1 Corinthians 13:1-7

The Better Way

Paul transitioned from the body needing one another and needing to be corrected by the Spirit through the spiritual gifts into a thing greater than the spiritual gifts: love for one another. The church in Corinth was divided, distracted, and devious. They had not taken seriously the impact of who they were positionally in Christ on their earthly condition. Paul starts off by exaggerating the extremely ridiculous idea that you’d have a spiritual gift acting in the life of the believer *and* not the nature of Christ. The point is not to mock the Corinthians, but to shine a light on the inconsistency of their thinking.

The King James Version uses the word charity here, but modern translations use the word love. The Greek word for love in this section is focused on agape love, which is benevolent or charitable love. Love is also an act of the will verses an emotional impulse. We do not get to read this passage and come away with the idea that an emotional impulse is patient, etc.

*If love is an act of the will whose will are we reflecting?*

# Carnality Over Love

Paul makes an exaggerative comparison three times so that the believers in Corinth are without excuse: they must understand the practical implications of salvation without love. The believer who is not abiding is not going to be manifesting the life of Christ for love is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). If the believers are not manifesting the fruit of the Spirit and the Spiritual gifts then they need to get their fellowship with the Lord squared away. As Paul will write in his later letter (2 Corinthians 3:18), they must be beholding the Lord to grow and manifest the glory of the Lord. Paul’s illustrations in this passage are targeting Corinthian culture; he knows his audience.

The Greek word for love here in these verses is agape love, which is benevolent love. It is the kind of love that God shows towards us. It is unmerited. Love gets its definition in Him.

## Tongues, but No Love

1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul describes himself in this illustration as an extremely capable communicator, but then throws himself into the disgraceful position of having no love. The outcome is obnoxious noise. If oratory was socially valuable in Corinthian culture Paul turns it up to 11. If you could communicate directly with all men the messages of God but your level of clarity was nonsense you would be *wasting the gift*.

You may have heard various teachers or apologists for charismatic thinking use this verse to suggest that the tongues of angels is referring to a prayer language or that everyone has a prayer language. This is not Paul’s intent for several reasons:

1. The reference to the tongues of angels is used for exaggerative example (as is established by the repetitive pattern here)
2. The Greek word translated Tongues means language here and that’s why he uses men as the baseline comparison. Cf. 1 Corinthians 14:10-11
3. We don’t pray to angels, and God doesn’t need us to mask our prayers in some language to understand them or for them to be more persuasive.
4. Paul’s focus is on the love, not the languages
5. Paul already said that not everyone has tongues in 12:30
6. We find in other verses after this one, and elsewhere, that tongues is used for evangelism. Cf. Acts 2:4-6, 1 Corinthians 14:6-7

If evangelism is the purpose of tongues and love should be our motive for evangelism, Paul points out the absurdity of the scenario. We don’t find a prayer language, we find a lack of language’s value here. The same teachers for some reason don’t get the same sense of everyone having a prayer prophecy or prayer faith or prayer sacrificial life from the following verses. This rabbit trail is theological nonsense.

*Why is love more important than the gift of languages?*

## Prophecy and Faith but No Love

2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Paul continues his emphasis through amplification of the problem by pointing to prophecy[[1]](#footnote-1) (the second most valuable gift in chapter 12:28) and in his example he has access to all mysteries and all knowledge from God – but he has no love, his value as a man is nullified. In a Corinthian culture having a spiritual mystery as part of your cult was part of its value. On top of this were pride and ego where building yourself up was critical socially. Inside of the church where clear teaching was desperately needed this gifting would have been incredibly valuable. But without love it is not valuable at all.

He emphasizes that he might even have faith that would be able to move mountains (clearly a massive miracle worth bragging about), but that without love his value as a person is nothing.

The idea of uselessness and wastefulness of a resource is part of Paul’s point, but the believers in Corinth were already being wasteful. This was going on inside of the body: they were not seeking an abiding, beholding condition and were therefore throwing away time and ministry opportunities.

*Do we do this in the church today?*

## Full Sacrifice but No Love

3 And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

Paul then ups the level of extremity of behavior from a gift of time and agency, to a full sacrifice of possessions and person. At this point in time wealth and hedonism through the body’s senses would have been under attack by Paul. The church in Corinth would have been surrounded by opulence and carnality. Paul attacks those things through suggesting that their sacrifice would be useless and would gain the sacrifice no merit.

If you feed the poor, but you have not loved them then they don’t see Christ, they don’t hear the gospel, they don’t see you walk by faith and your body is just a temple of selfishness neither of you profit. This is the supreme waste of stewardship and sacrifice.

*Why is love more valuable in the body than material sacrifice?*

# The Nature of Love

4 Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, 5 does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, 6 does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

In reading this text in light of the original recipients of this letter we need to keep their culture front and center. Paul’s description of love reflects Christ’s love and it would have been a shock within the greater Corinthian community to see this lived out. We can also see that this sort of love would also shock the world around us in its current state of selfish carnality and faux tolerance. While we often here these verses delivered for those who are getting married, this passage is still being written in light of the body and in light of spiritual gifts.

It is worth noting that there is a heavy overlap here between the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 and the fruit of love. This is not accidental and we can see that the Holy Spirit leads us to love as a result and response to God’s love due to Christ’s totally adequate, and loving, work on the cross.

## Patience

When we think of patience or perseverance we often think of our own suffering or gumption in these scenarios but the biblical model of patience is one that is empowered and motivated by the Holy Spirit for our growth and well-being. 2 Peter 4:1-9 paints the picture of perseverance and patience from a Jewish perspective (if it is true, you do it), but there we see Peter link patience to love as well.

*Why does love bolster patience?*

## Kindness, Not Jealousy

When we seek to promote ourselves we are implicitly selfish. When Paul adds to the list of qualities of benevolent love, he challenges a selfish people to recognize that God’s character of graciousness is anything but selfish. Possessions often lead to jealousy, but the Christian who is in need is desperately needing kindness and generosity; the believer who has should be giving with liberality to those in need (cf. Acts 2:45; Romans 12:8b).

*When inside the body how does this kindness manifest itself?*

## Does not Brag and is Not Arrogant

Boasting is self-embellishment so that others would see you in an untrue and unfair light. Love thinks of others first. In light of chapter 12:24 where Paul writes about the need for the body to honor those who were less honorable, this characteristic of love calls us to Spirit-led action.

*If someone inside of the church did brag how would love handle it?*

## Does not act unbecomingly

The idea of something being unbecoming is not common in the English language today. The word means to be unfitting for their current state in life. Looked at in a different light, we often see smear campaigns that look for someone of influence to do something outside of perfection and then paint them as unbecoming. The believers in Corinth were constantly doing divisive things that were outside of their character in Christ and Paul has called them out on this many times in this letter already.

*What does Paul prescribe for the situation when someone does act unbecomingly?*

## Does not seek its own

The Greek construct for this descriptor carries with it the idea of being selfish. Love is not selfish. This seems obvious, but often we need to be reminded of the raw truth of what is really important.

*If selfishness is not the role of a believer who has more possessions, what is the biblical model for handling those possessions?*

## Not provoked

Love, because it is looking for the benefit of the other person, doesn’t snap at or get charged up by the other person. This sort of tempered response is a sign of Holy Spirit led maturity. It pairs nicely with patience.

*Is there a biblical version of getting stirred up? A positive provocation?*

## Does not keep records of wrong

Keeping a record of wrongs is a classic argument tactic in relationships. Many comedians have shared jokes throughout time about the wife who can remember a fault of a husband from decades earlier. This sort of behavior has no place in the Christian relationship (married or otherwise).

*How could we possibly describe loving someone* ***and*** *keeping track of reasons not to love them?*

## Does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but Rejoices in Truth

Love does not rejoice in others behaving in a way that is unbecoming, but instead it rejoices in the living, the discussion, and sharing of truth. Paul calls out in Romans 1 the propensity for wickedness and that those who practice it tend to encourage others to join in. This is not the role love plays.

*How do we rejoice in truth instead?*

## Bears all things

While this is translated ‘bears’ the Greek word carries with it the idea of coverage like a roof. This indicates the idea that the sins that may be committed on purpose or on accident are covered by love. God’s love caused Him to send His Son to die on our behalf so that there would be no reason for Him to not accept us. He can cover the sin with the blood and therefore bear the sin (though He disciplines us in our hard headedness).

This carries on the message of the previous verse’s keeping no record of wrong. Not only is the record not kept, but it’s covered in love.

*How do you respond to being grieved biblically and on a practical level?*

## Believes all things

Love believes all truth and meditates on truth and is committed to all truth. Love is not suspicious. Paul is not suggesting that Christians are mindless here, but instead that the interactions of believers should not be driven by reluctance to trust. When truth and love are the core of a relationship then prejudice drops away.

*What earthly relationship models a great handling of belief even when there isn’t clarity?*

## Hopes all things

Similar to the above principle of belief in what others say, the believer looks to see the empowering life of Christ fulfilled in the believers around them. The hope is in Christ, His work, and the direction of our conformity in our condition [Romans 8:28-30].

*What is the difference between faith and hope?*

## Endures all things

Lastly, love endures all things. Love’s endurance is not based on merit, but grace. If love is patient and bears all things then it abides or endures. It stays put and waits for the outcome that is hoped for.

*Does endurance mean taking all abuse in silence?*

# Closing Thoughts

We have been challenged by Paul, just like the Corinthians, to not look for outward signs and wonders and self-importance within the body, but instead to be a people of Christ’s love. Paul is not finished with his thoughts on love and verses 8-13 will continue into further explanation and clarification, but he has established a clear foundation for agape love and its attributes within the body.

*What does Holly Hills Bible Church look like if these characteristics of love are manifested within it? How do we put “tennis shoes” on these principles?*

1. Prophecy is the gift of communicating clear doctrine by the direction of the Holy Spirit, not just foretelling the future as used by some [↑](#footnote-ref-1)