

# LOVE AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

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*1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

## Introduction:

Thursday of this week is Valentine's Day – a day set aside to celebrate love, particularly romantic love. It is amazing to realize how much effort is expended and how much money is spent to express love around Valentine's Day. The kind of love that most people think of at this time of year is romantic passion, the feelings of affection, even the sensual and erotic ideas of love.

But is that what real love is? I am not denying the importance of romantic love in the relationship of a husband and wife. But there is a much deeper level than that at which true love operates. And Paul addresses the meaning and significance of that deeper, committed, sacrificial love in our text this morning.

But we need to begin by looking at the context of this text. Most of you have probably heard this text used in wedding ceremonies. I myself have used it in addressing couples at their wedding. But, while I believe that is certainly a valid application of these words, I don't believe Paul had weddings and marriage in mind when he wrote these words to the Corinthian believers.

The church in Corinth was embroiled in a culture of egotism and one-up-man-ship. They were self-serving and seemed to be focused on outdoing one another in many areas. They were divided into different camps based on who they looked to as the best leader and teacher among them – "I follow Paul ... Apollos... Cephas... Christ..." The other major area of contention was over the value or importance of certain spiritual gifts.

In chapter 12 Paul addressed the issue of spiritual gifts and their role in the body life of the church. I don't want to rehash all of that, but let me simply say these three things:

1. Spiritual gifts are given by the Holy Spirit, not according to our desires or wishes, but according to the will of the Spirit – verse 11.

2. The body of Christ is designed to work together, just like our physical body, with each part—each member—performing its function. The result is a body that works and functions as it was intended.
3. God has given gifts to the church, not for the benefit of individuals, or to attract attention to ourselves, but for the benefit of the body of Christ – vv. 7, 28

The problem in the Corinthian church seems to be that people were seeking attention through the use of their gifts and placing value on individuals based on their gifts. So, Paul says, I'm going to show you a better way, a more excellent way – v. 31b. That is the way of love.

So, we come to chapter 13. When you look at the context, it becomes clear that Paul is not talking about love in relation to marriage. What he is really dealing with is how we interact and treat one another in the body of Christ. This is not about romantic love, it is about building up others in the church.

Last time we looked at the first part and briefly at the last part of this chapter. In the first three verses, Paul gave us a series of challenges showing how worthless all of our gifts are if they are not accompanied by a love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. The greatest gift of tongues, the highest powers of prophecy and knowledge, even surrendering all our possessions and giving up our very life, without love, Paul says, is a waste and is without value.

In the latter part of the chapter, we noted Paul's reminder that while the time will come when spiritual gifts will pass away, and no longer have any purpose or value, there are three things that will last into eternity – faith, hope, and love. And the greatest and most important is love.

So, what is love? In the last message we talked about the importance of love, and briefly about the permanence of love, but how do you define true love. Again, we are not talking here about feelings of affection, or romance, or erotic or sensual love, but genuine sacrificial love—love that is committed to the one loved. We are talking about love that says, I care about you—your joy, your growth as a brother or sister in Christ is the most important thing to me.

## The Characteristics of Love vv. 4-6

In vv. 4-7 of this chapter Paul gives us a list of thoughts that help us to understand better the nature and the characteristics of love. I am very uncertain just how to approach this, but I think that we will just take a few minutes to look through these statements, define them briefly, and try to create a picture of what true love in the body of Christ looks like. So here is what love is:

- Patient – long suffering. Love has an amazing capacity to endure under trial or opposition. Barclay indicates that the word points to patience specifically with people, not so much with circumstances.
- Kind – even when faced with ill-treatment, love responds with kindness. It is not abrasive or harsh but shows itself to be mild and generous.
- Does not envy – the term means to burn with zeal. Within the context, it seems to suggest that love does not seek the attention that others may receive, does not resent the success of others.
- Does not boast – The KJV says, vaunteth not itself – a rather striking term. The NKJV puts it this way – love does not parade itself. Love within a fellowship of believers means I am not concerned with making sure that others see my value or my importance.
- Is not arrogant (NIV – proud, NKJV – puffed up). The implication of this terminology is that one who is truly loving does not have an inflated view of his own value, worth, usefulness or importance. Romans 12:3 - *“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”*
- Is not rude (KJV – does not behave itself unseemly). The word means to act in an unbecoming manner. It suggests actions which are disgraceful dishonorable, even indecent – behaviour which insults or offends others.
- It does not insist on its own way (NIV – self-seeking). Phil. 2:4 – *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* True love is willing to surrender to the wishes and desires and needs of others, not demanding its own interests.

- Is not irritable – not easily provoked (KJV), not easily angered (NIV). The idea is that one who is truly loving is not touchy or petulant, does not easily take offense at the actions or words of others who may say or do things that are hurtful.
- Keeps no record of wrongs (NIV) – the ESV uses the word resentful but has a footnote – does not count up wrongdoing. The word used in the original means to count or reckon, thus the idea of thinking someone to be evil or attributing evil to them. It carries the idea of counting up, reckoning, or keeping records of evil actions or words. I think of Peter’s question about forgiving – How many times...
- It does not rejoice at wrongdoing (delight in evil) but rejoices with the truth. Matthew Henry says of this in his commentary, *“It takes no pleasure in doing injury or hurt to any. It thinks not evil of any, without very clear proof. It wishes ill to none, much less will it hurt or wrong any, and least of all make this matter of its delight, rejoice in doing harm and mischief. Nor will it rejoice at the faults and failings of others, and triumph over them, either out of pride or ill-will.”* He says that rather, *“... [it] is glad of the success of the gospel, commonly called the truth ... and rejoices to see men moulded into an evangelical temper by it, and made good. It takes no pleasure in their sins, but is highly delighted to see them do well, to approve themselves men of probity and integrity.”*

## The Prevailing Nature of Love v. 7

In v. 7 Paul makes 4 brief statement that I am calling ... read v. 7.

In these statements we have a summary of the preceding statements. Let us briefly consider these four statements of the nature of love and how it prevails over all else. Love...

- Bears all things - the word literally means to cover, to hide, to keep secret. In that sense it fits with the idea of the previous verse – love does not delight in either promoting or spreading evil or wrongdoing, but rather would keep such quiet, that truth and righteousness should have the limelight. Consider the words of Peter - *“Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.” (1Pe 4:8 ESV)* Love does not want to expose sin but rather see

it dealt with privately so that God will be honored and peace and unity in the body are maintained.

- Believes all things – this sounds on the surface to suggest that a loving person is trusting to the point of fault. But Albert Barnes in his notes on this passage makes this distinction. He says, *“It cannot mean that the man who is under the influence of love is a man of universal credulity; that he makes no discrimination in regard to things to be believed ... But it must mean, that in regard to the conduct of others, there is a disposition to put the best construction on it; to believe that they may be actuated by good motives, and that they intend no injury; and that there is a willingness to suppose, as far as can be, that what is done is done consistently with friendship, good feeling, and virtue. Love produces this, because it rejoices in the happiness and virtue of others, and will not believe the contrary except on [irrefutable] evidence.”* Beyond that, clearly a heart of love will believe all that God has said, trusting firmly in the promises of God, even when we cannot see what the end will be.
- Hopes all things – this is closely tied to the previous one. If we truly believe all that God has said, then our hope is firmly fixed in his promises which cannot fail. And if we believe the best about others, then our hope will also be that they will prove to be right and just, and we will hold on to that hope. As Barnes puts it, *“This hope will extend to all things — to words, and actions, and plans; to what is said and done in our own presence, and to what is said and done in our absence. Love will do this, because it delights in the virtue and happiness of others, and will not credit anything to the contrary unless compelled to do so.”*
- Endures all things – this is the ultimate test of love – endurance. To quote Barnes one more time, *“Bears up under all persecutions at the hand of man; all efforts to injure the person, property, or reputation; and bears all that may be laid upon us in the providence and by the direct agency of God.”* In other words, even though everything seems to be against us, we will endure. Consider the words of Job, who said when faced with unbearable suffering, *“Though he slay me, I will hope in Him.”* That is true hope and true endurance.

## Conclusion

Well, we have very quickly gone through a great deal of information about love. But what does it all mean for us now, in the context in which we live? We could ask a whole series of questions going back over all the characteristics that we have looked at from this passage, but I would just like to make a couple of applications as we close.

First, we need to see this passage in its context. Paul was writing to a church that was embroiled in controversy. They were fighting over many things, and their approach to the use of spiritual gifts and life in the body of Christ was anything but loving. So, Paul felt it necessary to direct their attention to the importance of love within the body and commitment to serving and building up one another.

In light of that, I would like to close with two questions that we each need to consider:

1. Am I committed to growing in love in my own life – seeing an increasing demonstration of the characteristics of love, as we have looked at them here this morning – things like patience, kindness, looking to the interests of others, etc.?
2. Do I truly believe the best of others, not being unduly gullible, but trusting that God is indeed working in the lives of my brothers and sisters in Christ and that they are acting out of sincere motives? Or am I quick to judge and condemn, assuming the worst.

Paul calls us to a life of genuine committed love for one another, a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things.

That kind of love grows out of a deep appreciation for the love that God has shown us, in providing for our deepest spiritual need. If you have never responded to His love that was shown in Jesus Christ, you can never truly experience or express the kind of love we have talked about today.

Invitation ...