

## Love is the Greatest • 1 Corinthians 13

‘I love you’ are the three most powerful and potentially life-transforming words that anyone can ever say or hear. Love gives hope. Love gives meaning. Love makes us feel good. Love changes everything. Love is God’s great gift to us.

Oh, it’s true that love is sometimes maligned and sometimes counterfeited by sex or other parts of our culture. It is true that for some who have never really experienced love it is a difficult thing to understand, and an even more difficult thing to do. But the truth is, if we can understand love, if we can experience love, if we can express love in all the rest of our lives, then not only our lives will be transformed, but we will become the agent of transformation in the lives of others. There is this sense in which, if we get love right, everything else in life we will also get right. And if we get love wrong, then nothing else in life will we get right.

Probably the grandest description of love in all human literature was written by St. Paul. 1 Corinthians 13 starts out by saying that everything without love is nothing. So, for example, have you ever wanted to speak another language? Wouldn’t it be great to be fluent in different tongues? When I was a high school student I took Latin and discovered a year or two into it that no one spoke it, so I switched after two years and took French. The first year of French I got a B for the year. A lot of it was because the teacher mostly spoke English. But then I changed high schools and for French II had a teacher who spoke no English. While he may have known English, I never heard an English word come out of his mouth. So I pretty much didn’t understand anything he said for the entire school year. I got a D and I’m proud of that D. I’m proud of that D. It was a good thing! It was a gift! It enabled me to move on to other things in life.

But I have since dreamed what it would be like to be able to speak flawless French, or great German, or accentless Italian. Or what if I could speak Chinese, Japanese, or a language I most wish I could speak — Spanish.

Well, St. Paul said that, “If I speak in the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” That means

that the best linguist in the world is nothing without love.

Or, would you like to be really smart? What if you could be a highly persuasive public speaker? What if you were educated in everything from science to history to literature, and you were able to communicate the most profound truths, and you were able to do that in a way that the most ordinary of people could understand them? What if you had that element of faith that was so great that it could lead to the cures for cancer? What if you could move mountains? Well, all those things would be nice, but it’s really not enough.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I’m nothing.”

What about generosity? Wouldn’t it be just fabulous to be able to give away millions — tens of millions — of dollars every year to be able to help the poor and underwrite causes and to just to great good and to help other people to do great good as well? That would be impressive. But you know, even generosity can be selfish.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

One of the early lessons in grade school math classes is the power of multiplication. Oh, it’s true

that addition is powerful. You can take a small number like ten and add to it another small number like fifteen

and get a larger, but still comparably small, number of twenty-five. But if, instead of adding it, you multiply it then you have ten times fifteen, and you’ve taken a huge leap up to one hundred fifty.

But what if you start out with a really big number, like a million. And you don’t add to it, but you multiply it times another big number, like a thousand. Then you can jump to a billion.

However, suppose you start with a really, really large number and you multiply it times zero? You know that zero times anything still comes out to zero.

And so it is that life without love is zero. A person can be smart. A person can be beautiful. A person can be powerful. A person can be rich and

*Love is God’s great gift to us.*

generous, multilingual, or famous. But if life is multiplied by factors other than love it comes out to zero, because everything without love is nothing.

You know, as often as the word 'love' slips across our tongue and as frequent as it is in our vocabulary and culture, the truth of it is that a lot of us really don't know what love is all about. So let's find out.

Real love does life right. Love is patient. The Greek word that was used by St. Paul refers not to patience with circumstances but rather patience with people. In other words, when a person has the power to do something like get even and doesn't use that power, or puts it off and postpones it, that is patience.

Edwin McMaster Stanton became the attorney general of the United States of America on December 20, 1860. He was a democrat. He had a long and famous opposition to the republican candidate for president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. He said vicious things about Lincoln. He predicted that if Lincoln were ever elected president of the United States that he would ruin the country. He described Lincoln saying that he was a cunning clown. He described Lincoln as the original gorilla. He said, "There's no need to send researchers to Africa to study gorillas, just send them to Springfield, Illinois, and they can study Abraham Lincoln."

When Lincoln was elected president and when the Civil War began, he had a very important choice to make. Some historians will say that that choice determined the outcome of the Civil War. He needed to choose the secretary of war. He concluded that the best person was his most outspoken critic, Edwin Stanton. (Lincoln had never publicly or, to my knowledge, privately responded to the criticism that Stanton had put to him.)

Stanton then had a lot of opportunity to be in the cabinet of Abraham Lincoln. In fact, he was in Washington on the night that Lincoln was shot. Secretary Stanton was beckoned to Lincoln's deathbed. There he stood by the side of the bed and said, "There lies the greatest ruler of men that the world has ever known." Lincoln's treatment of Stanton had changed the man. Lincoln was patient.

"Love is patient. Love is kind."

To be kind is to do good to others even if others don't do good to you. Kindness is graciousness. It is pleasantness. It is being nice to others. If you have ever just been mean to someone and that person has not retaliated but has been pleasant back to you, nice to you, then you know what kindness is all

about.

Romans 15 says that "We who are strong ought to bear the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." Build up your neighbor because love is kind.

Love "does not envy, does not boast, is not proud."

We most often think of envy as wanting what someone else has, but there's quite a bit more to envy. Envy is that which resents when good comes to someone else, when another person has success or possessions or happiness. Envy feels good when bad things happen to other people. Envy feels bad when good things happen to other people. Love isn't like that. Love doesn't boast. It's not proud. It doesn't build itself up. You never hear a lover saying, "I'm better than you are."

William Carey was a shoe repairman in London near the peak of the British Empire. He had a great concern for people who had never heard about Jesus Christ. That became a growing passion to become a missionary to India. So he left his cobbler's bench where he did shoe repairs and went on to become one of the most famous and competent linguists in all of history. Carey learned and translated at least part of the Bible into thirty-four different languages. That's astonishing.

While in India he was invited to a party of British leaders and officers, the elite of that part of the Empire. One arrogant and proud man decided that he would build himself up at the expense of the well-known William Carey, and he did so by, in a loud voice at the party, asking Carey, "So what did you do before you came to India? You made shoes didn't you?"

Now with the crowd silenced, Carey answered and said, "No, I never made shoes. I just repaired shoes."

He didn't build himself up. He didn't proudly declare his successes. He humbly acknowledged what his origins and roots were. Carey was loving. And love "does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. (Love) is not rude."

Rudeness is defiance of social standards. The rude person is the person who pushes to the head of the line and doesn't care about the other people. Rude people disrespect and disregard the privacy and the personhood of others. Rude people do all of the talking. Rude people interrupt other peoples' conversa-

tions. Rude people say embarrassing things. They have vulgar comments. Rude people get laughs at the expense of someone else, putting that other person down. Rude people disrespect the comforts and the needs of others. But love is not like that. Love is not rude.

Love “is not self-seeking.” Self-seeking is putting one’s self ahead of others. This is the person who is always demanding his or her rights. She insists upon special treatment. He’s the person who, at the slightest provocation, is threatening a lawsuit. You can see this almost everywhere you go. You see those that are self-seeking in restaurants. You see those who are self-seeking in airports. You see those who are self-seeking at school, or at church, or even at home. These are the people who are very demanding of others. They frequently complain.

They want special treatment. They want to be served, but they’re very reluctant to do the very things that they criticize other people for doing poorly or not doing at all. They want to know what they will get and what the benefits will be for them, but rarely think about others.

Love’s not like that. Love “is not self-seeking. Love is not easily angered.”

There are some people who just very quickly lose their tempers. They’re constantly at the very edge. This is the person who has little or no self-control. She’s instantly irritated, he flares up with just the slightest provocation or no provocation at all. He’s quick to swear.

You see it in those who are triggered with road rage, driving down the highway and someone is too slow or too fast or too far over or doesn’t put the blinker on or does put on the blinker. This is someone this person will never see again, someone they’ll have only a few moments of quick contact with, and there’s a rage that comes out against them.

It’s not just road rage. It’s air rage. It’s school rage. It’s office rage. It’s church rage. It’s home rage. It’s just lashing out at other people. Love doesn’t do that. Love doesn’t do that even when it’s provoked. Even when it seems like it’s justified. The truth is that love is hard to enrage. Love is very slow to anger. Love keeps tempers under control. Love is not easily angered.

Love keeps no record of wrongs, so on the

lover’s computer, the best-worn key is the delete key. On the lover’s pencil, there’s always an eraser. And it’s a well-worn eraser.

The Greek word that’s used in 1 Corinthians 13 is an accounting term and refers to a ledger sheet. On a ledger sheet you keep a detailed record, the dates and exactly what happened. But the lover doesn’t do that. Lovers are good at forgetting. Lovers keep short accounts. Lovers don’t hold yesterday’s sins against you. When you go to someone who truly loves you and you apologize for the insults, the things that you’ve done wrong, the hurts

that you’ve done to that person, the most likely words that will come from a lover’s mouth are the words, “I don’t remember.” That is not to say that lovers are not hurt. It is not to say that lovers find forgetting an

easy thing to do, but it’s just that the very nature of love is that love keeps no record of wrongs.

“Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with truth.” There are some people who just take delight when bad things happen to other people. These are those who like to hear the latest gossip, who are pleased to find out when someone is having an affair, or when an athlete has taken drugs, or when someone has cheated at school, or is pleased to find out that in the latest decline of the stock market someone they know has lost a lot of money. It makes them feel good.

But love is different. Love is saddened by sin. Love is happy when good things happen to others. Love is pleased with the truth. “Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.”

“Love always protects.”

There’s an interesting line in the movie *Brave Heart* where the heroine has undergone a terrible assault. She decides that she will tell no one, that she will keep the shame and the injury and not even tell her husband. But someone else discovers what has happened, and she asks him not to tell. He says, “I just can’t do that. I just can’t keep the secret.” She turns to him and says, “If I can endure the shame, you can endure the silence.”

You see, those who love are willing to protect the reputation of others. Love does not drag someone’s problems and difficulties out into public view. I know that you love me when you will pro-

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tect me. When I've stumbled and said the wrong thing, when I've made a fool out of myself, when I've done something that I shouldn't have done, if you love me you'll try to cover up for me. You'll try to put the best possible spin on it. You'll try to help me out because love always protects.

Love always trusts. Love trusts God. In fact, that's one of the wonders of lovers that we don't have to take responsibility for our parents and our children and for society and absolutely everything. No, to the contrary, love trusts God. Trust God. He loves even more than we do. Then love is free to believe the best about others. Love's first inclination is to think good about others and to trust others, rather than think the worst and to doubt them.

Love trusts and love always hopes. It does not easily give up on other people. Love hangs in there, looking for a cure, anticipating a change or expecting things to get better. I tell you that love doesn't always make sense. It's not always all that reasonable and rational. A mother who loves her son who is on death row holds on and hopes to the very last second that there will be a reprieve, even when everyone else says it will never happen. The husband or wife or parent or child who has someone dying of a terminal illness hopes when everyone else says it's just not going to happen. This person's just not going to get better. But those who love keep on hoping. It's just what love does. Love hopes.

Love always perseveres; it just doesn't give up. It never quits. We're not here talking just about passive acceptance. Love rises above the circumstances. It endures problems that otherwise would not be enduring, the kind of thing that would take a person down. But not when you love. No, you can't beat love down. Love just will not give up. Love perseveres.

"Love never fails." It's permanent. The weather changes, our bodies change, careers change, all kinds of things change and death finally comes, but "love never fails. Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will be pass away.... yet these three remain - faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."

Wouldn't it be great to be loved like that?. Wouldn't it be great to be that kind of a lover? You know, we all struggle. We struggle with life and with people and circumstances. Every single day of every year we face irritations and injustices. None of this is to excuse anything that is wrong. But we can

chose how we're going to respond. Sometimes, to those injustices and irritations, we blow up and some people become resentful and hateful. Some become angry and bitter, and some hold on to grudges for years and years and years, hoping that somehow they'll be able to get even. Then there are some who adopt a victim mentality that says, "Poor me. Everything is against me."

But the introduction to 1 Corinthians 13 says there's a better way. A better way to respond to all of the irritations and injustices of life. "Now I will show you the most excellent way." It is love. It is the better way to live. Love is the superior approach. It's taking God's side; it's adopting God's perspective. It's doing things God's way.

Will that make life always easier? It will not. But will it make it better? Indeed, it shall.

Some of us will say, "You know, I wish I could live like that. I wish I could love like that. But I didn't grow up with that. My parents weren't like that. I live in a household where none of this is practiced. Where I work, where I go, there are no models. There are no mentors for me to check out."

You know the truth of it is that unless we are loved, it is a very difficult thing for us to love others. But God really loves us. God really loves you. So he becomes our model, our mentor, our source. We fill the tank of our lives full with the love of God and then, when we have truly understood, when we have experience his love, when we have accepted his love, then we are able to love others.

When you think of love, think of Jesus. In fact, you can put him in this same piece of literature, reading that Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, Jesus does not envy. Jesus does not boast. Jesus is not proud. Jesus is not rude. Jesus is not self-seeking. Jesus certainly is not easily angered. Jesus keeps no record of wrongs. Jesus does not delight in evil, but rejoices in the truth. Jesus always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Jesus never fails.

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