful than you, is disgraced by a sex scandal and forced to resign. What do you feel deep down? Nothing but sorrow?

Schadenfreude is a sly and subtle kind of rejoicing. It is a delicious inward pleasure, made up of self-love, gratified envy, and the enjoyable experience of feeling indignation, disgust and moral superiority all at once. And most of us cannot resist it.

Love and Evil

But Christian love does resist it. Love never rejoices at evil, not even the evil that befalls those who deserve it and tempts us

to say, “Good; it serves them right.” If love refuses to take pleasure in anything bad, we might then wonder how it does react. What does agape do when it is faced with evil? Look at this series of practical instructions for Christian loving from another of the apostle Paul’s letters.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection. . . .

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. . . . never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12:9-21, NRSV)

Here are three ways in which genuine love responds to evil.

1. *Love hates evil.* Genuine love knows and sees the truth about evil. It does not think evil is anything other than what it is. The fact that as Christians we refuse to be glad about even the bad things that happen to bad people does not mean we ignore or excuse those people. Love is not indifferent to wrong, nor does it excuse it. Love hates and rejects all evil because it recognizes exactly how awful it is. Evil is an offense against the goodness and the glory of God. Evil is a terrible thing, an alien intruder in God’s good creation, and we must never think of it as tolerable or acceptable. When people hurt us by doing evil, we cannot pretend it does not matter. Simply saying, “It is all right. I love you anyway,” is hypocrisy, not real love. Genuine love feels evil deeply. It refuses to justify it. It struggles to fulfill the old cliché: to hate sin while still loving the sinner.

2. *Love forgives evil.* “Bless those who persecute you,” says the apostle. “Bless and do not curse them.” The only way you can pray for blessing for your enemies instead of cursing them is by learning how to forgive them. Here is another of the things the love song in 1 Corinthians 13 tells us about love—it is not resentful. “[Love] keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5).

Resentment is the mental practice of record-keeping. Our natural human tendency is to store up all the wrongs and hurts and injuries that others have done to us in our memory, like so many computer files. Then we play them back every so often to enjoy the thrill of indignation that remembering gives us. Perhaps you have things like that filed away in your memory. Someone did you a wrong once that hurt badly. It may have been years ago but you can recall every word, every image of the incident, as if it happened yesterday. Wouldn't it really be better for you to forgive and forget all those old wrongs?

When I want to delete a file from the memory of my computer, a picture of a little waste bin filled with crumpled paper appears on the screen. I point to it, click a button, and the bin is miraculously emptied. It would be wonderful if we could get rid of resentment that easily, if we could erase our memories of evil just as simply. But it is not easy. Forgiving is hard, and just as we manage to do it, we discover the waste bin is full again of the same old memories, and we have to empty it out all over. It is only the grace of experiencing God's forgiveness ourselves in Jesus Christ that gives us the power to offer forgiveness to others. Christ alone can teach us the love that keeps no record of wrongs.

3. *Love overcomes evil.* “Do not repay anyone evil for evil . . . never avenge yourselves . . . for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord’ . . . Do not be overcome by

evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17-19, 21, NRSV). Love overcomes evil with good. The desire for revenge can be extremely powerful—to repay evil for evil, to want the person who injured us to suffer just as much in return. We often disguise our thirst for revenge as a desire for justice; but deep down, it is mostly a craving to hurt because we have been hurt.

Yet love learns to leave all these things to God. Love realizes that issues of justice belong to him, that ultimately revenge for evil only leads to an ever increasing spiral of more evil, more hatred, more violence, with no end in sight. So love responds to persecution with blessing, to sin with forgiveness. Love allows God to have his way with respect to justice. Love overcomes evil with good.

Can It Happen? It Has!

I can guess what you are thinking. “Do you really expect me to take this seriously? To respond with forgiveness and love and blessing to those who hate me and mistreat me? To forswear revenge against those who have hurt me deeply? That is asking too much. That is not the way things are. Good does not overcome evil. Only greater force overcomes evil.”

And yet I can think of one place where it actually happened. I know of at least one Person who really did respond this way. His enemies arrested him, lied about him, got him sentenced to death on a false charge. Then they mocked him, spat upon him, slapped him, ridiculed him, and finally beat him bloody. At last they took him out to the place of execution, nailed him to a cross between two condemned criminals, and there he died. And as he died he said, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Jesus Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth. With one word, he could have destroyed all his enemies. Yet he allowed

the evil of the cross to seemingly overcome him. But the truth is that it was there, at the cross of Jesus Christ, that love triumphed and evil was overcome by perfect good. Because of this, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ you too have the power to overcome evil with good. By faith, Christ's love can fill you, giving you the power to forgive and forget the wrongs done to you, to keep no score of them because you trust God to do the necessary record keeping, to bless those who persecute you, to forgive as Christ has forgiven you, not to rejoice in the wrong but to be joyful only for the good and the right—in short, to love.

Study Question

1. *Think of a time you have been hurt by someone. Have you found it possible to hate the sin but love the sinner? If so, how were you able to reach that point? If not, what are some steps you can take toward keeping “no record of wrongs”?*

8

Love Is Trusting

Love . . . is not jealous.

Love . . . believes all things, hopes all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4,7

There is a difference between trust and gullibility; fools are gullible, lovers are trusting.

Love is trusting. “Love is not jealous. Love believes all things, hopes all things.” Or to translate these verses differently: “Love . . . does not envy . . . it . . . always trusts, always hopes.” Once again the apostle Paul gives us both a negative and a positive statement about the way love behaves. Let’s think about the negative first.

Love’s Proper Jealousy

“Love does not envy,” we are told; “Love is not jealous.” On the surface of it, this does not seem to be true at all. I think everyone would agree that love often is jealous, sometimes very jealous. And there is a sense in which it ought to be, for there is a good kind of jealousy. The word Paul uses here for “envy” or “jealousy” also can mean simply “zeal,” and the right kind of zeal is something every lover should have. We ought to have a passionate desire for the faithfulness and well-being of those whom we love.

This is what the Bible means when it tells us that God is jealous. “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God,” God says in one of the ten commandments. God has a zeal for his own honor and glory. He is eager, passionately eager, for our loyalty. He has an unconditional expectation that we worship only him and remain completely faithful to him always. God does not want our love to be divided among other gods. For one thing, all other gods are idols that do not deserve our worship, but beyond that, God refuses to allow his glory to be shared with anyone or anything else. All the glory in creation must be given to him. Only he is to be worshiped, honored and adored. All love must be given to God first; anything else comes in a distant second. God’s name must be at the top of every person’s list of what is most important in his or her life.

I suppose this could sound like a monstrous kind of vanity, as if God were the biggest egotist in the universe. In anyone else, it would be—but not in God, precisely because he *is* God. By definition he deserves it all: all the praise, all the glory are his. God is the ultimate good. He is the best and most of everything that is praiseworthy in all existence. If anyone or anything other than God received any glory, it would be terribly wrong, and it would be just as wrong for God to want that as it would be for any of us to do it.

What is more, God knows that his jealousy for us, his passionate desire that we love him most and worship him only, is not just a desire for what is right; it is also a desire for the very thing that is best for us. Because he made us, he knows that worshiping him is the only thing that can make us truly happy. In the end, putting anything else before God in our lives will only hurt and disappoint us. God’s jealousy is, in the deepest sense, an expression of his love.

So there is a right kind of jealousy for lovers. It is the zealous desire to have those they love be faithful to all their rightful obligations, to do what they ought to do, and so experience genuine happiness. Lovers are intolerant of any attachment in their beloved's life to that which is less than right, true, or good—precisely because they do genuinely love.

How Love Is Not Jealous

But what about the wrong kind of envy? In what ways is love *not* jealous? Jealousy in the bad sense can be defined as the desire to dominate, control and possess another person exclusively, to have someone's whole life all to yourself. There is a story in the Old Testament about how King Saul became jealous of his young captain David when he heard the crowd singing one day, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands." What rankled the king was not merely that David was more highly praised for his successes in battle than Saul himself; it was that he was praised at all. Saul wanted the praises of the people all to himself.

Jealousy operates on many levels in human relationships, not just between couples in love. Have you ever heard children arguing about who is whose best friend? It is not enough just to have a friend. They want to have friends exclusively, all to themselves. If I am jealous, I become upset at the thought that a friend might share something with another friend instead of with me, so that there is a part of his life into which I do not enter.

Take an extreme example. Here is a husband who says that he loves his wife passionately. He worships her, he claims. He will do anything for her, give her anything she wants, but his so-called love is dominated by a possessive jealousy. He wants her whole existence to revolve around only him. He insists she

have no outside interests of which he is not a part, no other close friends besides himself, no job or career outside his home. He must dominate everything. He cannot stand to share her in any way with anyone or anything else. That is not love. That is an obsession to control.

Genuine love—agape—is not jealous because it does not desire to possess or control others. It only wants to serve them. It only wants what is truly best for them. Consider a second example. Here is a husband who loves his wife, not just with the attraction of natural love, but with agape. He does have a passionate attachment to her. He is jealous in the sense that he has a deep zeal that she remain faithful to him, as he to her. But beyond that he has no jealousy of sharing her life with other people. He does not insist on being everything to his wife because he knows he cannot be. He does not try to control her whole life; rather, he longs to see her grow, both as a person and as a follower of Jesus Christ. He knows that God, not he, must come first in her life, and that his wife will need other people and other interests besides him if she is to become the servant the Lord intends her to be. Love is not jealous because love always wants what is best for its beloved.

Neither is love envious. Envy is the resentment we feel toward those who have things we do not have. If pride causes us to look down with scorn on those we think are beneath us, envy is what makes us look up with hatred at those who are above us. One evening not long before his death, as Jesus was having dinner in the home of a friend, a woman named Mary came in, broke open a box of precious perfume and poured it over him. It was an extravagant gesture of love, but Judas, the disciple who would betray Jesus, was greatly annoyed by it. “Why didn’t she sell this perfume and give the money to the poor?” he grumbled—not because he cared so much for the

poor, but because he was a thief who stole from the contributions made to Jesus. Judas was upset because he saw a good chance for embezzlement being wasted, being literally poured away.

But I think what really rankled Judas was his envy of Mary's sheer goodness, of her uninhibited love for Jesus. Envy is cold, calculating, disapproving. Love is generous, free, spontaneous, unreserved. Love does not quibble about costs. It simply gives. Love does not stop to calculate whether it will receive a high enough return on its investment. It spends itself without thinking about a payback.

The Risks of Love

So love is neither jealous nor envious. On the contrary, love is trusting. Love is generous and free, sometimes even a little reckless. Love seeks and wants the best for others, and celebrates when they experience it. Love does not begrudge anyone her happiness or pleasure, but rejoices in what is good. It enables us to delight in the gifts and accomplishments and blessings of others, even if we don't share them ourselves.

But loving also has its risks. What if the person I help takes advantage of me? What if the one to whom I give freedom for growth grows away from me and loses interest in me? What if my beloved hurts me? Even betrays me? It is a very real possibility. Some of the saddest letters I get are from people who have been betrayed by those they loved. God knows we not only need to love and be loved by him; we also need to love and be loved by other people. To try to do that, though, is to open ourselves to the cruelest kinds of hurt and disappointment.

But love risks the disappointment. Despite the hurts of the past, love keeps on trusting for the future, and so it reaches out in the present. "Love believes all things, love hopes all things,"

sings our song. This does not mean that love believes literally everything, including all the nonsense, the deceitfulness, the lies that people tell. Love is not gullible. Fools are gullible; Christians are not supposed to be. “Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves,” said Jesus. “Be as innocent as babies with respect to evil,” added the apostle Paul, “but be grown-up in your thinking.”

We are supposed to be hardheaded, shrewd realists, especially when it comes to the promises people make. As biblical Christians we have no illusions about human nature or human goodness and honesty. No, when Paul tells us that love believes all things, I think he means that love believes all things are possible because repentance is always possible. Love always has hope that the ending will be a happy one.

How can this be, given the world in which we live? Jesus’ disciples once asked him that very question. His answer: “With God nothing is impossible.” So love always goes on believing and always goes on hoping, even when it seems like it has no future. Love has great expectations. We believe and we hope because we trust in Jesus Christ.

Ludwig van Beethoven was a complex and difficult man; brilliant, temperamental, cruel, overbearing, disappointed in love, unhappy in life. His greatest composition was his ninth symphony, a monumental work for orchestra and choir that is one of the world’s greatest artistic masterpieces. What makes it even more amazing is that by the time he wrote the piece, Beethoven was completely deaf. He never heard a note of it, except in his own mind. The ultimate frustration in this man’s frustrated life was to lose his hearing, the one sense he depended on to exercise his genius. The final movement of the Ninth Symphony begins with a clash of discordant sounds symbolizing chaos, perhaps the chaos in his own mind, but

eventually the choir breaks into a magnificent hymn of joy. “Brothers,” they sing, “beyond the starry heavens a loving Father must dwell.” I think in its own way this song is Beethoven’s confession of faith and of hope. Despite the hurts we experience, despite appearances to the contrary, there is a God of love who rules the world, and because of him we know that our love will not be ultimately disappointed.

But God does more than just dwell beyond the starry heavens. He is here with us. The Bible says that God loved us so much he gave his only Son to become one of us, to die for us, to rise again, and to bestow his Spirit on everyone who believes in him. Put your faith in Jesus Christ, live your life in him and for him, and you will know the love that can believe all things and hope all things. And that cannot, in the end, be disappointed.

9

Love Is Lasting

Love never ends. . . .

*So faith, hope, love abide, these three;
but the greatest of these is love.*

1 Corinthians 13:8 and 13

Is there anything in the world that lasts, anything you can hang onto that you know you will never lose? The answer is Yes!

We come now to the last of the qualities of love which are described in the New Testament's magnificent love song, and fittingly, the last thing we are told about love is that it lasts. Love never fails, says the apostle, it never ceases; it abides forever, it always will be. "Love never ends."

That is an amazing claim to make about anything, because it seems as though the world we know is one where nothing lasts forever, not even the universe itself. The one constant in our lives is change. The only thing we can be sure of is that nothing is certain; nothing in the world ever remains the same and no one here endures forever.

What Doesn't Last?

Think about some of the things in life that do not last. *Money* and *possessions* do not last. Everyone knows that "you

can't take it with you." A friend of mine recently quoted a Spanish proverb which expresses this truth a bit more colorfully: "A burial shroud has no pockets." The Bible says much the same thing:

Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases, for he will take nothing with him when he dies, his splendor will not descend with him.

(Psalm 49:16-17, NIV)

Another psalm says,

Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.

(Psalm 39:6, NIV)

Isn't that true? So many people spend their lives in the pursuit of money. They strive to accumulate more and more even as they struggle to hold on to what they already have, and in the end they have to let it all go anyway. They have no choice but to leave everything behind, and they don't even know what happens to it! Jesus took note of this fact and urged people not to store up treasure for themselves on earth where it can never last, but rather to store up treasure in heaven where it can never be lost (see Matt. 6:19-20). According to Jesus, those who focus exclusively on this world's transitory wealth, who gather more and more things and build bigger and bigger storehouses to hold them, are fools! The most important thing to be is "rich toward God" (Luke 12:15-21); that is, rich in faith, rich in hope, rich in love.

Another thing that doesn't last is *fame*. You might be justly proud of all your accomplishments in life, of the name you have earned for yourself, but one day in the not-too-distant

future all of that will be only a memory, and in a few years more, even the memory will be gone. Let me ask you this: Do you know who your grandfather's grandfather was? Most likely not. Even our own ancestors, if we remember them at all, we know only as names and dates in a family tree. Unless we are noteworthy enough to have our life story preserved in a book, some day no one will remember anything about us at all.

But the same is true even for famous people; with them, it just takes a little more time. The other day I was watching a sporting event on television in which an athlete performed a magnificent accomplishment. "This will be remembered for two thousand years," exclaimed the announcer. I thought to myself, "I doubt it." We really have a much greater estimate of human fame than is warranted by the facts. Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" tells of a traveler who stumbles across an ancient monument in the Egyptian desert. All that is left of the statue are broken pieces and an inscription:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings;
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Then the poet continues,

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

So who was Ozymandias, once the greatest man in the world? Who knows? Even the mightiest and greatest of human beings will some day be forgotten. The book of Ecclesiastes says that "the wise man, like the fool, will not long be remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die" (Eccl. 2:16, NIV). So worldly

fame doesn't last, any more than worldly wealth does. If you were taking some comfort from the fact that you will be remembered after you are gone, I'm sorry to have to disappoint you. As far as this world is concerned, it won't be long before it will be as if you never lived. A life is like the wake a ship leaves behind it: after a little while it subsides without a trace.

Another thing that does not last is our *talents and abilities*. Time takes its toll on all natural gifts. World-class athletes retire from competition while still in their twenties or thirties, as speed declines and skills erode and reflexes wane. Even the voice of a Pavarotti will one day waver and crack, before it is forever stilled. The greatest genius among us will someday grow feeble-minded and forgetful.

Not only are our natural gifts temporary; astonishingly, the apostle Paul says the same is true (though in a different way) of the supernatural spiritual gifts God gives us. In fact, Paul singles these out as examples of impermanence:

. . . as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

These words near the end of 1 Corinthians 13 remind us once again of the chapter's context. Paul is returning here to the issue of spiritual gifts. To underscore his point that love is greater than any special gift or ability, even the spectacular gifts so prized by the Corinthians, the apostle declares that all gifts, including the most impressive gifts of the Spirit, are only temporary.

Spiritual gifts, as wonderful as they are, are nevertheless both imperfect and impermanent. And when the perfect comes, when this life ends and the next begins, then all these gifts will

no longer be necessary. They won't wear out like our bodies and minds, but they will be superseded. In this world our experience of God, even at its best, is fragmentary. We only know little bits and pieces of him. Even if we are granted a special revelation from heaven, we still see God only as if by a dim reflection in a mirror. Our fellowship with God, even in moments of pure ecstasy, is still only partial and imperfect. But some day all that will change. The imperfect will give way to what is perfect. We will not need miracles or healing, for then we shall have been made perfectly whole. We won't need prophecies and teaching anymore, for then we shall understand fully. We will know even as we are known. We will see God face to face.

What Does Last?

So what does last? Three things at least: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Love never ends. Love is forever. Perhaps one reason the apostle says love is greater even than faith or hope is that of these things, love alone will always be the same. Faith and hope will abide, but they will both be changed. We will eternally enjoy the salvation that is the fruit of faith and the object of hope. Faith and hope will always remain in the sense that the benefits we receive through them will never pass away. But they will be changed. For faith one day will be turned into sight, and future hope will become present reality.

But love is different. Love will forever be what it is now. [Love] is the one reality in time that goes into eternity unchanged. Love will never need to be transformed into something better because love is the one perfect eternal reality. It abides throughout this life and into the next in its

simple form—the power that moves us toward another without expecting a reward.

(Lewis Smedes, *Love Within Limits*, p. 119)

One More Thing That Lasts—You!

There is one more thing I want to say. If love never ends, that means God's love never ends, and because God's love never ends, neither will you—if you have experienced his love in Jesus Christ. Think about it. Your life will last forever. If God is going to love his people always, then they always will be there to be loved. So add one more item to the list of things that last: the people of God.

Do you realize how important you are? Do you understand how crucial it is that you know and live in the love of God? God's love changes everything. It invests your life with eternal significance and worth. You are not going to just disappear as if you never existed, for you will live with God if you know him through Jesus Christ. Because of the eternal love of God, these lives of ours that seem so temporary and impermanent take on an eternal weight of glory.

There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit— immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.

(C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*)

Scientists like to speculate about the end of time. They think that eventually the universe will run out of energy, collapse in upon itself, and disintegrate into chaos. A blinding explosion will be followed by darkness, silence, nothingness. And thus the world will end. That is what the future looks like

if you do not take God into account. But God has written a different ending to the world's story. This is what the future looks like if you do know God and are living in his love. One day he will return—suddenly, unexpectedly, personally. Jesus Christ, God's own Son, will appear, and everything will be changed and made new, including all those who are looking for and are ready for his coming. Then, says the Bible, God himself will come to be with his people.

He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

(Revelation 21:3-4)

When that happens, only love will be left: God's love for us, our love for him, and the new world that love will make. I want to see that. Don't you?

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. 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. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

Make love your aim. . . .

(1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1)

10

A New Target

Make love your aim.

1 Corinthians 14:1

Everyone needs a goal in life. If you aim at nothing, that is exactly what you will hit. So what are you aiming for with your life?

One of the ways scholars help us to understand the teaching of Paul's New Testament letters is by drawing attention to the difference between the *indicative* and the *imperative*. Those are grammatical terms referring to two different kinds of sentences. Sentences in the indicative are statements; they "indicate" something. An imperative is a command. In English a sentence in the indicative is distinguished from one in the imperative simply by the order of the words. For example, "John hit the ball" is an indicative, a simple statement. But "Hit the ball, John" is a command in the imperative. The reason this is important will be clear, I hope, in a moment.

The Point of It All

First Corinthians 13 is the most important passage about love in the Bible. It is a rich chapter, full of profound truths and important information, and every sentence in it, from the first one to the last, is an indicative. What we have in this chapter is simply a series of statements about love (though they are not *simple* statements). Paul tells us here why love is important: “If I have not love, I am nothing. I gain nothing”—no matter what else I may do with my life. He tells us what love is like: Love is patient and kind, not jealous or arrogant or irritable. Love rejoices in the right. Love bears all things. Love never ends. Faith, hope and love abide and the greatest is love. And then at the very end, after all these indicatives, Paul adds one simple imperative: the command, “Make love your aim” (14:1).

The point is that the imperative is based upon the indicatives. That is why the indicatives come first. First is the teaching, the wonderful, rich truth about this thing called agape, the love that God himself invented. Paul states the facts about that love; what it is, how it behaves, what sorts of things it does and does not do. Then all this truth, this information that has been given to us is applied with the command to make love the primary goal of our lives.

One of the nice things about the Bible is that it always tries to help us understand the reasons why we should do what it tells us to do. Has this conversation ever taken place in your family? You tell your child to do something, and instead of obeying, he asks, “Why do I have to do that?” “Because I said so,” you growl. That is really not a very satisfactory answer, nor is it the way God speaks to us. He never says simply, “Do this because I said so.” The biblical pattern is indicative first, then imperative; explanation before application. We are given truths to understand before we are issued commands to obey.

What Are You Aiming At?

So if you have followed any of this teaching on love from 1 Corinthians 13 you have been exposed to a lot of indicatives. Now let's consider the imperative. *Make love your aim.* "Follow hard after love," Paul urges his Christian readers, "pursue it as the great goal of your life. Make it your highest priority and your greatest ambition."

Think about some of the things people are living for. There are people who live entirely for their own pleasure. The Bible was referring to them when it said, "Their god is their belly and their end is destruction" (Phil. 3:19, KJV). Some people are worshiping, literally, their own appetites. Addiction is prevalent these days, at least in the United States. In our society people claim they are addicted to almost anything: drugs, alcohol, tobacco, of course, but also things like pornography, food, exercise, other people, even religion. In a therapeutic culture, there seem to be no longer any vices. There are only illnesses. But the Bible calls these things a form of idolatry.

Then there are those, the ambitious among us, who have made success their great aim in life. It does not matter in what field; it may be business or politics, the arts and entertainment, athletics, or even the church, but whatever their chosen area of endeavor, these people are pursuing success with single-minded intensity. Everything they do is devoted to reaching the goal. Nothing can get in their way of the climb to the top. If they fail in reaching their goal, they are disappointed, and when they succeed, more often than not . . . they are disappointed! The funny thing about success is that it so rarely seems to satisfy.

Still others are wiser, or perhaps humbler. They have turned away from the glittering temptations of power and wealth and fame. They are pursuing personal happiness as a goal in life. To be comfortable with one's self, satisfied with one's

circumstances, to find quiet satisfaction in family and friends and the ordinary everyday pleasures of home and work—these are the goals of the wise. This is the mark at which many are aiming, and it's not a bad one. But I do not think it is enough.

The problem with all these goals is that they are neither important enough nor lasting enough to be worth the investment of a life. Think about this: you have only one life to live, and some day you will have to give an account of how you used it. What are you spending it on? What are you doing, really doing, with your life? Do you even know? Are you aiming at anything at all, or are you just drifting along without much sense of meaning or purpose?

Maybe you're thinking, "All this talk about goals for my life is too high and mighty. I'm just trying to get by each day, to do my job and take care of my family and pay my bills." And you're right. That is what most of us are trying to do from day to day. But here is an exciting thought. You can keep on doing just that, doing your job each day, fulfilling your responsibilities as best you can, but you can do it in such a way as to invest your whole life and everything you do with an eternal significance. How? By making love your aim in everything you do.

Another way of saying "Make love your aim" is this: "Make it your goal in life to live for people." Love in the Christian sense means to act for the benefit of others purely for their sake: to be kind and good and patient, even toward those who don't deserve it—*especially* toward those who don't deserve it; to humbly serve the needs of the neediest without thought of reward; to forbear and forgive; to put your neighbor's interests ahead of your own, doing whatever you do for the sake of others. If you live that way, you will find that nothing you do, not even the smallest and most secret thing, will ever be

forgotten. Live for other people and you will discover the truth that other people are really the only thing worth living for.

Let Me Tell You Why

Do not misunderstand: making love our aim in life is not a simple thing to do. We do not adopt this goal because it will automatically yield an easy and happy life. On the contrary, loving others the way Christ has loved us is a very hard thing indeed. It takes self-denial and strength and endurance and determination. It takes a power that only God can give. It is not always fun, though I am sure that it is the only way to real and lasting joy.

Maybe you still are not sure that this is what you should live for. I won't try to persuade you; I don't think I could even if I tried. Only love can convince anyone to love. Only the experience of God's love for you will give you first the desire and then the strength to turn outward away from yourself toward your neighbor. But let me give you three quick reasons why it is important to make love your aim in life.

First, because this is clearly what God wants us all to do, and Christians, at least, are people who "make it our aim to please him" (2 Cor. 5:9). Second, because our love for others proves the genuineness of our love for God. "We love, because he first loved us," says the Bible. "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:19,20). Third, because loving people selflessly and sacrificially is what makes us most like Jesus. "A new commandment I give to you," he told his followers, "that you love one another; even as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

One Last Question

If you are like me, about now you might be wondering: “All right. I do want to make love my aim. I want to live this way more than anything else. I want to be like Jesus Christ. I want to show that I really do know God, that my love for him is genuine. I want to make it the main business of my life to please him. But how do I do it? Tell me how to love. *Show* me how to love.”

I wish there were an easy way I could do that, but the truth is, there is not. In real love, as in real life, there are no easy answers, no quick and simple formulas for success. Even the imperative Paul uses is hard. The command to “Make love your aim” could literally be translated, “Pursue love.” It conjures up an image of a runner in training, working hard day after day to reach her goal. Her eyes are fixed on the target. Her whole life becomes a quest for achieving this great ambition. Nothing is allowed to interfere with the training, and the closer to the goal, the harder she works. That is how it has to be with our efforts at love. It is hard work, a goal to which all lesser ambitions in life must be subordinated, one we pursue for a whole lifetime without ever quite reaching it.

But do you know what? Someday, I think those who have made love their aim will realize it was all worthwhile.

