

Rise Up And Build

"So They said, 'Let us rise up and build,' Then they set their hands to do this good work," Neh. 2:18

“The Greatest Of These Is Love”

By Marc Gibson

“And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13:13).

I Corinthians 13 is that great chapter on love. It falls right in the middle of Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth (chs.12-14). Why would Paul raise the issue of love in the middle of this context? Because love is so important in any congregational setting. Spiritual gifts were drawing a lot of attention among the brethren, but Paul told them, *“I show you a more excellent way”* (12:31). That *“more excellent way”* is the way of love.

Paul declared that speaking in tongues without having love is just making noise (13:1). Paul went so far as to say that possessing great and powerful spiritual gifts without love adds up to zero (13:2). And even impressive works such as feeding the poor and giving your body to be burned profits nothing without love (13:2). Obviously, love is a central and essential ingredient for proper spiritual activity.

I Corinthians 13:4-7 lists several qualities of love. True love can be identified by its works and fruits. False love can also be identified by the lack of spiritual traits. We will examine each of these qualities of godly love. While doing this, let us honestly examine ourselves and remember that *“love never fails.”*

Love Suffers Long

The first characteristic of love in I Corinthians 13 is *“suffers long.”* The Greek word is *makrothumeo* which is defined “to be long spirited, i.e. (objectively) forbearing or (subjectively) patient” (Strong). Some English versions render it *“patient”* (e.g. NIV, NASV).

The literal translation is “long tempered.” A short-tempered person does not manifest this attribute of love. “The word also describes the man who has the power to avenge himself but refrains from the exercise of this power. It is that self-restraint which does not hastily retaliate a wrong; it endures injuries and evil deeds without being provoked to anger or revenge... The verb *makrothumeo* is a present tense verb indicating that this is one of the habitual characteristics of love” (Mike Willis, *First Corinthians*, 371).

If you have a “short fuse” and are easily provoked to anger, then you do not have the patience of love that God commands. Of course, one’s loving patience is not infinite, but it should last much longer than is usually characteristic in our impatient and harsh world. True godly love wants to be patient with others.

Are you ready to criticize or disparage another person at the drop of a hat, or to extend great amounts of loving patience? God says, “*Love suffers long.*”

Love Is Kind

The second characteristic of love is that it is “*kind.*” It would seem obvious that kindness and love go hand in hand. God showed us kindness in Christ (Eph. 2:7; Titus 3:4). True love is never unkind to others, even to enemies. Paul taught us to “*be kind to one another, tenderhearted..*”(Eph. 4:32; cf. Col. 3:1 2). This is the opposite attitude to “*bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking..with all malice* (Eph. 4:31).

The word translated “*is kind*” (*chresteuomai*) has the meaning of goodness, graciousness, and gentleness. One commentator writes that “the usage of *chrestos* in Luke 5:39 to describe the old wine that has mellowed with age helps us to understand the precise meaning of this word. The old wine is not sharp or biting in taste; rather it is mellow. Hence, love is not caustic, or sharp-tongued; it is mellow and kind. It mellows all that is harsh or austere; roughness and bitterness are banished by love” (Mike Willis, *I Corinthians* 372).

God’s people are to be loving people, and loving people are kind. Kindness is part of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” (Gal. 5:22), and brotherly kindness is one of the virtues of godliness (2 Peter 1:7). Love seeks opportunities to express kindness to others, especially those who may be the least deserving!

Love Does Not Envy

The next characteristic of love is the first that identifies an attribute that is “*not*” a part of true love. This passage says that love “*does not envy*” Love and envy cannot exist in the same heart.

The word used here (*zeloo*) can have a positive and negative application. It can refer to an attitude that “*earnestly desires*” that which is good (see I Cor. 12:31). But here, it refers to envy, jealousy, and bitter resentment of what is seen in others. “Envy is chagrin, mortification, discontent, or uneasiness at the sight of another’s excellence or good fortune, accompanied with some degree of hatred and a desire to possess equal advantages; malicious grudging. Love does not envy the happiness and prosperity others enjoy; but delights in their welfare, and as their happiness is increased by their endowments, their reputation, their health, their domestic comforts, and their learning, it rejoices in it all and would not diminish it and would not detract from that happiness” (Lipscomb and Shepherd, *I Corinthians* 197).

Envy is a carnal attitude that keeps company with strife and division (I Cor. 3:3). Its self-seeking attitude results in “*confusion and every evil thing*” (Jas. 3:14-16). Envy will annihilate the love that should fill our heart. A person filled with godly love will not manifest an attitude of envy toward anyone or anything.

Love Does Not Parade It Itself

Another characteristic that is not a part of true love is the desire to “*parade itself.*” We are familiar with parades. They are all about “tooting one’s horn” about a holiday or special occasion. There are appropriate times and places for parades, and there are inappropriate times

and places for parades. A “parade” is not appropriate when godly love is manifesting itself.

The word used here (*perpereuomai*) is translated “*vaunteth itself*,” “brag” and has the meaning of vainglorious, a braggart, boastful. Others commenting on this word have said that it “refers to arrogance of speech; the emphasis is on boasting that wounds others, causes unrest and discord, and represents unfounded presumption” (Mike Willis, *I Corinthians* 372). Love does not “ostentatiously parade its superiority to others, whether real or supposed, priding itself on it” (Lipscomb and Shepherd, 197). This “parading” of love is not to celebrate a good time, but to hurt others by exalting self. True love does not act in such a manner.

One who is filled with godly love will not exalt himself by bragging about how wonderful he is. Instead, love desires to lift up others and seek their good. Braggarts cannot see anyone but themselves or toot any horn but their own. They don’t share godly love because they are too busy marching in their own parade!

Love Is Not Puffed Up

The next characteristic that is “*not*” a part of true love is being “*puffed up*.” To be “*puffed up*” is to have an inflated view of oneself. It is what we may call having a “big head.” Paul had warned earlier in this first epistle to the Corinthians that “*knowledge puffs up, but love edifies*” (8:1). A person caught up in his own supposed importance will become puffed up or manifest an arrogant attitude. True love cannot be linked with such a carnal mind-set.

Not being “*puffed up*” means that love “does not indulge in inflated opinions of itself; the words imply an instinctive aversion from all false glitter, pompous bluster, strutting in borrowed plumes, from extravagant words, looks, tones, styles, in short, a deep hatred of seeming to be more than one is” (Lipscomb and Shepherd, *I Corinthians* 197). This attitude causes one to outwardly “parade” himself. And again, love would never think to do such a thing.

The “*puffed up*” person has no interest in others, and therefore will not think to love and care for others as he should. Rather, he wants all eyes on himself as he “swells” with pride and arrogance. There is no way this person can love as he should with such an attitude. Let us avoid being “*puffed up*.”

Love Does Not Behave Rudely

Paul states next that true love does not “*behave rudely*” or “*behave itself unseemly*” (KJV). The word that Paul uses (*aschemoneo*) has the meaning “to be (i.e. act) unbecoming” (Strong) and to “behave disgracefully, dishonorably, indecently” (Arndt and Gingrich). The world is full of people acting disgracefully toward one another on a daily basis. Such actions demonstrate very little love shown to one another.

One writer notes that this is the attitude that “takes delight in being blunt and almost brutal” (William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, 135). One can say the right thing in a very rude way and be totally ineffective. “There is a graciousness in Christian love which never forgets that courtesy and tact and politeness...are lovely things” (*ibid*). We must not forget our manners, but always respect, honor, and value others as well as other accepted standards of decency.

No one has a right to be rude to another person, even if that person has acted rudely. This is especially true between members of the household of faith. Each person should be treated with respect as a soul with value in the eyes of God. If we are just plain rude to another person, we lack true love in our hearts.

Love Does Not Seek Its Own

Another characteristic of love is that it does not “*seek its own.*” This would seem to be a particularly difficult trait of genuine love for men to master, even Christians. Paul sadly stated a general observation that with but few exceptions, “*all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus*” (Phil. 2:21). We get so wrapped up in our own lives that we have little to no time to give attention to the things of others, or even the Lord. Each of us is admonished to “*look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others*” (v. 4).

William Barclay noted that “whenever we start thinking about “our place” we are drifting away from Christian love” (*The Letters to the Corinthians*, 135). Lipscomb and Shepherd added that “the love here commanded will prompt us to seek the welfare of others with self-denial, personal sacrifice, and toil” (*First Corinthians*, 198). Love’s first thought is about others — what they need and how we can help.

Seeking our own things first will result in selfishness, self-pity, apathy and discouragement. The best medicine for a lonely, depressed spirit is to seek the good of others. Such expressions of love will lift our spirits and draw us closer to Christ Who, for our sakes, “*did not please himself*” (Rom. 15:3). (To Be Continued)
