

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Properties Of Love I Corinthians 13:4-7

What do we say to the person who makes the statement, "I love humanity, but I can't stand people?" If he is a non-Christian, we may tell him we understand but point out that his thinking is wrong. If the person is a Christian, we say that this is an impossible situation for a Christian because the essence of practical Christianity is loving people. With the new birth, which comes from the sovereign God, the Christian receives the capacity and ability to love people in a way that he could not do before his conversion to Christ. He may not always love, but he has the capacity to love. Yet, God has also provided the power to love through the Holy Spirit. Love is the greatest thing in the world. It is the most powerful force in the universe and only the Christian has the capacity and power to produce this supernatural agape love.

"There is no gift of God more excellent than love. It alone distinguishes between the children of the everlasting kingdom and the children of the everlasting perdition" (St. Augustine).

In I Corinthians 12-14, the Apostle Paul deals with the subject of spiritual gifts. Chapter 13 is a parenthesis to show that love is a more excellent way than the way of spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are important to the proper functioning of the church, but love is more important. God is far more concerned that Christians become loving people than they become active, busy people. Both are necessary, but one is greater than the other. In I Corinthians 13:4-7 Paul attempts to describe the character of love. He does not attempt to define love but to give ways to discern love. What he does is personify love so as to show us love in action. Love is action or it is not love at all.

First Corinthians is very closely related to Galatians 5:22-23 where Paul says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Joy is love rejoicing in truth. Peace is love seeking not its own. Patience is love bearing all things. Kindness is love showing itself in kind acts. Goodness is not taking into account a wrong suffered. Faithfulness is love believing all things. Gentleness is love enduring all things. It becomes quite evident that this love is a supernatural love which can only be produced by the power of the Holy Spirit in one's life, and it can only come as one is yielded and submitted to the Holy Spirit so as to receive the filling of the Spirit.

The Apostle, in the first three verses of the chapter sets forth a hypothetical, ideal man. This man had the spiritual gift of tongues to the maximum so he could speak in all the languages of men and angels. He had the spiritual gift of prophecy to the maximum. He had the spiritual gift of knowledge so that all human and divine knowledge was at his fingertips. He had the spiritual gift of faith so as to do miraculous works. He had the spiritual gift of giving to the extent that he gave away all of his possessions to the poor. He had the spiritual gift of mercy so that he was willing to give himself for martyrdom. Yet he lacked the most important virtue of life-love. Consequently, he was nothing and it profited him nothing. Love is more important than spiritual gifts. All Christians do not have the same spiritual gifts, but all can produce love. Great spiritual gifts do not make great Christians but great exercise of love makes great Christians. What Paul has shown in the first three verses is that love is indispensable; what he will show in verses 4-7 is that love is unmistakable.

First Corinthians 13 must be placed in the context of the book of which it is a part. This chapter was written to a local church which was full of divisions. It is an indirect reprimand to the Corinthians, confronting them with the issue of love because there was no unity in that local body of believers. Therefore, this section on love was written to preserve the unity of a church rent by divisions, factions and power struggles.

This chapter has many applications and none more important than exhortations to husbands and wives. Marriages are falling apart today because people do not know how to love or they intellectually understand how to love but refuse to do so because of their own selfishness. Many people would rather destroy their marriages and families rather than change and learn how to love.

LOVE IS PATIENT

In the church at Corinth there was strife, division and contention. Therefore, there were personality conflicts, false accusations and character assassinations. Mudslinging was a way of life with these carnal Corinthian Christians.

The solution to division and strife was to show love, namely in the area of patience. In the Greek the essence of patience is "to put up with." Patience is the capacity to be injured without paying back. It is being long-tempered rather than short-tempered. Love is slow to be aroused to resentment and bitterness. It does not retaliate when attacked by antagonistic people. Love forgives--not only seven times, but seventy times seven. When attacked or when you hear a rumor or half truth about yourself, stop and say to yourself, "That person did not really mean what he said, and even if he did mean it, he will be sorry for it later." Our natural tendency when attacked is to rip people apart, give them a piece of our minds, make them suffer for the injury they have done to us, freeze them out or let them stew in their own juice. But love is patient and goes the second and third mile if necessary.

In the church at Corinth, there were many unlovely, obnoxious Christians because they were babies in Christ. They were difficult to like, let alone to love.

Yet, love is kind. Love, when injured reacts with kindness and goodness. It is courteous, gracious and pleasant. The negative side to being injured is patience; the positive side is to do your enemy an act of kindness. Love is never passive but is actively engaged in doing good. Love is not blind but it is kind. Kindness does good to those who irritate you. While patience puts up with a lot, kindness gives out a lot.

"I shall pass through this world but once. Any good thing, therefore, that I can do, or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer it, or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

LOVE DOES NOT ENVY

In the church at Corinth, some with the lesser spiritual gifts had become jealous of those with the greater gifts. Envy obsessed many of the carnal Christians.

The Greek word for "envy" means to boil. Love does not boil over when it sees another having success, or being promoted, or receiving the applause of the crowd. Love does not burn with envy when someone else enjoys something we want, or has a relationship that we would like, or a quality of life that we desire. Jealousy causes a person to be short, spiteful and hateful towards the person who is something, has something or does something he or she would like to be, have or do.

How subtly jealousy can creep into the local church. People yearn for power, prestige and position. They long for spiritual gifts they do not have. One man may burn to be an elder when he is only a deacon, or a woman may long to be a teacher when she has only the gift of helps. Perhaps you envy someone who is married when you are single, or boil on the inside when God has not blessed your family as He has some other families, or you get angry when your mate is not saved but others do have saved mates. Jealousy is a very common thing in Christian circles. It leads to discontent, and discontent leads to a bitter spirit. Yet, love is not jealous.

LOVE DOES NOT BOAST

There were those in the church at Corinth with greater gifts who looked down their noses at those with the lesser gifts. They would brag and boast about their superior gifts so as to despise others.

Love does not boast or parade itself before others. It does not desire the applause of men, nor to be up front, nor want to push itself forward. Rather than boasting, love wants to listen to others. It is not a talkative, know-it-all. The Greek root word for "boast" is windbag. Love does not blow hot air about itself but is interested in others and their problems. It does not brag.

LOVE IS NOT PROUD

Pride ran rampant in the Corinthian Church. They prided themselves on their wisdom, even to the point of exalting human reason above divine revelation. Their pride led them to follow leaders in the church rather than Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church.

The Greek word for "proud" "puffed up" or inflated." Love is not blown up or inflated with pride. It is not conceited or ostentatious. It is not haughty, cutting or sarcastic. Pride is disdain, a feeling of superiority, asserting self and ignoring another's rights. Love is concerned to give of self rather than self assertion. It is not arrogant but

modest and humble. What is humility? Humility is recognizing what we are in God's program and giving God all the glory.

Pride is so subtle in the local church, for success is often determined by numbers of people and the size of the offering. Then there are those who think they are better than others because of their jobs, the money they make, the amount of education obtained or the spiritual gifts they possess. Then there are always the pious who think they are more spiritual than others because they have made their own little set of religious rules which they think determine true spirituality. Yet, love is not proud.

LOVE IS NOT RUDE

The Christians at Corinth were not acting in an appropriate way. Women in the church were refusing to have their heads covered when praying and prophesying. They were coming to the Lord's Table drunk, and the rich were not waiting for the slaves to eat at the Agape Feast. So severe was their action that the discipline of the Lord was upon that church so that many were weak, sick and dead among them.

Love does not have actions which will disgrace or dishonor the brethren. It does nothing for which it is ashamed and always conducts itself in a decent manner. Love's whole deportment is decorous and becoming. It does not act ungraciously and ill-mannered. It avoids any act which would be inappropriate -- improper actions and dress, indecent language and innuendoes and double meanings. Why? Because love does not act rudely.

LOVE IS NOT SELF-SEEKING

The Corinthian Church had a deep problem in the area of Christian liberty. The stronger, more mature Christians who understood Christian liberty were eating meat sacrificed to idols which offended the weaker brothers. The stronger brethren were not taking into consideration their weaker brothers who had scruples about this practice. The stronger were abusing their liberty, seeking to please themselves only, and the weaker were being caused to stumble into sin. The strong insisted upon their rights and privileges, refusing to set aside their rights for the good of the body of Christ.

Love does not seek its own interests. It does not please self but pleases God and others. It is not always insisting upon its rights. Love never says, "I will not bring my life into conformity for any negative, immature, legalistic brother or sister!" It is not stubborn, intractable, inflexible, insisting that everybody else adjust. Love is willing to find a way, to examine a matter, to look at it from a different angle; it finds a solution, Why? Because loves does not seek its own.

LOVE IS NOT EASILY ANGERED

The Corinthian Christians were getting mad at each other and were going to the secular courts to solve their legal problems instead of using the church courts.

Love is not irritated. It is not aroused or stirred to anger. It is not touchy, but good-natured. The cure for an irritable temper is the persevering cultivation of unselfish love. This is the brother or sister who gets a little hurt by the preached Word or the sharpness of a brother's rebuke, and he or she gets into the corner and pouts or blows the stack. Some Christians have a very low boiling point and they get hurt at the slightest things done or said. Yet, love is not easily angered.

LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS

Different party factions within the Corinthian Church were deliberately finding fault with one another. They were not only finding fault but they were also writing down each other's faults and then accusing one another to the church authorities, in the Greek this means "to log or register," implying the keeping of tedious accounts. Love does not keep score. A Christian does not impute evil to or keep notes on another brother's sins. Love does not register the evil done against him. We are to think the best of our brethren and give them the benefit of the doubt. We do not have the right to point to evil in another's life unless there is a clear disobedience to the Word of God. Love does not store in its memory wrongs, grievances and hurts. It is not only able to forgive but also to some degree is able to forget.

There are some Christians who are so low-down that they rejoice in the triumph of evil in another brother. This may be a picture of a jealous brother who says, "I told you so. He should have listened to me. He got what was coming to him." Or it may be a picture of two or more local churches in an area hoping for the worst for the other so one could be "top dog" in the community. Whatever, love does not rejoice in wrongs.

LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH

The Corinthians were so schismatic and divisive that they were willing to listen to every rumor, half-truth and lie about another brother or sister they did not care for.

Love listens to the truth, not rumor. It rejoices in the truth about another person and is glad when good things are happening to that person. Love sympathizes with that which is right, good and just. It rejoices when truth defeats evil, when suspicions are proved unfounded, when wrong is vanquished and right prevails. Love insists upon facts, truth and reality, and does not say things like, "I have information about someone but I cannot reveal the person who gave me this information because it was given to me in confidence." Love keeps confidences period and says nothing unless sources are mentioned to back up rumor with facts.

Love always speaks the truth but it speaks truth in love. Instead, speaking the truth in love... (Eph. 4:15). Love without truth is nothing more than "touchy-feely" stuff. But truth without love is harsh, insensitivity.

LOVE PROTECTS

Some of these carnal Corinthians were quick to expose the error of another brother or sister who did not agree theologically with them or who had practices different from themselves. They were eager to tell of the sins and shortcomings of another Christian.

"Protect" is a word which means "to conceal or to cover." It is used as a roof over a building to protect from the elements. Love covers everything. It acts as a shield to hold off threatening, damaging situations and rumors. When love does learn something unpleasant about another, it does not go spread it _____ brother's or sister's sin but it does not gossip about these sins. Love covers a multitude of sins.

This does not mean we ignore the obvious sin of a brother or sister. We will do something about the sins or weaknesses or shortcomings in a biblical manner, but we will not speak about it for others to hear. Love protects the erring brother or sister as much as possible. Why? Because love protects.

LOVE ALWAYS TRUSTS

The Corinthians were not stating the true facts about their brethren. There was much rumor and they were thinking the worst of a brother.

This does not mean that a Christian is to be gullible and taken in by every wind of doctrine or false teaching. What this does mean is that love is not suspicious. It does not look for facts that are not there. It has faith in fellow believers. It takes a person at his word, treating him with honor and dignity. Love is always ready to believe the best. It is ready to believe anything which has a ground of reality to it. It gives the benefit of the doubt. It is always ready to start over. It is ready to trust someone again and again and again.

Love does not assume the negative attitude, "Well, you have done that three times before and you did not do it right. so I'm not going to trust you anymore!" If anyone wants another chance, love grants it. Why? Because love believes all things.

LOVE ALWAYS HOPES

The carnal Corinthians at Corinth were thinking the absolute worst about one another. There was no benefit of the doubt given.

When there is no evidence, love believes the best. When there is evidence, love hopes for the best. Love sees the bright side of things. It not only sees the faults but the strong points of a brother or sister in Christ. No matter how bleak a situation may appear, no cause, no situation, no person is ever regarded as totally hopeless. There is always a place to begin again. Love will find it; it never gives up hope. Love looks at the ultimate triumph, a final victory, because it is grounded in the confidence and providence of God. When a situation looks gloomy and impossible, love hopes all things.

LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES

The Corinthians threw up their hands in disgust with one another. They stopped trying to love their brethren in Christ. They were fed up with the attitudes and actions of one another and were ready to throw in the towel.

Love perseveres; that is, it stands with a loyal, faithful fortitude. It endures. It bears up courageously under suffering. It has an infinite capacity for endurance. Love is undaunted, not discouraged; it never quits and it never gives up on anyone. Real love outlasts disappointments, sorrows, hatreds and hurts. Love never gives up or lets go of other people. It hangs in there to the bitter end. Why? Because love perseveres.

CONCLUSION

Paul, like a skilled surgeon, cuts deeply into the wound of sin in the life of the Corinthian Christians and hopefully he has penetrated our own superficial facade, showing us our great need for agape-love in our lives. Hopefully this section will drive us to our knees where we will plead with God to produce this supernatural love in us by the power of the Holy Spirit, so we can have solid marriages, happy families and dynamic churches.

"It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look,' they say, 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another.'" (Tertullian).

How do we get this kind of love? It must be produced by the Holy Spirit as we yield ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. God has given us Christians the Holy Spirit that He might reproduce the life of Christ in us. Paul said to the Galatians that he was waiting patiently until Christ be formed in you (Gal. 4:19). To have Christ formed in us, we must yield and submit our lives continually and daily and repeatedly to the Lordship of Christ and claim the power that is ours through the filling of the Holy Spirit.

"Whosoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive." (Jn. 7:38-39).

If you are not a Christian, you might be saying, "How can I get this kind of love?" You get it by receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. You get it when you are born from above by an act of God which causes you to accept Christ as your Savior for sins and as Lord of your life, giving Him the right to rule in your heart.

When you receive Christ, you get the Holy Spirit and a capacity to produce this supernatural kind of love. Come to Christ. Receive Him. Bow to Him, and He will give you forgiveness for every sin you have ever done. He will give you eternal life. He will give you the Holy Spirit and the capacity and power to love.