

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE
1 Corinthians 13:4-7
April 30, 2006 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

I. Love Stated Positively, “Love is...”

1. Love is patient (13:4)

The first characteristic that Paul gives concerning love is that it is “**patient.**” It is the Greek word *makrothumeō*, a compound word, *makro*, meaning “long” and *thumeō*, meaning “suffering” or “tempered.” A literal rendering is, “**Love suffers long**” or “**Love is long-tempered.**” Each of the characteristics that Paul gives for love is in the present tense, denoting an action that is ongoing and ever-present. Therefore, love is always patient and, conversely, love that lacks “patience” is not love, *agapē* love, at all.

John MacArthur describes “**patient**” as “the ability to be inconvenienced or taken advantage of by a person over and over again and yet not be upset or angry” [*1 Corinthians*, 338]. He reveals the real thought that lies behind patience, that it is slow to anger, able to bear up under the onslaught of wrongdoing, whether the offender does so consciously or not. The result of this is that love does not seek vengeance in actions or retaliation with words. “**Love suffers long.**” The love that is “**patient**” takes a long time before fuming and breaking into flames [Rogers & Rogers, 379].

This does not mean that we are never to take action. Some people confuse “patience” with ignoring the situation altogether. That is not Paul’s intent. There are times when we have been wronged that require action or response. To ignore the situation would be unloving. But how we respond is the key. We must stand back until a cooler heads prevail and address the situation kindly and gently. So “**love is patient**” means that we should be slow to anger and when we have been wronged we are to respond in a way that is loving and not in retaliation. We must put a “get-even” mentality out of our hearts. We are to respond in love, not in anger.

2. Love is kind (13:4)

The second positive aspect of love is that it is “**kind.**” It refers to the response the believer is to have towards those who have wronged them. They do not respond in anger, but with “kindness.” D. A. Carson suggests, “Love is kind—not merely patient or long-suffering in the face of injury, but quick to repay in kindness what it received in hurt” [*Showing the Spirit*, 62].

In the second century, “kindness” was so evident in the lives of Christians that pagans often called Christians not *christiani* but *chrestiani*, “made up of mildness or kindness.” These Christians were filled with kindness towards others. These at Corinth were not demonstrating this in the congregation. At its core, “**love is kind**” is a love that considers others as God’s creation before self. “Kindness” remembers that sinful people can be expected to exhibit sinful actions.

This love is demonstrated by our Savior. Paul wrote to Titus, “But when the *kindness of God our Savior* and His love for mankind appeared, ⁵ He saved us, *not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy*, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:4-6). Even though our righteousness is as filthy rags, Christ saved us. And He continues to show us kindness even though we continue at times to live for

self rather than for Him. Are you quick to repay in kindness what you have received in hurt? If not, then remember the kindness of Christ!

I ask one question to help us analyze our own hearts in this matter, “What if God were not long-suffering with us?” One of the attributes of God that captures the idea of patience and long-suffering is His *mercy*. The Hebrew word for “mercy” is *hesed*, which carries the thought of mercy, long-suffering, patience, forbearance, love and compassion all in one word. It is God’s not giving us what we deserve even though He would be just in doing so. As God is with us, we are to be towards others. Chrysostom, the early church father wrote, *patience* “is a word which is used of the man who is wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself but will never do it” [MacArthur, 338]. We who have experienced the love of God and Christ have no option but to be patient, long-suffering, and forgiving towards others. Just as God has the divine prerogative to strike us down and avenge His holy name for sins against Him but is patient, so we who bear His name must be patient towards others, demonstrating the love of God and Christ in us. Paul says, “**Love is patient, love is kind.**” Does this describe your actions towards others who have wronged you? Do you exhibit the love of Christ in this way? Or do you, like these Corinthians, seek to serve yourself? Are you “walking in love, as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for you” (Eph. 5:2), the greatest act of patience and kindness known to man?

II. Love Stated Negatively, “Love is not...”

1. Love is not jealous (13:4)

Love and jealousy, or envy, are mutually exclusive. This was a problem at Corinth. You will remember that there were those who did not have these charismatic gifts that were jealous and envious of those who did. This jealousy caused division in the church. It was rooted in this desire to have what someone else had.

This describes jealousy. It is an intense, all-consuming desire to have something someone else has or to be like someone else. Or conversely, it can manifest itself in a desire for them to be more like you, wishing that they did not have certain qualities or characteristics that you so long to have. Either way, jealousy is counterproductive to love. Love and jealousy cannot exist together because love edifies and jealousy is destructive.

You might say, “Wait a minute, Pastor Todd. The Bible says that God is a jealous God (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9) and that God is love (1 Jn. 4:16). Isn’t this a contradiction?” And I would commend you for noticing. However, there is a jealousy that is positive, a jealousy to guard one’s honor or name. Obviously, it is proper for God to have this type of jealousy and it does not contradict His love in any way. We should also be jealous of God’s honor and name, as He is jealous. But in this verse, jealousy refers to that vice that is exactly opposite of the greatest of vices, which is love. It is not God’s love and it is not God’s jealousy.

In Genesis 37 we read the account of Joseph’s dream. The interpretation of his dream was that his family would one day bow down and serve him. This was too much for his brothers who respond with a plot against Joseph to sell him into slavery and allow their father Jacob to believe that the young Joseph had been torn to pieces by a wild animal. What was the source of the brothers’ anger? What led them to these actions of evil that God, in His providence, meant for good? In Gen. 37:11 we read, “His brothers were *jealous* of him.”

Contrast that with the story of David and Jonathan, the son of king Saul. According to the standards of the day, all that Saul had as king was Jonathan’s by right when Saul died. In other

words, according to bloodline, Jonathan was next in line to be king. However, this right was granted to David. While one would expect Jonathan to fight for his rights, we see just the opposite. Jonathan does not react in jealousy, but in love. He understood that, while according to man he should be king, it was not so according to God. Jonathan knew that God had anointed David as king and pledges his allegiance to David. Out of this comes one of the greatest friendships we read about in Scripture. Jonathan describes a love that **“is not jealous.”**

We see in both of these accounts the stories of men who by man’s standards had no rights. Joseph was the youngest and had no claim of allegiance from his brothers, and they reacted in jealousy. David had no right to the throne. That was Jonathan’s. But Jonathan responds in love. How do you respond when, from your perspective, you feel that your rights have been violated? Do you respond in jealousy, as Joseph’s brothers, or like Jonathan, in love?

2. Love does not brag (13:4)

The word **“brag”** is somewhat difficult to describe in biblical terms, though it is similar to the word “boast.” This is the only place it is used in the New Testament and refers to what we would properly call a “windbag.” We would call a braggart someone who is full of hot air. This was also a problem at Corinth. Paul said that while the noncharasmatics should learn not to be jealous of those who had certain gifts, the charismatics who had them should learn not to brag about these gifts. Some versions have, **“Love should not parade itself.”** I have used the term “flaunting” in past messages to refer to those at Corinth who exhibited their “spiritual” giftedness in a wrong way, for public notice.

In her beautiful prayer in 1 Samuel 2, Hannah gives a picture of what “bragging” or “boasting” is. “Boast no more so very proudly, do not let arrogance come out of your mouth” (2:3). Here we see that “bragging” or “boasting” is verbal and is closely associated with the third negative that Paul gives concerning love, which is “pride” or “arrogance.”

3. Love is not arrogant (13:4)

“Arrogance” refers to pride. As we have seen in earlier chapters, this was a definite source of division in the church at Corinth. In 4:6-7, Paul said, “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become *arrogant* in behalf of one against the other.”⁷ For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast (or *brag*) as if you had not received it?” The Corinthians were undermining Paul’s apostolic authority by going beyond what He taught as if they had a superior knowledge and understanding of things. That is why Paul issued a warning in 8:1, “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” What did Paul say edifies? Love, not arrogance. Like jealousy, arrogance and love are mutually exclusive. As one writer put it, “Arrogance is inflated selfishness, while love is genuine humility. Arrogance is devoid of love and love is devoid of arrogance” [Kistemaker, *1 Corinthians*, 459].

We mentioned king Saul earlier. What was the problem that ultimately led to Saul’s downfall? It was pride that flowed out of jealousy for David. Saul’s story is tragic. He began his reign in humility. We read in 1 Samuel 9 of the beginnings of Samuel’s revelation to Saul that he would be king. And what was Saul’s response in 1 Sam. 9:21? “Am I not a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then do you speak to me in this way?” We see Saul’s humility. He asks

Samuel, “Are you sure you got the right man? I am not remotely qualified.” But we see this humility turn to full-blown pride and arrogance in a relatively short time.

Saul’s problem is the same with all who put themselves at the center of everything as if the world revolves around them. Love and arrogance cannot exist together in the same heart. Love puts others before self; arrogance always looks out for its own interests. When you examine your heart and your motives, what is true about you? Do you seek the interests of others or do you seek to live for yourself? King Saul forgot humility and became consumed with self. What about you?

4. Love does not act unbecomingly (13:5)

In v. 5 we see the fourth negative aspect of love, “**Love does not act unbecomingly.**” This has to do with poor manners, with acting rudely. It refers to insensitivity towards others feelings or to be inconsiderate of others.

One of the first things we learn in going on a mission trip is that we must show others love by being sensitive to their cultural mores and practices. We must “become all things to all people.” When Hudson Taylor sought a way to best reach the people in inland China he did so by dressing like them. William Carey did not build a castle when he moved to India, nor did Adoniram Judson in Burma. They lived amongst the people, in the same type of huts with the same man-eating mosquitoes. When we go to Mexico, we will eat with the people and sleep in tents, in 100° heat. Could we prop up a window unit air conditioner on a couple of milk crates to cool our tents at night? We could, but what kind of message would this send to those we are trying to reach who, for the most part, have never seen an air conditioner, who are laying in their beds sweating because they have no air flow in their homes other than fans? It would be inconsiderate of us to even think of such a thing.

Simply put, love sometimes means that we must make ourselves uncomfortable for the sake of others and the cause of Christ. But while I think that many understand this when it comes to the work of missions, what about in our every day life? What about our relationships with others that we see every day? Children, how do you treat your brothers and sisters? Husbands, how do you love your wives? How many times do we see marriages destroyed because the husband thinks his wife is there simply to serve his every desire? Men, that is not submission. That is your sinful inconsideration of your spouse. Paul says, “**Love does not act unbecomingly.**” Or, stated positively, love always considers others.

5. Love does not seek its own (13:5)

This phrase is translated in different versions with greater variance than any of the other characteristics. “Love does not insist on its own way (NRSV); “Love never seeks its own advantage” (NJB); “Love does not claim its rights.” While all of these translations are worded differently, they convey the same message. Perhaps the NCV captures it well, “Love is not selfish.”

This perhaps lies at the very heart of what Paul is trying to get across to these Corinthians. They selfishly used their gifts for themselves, not for the common good. Again, selfishness is the opposite of love. It is at the heart of all evil. As Lenski, the well-known commentator put it, “Cure selfishness and you have just replanted the garden of Eden.” Adam and Eve rejected God’s way and authority. They put self on the throne and threw all of their posterity into rebellion. Cure this, and you have a heart for God. We must recognize that our greatest enemy in loving others is self.

6. Love is not provoked (13:5)

This goes along with patience and long-suffering. Love guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by things done against it. This does not mean that others do not irritate us. Let's be honest here. We all know people that, if given the choice, we would rather not be around. For whatever reason, when we are around them, they are an instant and constant source of irritation. They rub us the wrong way. But have you ever stopped to think that God places these people in your life to humble you and to sanctify you? If you are easily provoked, then the problem might not be them, it might be you. It might be a sign that you are not patient and living for self and therefore unloving. Who did Jesus spend the bulk of his time with in public?

If you find yourself easily irritated by others, then you are lacking in love. If you fly off the handle because the toilet paper roll is hanging in instead of out or because the toothpaste tube is squished instead of squeezed from the bottom then you need to check yourself. These are silly illustrations to show that our idiosyncrasies, our perfections, can serve to make anger well up in us. This is not love. Our little fits of anger and petty provocations can destroy a relationship.

Jonathan Edwards had a daughter with this type of quick temper. When a young man fell in love with her and asked Edwards for her hand in marriage, Edwards replied, "You can't have her." "But I love her and she loves me," he protested. "It doesn't matter," Edwards insisted. When the young man asked why, Edwards said, "Because she is not worthy of you." "But she is a Christian isn't she?" the man asked. "Yes," said Edwards, "but the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live."

Are you one who is difficult to live with because you are easily provoked? Then hear Paul's warning, "**Love is not provoked.**"

7. Love does not take into account wrong suffered (13:5)

This has been correctly translated, "Love does not keep a record of wrongs." Simply put, love is quick to forgive. It does not harbor bitterness in wrongdoings but seeks reconciliation through forgiveness as soon as possible. And when there is true forgiveness, the debt is forgotten.

The parable of forgiveness in Matthew 18 serves as a reminder for us in this regard. One of the king's servants owed a debt that he could not possibly repay in his lifetime. The servant cried out to the king for patience and mercy, and the king felt compassion for him and forgave his debt. This serves as a picture of Christ's forgiveness towards those who owe an unpayable debt for sin and cry out to him for mercy. But you remember the rest of the story. That same servant went out and found another that owed him a debt that was repayable, and choked him, demanding him to pay. The man pleads his mercy, but the servant is unforgiving and has him thrown into prison.

Jesus shared this parable to remind others that those who have been forgiven by the greatest act of love in history by the One who was wronged more than any other, have no option but to be forgiving towards those who have harmed us far less than our sins harmed our Savior. The psalmist asked the question, "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? (Psalm 130:3). But, "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities (Psalm 103:10). If the Lord does not keep a record of our wrongdoings, then who are we to do so? "**Love does not take into account wrong suffered.**"

8. Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth (13:6)

Love and *the* truth, the truth of God's Word, always go together. The truth is what shows us that which is wicked and unrighteous. Real love, *agapē* love, flows out of a love for the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and the written Word, the Scriptures. True love "delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night" unlike those that "walk in the way of the wicked and sit on the seat of scoffers (Ps. 1:1-2)."

If you have sat and listened this morning and know that you are failing to love in any of these areas, then I ask you, "Do you hunger and thirst for the truth?" You see, it is God's Word coupled with the Spirit of God that teaches us patience and kindness. It is the truth that reveals our pride and jealousy, our rudeness and our unforgiving hearts, our anger and our selfishness. If you do not labor in the Word and rejoice in the truth, then you are rejoicing in wickedness. And to rejoice in unrighteousness is to be unloving.

III. Love Stated Conclusively (13:7)

1. Love bears all things, literally, "Love covers all things"

Idea of protection and security like a roof covers a house. Love does not seek to expose the sins of others. It seeks to protect others from shame. This does not mean that there are not instances when a person's sin should be exposed publicly. Paul told Timothy that "those who sin are to be rebuked publicly" (1 Tim. 5:2) and he himself called attention to the strife between Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2) as well as exposing the public sin of the man who had his father's wife in this letter (chapter 5). Wisdom is required in knowing when to protect and when to expose. Our first inclination, however, should be to protect. That is why church discipline begins in private, in hopes of repentance, and progresses to the public church level.

2. Love believes all things

Trusts others. This does not mean that love is gullible but that it leans towards being open and accepting rather than immediately suspicious or cynical [Carson, 63]. Love gives the benefit of the doubt. But this also needs wisdom. Love does not give the benefit when there is no doubt. Love must be discerning in truth. But the idea is that love is trusting until there is evidence otherwise.

3. Love hopes all things

"**Love hopes**" under all circumstances. Love always hopes for the best outcome. This is not to say that a person is to be passively unrealistic nor is it unreasoning optimism. But love begins in believing the best will come for a person that is down and out, whether spiritually or physically. Some of the best intercessors are those who plead for others with the optimistic hope that all will be well by God's grace and for His glory.

4. Love endures all things