

“But The Greatest of These Is Love”

(1st Corinthians 12:31b-13:7)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. 1st Corinthians 13 might be the single most popular text used in Christian weddings, but it is given to Christians to apply to all relationships across the board. It's known as “the love chapter” of the Bible and it expounds upon what true love looks like:

This is “all or nothing” rhetoric (The Lutheran Study Bible, p 1967) with verses 4-7 being that famous, seemingly definitive description of love: two positive statements, eight negative statements (the last one adds a positive contrast), then four more positive statements. (Ibid., 1968)

So here it is:

1. Love is patient.
2. Love is kind.
3. Love does not envy.
4. Love does not boast.
5. Love is not arrogant.
6. Love is not rude.
7. Love does not insist on its own way.
8. Love is not irritable.
9. Love is not resentful.
10. Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.
11. Love bears all things.
12. Love believes all things.
13. Love hopes all things.
14. Love endures all things.

This is a magnificent description of love, but we mustn't forget dear Christians that this love is *the gift of God!* In chapter 12 the Lord teaches us about the many manifestations of the Holy Spirit given to you, the Body of Christ, but love is among the “higher gifts” and is indeed the “more excellent way.” This love is “of” God, and like all of the gifts, we can't take any credit for any of them. They belong to and are from God.

If we experience any of these gifts – like leadership or service or hospitality or impressive abilities in medicine or languages – these things are of God.

As much as we are responsible for creating our respiratory, nervous, or circulatory systems, we are responsible for generating spiritual gifts. As much as you gave yourself your

heart and lungs, you gave yourself your spiritual gifts. "You are not your own, you were bought with a price." (1st Cor. 6) Consider how active Adam was when God made him from dust. Consider Eve's contribution when she was formed from Adam's side (nor did Adam do anything either as he was asleep the whole time). Consider how active you were when you were born from your mother's womb. All of you belongs to God; He is the Actor and Creator. He has also created and given to you your gifts.

So why is this insight so important? Because this insight reminds us to give God all of the glory; and to thank Him for our very ability to live and move and have our being (Acts 17). We are His and everything we are able to do is His gift to us. What is more, however, the gifts that are the Lord's which we manage and employ are intended by God for the SERVICE of OTHERS...for the common good of the Church (1st Corinthians 12:7)! Love is not for us to bask in, in our private corners, but to share, to give, not for our ego, but for the good of someone else. You are God's conduit for His gift of love to flow through you to someone else!

But how often we totally forget about this! How often do we assume that this love in 1st Corinthians 13 is what we must hoard for ourselves and cling to? Another Christian gave me an illustration: we act like we do when we handle our coffee in the morning, our mug, our thermos. Have you noticed how we handle "our coffee," our café mocha? We hold it close, hold with one hand, and further contain the heat with the other, or just hold it with two hands. "This is MINE!" Sometimes our mugs have our NAMES on them for crying out loud! "Back off!" We hold it so close that the last thought we have is to pass it around to share with others. I'm not suggesting you should (when it comes to your coffee), but you get the point. It's the *handling* part.

This is how we might treat love at times: it is for me to take in and soak in; it is for *my* pleasure. It is for my meditation on what I get; it is what is mine! It is all about me!

But such a "gimme, gimme" self-serving attitude does not get along with what the LORD says about love itself. Consider the first two positive descriptions: love is patient and love is kind. St. Paul wrote about these virtues elsewhere in Galatians 5 on the fruit of the Spirit. John Stott put forth the idea that in the second triad of the 9 fruit of the Spirit – patience, kindness, goodness – we are esp. describing what is needed in *relationship with others (Baptism and Fullness, p 77)!*

How easily we get critical, upset, resentful; how easy it is for us to *not* love our neighbor, esp. our closest neighbors like our spouse for example. Never underestimate the evil one's attack upon marriage. His desire is to pull you apart and to destroy your family. He does this by first eliminating your glue and protective gifts: like patience and kindness. But what do relationships really need? They need patience, and they need kindness. These are fertilizer for the blessed growth of your marriage, but they are also shields against the evil one!

Trust me that when I work with couples we counsel about the importance of communication, finances, trust, intimacy, etc., but how easy it is to neglect the basics: just making it a point to be patient. Just striving to be kind!

Our tendency, however, is our nature. How easy it is for us NOT to be patient (“Enough is enough;” “I’ve had it;” “All I do is give and give!”). This is defeatist language, but more importantly, it is the antithesis to faith and the enemy of love.

1st Corinthians 13 is fascinating in that it teaches at the end that faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love. But we must not misinterpret what we mean by “faith” here. This faith is not THE FAITH; not the CHRISTIAN FAITH, the Word of Christ! It is rather the faith in the heart. So that even if I have personal faith to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing! (1 Cor. 13:2) That is, the Word of God must guide our love; and it must also produce it as the Holy Spirit works through it! To truly love God is to love the person right next to you. There is no other tangible way to love God, with the exception of being faithful in receiving His means of grace such as the Holy Sacraments, or by simply obeying His commandments (1st John 5:3), but how many of those commandments are focused on how we treat our neighbor? And how vital it is that this world just see patience and kindness?

Think about it: what goes through your head when you are cut off on the road! How patient are you? How kind are you?

This is why dear Christians that we can’t leave these first two positive virtues on love dependent upon ourselves. We need help. Thank God for His Word!

Let me ask you to back up and answer this question: “WHO – IS – LOVE?” Not WHAT is Love? But WHO is Love? You know the answer. God is love (1st John 4:8 & 16) Jesus Christ is Love. So WHO is really patient? Who is really kind?

This is where I’m going with this: Christian, you need patience in order to give patience (that’s just how weak we are...I am just stating a fact). You need to know that the LORD is patient with you. If you don’t know this patience, if you don’t actually live in receiving this patience; if you are not actually fed and nourished with this patience, then game over. There will be no patience flowing through you.

You need kindness. You desperately need to see someone kind to you. Truly kind to you, generously kind to you. Someone who pours out kindness to you and never stops. Without this kindness, you will never be inspired enough to be kind. You need to see it first. You need to know it first. Otherwise, your soul will be like a parched desert, and you won’t have anything else left to give.

So back to what we must know: “WHO is Love?” Jesus the LORD is LOVE. And He, dear brothers, dear sisters, is patient with you and Jesus the SAVIOR is kind towards you. His patience is never ending. This we must keep before us or our patience-tank will be empty. But

with this truth of what we cling to in faith, then we can rejoice each day: He is patient with me so that I won't be lost, so that I won't perish, so that I won't miss eternal life; He is patient with me so that I'm forgiven over and over and over and over and over and over...again and again and again...not just 7 times forgiven, but 70 times 7 times...He never tires of being patient. His blood that covers my sin is proof, because not even my lack of patience can erase my covering of His patience over me. This patience, however, is not only for your justification, but it is also for your sanctification. If this patience from the LORD is really for ME (and it is), then how can I NOT be patient towards that other person in relationship with me?! It's no longer about me, my feelings, my frustration, my anger, because these have been covered by God's patience for me. In Jesus' patience, I can now extend patience. That is how "it works."

Kindness is no different. How kind has the LORD been to you?! When you have deserved condemnation for YOUR SIN, He has performed the kindness of regeneration, the kindness of grace; the kindness of giving you the Kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit; the kindness of welcoming you into His Church; the kindness of giving you His body and blood. The kindness of calling you friend and child, after you've betrayed Him and let Him down (Romans 5). He is still kind. He is super-abundantly kind. He is so kind that now your kindness towards others can't be about what the other person "deserves" (that question is utterly and totally beside the point), because you have deserved only hell, but in kindness the LORD has given you heaven. From His kindness, we can begin to be kind and know that when we are, we are being kind back to Jesus..."whatever you did for the least of these, you did it to me." (Matthew 25)

And when this new way of seeing comes upon us, everything changes in our approach to love: I am now led to know what else to do:

1. Love does not envy! But I do, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
2. Love does not boast! But I do, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
3. Love is not arrogant! But I am, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
4. Love is not rude! But I am, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
5. Love does not insist on its own way! But I do, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
6. Love is not irritable! But I am, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
7. Love is not resentful! But I am, so I confess it and I'm forgiven so that I can live in Christ!
8. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing! But I do, so I confess it so that I may then rest in Jesus and rejoice in the truth.
9. Love bears all things...and I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me! (Philippians 4:13)
10. Love believes all things...and I can believe all things in accord with the eyes of faith because with God all things are possible! (Matthew 19:26)
11. Love hopes all things...and Christian "hope does not put to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." (Romans 5:5)
12. Love endures all things...because I know Jesus who went to Calvary's cross FOR ME and endured to the point of death FOR ME...so yes, with Christ, I can endure; in Christ, I will.

Such love never ends (1 Cor. 13:8) because it is God's love, but it is also a love that has been gifted to you dear Christian. Let us live in this love, because "the greatest of these is love."