

“GOD’S KIND OF LOVE”

1 Corinthians 13

“And now I will show you the most excellent way,” 1 Corinthians 12:31. And that which the apostle Paul wrote next, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, has remained one of the most cherished parts of Scripture for more than two millennia; cherished by Christians, familiar even to the world. Type “1 Corinthians 13” into the search menu of Amazon.com and you’ll find nearly one thousand related entries: books, bookmarks, crosses, frames, iPhone covers, mugs, paper weights, posters, signs, wall paper designs, wedding albums, and much more—all with verses from 1 Corinthians 13; and most often: “Love is patient. Love is kind.”

Everything about 1 Corinthians 13 is remarkable; from its choice of words; to its powerful definition of love; to its literary style and grammatical construction. The words πάντα στέγει, πάντα πιστεύει, πάντα ἐλπίζει, πάντα ὑπομένει are as lyrical in Greek as they are in English; meaning **“always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres,”** 1 Corinthians 13:7.

To approach this majestic chapter of First Corinthians is to recognize, as Moses did at the burning bush, that we are standing on holy ground; that we are standing in the very presence of God’s kind of love. Yet, why did Paul write this great chapter on love?

Many associate 1 Corinthians 13 with wedding ceremonies. And this is understandable. The selfless, determined love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is the same selfless, determined love prescribed by God for Christian marriages. In fact, when Paul urged Christian husbands to **“love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her,”** Ephesians 5:25, he used the same Greek word for love found throughout 1 Corinthians 13.

However, when Paul wrote **“love is patient, love is kind”** and the rest of the chapter’s beautiful words, he was not preparing a wedding sermon. He was not addressing blushing brides and handsome grooms. He was addressing a Christian congregation sorely lacking in Christian love; a congregation that had forgotten the supreme place God’s kind of love was to occupy in their hearts, homes, relationships, ministries, words, deeds, and Christian fellowship.

The church sign may have read: “First Christian Church of Corinth. Worship service, 10:00 AM. Bible class, 11:15 AM. All are welcome.” And beneath, in lilted,

happy script: “We love like Christ loved.” Yet, inside the church building, amid the prayers and hymns and sermons and creeds, the circumstances were very different.

According to the first eleven chapters of First Corinthians, the Corinthian Christians were arguing over favorite pastors; abusing Christian liberty; misusing the Lord’s Supper; tolerating immorality; suing each other in court; and envying spiritual gifts. And they were no doubt doing these things in the name of love. Was this love? Was this God’s kind of love?

This, not a wedding, was the historical context in which Paul wrote his great chapter on love; and not simply any kind of love, but God’s kind of love—clearly expressed in Jesus Christ. And in that great chapter on God’s kind of love, the apostle reminded the Corinthians of the priority of that love, verses 1-3; the practice of that love, verses 4-7; and the permanence of that love, verses 8-13.

Why have I emphasized God’s kind of love? Because God’s kind of love is the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. God’s kind of love is the only reason Paul could say, **“And now I will show you the most excellent way,”** 1 Corinthians 12:31. The most excellent way to do what? Anything. Improve your marriage. Raise your children. Use your gifts. Carry out your ministry. Live your life. Face your death. The most excellent way through all these circumstances is God’s kind of love. So, to understand 1 Corinthians 13, we must first understand God’s kind of love.

Humanly speaking, love is not easy to define. Have you ever had this type of conversation? “Hey, dad, how do you know when you’re in love?” “Well, son, um...See, love is like...um. Let me think of the best way to put this. Oh, I don’t know. I can’t describe it. But trust me, you’ll know when you’re in it.” Such certainty. Such clarity.

Defining love is complicated further by the fact that in English we have but one word for love; namely, “love.” And we use that one word to describe a wide range of emotions and relationships. Marital love. Romantic love. Parental love. Puppy love. Brotherly love. Friendship love. The love of career, movies, cheesecake, and Super Bowl Sunday.

Ancient Greek, however, had no such linguistic confusion. It offered several words for love, each with a different meaning. For example, the Greek word PHILOS meant the love between friends. The word EROS meant romantic, sensual love, as reflected in our English term “erotic.” The word STORGE meant kindly affection; the type of affection one could have for an old friend, old sofa, old pair of shoes, or old family dog.

What word have I not yet mentioned? You likely know the answer. The Greek word AGAPE; without question, the highest form of love. The love of unrelenting commitment. The love of willing sacrifice. The love of truth-seeking, evil-shunning, and problem-solving. The love determined to go on loving despite the cost of its love and the unworthiness of its object. This is AGAPE love. This is God's kind of love.

Significantly, this word for love, AGAPE, was never used in classical Greek writings, by men like Homer, Hesiod, Aesop, Pindar, Sophocles, or any of the Greek philosophers—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Why? Was it because they failed to understand the meaning of AGAPE? No. It was because they knew the meaning too well, and therefore could never conceive of a circumstance in which this type of selfless, sacrificial love existed.

Yet, AGAPE is the word for love most often used in the New Testament: 147 times as a verb; 116 times as a noun; 16 times in 1 Corinthians 13 alone, whether by name or reference. It remained for the New Testament writers, guided by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to give the word AGAPE, love, its fullest, truest, and richest meaning. The New Testament is about the coming of Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ is the fullest expression of God's kind of love—God's love come to us in real flesh and blood.

And so we find passage after passage about God's AGAPE love. John 3:16, **"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."** Romans 5:8, **"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** 1 John 3:16, **"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us."**

AGAPE, then, is God's kind of love. It is always used of God's love for the lost and God's love for His redeemed people. It is a **complete love**, not lacking in any area or resource. It is a **determined love**, unwilling to give up or let go. It is a **purposeful love**, focused on need instead of want. It is a **present love**, always with us—even when we are convinced it is not. It is a **truthful love**, knowing there can be no light, no life, no hope, no salvation, and no real love without the truth. It is a **perfect love**, used in the New Testament of the complete love between God the Father and God the Son. It is a **sacrificial love**, willing to expend itself in service to others.

This is God's kind of love; and to such an extent that in the New Testament God Himself is called AGAPE, love. The apostle John wrote, **"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because"**—and here the Greek is ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν; literally, **"God is AGAPE. God is love."**

Dear friends, God's kind of love, demonstrated clearly in the cross of Jesus Christ, is so magnificent, that even Paul could only pray: **"I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge,"** Ephesians 3:17-19.

And when God's kind of love shines upon us, shines in us—in our hearts, as we heard in our first Scripture reading for this morning; then, that kind of love must also shine through us. This is why Jesus commanded us to love as He loved and to serve as He served, John 13; not with an uncaring, distant, or self-absorbed love, but with His kind of love that rolled up its sleeves, dropped to its knees, and washed the filthy feet of His disciples. What claim does this type of love place on our lives and ministries and relationships and congregation?

First, God's kind of love must be a priority in the Christian life and Christian Church. For without that kind of love, as Paul insisted in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, we have nothing; we gain nothing; and we are nothing. Staggering, thought-provoking words, aren't they? Without God's kind of love, we have nothing, gain nothing, are nothing.

Paul wrote: **"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing,"** 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

In other words, even good things, even wholesome things, and even religious things are worthless things without God's kind of love as their beginning and end. Without God's kind of love—a love that serves and sacrifices for others—orthodoxy is useless. Without God's kind of love—a love that seeks and saves the lost—a Gospel ministry, whether in Corinth, Greece or Lemmon, South Dakota is useless.

Without God's kind of love—a love that speaks the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; the truth about sin and grace; the truth about faith and works; the truth about the enormous cost of Christ's sacrifice; the truth that proclaims the centrality of the cross of Jesus for our salvation, instead of hiding the cross from public view and pulpit sermons for fear of decreasing attendance and depressing attendees—without God's kind of love, the largest buildings, largest budgets, and largest Sunday attendances are useless. Many churches today are willing to talk about love. But they are not willing to talk about God's kind of love.

Second, God's kind of love must be practiced or active in the Christian life and Christian Church. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, **"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."**

There is much to learn from these beautiful verses. But first and foremost, God's kind of love acts. It does not wait for a specific mood or emotion to act. In each verse or phrase of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, love is the subject. If our love is God's kind of love, we too will act on that love. God's kind of love is not just talk; it is action. And because it is an action, by God's grace and power, as His loved and redeemed people, we too can make a decision to act according to His will, whether we feel like acting or not. We decide to be patient because God is patient. We decide to be kind because God is kind. We decide to go on loving because God goes on loving. **"Dear children,"** John wrote in His First Epistle, **"let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth,"** 1 John 3:18.

Additionally, God's kind of love always acts in a certain way. Every verb used in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 is in the present tense, meaning nonstop, uninterrupted action. This means God's kind of love is not merely patient, but always patient; not merely kind, but always kind. It is never envious, never boastful, never proud, never rude, never easily angered; and it never keeps a record of our wrongs. And thank God for this; for as the psalmist wrote: **"If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness,"** Psalm 130:3-4.

Consequently, if our love is like God's love, there should never be a time—no matter how difficult the situation or irritating the person—when we should be unkind, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, or keeping score of past injuries.

I can't speak for you, dear friends, but when I read this description of God's kind of love and compare it with my own, I know how miserably I fail; and at the same time, how much I praise God for the fact that His kind of love never fails me.

And this leads to our third and final point; namely, the permanence of God's love. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 13:8-13, **"Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a**

mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

That is an amazing thing to say. Love is greater than faith. Love is greater than hope. How can this be? Faith and hope have to do with this life—when, to use Paul’s description, we **“see but a poor reflection as in a mirror.”** But one day soon, when the Lord Jesus returns; faith will become sight. Hope will become reality. Everything that so many counted so dear in this life—fame, fortune, power, pleasure, education, homes, clothes, perhaps even Super Bowl tickets—everything will pass away. And what will remain is God’s kind of love; and our love for Him.

So then, God’s kind of love is a priority love. God’s kind of love is an active love. God’s kind of love is a permanent love. And this is what makes God’s kind of love “the most excellent way.”