

The Necessity of Love – 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Introduction – We come to the famous “love poem,” famous in wedding ceremonies. And while there is plenty of good application for a marriage, that was not the original context nor Paul’s first application (which is why the first three verses always sound a bit awkward in the wedding ceremony). The chapter comes in the middle of a three-chapter argument against the abuse of tongues and Word/sign-gifts in the gathered assembly. More importantly, Paul has made clear that although they are without any of the spiritual gifts (1:7) they are not spiritual, but carnal people (3:1). They think the gifts are the important thing. They speak in tongues, but tolerate sexual immorality, exploitation, and idolatry (5:9-10, 6:1-11, 8:1-10:22). They claim great wisdom and knowledge (1:10, 3:4) but tear down brothers with it (1:11-12, 8:1-13, 11:17-34). Full of religious trappings, they lack the genuine marker for being a Spirit-filled Christian: “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). “But the fruit of the Spirit is love...” (Gal 5:22).

The Necessity of Love (vv1-3) – Religious activity, even if amazing or heroic, is hypocritical if the individual (or the church) is not also characterized by love. Speech, even if it’s the spiritual gift of tongues, that is not exercised out of love for others, is like a meaningless, clanging noise (v1), which may refer to their previous pagan worship (12:2). “*Tongues of angels*” could be that spiritual gift of tongues, or he could be speaking hyperbolically. Either way, it’s worthless gibberish when used for self-promotion and not for God’s intended purposes within the body. If the gifts of prophesy, knowledge, or faith to “*remove mountains*” are exercised without love, the user is nothing (v2). Paul is contrasting loveless words and deeds with love-driven words and deeds. You can have the gift of teaching but teach falsehoods. You can have the gift of exhortation but if you are prideful, you can use that gift to tear people down. Spiritual gifts can be used carnally; the fruit of the Spirit always is the fruit of the Spirit. Even heroic, charitable deeds or stands for righteousness unto death, if not done out of love, profit us nothing (v3, Matt 6:1, 3-4). The absolute necessity for life, if one is a Christian, is what Paul calls “love.”

What Love Is (and Isn’t) – “*Agape*” – the word translated here, “love,” (“charity” in the AV) is used 10x from 13:1-14:1. It is the most common word for love in the New Testament and yet was not commonly used before the writing of the NT. Christians employed this old word in a new way to express the unique love of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:16, 4:10). The Bible describes God as love (1 John 4:8), and then commands us to imitate this love (1 John 4:11).

Love is not fond emotions. Fond emotions may or may not accompany agape-love. This love is not an abstract quality. It is concrete, full of action, able to be demonstrated – in fact it demands to be seen. This love has been demonstrated in the coming of Jesus (Rom 5:6-8, Eph 5:1-2). It is not an emotion, but it is a disposition as well as a behavior. Love could be defined as “obeying God from the heart.”

That is why “love” defines God’s law. “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength*” and then “*love your neighbor as yourself*” summarize the entire law (Matt 22:37-40). It is amazing to think of how the Law of God is equated with love and yet the world (and sometimes the modern church) declares the Law of God as unloving. This is how law-breakers justify their sin – it’s a matter of definition.

Love is the purpose of the Law (1 Tim 1:5, Rom 13:8-10, Gal 5:14). Above all things, we are to have fervent love for one another (1 Pet 4:8, Col 3:14). Love is not a potion or emotion in the air. It is a transitive verb and so it takes an object, and the object makes all the difference. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world (1 John 2:15). Agape-love is to desire what God desires and then to go and act on it.

What Love Does (vv4-7) – This may be another ad hoc list, not an exhaustive list of the characteristics of love. Paul obviously has the Corinthian situation in mind. For instance: Love does not envy, but the Corinthians do (3:3). Love does not parade itself, but the Corinthians do (4:7). Love is not puffed up, but the Corinthians are (4:18, 8:1).

There is something else about this list. It is often used as a means for self-evaluation. A preacher will tell you to substitute your name for the word “love” and see how you measure up. But of course, we don’t, which is why Christ has come. We are liberated in Christ to imitate Him. Therefore, begin by substituting the name of the Lord Jesus here and see how perfectly it fits Him and is consistent with the good news. Because He is like this, we are not condemned. Instead, consider these characteristics in light of Gal 5:22-23. This love is a release of the power of the Spirit in our lives and in the church.

Love is not that froofy emotion we think of, for “*love suffers long and is kind.*” Love does not rush to judgment and is frequently imposed on. It doesn’t suffer long and become resentful. “*Love does not envy,*” it knows how to rejoice in the inequality of God’s blessings visited upon others. “*Love does not parade itself*” because it considers others more important. “*Love is not puffed up,*” because it is not interested in inflating its own name. “*Love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil*” (v5). And so, love isn’t looking for its own angle at other’s expense, rises above affronts and insults (Prov 19:11). If he thinks no evil, it means that he is not sitting their thinking over past resentments, feeding his bitterness.

So what does love do? Rather than rejoice in iniquity, love rejoices in the truth. Love refuses to celebrate any ungodly, unlawful, or perverse activity – and this will cause love to be declared unloving in our ongoing culture wars. God is love and Jesus is the truth and the two link arms and rejoice together. Finally, love “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” This is not because love is naïve. This is not about always trusting those around us (who often are not to be trusted), but rather to bear and endure because one believes and hopes in the living, loving, enduring Christ and His promised eschaton.

Just like Jesus – This list is not a club to beat oneself or to beat someone else with. This is the good news of Jesus Christ. Love always perseveres, never gives up, never quits, because Jesus never does. Love hopes and perseveres and trusts the Father through all the challenges of this life because Jesus did. Love does this by the Spirit because the Spirit is love and has loved us first.

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