

The Characteristics of Love, part 1 • By Dr. David O. Dykes  
1 Corinthians 13:4-7

In 1 Corinthians, chapter 12 is all about spiritual gifts and how the church at Corinth has been misusing spiritual gifts. Chapter 14 has the same context, mainly the contrast between the gift of prophecy and the gift of tongues. But right in the middle of this deep discussion about spiritual gifts, Paul says in chapter 13 that there's something that's a whole lot better than spiritual gifts. It is love.

Have you noticed how easily we say to one another “I love you”? We say that to friends. We say that to family members sometimes. But I think sometimes we say it without really knowing the true meaning of the word “love” in the Bible. Our definition of love should come from the Bible. We should not rely on our own human understanding of what we think love is—from what we saw in a movie or what we read in a book or some true confession magazine. Our definition and understanding of love should come out of the Bible.

If you have some beliefs or thoughts about love that do not line up with what the Bible says, you need to change and repent of your belief about what love is. Love is tied up in the very nature and character of God. The Bible says God is love, but the Bible does not say love is God. I say that because some people in our world have tried to elevate love, as if it is the highest ideal and where the most noble achievement of life is simply to “love Oprah.”

The most noble achievement of life is to know God and to serve God. God is love. People make a mistake when they have some idea of some sentimental type of love, and they try to impose it upon God. For instance, some people say, “If God is love, how could God ever allow anybody to go to hell and burn forever and ever?” That doesn't compute for people who have a syrupy, sentimental understanding of what love is. But the problem is you're not using the concept of what love is according to the Bible. Let the Bible tell you what love is. First Corinthians 13:4-7 says:

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

We've already covered the first four characteristics of love in this list. Paul contrasts self-love with agape love, that's the Greek word for the unselfish love God has for us. One, whereas self-love is impatient, God is patient with others.

Two, self-love says, “If you hurt me, I'm going to be mean...” but agape love is kind. Three, self-love is envious of anybody else’s success. It's jealous. But agape love is happy when somebody else succeeds if you really love them. And four, self-love struts around and brags. But agape love is truly humble. We’ll look at four more characteristics in this message.

Last Sunday’s message had a story about George Whitfield and John Wesley. Several people asked me to explain a part of the story again. And if they misunderstood it, maybe you did too. I said that George Whitfield was Calvinist, but John Wesley was of the Armenian belief. I can't go into a long exposition of it. But basically Calvinism is the belief espoused by John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian church, that God has already pretty much predetermined who's going to be saved and who's going to be lost. And so those who are of a Calvinistic persuasion tend to be less evangelistic because they say God's already chosen who's going to be saved and who's going to be lost. And so you don't have to be very evangelistic.

George Whitfield, however, was highly evangelistic. John Wesley held the Armenian position, which is what we would call “free will.” I hold to sort of a combination of the two, meaning God gives everybody a free choice about whether or not to be saved. Now that's the difference between the two that some people were confused about. Even though they disagreed and they were publicly identified as opposing two positions, the question was asked of George Whitfield, “Do you believe that you'll see John Wesley in heaven?” George Whitfield said, “I do not think I'll see John Wesley in heaven...” Everybody thought he was saying that out of spite, anger, and resentment. But in Christian love, George Whitfield completed the statement by saying, “...I don't think I'll see John Wesley in heaven because John Wesley will be so close to the throne of Jesus. And I'll be so far away. I don't think that I'll ever see him.” So that was the point of the humble love that George Whitfield had.

## **I. CHARACTERISTICS OF LOVE**

### **5. Self-love is rude, but agape love is courteous (13:5)**

It's gracious. Verse 5 says love is not rude. The church at Corinth was infamous for their poor manners. In fact, Paul has already chastised them because when they had the Lord's Supper, they weren’t waiting on everybody. “You're being so discourteous and rude,” he said, “and some of you are eating before everybody gets there. Some of you are getting drunk! You're not even thinking of the other person. All you're thinking about is feeding your own face.”

True love is not like that. True love is courteous. It always thinks of the other person. Have you ever heard the phrase “common courtesy”? I think that's almost an oxymoron because true courtesy is not very common these days. It is rare, but courtesy ought to characterize the life of a Christian. You can claim to be as

spiritual as you want to be. But if you act rudely toward people, there's not much love in your life.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to hear a fairly famous American preacher preach. He is a tremendous preacher. We were in a worship service that night with about 3000 people, and he stood up and preached the word with tremendous power. When he gave the invitation, the aisles just flooded with people getting right with God. But after the service that night, it was my job to take him out to a restaurant and feed him dinner. He treated our server with such rudeness and was so short and demanding toward that server! His rudeness canceled out everything he had said that night. You don't judge people by how well they preach, how good their outlines are. You don't judge them by how many people walk down the aisle. Instead, the fruit of the Spirit is first of all, love.

You ought to always be careful to be on your best behavior. I like studying about Calvin Coolidge, who was one of the presidents of the early 20th century and the late Twenties. Calvin Coolidge's motto was "the government that governs least governs the best," which I tend to believe myself. One of my favorite stories is about the night they were having a big state dinner there in the White House with Calvin Coolidge sitting at the head of the table and other dignitaries lining both sides of the table. Everybody there was so careful, they didn't want to demonstrate poor manners or make some kind of a social mistake. And so they watched Coolidge throughout the meal. When he would pick up a certain fork, they would pick up a certain fork. When he would pick up a certain dish, they would pick it up. But to their horror at the end of the meal, when the coffee was served, Calvin Coolidge took his coffee and poured it into a saucer, which appeared to be very poor manners. To their amazement, he took a little cream and added it to that saucer. He even put a little sugar in there and stirred it. So the other guests took their saucers and started pouring their coffee into their saucer, putting some cream and sugar in it and stirring. Then to their horror, Calvin Coolidge bent down and put it on the floor for his cat to drink.

Not to show bad manners is based on a desire to show love. My mother tried to teach me good manners. And that's exactly what this word means. It says true love is not rude toward people. It is courteous. It is gracious toward other people. The attitude of rudeness says to someone, "You don't matter. I can act any way I want to. I don't care how you feel about the way I act." And that is the epitome of selfishness and self-love.

## **6. Self-love is self-centered, whereas agape love is unselfish (13:5)**

Galileo invented the telescope so that man could really look out into space. But for centuries, our ancestors believed and taught that the earth was the center of the universe. They believed the sun was a little ball in the sky that went around the earth. But we're just one small part of the universe. And we're not even the center

of our solar system. The sun is the center of our solar system, and the planets rotate around it. Many people today are living their life as if their ego is the center of the universe. Everything revolves around the way you feel, the way you think, and the way it affects you. And that is a self-centered kind of life. The Bible says love is not self-seeking. I came across another interesting epitaph a while back. It was on a tombstone of a man who lived and died in Ireland. And he was a very selfish, self-centered man. And those who buried him wrote: Here lies a miser who lived for himself and cared for nothing except gathering wealth. Now where he is and how he fares, nobody knows. And nobody cares.

When a person dies who pretty much lived a self-centered life and just lived to see what they could get for themselves, nobody really cares because they were a world unto themselves. You know what we call that? We call that being egocentric. Your ego is the center of the universe. And let's face it. That's the essence of sin. Your ego is still the center of your universe. But love completely reverses that and you no longer think, "How does this help me? How does this affect me? How does this feel to me?" The question that you ask is how it's going to affect the other person. You become unselfish.

The church at Corinth needed to hear this message. Paul said, "You folks are taking one another to court. You're suing believers in front of the godless world, just so you can get more for yourself." Did you know a person who is wrapped up in themselves makes a mighty small package? And if you live your whole life wrapped up in yourself, you never will know what love really is. I read an interesting true story by John MacArthur that happened years ago. One day a chauffeur drove a limousine beside a cemetery. And there was a minister who operated the cemetery and the chauffeur came up to the minister and asked if he would come over to that limousine. The minister walked over there and the windows were smoked so that he couldn't see in. Then one of the rear windows of that limousine lowered and inside he saw a frail-looking old woman. She was in very poor health and in her eyes all you could see was hurt, anguish, and a wasted life. She introduced herself to the minister and she told him that for the last five years, she had been sending \$10 a month to the cemetery account so that flowers could be placed on her husband's grave. She said, "I've come in person today because the doctors have only given me a few weeks to live. And I wanted to see my husband's grave one last time." The minister said, "Ma'am, I wish you hadn't been sending money for flowers for your husband's grave all these years. I'm part of a group of Christians who take flowers to patients in nursing homes and hospitals. You know, those who are in the grave can't appreciate the flowers. They can't smell the aromas. But patients in the nursing home and in the hospitals love getting flowers."

She didn't say anything in reply and just motioned to the chauffeur to drive away. John MacArthur said several months later, the same limo drove up to the cemetery.

But the chauffeur wasn't driving it. Instead, it was the little lady driving the limousine. And he said it looked as if a transformation had taken place in her life. She was healthy. She had a glow about her. She was totally changed. She said to the minister, "At first I resented what you said to me that day when I came here for a last visit to my husband's grave. But as I thought about it, I decided you were right. Now I personally take flowers to the hospitals myself. It does make the patients happy. And it makes me happy too. The doctors can't figure out what made me well, but I know I now have other people to live for."

Oh, that's a great lesson right there. Don't spend all your time saying, "Oh, woe is me...isn't it pitiful." If you have a pity party for yourself, you'll just get lower and lower and lower. That's being self-focused and self-centered. That's not love. Therapists agree that if you've got problems that are basically emotional in nature like being discouraged and depressed, one of the best cures is to try to help other people with their problems. Stop focusing on your own problems and focus on somebody else's problems. And it's amazing how much better you feel. Why? Because there's something healthy about showing love.

### **7. Self-love has a trigger temper, whereas love is slow to anger (13:5)**

Verse 5 says love is not easily angered. The word in the Greek language for "angered" is "paroxysm." We don't use it very often, but it means a person who has a violent temper, who suddenly explodes with anger. And the Bible says real love is not that way. Love is slow to become angry. Self-love has a hair trigger temper. Guns have a trigger that activate the firing pin. And sometimes those triggers can be rather tight and hard to pull, but a gun that has a hair trigger means that you basically only have to apply the slightest amount of pressure and it goes off. I know people like that, and you do too. It doesn't take much to set some people off.

I want you to turn anger around and look at anger from the other side. The reason why many people get angry is because they say feel they're being offended. Something someone has said or done is affecting them, and they don't like it, and so they show you how much they don't like it. Real love is slow to anger. What is your response time? When you are offended? Are you the kind of person who stands up and says, "I demand my rights"? Or are you the kind of person who is more interested in the other person's rights than your own?

Some people try to explain away their temper. They say, "I know I've got a temper, but I just let it explode and it's all over in a moment. And then I'm okay." That is the same description of a nuclear bomb. The bombing of Hiroshima was over in just a second, but the fallout from it lasted years and years. There is a difference between dangerous, sinful anger that lashes out at a person and the righteous indignation of Jesus that the Bible teaches is never directed toward a person. It's

always directed toward an injustice. And it's not an anger that boils over out of control. It is a settled anger against injustice.

Some people say, "Well, Jesus drove those money changers out of the temple. Didn't he lose his temper?" Absolutely not. He did that in love, and he did not hurt a single person in doing that. He was angry at the injustice of making his house a den of thieves, where it should have been a house of prayer.

The best testing ground for love is in your own home and in your own family. Who you are at home is who you really are. You can put on an act at church or when you're with your friends. You can put on an act when you're at school. But who you really are is who you really are at home. And this is a place where we probably have the greatest room for God to put some love in our hearts, to be slower to become angry at our friends, our family members, the people we live with.

For years I had trouble with what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about blessed are the meek, etc. I was a tough guy, and I grew up being taught by my Daddy that if somebody hit me, I should hit them back harder. They may start it, but you finish it. That's what my dad taught me. And there were times growing up when that very thing happened. I was just like any other kid. I'd get in an argument and we'd say, "Meet me after school." And we'd meet after school and we'd go after it. I'm not proud of the fact that I was involved in a number of fist fights. When I got a little older and started reading the Bible, I learned that Jesus said if somebody hits you on the right cheek, you turn to them the left cheek. I didn't like it one bit, but you know what? I've since learned that this is most often applied, not to a physical strike but a verbal strike from someone. Since I was in the eighth grade, nobody has tried to hit me with their fist. But I tell you what, there've been a lot of times that people have struck me with their words. I'm looking into the faces of young people and adults and children who have had that someone slap you on the face verbally many times. They say something that makes you angry. That's when you need to do what Jesus said and turn the other cheek. Proverbs says a soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.

Have you ever noticed that when somebody hollers at you, you want to holler back even louder than they hollered at you? It just builds up in hostility. But true love turns the other cheek, and true love always gives back a soft answer.

### **8. Self-love keeps a list of wrongs, whereas agape love forgives quickly (13:5)**

This characteristic gets my vote for the best indicator of whether or not there's agape love in your life. Verse 5 says that love keeps no record of wrongs. For all of you who are accountant types or number crunchers, you'll like that word "record." It is an accounting word that was used of someone who kept very precise books. Can't you just see some miserly accountant sitting over his books, making sure every penny is where it's supposed to be making sure every line on that spreadsheet

is filled out. The Bible says when it comes to people who may mistreat you, love doesn't keep that kind of record of wrongs.

Do you have a list somewhere? Are you keeping records? Maybe you heard the story about the kid at school who was bragging to some of his classmates, "My daddy can whip your daddy. My daddy has a list of all these daddies in town that he can whip. And your dad's on the list." Some kid went home and told his daddy about what this boy said, and his daddy didn't like it one bit. So he stomped over to the house of the kid that had said that his daddy had a list, and he knocked on the door. A little man opened the door and the big angry dad said, "I hear that you have a list of all the men in town that you can beat up. And that I'm on that list. Is that right?" The little man said, "That's right." The angry dad said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" The little man said, "I'm gonna take you off my list."

I think that's what we all need to do. We need to just start marking out all of those things that people have done against us that are wrong. Mark them all out, and then take your list and throw it away. Throw the whole book away. Don't keep a record of wrongs.

Second Corinthians 5:19 shows that this is what God has done for us. There are only two other times in the New Testament where the Bible uses this accounting word in that sense. This verse is talking about how God reconciled the world through Jesus, and it says that God was "not counting" men's sins against them. And he's committed to us the message of reconciliation. Let me tell you what that means. That means that God really does have a list. He has kept accurate records of every sin you've ever committed. And every sin I've ever committed. Do you know what happens when you come to the Lord Jesus Christ and you put your faith in him and repent of your sins? Guess what God does with that list? He says, "I'm not counting it against you." And he throws away the list.

Aren't you eternally grateful to God that he's not keeping a record of your sins? If you're a believer, God doesn't have a list of everything you've ever done wrong. Aren't you happy for that? That's God's character. And that's what he's demanding of us, that we have the same kind of love toward other people. He says you won't keep a record of wrongs. You will forgive quickly. Some of you have the attitude that says, "I don't get angry. I get even." And you're keeping a list. You remember something some guy said to you three years ago, and you haven't forgotten it yet. You're just waiting for a chance to get back at him.

Sometimes husbands and wives are the worst ones about keeping lists. Have you ever noticed that sometimes when a husband and a wife begin to argue, they don't get hysterical. They get historical. "What about six months ago? Do you remember when you did this?" I want you to know that true love doesn't keep a record of wrongs. It doesn't keep a list. If it keeps a list, it's a short list and it forgives quickly. And that's the nature of God. Resentment keeps an accurate ledger of

every time you offend me. Every time you do something I don't like. Every time you say something I don't like. Every time you don't help me or you don't speak the way I want you to speak to me. Self-love keeps an accurate ledger of that. But love says, "I forgive without your even having to ask me to be forgiven."

In Matthew 18, Jesus said the same way you forgive others, this the way your Father is going to forgive you. Peter asked, "How many times should we forgive somebody? Seven times?" And he was thinking that was being pretty generous because the Jewish culture said "an eye for an eye" and "a tooth for a tooth." You know what that meant? "You gouge out my eye, and I can gouge out the same eye on you. If you knock out this tooth, I get to knock the same tooth out of you." And for Peter to say seven times, that was seven times more than the Law required. Jesus said, "No, Peter, not seven times. But 70 times seven, which in Jewish gematria (or the study of numbers) is an unlimited number.

Then Jesus told a story. He said there was a man who worked for a wealthy man. He owed the wealthy man \$10 million, and one day it was time for him to pay it back. And the guy fell on his knees and said, "I can't repay you." So the rich man said, "I'm going to have mercy on you. It's forgiven." And the guy walks out of there and he's so happy, \$10 million forgiven. But then he finds a guy that owes him 10 bucks. And he grabs that guy who owes him 10 bucks and says, "Buddy, you better pay me back." But he answered, "I can't pay you back. Have mercy on me!" But Jesus said the man refused to have mercy on him and threatened to throw him in jail until he paid back the ten dollars. Jesus says, "What's wrong with this picture?" When the rich man heard about this, he called that guy back to see him and said, "Now let me get this straight. I forgave you a \$10 million debt, but you won't forgive that guy \$10? There's something wrong here. Now you still owe me the \$10 million."

And then Jesus said the same way you forgive others is the way your Father's going to forgive you. Now, you know who you are in that picture, don't you? You and I are the ones that got forgiven \$10 million because we had a sin debt so big we could never repay it. And on the cross, you know what Jesus said? He said, "tetelestai" which means "it is finished." That was a legal word that meant a debt is paid.

So, you say you won't forgive those people who talk ugly about you? Who maybe say something about you to somebody else that makes you mad? Or they gossip to your friends about you? You won't forgive them? Well, you better ask yourself again whether or not you have truly been forgiven by Jesus. Love covers a multitude of sins.

## **CONCLUSION**

A little boy went in the pet shop to pick out a new puppy. When he found the one he wanted, he pointed him out to the store owner. The man said to the boy, "Son,



you don't want this one. This one was born with a birth defect and it's crippled. Its back leg is crooked and will never be straight. To tell you the truth, we're just going to put him to sleep. Surely you don't want that little cripple.”

But the boy said, “Oh, yes. That's the one I want.” He said, “Son, why do you want that puppy?” And the little boy reached down and pulled up his pant leg so the man could see the braces on his legs. And he said, “Mister, I just want to show him what a whole bunch of love can do.”

## **OUTLINE**

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