

IT NEVER FAILS
1 Corinthians 13

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We continue with our sermon series from 1 Corinthians and come to the best-known chapter in the entire book – the chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13. Having gone through the book, let's not lose the original context of the chapter. This passage is often used at weddings to describe the love that husbands and wives ought to have for each other – and that's okay. It's really, however, used by Paul to describe – not so much the love between spouses – but the love between church members.

There are certainly some things husbands and wives can learn from this chapter, but there are also some things, applying Paul's original context, that I can learn about loving you and you can learn about loving me and we can learn about loving each other as the body of Christ.

Remember the context of this chapter. In chapter 12, Paul has spoken about spiritual gifts. In chapter 14, he will speak about spiritual gifts, especially the gift of speaking in tongues. He's trying to reform the Corinthians' understanding and practice of spiritual manifestations in worship. Only when spiritual gifts are exercised with love do they become useful in building up the church. Notice tongues were mentioned last (v. 30) in the lists in chapter 12, but now the controversial gift is mentioned first.

At the heart of the Pauline understanding of love is the concept of God loving us enough to send His Son to die. The death of Christ Jesus is the fundamental concept by which Paul begins to understand love. Paul is describing what love looks like, and it doesn't look anything like the church at Corinth. "This is the way you ought to conduct yourselves." "Love should govern the use of spiritual gifts in the church."

Love, for Paul, is not a feeling. Love, for Paul, is a name for specific actions of patient and sacrificial service (with pure motives) to others in the church.

Several years ago, the *Nova* TV series advertised that it was going to air an intimate portrait of two groups whose members labor exclusively for the good of the community. In other words, no individual in either group put himself or herself first. And who were these remarkable groups marked by such selflessness? Some previously undiscovered tribe in the African jungle? Some isolated clan living in the interior of South America? Some unique cohort in the far, frozen North? No. It was ants and cockroaches. To find individuals that are by *nature* selfless, *Nova* had to look outside our own species to bugs. (www.homileticonline.com)

The first section of this chapter, verses 1-3, says something like this: "Spiritual actions without the motivation of love are meaningless." Paul says it doesn't matter if you are speaking in tongues (verse 1) or whether you're prophesying. Speaking in tongues was the Corinthians' favorite gift.

Prophecy was Paul's preferred gift, as we will see in chapter 14. "It doesn't matter if you're conducting miracles by faith or experiencing self-deprivation – all of that is worthless unless accompanied by love."

"You have to be careful," Paul is saying. "You can do the right thing for the wrong reason." As you sacrifice yourself through service, what are your motivations? A motivation of love and service, or motivation to receive recognition? What is at the heartbeat of your expression of your spiritual gifts?

"Let me be more clear." Paul declares, "This is what love looks like." Then he begins in verses 4-7 to give us a description of love.

Sometimes love is easy. "I love those who already love me. If you love me, I will love you back." That's the lowest form of love.

Or, maybe you progress to "I will love you if I think you might love me in return." I'll venture out and love you if I think you will love me in return.

Maybe you even have more God-like love in your heart than this. Maybe you can say, "I have learned to go into the community and love the people who are unlovely or the people who are different from myself."

It can get even tougher. "I have learned to love my harshest critics."

And then, maybe, at the very top, the commandment of Jesus. What did Jesus say? "Love your enemies." Jesus said anybody can love those who love them in return. But the uniqueness of God's people is that they love like God, they love even their enemies who do not love them back.

Love your enemies.

Soren Kierkegaard once said, "You say you don't need God? Try to love your enemies and believe me, you'll need God."

Love is doing, serving. Each thing that love does is something in which the ego does not dominate; each thing that love does not do is something in which the ego does dominate.

What does this love look like – this love that is even willing to love enemies? Paul gives a description of this God-like, higher love. He begins to give us a list of attributes.

I. Love is patient.

This is a passive word. "Love suffers long. Love is slow to anger." This love, of course, is best depicted by God's patience with us. Paul warns the Christians in Rome, "Do not think lightly of the forbearance and the patience of God."

Love is patient.

The Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still lit. (J. Stowell, *Fan The Flame*, p. 32)

II. Love is kind.

If being long-suffering is being passive, then being kind is being active. Love is active.

Look what love does. Love is busy doing for others when they are not able to do for themselves. Love does not sit still. Love is out and about, tending to others. Kindness recognizes everyone carries a heavy load.

A Christian third-grader sits next to the new kid in school who speaks no English.

A student in the youth group visits the nursing home Saturday mornings to check on an older friend.

III. Love is not jealous.

That's a tough one. What does love look like? Well, it never comes in the color green.

Remember, he's talking primarily about relationships between church members, some with more showy gifts than others. In the context of saying that the church needs all the various gifts and all the various parts of the body in order to be able to function, he reminds them that true love in church is never jealous.

The love of God is just the kind of love that rejoices when someone is more fortunate than you.

We all wish our friends well, but not *that* well.

You want your friends to succeed, but when they do and you are not sure of yourself, you fear being shown up.

When you feel down about yourself, it's easier to tolerate hearing about a friend's misfortunes than his or her successes.

Because your friends are closest to being like you, their success makes you question yourself.

"Why not me?" you ask. We all feel this way.

Nothing alienates people quite like success.

When people become successful, they discover a sad and unexpected truth: *It is lonely at the top.*

Your friends need to celebrate their success without feeling that they are intimidating you and to share their failures without your taking secret satisfaction from them.

Allow your friends to confide their success in you without becoming envious of it or asking to participate in it.

Just say, “No one deserved it more.”

You’ll probably be right.

You’ll certainly be a friend. (David Viscott, *Finding Your Strength in Difficult Times*)

IV. Love is not puffed up. Love does not brag. Love is not arrogant.

So many people are constantly talking about “I” and “me” and “my.” We are dealing with a very insecure person who is trying to compensate for some deep-seated insecurity. When a person talks about “you,” “yours,” and “ours,” you have found a person with a mature concern for the well-being of others.

In church, in the body, Paul says, love should not be arrogant, puffed up, or braggadocios, but, rather, a love focused on others.

Three boys were comparing notes about their father’s abilities. With an air of arrogance and pride, the first boy said, “My dad is so fast he can shoot an arrow at a target and catch the arrow before it reaches the target.”

“Not bad,” said the second boy, “but my dad is so fast he can shoot at a deer and tackle the deer before the bullet gets there.”

The third boy was listening quietly, and then offered his own view: “My dad is faster than both of yours. He can get off work at 5:30 and be home by 5:15.” (www.homileticonline.com)

Of all the bad things mentioned in scripture, God reserves some of His greatest criticisms for pride. He says, “Pride I do hate.” That’s what God says, because pride is a “me-ism.” Pride becomes a shoving of God off His sovereign throne and the installing of ourselves. Pride makes me the center of the universe at God’s expense.

In 1 Corinthians 4:6, 4:18-19, 5:2 (6 of the 7 New Testament usages of “arrogance” are in 1 Corinthians), and even in 8:1, Paul has deflated the Corinthians because they have been puffed up. “But,” he says, “love builds up.” This is exactly the context where he dealt with a bunch of arrogant folk in the church at Corinth. You show me a man who thinks he knows it all and thinks he knows how it all ought to be done, and I’ll show you a man who is immature in his Christian walk, who is immature in his Christian love.

We live in a day of more arrogance, I believe, than ever before. Our bragging rights are dispensed in such subtle ways. Please understand, I know every Christmas letter isn’t like this. But over the

years people mail out generic Christmas card letters, and I find some of them to be quite braggadocios. In fact, I'm not the only one who finds them that way. Dear Abby found them so silly that she did a parody on them in one of her columns. These letters basically try to make ourselves and our family look worthy. It's an arrogance. It's a puffed-upness.

This is the one she wrote. And it's really not far off from some that we receive.

Dear Friends,

What a great year! Jim was named Vice President of the bank! We celebrated by buying a Mercedes and flying off to the Orient. In addition to his Boy Scout work, Jim was Co-Chairman of the United Fund Drive. He continues on the Board of Grace Hospital and is Treasurer of the Rotary. His first love, however is still conservation, and he is heading up the committee to fight Dutch Elm disease. After completing my term as Junior League President, I swore I would take life easy, but I'm more involved than ever. I accepted the Vice-Presidency of the Garden Club, and I'm still active in the D.A.R. I ran the bake sale for the Eastern Star again, and we made \$680. I also squeezed in a flower-arranging class offered by a Japanese exchange student. All this with my leg in a cast! Dumb me fell off the ladder while hanging curtains at the homeless shelter.

Don't you love those letters?

Well, somebody who had just "had it" with those puffed up, arrogant letters decided to write one that just told the truth.

Dear Friends,

We've had a rotten year! Bill was passed over for promotion again, so he just quit his job. He hasn't lined up anything yet, but he's listed with the unemployment agencies. He looks at the Want Ads every day. In the meantime, he's drinking like a fish....

Just come and serve in silence. We don't have to know who you are or how great you are. We don't have to call you up here and give you an award. You've missed it all.

Love in the body of Christ is not puffed up or arrogant.

V. Love is not rude (verse 5).

It treats others with the same respect that it desires.

VI. Love is not self-seeking.

Pastor E. V. Hill tells of the Watts riots in Los Angeles, where he pastored. One black preacher was killed for not disassociating himself from the whites. The report was that E.V. Hill was next on the list. A phone call in the night informed him that his car was targeted for a bomb. At her insistence, he told his wife the message he had received.

The next morning, Hill got up and saw his car was gone. Several hours later his car pulled into his driveway, driven by his wife. “What did you do?” Hill insisted.

“Well, if your car was bombed,” his wife said, “I wanted to die and not you.”

Hill said, “Since that day I have never asked my wife, ‘Do you love me?’ I know. And since that day 2,000 years ago when the Son of God died on that cross, I have not needed to ask God, ‘Do you love me?’ I know!” (as told in a sermon by John Sullivan)

VII. Love is not easily provoked, Paul adds.

In order to forgive those around you whom you love, you have to deny yourself. You have to die a little bit in order to forgive. Pride dies. Fairness dies. Your rights die. Your self-pity. The sweetness of pouting. The satisfaction of a little righteous wrath. Oh, I love all those things. Do you? You die a little, but the relationship with that other person might rise alive. (Walter Wangerin, Jr., *As For Me and My House: Crafting Your Marriage to Last*, Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1987, p. 95-96)

There will be times when one of the parties, be it a spouse or friend or a sibling, is picking for a fight. The individual will purposely pick at you, saying sharp words, and generally carrying themselves in such a way as to draw you into a fight. Love simply refuses to play. It refuses to be drawn into a squabble.

VIII. Love doesn't keep a laundry list when it has been wronged.

It reminds me of the husband who said to his wife, “Why do you keep bringing up the past. I thought you had forgiven and forgotten.” The wife said, “I have forgiven and forgotten. I just don't want you to forget that I have forgiven and forgotten.” She hadn't really forgiven or forgotten, had she?

Love keeps no account of wrongs. Wow.

IX. Love seeks the truth.

Love is based on trust. And love rejoices in truth.

What does love really look like? It looks like a Savior dying on a cross for a very imperfect people, giving of Himself – totally of Himself – for your sake and for my sake. That's what love really looks like.

Love never fails, Paul says in verse 8. A lot of gifts – they are on a time table. The gift of revelation, prophecy – it will be done away with one day. Speaking in tongues? No need for that always. Knowledge? There will be a point in the kingdom of God when it doesn't matter.

But love counts not only here but in the hereafter. Love never fails. “Faith, hope, and love,” verse 13 – Paul’s famous triad. “But the greatest of all of these is love.”

How have you loved those in this church family? How have you exercised your scriptural gifts in such a way as to serve this body? You can have faith. You can have hope. But love is the greatest. You can prophesy; you can give everything you have to the poor. But if you don’t have a motive of love, it’s nothing.

Love. It really never fails.