

A full-page background image featuring a night sky with the Milky Way galaxy visible, arching over a dark, silhouetted landscape. In the foreground, a calm body of water reflects the sky and a large, gnarled tree that stands in the water. The overall color palette is dark, with deep blues and blacks, accented by the white and yellowish light of the stars and the Milky Way.

LOVING GOD'S WAY

"Love according to 1 Corinthians 13"

Sage Crystal

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INTRODUCTION



WHAT IS LOVE?

What is love?

This is a question that has been asked and answered countless times over the centuries and across languages, cultures, and religions.

Poets have attempted to put words to it. Composers have written symphonies about it. Singers have crooned over it. Artists have covered countless canvasses in an effort to capture it.

Famous quotes about love abound. Everyone from Aristotle to Jane Austen to Lennon and McCartney have had something profound to say on the subject of love.

It's a little word that we use all the time. We say we love our spouse and our children, but we use that same word to describe our affection for a song or a color or a favorite pair of shoes. We proclaim love for lots of things, but is it all really love?

Why Is This Oft-Used Little Word So Hard to Define?

Merriam-Webster defines love as, *"a feeling of strong or constant affection for a person."*

But is it really a feeling? We all know how feelings come and go. Instinctively we know that love is far more than a feeling of affection, especially when we see last year's celebrity "it" couple filing for divorce.

Maybe the reason we fall short in our definition of love is that we think of it far too often in its noun form.

Maybe love is more of a verb; an action rather than a thing.

One of the most often quoted statements on the subject of love comes not from a philosopher, author, or singer/songwriter, but from a man whom history tells us was never even married. Yet his discourse on love is ironically the passage of scripture most often read at wedding ceremonies.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church around 53 A.D. these famous words on love:

Love is patient and is kind. Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its own way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never fails.

- (1 Corinthians 13:4-8, World English Bible)

This handful of verses is full of action words, defining love in terms of activities of the heart rather than fickle feelings. Love rejoices, bears, believes, hopes and endures. This love is active.

Yet this love Paul talks of is also inactive. There is a host of things that love does not do, though it is far from passive. This love exhibits great strength through restraint and self-control.

It's clearly not a word that can be summed up in a simple, dictionary-ready sentence, but in a mere four verses, the Apostle Paul eloquently defines for us this indefinable word. He unpacks it for us, describing it in practical yet beautiful terms. He teaches us how to apply love in our own lives.

He makes it clear that this Godly love is an action, not a feeling.

In this study, we'll explore this active love, first looking at the context of this passage to give us a proper understanding of why Paul wrote these words in the first place. We'll then take a deep dive into the dos and don'ts of love according to 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, and see how other scriptures support this striking definition of love.

Our chapters contain scriptures to ponder, reflections on the truths found in these verses, and prayers to help center our hearts on God and what he is teaching us.

There's an abundance of truth to be gleaned from this passage, so let's get started!



1



A LETTER TO A CHALLENGING CHURCH

Verse for Today

*"If I speak with the languages of men and of angels, but don't have love, I have become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal. 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 don't have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but don't have love, it profits me nothing."
- 1 Corinthians 13:1-3*

Reflection

The first-century church in Corinth bore a striking resemblance to the modern church today, and that is not a good thing.

It was established by the Apostle Paul himself and left in the hands of elders as he moved on to plant other churches. Yet just a few years later, he received disturbing reports of problems plaguing the Corinthian church, prompting him to pen this letter.

His affection for them is clear from the opening verses. He speaks of his love for them, thanks God for them, and encourages them. They

are his partners in the work of God, spreading the gospel among unbelievers and teaching the way of Jesus.

Despite their connection to the Apostle Paul himself, sin is wreaking havoc among them.

There is quarreling between the people who are debating theology, playing favorites with their leaders, and even taking each other to court. They are bragging about who is more spiritual and distorting the works of the Holy Spirit. They are falling into idol worship, sexual immorality, and a host of forbidden sins.

Paul has to correct them because he loves them, so he writes them this profound, epic letter that we know as First Corinthians. He does not mince words as he calls them to repent of their sins, change their ways, and forgive each other.

The twelfth chapter addresses their dispute about the spiritual gifts. He makes it clear that all gifts are from God for the purpose of building up the body, and not a thing to be bragged about, scoffed at, or debated. He ends this scolding chapter by stating that it was time for him to teach them a better way.

That better way is the way of love.

He says that speaking the language of men and angels is nothing but cacophony without love. Gifts of prophesy, knowledge, and mountain moving faith are worthless without love. Performing the greatest acts of sacrifice and service garner no reward at all when done without love.

His point is clear.

The greatest triumphs, spiritual gifts, or personal accomplishments imaginable are pointless if they are not done in love.

The Corinthian church had lost their way, forgetting that the reason they were a church in the first place was because God loved them. The

gospel is all about the love of God bestowed upon his children through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

He loved us, and he calls us to love others. Any work we do in his name has to be done under the banner of love. That is the point of the passage, but it's not the end. He goes on to explain exactly what the love does and doesn't look like.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have loved me with an everlasting love. You created the world and everything in it out of love. You sent Jesus into the world out of love. You called me to be your child through faith in him out of love. Thank you for the great love that you have lavished upon me.

I can only love because you first loved me. Any love within me comes first from you. You have called me to share your love with those you have put into my life. Help me to do this more completely, more thoughtfully, and more perfectly.

Any good thing that I do is pointless if it is not done out of love. Like the Corinthian church, I fall into sin all the time, even doing good things in your name but without love. Forgive me for failing to love others, for losing sight of your love, and for doing all kinds of things without love.

Help me to do everything you have called me to do under the banner of love. I do not want to be like the Corinthian church in this way. I don't want to be a clanging cymbal. I want to serve you and love others because you have first loved me. Help me remember my first love, Jesus. In his name I pray. Amen.



2



THE PATIENCE OF LOVE

Verse for Today

“Love is patient...is not provoked...bears all things.”

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk worthily of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and humility, with patience, bearing with one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

- Ephesians 4:1-3

Reflection

It should come as no surprise to us that the very first characteristic of love mentioned by Paul in this most famous passage on the subject is patience.

After all, anyone who has been married for any length of time will attest that love requires a great deal of patience.

Paul tells us in Romans 3:23 that, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” That includes you and the people who you have been called to love.

As a sinner attempting to love another sinner, we will eventually fail. It’s unavoidable. We will fall short, causing disappointment, grief, and

pain. Likewise, the person we love will fail in their attempt to love us in return, causing even more disappointment, pain, and grief.

The agape love of God, the same love Paul is calling us to in 1 Corinthians 13, is unconditional. It doesn't depend on the worthiness of our beloved. If that were the case, God would not bestow his great love upon us! Yet he does, and lavishly so, with incredible patience.

As Exodus 34:6 says, God is, "...a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness and truth." God's love for us is abundant, kind, true, and slow to anger. He is patient with us in his love.

He calls us to love with the same kind of patience, but he knows it will be a struggle. Loving imperfectly another imperfect sinner with patience is nearly impossible if left to our own devices. The soaring divorce rates attest to that.

God does not leave us to our own devices, though. He gives us the Holy Spirit to help us in our journey of sanctification, and one of the fruits of that Spirit listed by Paul in his letter to the Galatian church is patience.

The Holy Spirit helps us be patient with the people we are called to love, showing them grace and forgiving them even when they sin against us. He helps us be patient with them as they are on their own journey of sanctification, just as we are.

The Holy Spirit helps us not be provoked to anger, but to patiently endure through the inevitable disagreements and struggles.

The Holy Spirit helps us to bear all things. Of course that doesn't mean we should accept illegal or abusive behavior, but it does mean that we should turn the other proverbial cheek when a person fails to love us with the same patience and kindness we are striving to show them.

The love of God is patient. It is not provoked. It bears all things. And He calls us to love others with this same patient, long-suffering, enduring, hopeful kind of love.

Prayer

Father God, you have been so patient with me. The love you have shown me is abundantly patient despite my sin, my failures, my rebellion, and my own impatience. Thank you for loving me with such an abundantly patient love.

I confess to you that I am an impatient person. I struggle to display this fruit of the Spirit, even in my closest, most loving relationships. I am impatient and easily provoked to anger, which is sin. Please forgive me, Lord.

I know your Holy Spirit dwells within me to help me in all the many ways I need help. The fruit of the Spirit is there within me, but some are barely seeds. Patience is one that I need to grow in. Help me grow the fruit of patience in my life as I love the people you have called me to love.

Help me to be patient, to bear all things, and to not be easily provoked. I long to display this kind of love, especially in my closest relationships, and I need your help to do it. I submit to your work in my life to grow me in this area. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.



3



THE KINDNESS OF LOVE

Verse for Today

“Love is kind... doesn’t seek its own way...takes no account of wrong...”

“And be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you.”

- Ephesians 4:32

Reflection

Again Paul turns to the Fruits of the Spirit for a word to describe love.

Along with patience, Paul tells us that love is kind.

We often equate kindness to niceness. To just be nice and pleasant. Smile. Say something trite, like “bless your heart” or “have a nice day” and go on your way.

We trivialize Biblical kindness if we put it in such terms.

Biblical kindness is powerful and life-changing.

Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan told by Jesus in Luke chapter 10. A man is attacked, robbed, and left for dead in a ditch. Two religious leaders pass him by without lifting a finger to help. They show

him no love. No mercy. No kindness. You can almost hear them say, “Well bless your heart...” as they keep on walking.

Finally, hope arrives when a Samaritan man happens upon the victim. He shows incredible kindness to the poor man, and there is nothing trite about it.

He sees the man. He takes pity upon him. He moves toward him rather than passing him by. He tends to his injuries himself. He goes out of his way to take him to safety. He sacrifices his own money to care for this stranger.

He didn’t seek his own way by carrying on with his own pressing business and ignoring the man. He took no account of wrong by considering what the man might have done to end up in this state in the first place.

He just shows him love by being kind. The victim did nothing to deserve the lovingkindness of this stranger, and yet he received it in abundance anyway.

Love is kind, and acts kindly toward others without condition.

After all, this is exactly how God loves us.

He shows us his kindness by loving us, forgiving us, saving us, providing for us, and sustaining us when we have done nothing to deserve such kindness. It’s no surprise that he calls us to “do unto others” and show the people he puts in our path the same kindness he has shown to us.

Paul tells us in Ephesians to “...be kind be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you.”

Having a tender, loving heart toward others will prompt us to be kind to them and treat them in the same way God has treated us. This is the love of God we are called to show others in 1 Corinthians 13.

It is far more than being nice. It is a powerful characteristic of love that can lift a person left for dead in a ditch and point them to the grace of God.

Prayer

My loving, heavenly Father, you have been so kind to me. The great love you have lavished upon me is greater than any other kindness I have received. I have done nothing to deserve this kindness, and I am so thankful for it.

You have called me to love others with kindness, treating them the same way I have been treated. I know this yet I struggle to do it. I'm far too often the religious leaders passing the needy by rather than the Samaritan stopping to show kindness. Forgive me for being unloving and unkind.

I long to grow in kindness and display this fruit of the Spirit in my life. I know I need to grow in this area, so I ask you to help me. Grow the fruit of kindness in my life and help me submit to your work within me.

Father, help me to be kind to others the way you have been kind to me. Help me be loving, forgiving, merciful, graceful, and helpful to those you put in my path. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.



4



THE HUMILITY OF LOVE

Verse for Today

“Love doesn’t envy. Love doesn’t brag, is not proud.”

“If therefore there is any exhortation in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any tender mercies and compassion, make my joy full by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind; doing nothing through rivalry or through conceit, but in humility, each counting others better than himself; each of you not just looking to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others.”

- Philippians 2:1-4

Reflection

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us a handful of things that love is and love does. He also tells us an equal number of things that love is not and that love does not do.

It is interesting to note that all of the characteristics that he says are not exhibited by love could fall under one category of sin.

You might think that the antonym of love would be hate, but according to this passage, the opposite of love is actually the sin of pride.

It makes sense, doesn't it? Loving someone with the agape love of God requires putting that person's needs above your own. It requires sacrificing for them, serving them, submitting to them, partnering with them, working alongside them, providing for them, and a whole host of actions that require humility.

A prideful person will have a difficult time loving another unconditionally, because love is not arrogant.

Love isn't envious of what another has or does.

Love doesn't brag about what it has or does.

Love isn't proud of itself. It doesn't think highly of itself or boast in its own goodness.

Love doesn't seek its own way, but puts the will of another before itself.

Love, in essence, is humble.

The humility of love is seen all over the scriptures, and it is powerful. It builds up rather than tearing down. It helps rather than hurts. And according to Philippians 2:1-4, it unifies rather than divides.

A love that is humble, seeking the good of the beloved and putting their needs ahead of yours is unifying, strengthening, and enduring.

This humble love was exemplified by Jesus. Paul goes on to tell us in Philippians 2 that Jesus left behind his equality to God and humbled himself to become a man. He took that humility to the utmost extreme by living as a man, serving unworthy people, and dying for them in the most humiliating way.

He did it because of love.

The perfect example of love was Jesus, and there was no pride to be found in anything that he did. No arrogance. No selfishness.

He was the personification of God's perfect, humble, selfless love, and he calls us to love others in this same way.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you have loved me with your perfect love through Jesus. Jesus humbled himself to the point of death on the cross, and he did it for unworthy sinners like me. Thank you for loving me so.

Your love humbles me completely. I am undeserving of your love, and when I think of the depths of my sin and unworthiness, I am overwhelmed.

Help me to love others from this state of humility. As I seek to love the people you have put in my life, remind me of your grace, your love, and your mercy. Remind me that I am only able to love them because you have first loved me.

Remove the sin of pride from my heart. Give me a spirit of humility, without boasting or bragging or a hint of arrogance. Help me think of myself less and others more. Help me put the needs of those around me above my own. Help me to love others like you have loved me. In the name of Jesus, my first love, I pray. Amen.



5



THE HOPEFULNESS OF LOVE

Verse for Today

“Love...doesn’t rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth... believes all things, hopes all things...”

“And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

- Romans 5:5

Reflection

The love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is full of hope.

It is confident. It is optimistic. It is expectant. But this isn’t just an emotion that sees everything through rose-colored glasses. It isn’t just a glass-half-full perspective on everything.

In fact, in the Kingdom of God, the glass isn’t half full at all.

It’s filled to capacity and then some! Psalm 23, Luke 6, and other verses in the Old and New Testament speak of a cup filled to overflowing. God is a god of abundance, and his love knows no limits.

God's love is hope-filled, but not in a Pollyanna kind of way. It is a love that rests in the truth of who God is and what he has done. God has loved us, forgiven us, and adopted us into his kingdom. Hope flows from that truth.

This hope-filled love doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness. It's not happy when someone falls into sin. It doesn't delight in failure, grief, or shame. Love takes no pleasure in the pain suffered by others in our fallen world.

It does rejoice with the truth. This optimistic, hope-filled love is centered on the truth of God, his word, and our place in his kingdom as his children. It rejoices with the truth that we can only love others because God has first loved us. It rejoices out of the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit which dwells within us.

Paul tells us this love believes all things. But that doesn't mean love is gullible. It doesn't mean love turns a blind eye to the truth. It doesn't mean love is easily fooled.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 says, "Test all things, and hold firmly that which is good." We are to test all things according to the word of God, and believe the things that are true, right, and good.

This love also hopes all things. To love is to expect something, believe something, and have faith in something. When we love God, our hope rests in him and his will for our lives. When we love another person, our hope is in expecting the best for them, believing in them, and having faith in them.

Paul tells us in Romans 5 that, "...hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit."

Love and hope are inextricably linked to one another. When we know the unconditional love of God, we have hope. And that will never put us to shame, but will strengthen us, uphold us, and empower us, especially as we love others.

We are called to love the people in our lives with this kind of Godly, hopeful, optimistic love. Because our faith is in the God who first loved us, we can love others with a Godly love that is full to overflowing with hope.

Prayer

Gracious heavenly Father, my hope is in you and you alone. You have revealed yourself to me, saved me, and loved me with a love that fills me with hope. I know that if I put my hope in anything other than you, I will be disappointed.

You have loved me with a love that is full of hope and optimism. When you look at me, you don't see my failures, sins, and flaws. You see your beloved child who you have called out of darkness into your marvelous light. Thank you for loving me with a love that believes and hopes the best in me.

I know that I fail to love others with this kind of hope-filled, optimistic love. Sometimes my love is hopeless and pessimistic. I think the worst of the person I am loving rather than the best. I have no hope for them, and I don't believe in them. This is not your agape love. This is not love at all. Forgive me.

Help me to love the people in my life with a love that is full of hope. Help me see them as you see them. Help me believe in them the way you believe in them. Help me to love them the way you love them. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.



6



THE STRENGTH OF LOVE

Verse for Today

“Love...bears all things...Love never fails.”

“For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from God’s love which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- Romans 8:38-39

Reflection

The power of love cannot be understated.

Yet Paul doesn’t just say, “love is strong” in his letter to the Corinthians. He says instead, love bears all things and never fails.

The phrase “bears all things” makes us think of a person carrying a heavy load or bearing the brunt of a blow. While loving another might certainly involve carrying a burden for them or taking a hit for them, this isn’t quite what Paul is getting at.

In the original Greek, the word for “bear” in this context is “stego” which comes from the word for “roof.” A better English translation of this phrase might be “love covers all things like a roof covers a house.”

This certainly doesn’t mean love covers up sins or hides things for or from its beloved. Yes, you can hide under a roof, but that’s not its primary purpose. The purpose of a roof is to protect those that are under it from the elements.

In the same way, love covers, protects, and shelters those who are within it.

Think of a home being battered by a tornado or hurricane whose roof holds firm and protects the people within it. That is love, and it is a powerful, enduring force.

God’s love provides us shelter like this. In fact, the Psalms speaks several times of God covering us in the shadow of his wing or taking shelter in the cleft of his rock. God’s love bears all things for us when we take shelter in him.

Paul also tells us that this sheltering, protecting love never fails.

Imagine again that house facing a devastating hurricane. If the winds are strong enough and if the storm stalls without weakening or moving away, even the sturdiest roof will give way and fail. But that is not how it is with God’s love.

God’s love never fails, no matter how long or how strong the forces of the world batter against it.

We are not told that love will be easy. On the contrary.

In Romans 8:38-39, Paul lists a host of forces that will come against us and try to separate us from the love of God. Yet all will fail.

God's love endures against anything that comes against it, because God is love.

When we love the people in our lives with the love of God, it will endure. It will be capable of withstanding the storms of life. It will be long-suffering in the inevitable struggles we will face in this fallen world.

This love is indeed capable of bearing all things, believing all things, and hoping all things. God's love will never fail.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, your love is powerful, enduring, and long-suffering. You have loved me with this everlasting love, and in that I am humbled. Thank you for showing me such love.

Help me to take shelter in your love and trust in its enduring strength. I know in my head that there is nothing that can separate me from your love, but in my heart I doubt that sometimes. Forgive me for questioning your love for me and help me to believe it, trust it, and rest in in.

I want to love the people in my life with your strong, enduring love that can withstand anything that comes against it. I cannot do that on my own strength. I need you to help me as I love the people around me.

Let me point the people around me to you and your love. I will not love them perfectly, but you will. Your love will never fail me and it will never fail them. Help me to trust that and lead others to it. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.



CONCLUSION



THE GREATEST OF THESE

Verse for Today

*"But now faith, hope, and love remain—these three.
The greatest of these is love."
-1 Corinthians 13:13*

Reflection

Paul concludes his discourse on love with a poignant, provocative statement.

Faith, hope and love remain, the greatest of which is love.

It's important to remember the context of this chapter as we attempt to understand its bold conclusion. The church he is writing to was fraught with problems, sin, disunity, and conflict. They were fighting over the spiritual gifts, disputing whose were greater. He steps into the middle of this ridiculous conflict to set them back on track.

All the gifts are important in the Kingdom, he tells them, and useful for the building up of the church and the spread of the Gospel.

Yet the gifts were worthless if not exercised out of love.

Love must be the banner under which all of the gifts operate.

Love must be the banner under which Christians do everything!

Faith, hope, and love remain. These are the foundational attributes of the Christian life. These are the things that will endure for eternity, even when things like spiritual gifts are no longer needed.

Through faith by grace we have been saved, according to Ephesians 2:8.

Our hope is in the eternal life that God, who never lies, promised before time even began, according to Titus 1:2.

But then there's love, the greatest of the three according to the Apostle Paul.

Why is love the greatest when we are saved by faith and our hope is in eternal life?

Love is the greatest, because God is love.

Everything we do should be done with love. Any relationship we are in should be marked by love. Any service we perform should be motivated by love. Any gift we give should be given out of love.

Our love should expect nothing in return. It should be patient, kind, humble, and strong. It shouldn't be arrogant, selfish, rude, or prideful.

Our love should point people to God, the giver of this great love. It was out of his love that he sent his son Jesus into the world that we might be saved. Any love we show to others should point them to the love of God.

That is why love is the greatest of these.

Prayer

Father God, love is from you because you yourself are love. It is astounding that the God of the universe who created the heavens and

the earth is in essence all about love. I'm so humbled that you chose to bestow this love upon me.

My faith is in you and my hope is in you, but love is greater than both of those things. Because you love me I have faith. Because you love me I have hope. My faith, hope, and love are in you and you alone. Thank you for pouring your love on my life so that I can know you and be with you forever.

I know that everything I do in this life should be done out of love for you and love for my neighbor. These are the two greatest commandments according to your word, yet I fail in both of them all the time. Help me to love you with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. Help me to love my neighbor as I love myself.

Thank you Father for showing me how much you love me by sending your only son to die in my place. Jesus paid the penalty for my sins so that I might be forgiven and adopted into your kingdom. Your great loved saved me, and I am forever grateful, humbled, and overwhelmed. Thank you.

Help my life to be marked by your love, that others may see it and want it. Help me point others to your love that they might know it and be saved as well. Help me love with patience, kindness, humility, and steadfastness. In the name of Jesus I pray. Amen.