

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

By

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A little girl was invited for dinner at the home of her first-grade friend. The vegetable was buttered broccoli and the mother asked if she liked it. "Oh, yes," the child replied politely, "I *love* it!"

But when the bowl of broccoli was passed, she declined to take any. The hostess said, "I thought you said you loved broccoli." The girl replied sweetly, "Oh, yes ma'am, I do, but not enough to *eat* it!"

Do you love your family? *"Of course I do!"* We all would say that! It's the only right answer. But what do you mean by love? So often we love our family like that little girl loved broccoli: We love in the abstract, but when it comes right down to it, we don't want to get too close. In the words of the Apostle John, we love in word, but not in deed and truth (1 John 3:18).

What does biblical love look like? We know that our relationships in the family need to be marked by love. Husbands, especially, are to love their wives. But, wives, too, must love their husbands. Parents and children, brothers and sisters, must love one another. But how do we know what such love looks like in everyday dress?

Paul's famous chapter on love, 1 Corinthians 13, tells us. The Corinthian church was emphasizing a good thing, spiritual gifts, to the neglect of the best. They were using their gifts apart from love. Paul makes the point that the use of their God-given gifts would amount to nothing if the Corinthians did not make love their priority.

Selfless love is the priority for every Christian.

These verses are the most eloquent and profound words ever written on the subject of love. To comment on its parts is a bit like giving a botany lecture on a beautiful flower--if you're not careful you lose the beauty and impact of it. But we can profit from understanding the parts and applying it to family relationships.

In verses 1-3 he shows the *preeminence* of love, that love is greater than all spiritual gifts because without love, gifts are empty. In verses 4-7 he shows the *practice* of love, how love is greater than all spiritual gifts because of its selfless characteristics. In verses 8-13 he shows the *permanence* of love, that love is greater than all spiritual gifts because it outlasts them. We're going to focus mainly on verses 4-7, where Paul describes how love acts. While in English most of these words are predicate adjectives, in Greek they are verbs. Love is not talk; it is action.

We're all prone to apply verses like these to others: "My mate and my kids could sure use a lesson in love. But me? I'm basically a loving person. I'm really easy to get along with." But I ask each of you to forget about everybody else and ask God to apply these verses to you.

Paul enumerates 15 characteristics of love to show how love acts or what it looks like in everyday life. A New Testament definition of *agape* is "*a caring, self-sacrificing commitment which shows itself in seeking the highest good of the one loved.*" Jesus Christ, in His sacrificial death on the cross, is the epitome and embodiment of this kind of love. A whole series of sermons could easily be preached on these qualities of love. But let's look briefly at each of them.

1. Selfless love is patient.

Ouch! Why did he put that first? This often confronts me with my failure in relating to my family. Patience is an interesting quality in that when I don't need it, I want it. It's when things start to irritate or frustrate me that I need patience, but usually at that point I don't want to be patient!

The Greek word comes from two words meaning, "long-tempered." If you're patient, you're slow to anger, you endure personal wrongs without retaliating. You bear with others' imperfections, faults, and differences. You give them time to change, room to make mistakes without coming down hard on them. Do you do that, men, with your wife and children?

I read a story of a man who had developed this quality to a far greater extent than I. During the late 1500's, Dr. Thomas Cooper edited a dictionary with the addition of 33,000 words and many other improvements. He had already been collecting materials for

eight years when his wife, a rather difficult woman, went into his study one day while he was gone and burned all of his notes under the pretense of fearing that he would kill himself with study. Eight years of work, a pile of ashes!

Dr. Cooper came home, saw the destruction, and asked who had done it. His wife told him boldly that she had done it. The patient man heaved a deep sigh and said, "Oh Dinah, Dinah, thou hast given a world of trouble!" Then he quietly sat down to another eight years of hard labor, to replace the notes which she had destroyed. (Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* [Assurance Publishers, #2350.] Next time you think you've arrived at being patient, that will give you something to aim for!

2. Selfless love is kind.

Kindness is patience in action. The Greek word comes from a word meaning "useful." A kind person is disposed to be helpful. He seeks out needs and looks for opportunities to meet those needs without repayment. He is tender and forgiving when wronged. The word was used of mellow wine, and suggests a person who is gentle, who has an ability to soothe hurt feelings, to calm an upset person, to help quietly in practical ways.

The kind person shows kindness in response to harsh treatment. Jesus said, "And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same thing. . . . But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:33, 35). The kindness of God leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Kindness motivates others toward positive change.

As with patience, the real proving ground for kindness is the home. Are you kind to your wife and children? Do you do kind, useful things for them? Are you training your children to be kind to one another by the way you treat your wife and them? Love is not macho; love is kind.

3. Selfless love is not jealous.

The word means to eagerly desire, and it is used both positively and negatively in the Bible. Jealousy in the negative sense is

related to greed and selfishness. The jealous person wants what others have, he wants things for himself. He is too selfish to applaud others' success; he has to have all the attention. In the family, a jealous husband refuses to trust his wife. He doesn't want to recognize her abilities and contributions. He is jealous of the time she spends with the children or with her friends. He wants it all for himself. James says that jealousy is often the source of quarrels and conflicts (James 4:2).

4. & 5. Selfless love does not brag and is not arrogant.

These ugly twins are related. They both stem from selfishness and are the flip side of jealousy. "Jealousy is wanting what someone else has. Bragging is trying to make others jealous of what we have. Jealousy puts others down; bragging builds us up" (John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1 Corinthians* [Moody Press], p. 341). Bragging is an outward manifestation of pride.

The braggart tries to impress others of his great accomplishments in order to make himself look good: "After all I've done for you, and you treat me this way!" But love isn't trying to build up me; love is trying to build up the other person. Love is humble. The humble, loving person is aware that everything he has is an undeserved gift from God (1 Cor. 4:7). So he doesn't boast, but thankfully uses what God has given to serve others.

6. Selfless love does not act unbecomingly.

The NIV translates, "It is not rude." Love does not needlessly offend. Love has good manners. It is courteous, polite, sensitive to the feelings of others and always uses tact. The reason we are not courteous, of course, is that we are thinking only of ourselves and not of others.

I read of a man who was generally lacking in manners. He never opened the car door for his wife. "She doesn't have two broken arms," he would say. After many years of marriage, his wife died. At the funeral, as the pallbearers brought her casket out to the hearse, the husband was standing by the car door. The funeral director, who knew the husband by name, called out to him and said, "Open the door for her, will you?" He reached for the car door and then, for one second, froze. He realized that he had never

opened the door for her in life; now, in her death, it would be the first, last, and only time. A lifetime of regret came crashing down around him. Love is not rude.

7. Selfless love does not seek its own.

It is not selfish, does not demand its rights. Alan Redpath said, "The secret of every discord in Christian homes, communities and churches is that we seek our own way and our own glory." R. C. H. Lenski put it, "Cure selfishness, and you plant a Garden of Eden" (*The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* [Augsburg], p. 557). Selfishness is the root problem of the human race; it is the antithesis of love, which is self-sacrificing.

Elisabeth Elliot was once speaking on this subject to an audience that included some young children who were sitting right in front of her. As she spoke, she wondered how she could make this plain to them, so that they could apply it. Later, she got a letter from one of those children, a six-year-old boy, who wrote, "I am learning to lay down my life for my little sister. She has to take a nap in the afternoon. I don't have to take a nap. But she can't go to sleep unless I come and lay down beside her. So I lay down with my little sister." That boy is learning to love!

If husbands and wives, as well as children, would apply this verse as that little boy did, our homes would be free of conflict and an honor to Jesus Christ, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Aren't you glad Jesus didn't insist on His rights? He would have stayed in heaven and we wouldn't be saved!

8. Selfless love is not provoked.

The Greek word means to sharpen, stimulate, rouse to anger. Phillips paraphrases, "It is not touchy." Love does not have a hair-trigger temper. Some people make everyone around them walk on eggshells. They're easily offended. One little thing that doesn't go their way and "KABOOM!" They use their temper to intimidate and to punish. When you confront them, they say, "Sure, I have a bad temper. But I get it all out and it's over in a few minutes." So is a bomb. But look at the devastation it leaves behind! When you're angry, usually you're not loving.

9. Selfless love does not take into account a wrong suffered.

This is an accounting word, used of numerical calculation. It is used of God not imputing our guilt to us, but instead imputing the righteousness of Christ to our account (Rom. 4:6-8). Love doesn't keep a tally of wrongs and bear a grudge until every one is paid for. It doesn't try to gain the upper hand by reminding the other person of past wrongs. Love forgives.

One married man said to his friend, "You know, every time my wife and I get into a conflict, she gets historical." His friend said, "Historical? Don't you mean hysterical?" "No, I mean historical. She rehearses everything I've ever done wrong in the whole history of our marriage." That's keeping score! That's not love.

10. & 11. Selfless love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth.

These qualities are the flip side of one another. Moffatt puts it, "Love is never glad when others go wrong." To rejoice in the truth means to be glad about behavior in accordance with the truth of God's Word. If someone you don't like falls into sin, you don't gloat; you grieve, because God is grieved over sin. If they repent, you rejoice.

There is a fine balance to love. Although love is kind and overlooks the faults of others, it does not compromise the truth or take a soft view of sin. To allow another person to go on in sin, whether it is known sin or a blind spot, is not to seek his best; it is not love. Love will sensitively confront and correct precisely because it cares deeply and knows that sin destroys. Love rejoices with the truth. Love gets excited when it hears of spiritual victories. Love encourages by expressing joy over little evidences of growth. John, the apostle of love, wrote, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (3 John 4).

12. Selfless love bears all things.

The word can mean either to bear up under or to protect by covering. If it has the first meaning, then it would be the same as "endures all things" (end of v. 7). I prefer the second meaning, to protect by covering. Love doesn't broadcast the problems of others. Love doesn't run down others with jokes, sarcasm or put-downs. Love defends the character of the other person as much as possible within the limits of truth. Love won't lie about weak-

nesses, but neither will it deliberately expose and emphasize them. Love protects.

13. Selfless love believes all things.

The NIV translates, "Love always trusts." This does not mean gullibility; it does mean that love is not suspicious and doubting of the other person's character and motives without good reason, even if his actions offended you. If trust has been broken, then it needs to be earned again, step by step. But love believes the other person is innocent until proven guilty, not guilty until proven innocent. If there is a problem, love doesn't jump immediately to blame the other person.

In the family, trust shows itself by not grilling the other person about every detail of his story, like an attorney cross-examining a defendant. It means believing in your kids, expressing confidence in them. I'm thankful that my parents trusted me as a teenager; it made me want to live up to that trust. One of my friends had parents who did not trust him, and he lived up to their distrust! Sometimes you will get ripped off when you trust, but love persists in trusting.

14. Selfless love hopes all things.

It is not pessimistic. It does not expect the one loved to fail, but to succeed. Love refuses to take failure as final. It exudes a godly optimism which says, "I know you can do it, because God in you is able!" It does not ignore reality. It doesn't close its eyes to problems. But it rests on the promises of God, that He is working all things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. And so love always hopes.

15. Selfless love endures all things.

The word "endures" is a military word meaning to sustain the assault of an enemy. It has the idea of holding up under trial, of perseverance in spite of difficulties. It means that love hangs in there. It is not just a passive, stoic attitude. It is a positive, triumphant spirit that sticks it out.

There is an epidemic among Christians of bailing out of tough situations. People don't like something that happens in a church. They go find another church more to their liking. They run into

problems or disagreements in their marriage, grow tired of the effort and bail out. "But," you say, "isn't adultery a legitimate grounds for divorce?" Technically, yes. But all too often one partner uses it as an excuse to bail out of a marriage where both partners have wronged one another repeatedly in many ways. I'm not minimizing the seriousness of adultery. It destroys trust and creates all sorts of problems in a marriage. I'm not suggesting that it's easy to work through. It takes a lot of hard work to rebuild, a brick at a time. But God's best is to forgive and renew the marriage, not to bail out. Love endures all things.

That's how love acts. It is selfless, wholly directed to build the other person. Of course nobody can love like that. Only God is love (1 John 4:7). Put "Christ" in verses 4-7 instead of "love" and you have a description of Him. He is patient, kind, not jealous; does not brag, is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; does not seek His own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; He always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. If we want to love one another, we must focus on His love for us and walk in His Spirit who produces His love in us (Gal. 5:22).

Conclusion

Humorist Sam Levenson says, "Love at first sight is easy to understand. It's when two people have been looking at each other for years that it becomes a miracle" (*Reader's Digest* [3/83]). But it's not really a miracle; it's the result of yielding to God, repeatedly confronting our selfishness and daily practicing biblical love in our homes.

An old legend says that in his old age the apostle John was so weak that he had to be carried into the church meetings. At the end of the meeting he would be helped to his feet to give a word of exhortation. He would invariably repeat, "Little children, love one another."

The disciples grew weary of the same words every time. Finally they asked him why he said the same thing over and over. He replied, "Because it is the commandment of the Lord, and the observation of it alone is sufficient."

Someone has said that if we discovered that we had only five minutes left to say all we wanted to say, every telephone booth would be occupied by people calling other people to stammer that they loved them. Selfless love is our priority. "Pursue love" (14:1).

Discussion Questions

1. How does patience in love fit in with not tolerating sin? Does patience (even God's patience) have a limit?
2. Love does not get provoked and yet God gets angry at our sin. How do you reconcile this? Is it wrong to get provoked about someone's sin?
3. Love always trusts. But is it loving to trust a person who has repeatedly violated our trust? Where do you draw the line?
4. What would you say to someone who said, "Love is more important than doctrinal purity"? Can we love apart from truth?

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