

Becoming Like Christ

Lesson 3: Love That Looks Like Jesus -- 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Almost everyone has heard this chapter read at a wedding. The bride and groom stand at the front, someone in a nice suit opens to 1 Corinthians 13, and the familiar words roll out: love is patient, love is kind. We nod along. It is beautiful, and it belongs there. But it is worth remembering that Paul did not write these words to two starry-eyed people in love. He wrote them to a church that was fracturing, a quarreling, jealous, status-hungry congregation that was using its spiritual gifts to show off and tearing itself apart in the process. This is not a poem about romance. It is field surgery on a sick church, and the medicine is love.

That changes how we read it. The Corinthians were proud of their gifts. Some could speak in tongues. Some prophesied. Some had striking knowledge. And they had begun to measure one another by these abilities, ranking themselves, looking down on the less impressive, grasping for the spotlight. Into that mess Paul drops a quiet bomb. He says you can have all the gifts, every last one, and if you do not have love, you are nothing. Not less than you could be. Nothing. The most spectacular spiritual resume in the room counts for zero without the one thing that looks like Jesus.

Because that is what this love is. The word Paul uses is agape, and it is not a feeling that happens to us; it is a settled commitment to seek another's good, the kind of love God has for us and showed us at the cross. Read verses four through seven again and notice something striking. Every line is a description of Christ. He was patient with us. He was kind. He kept no record of our wrongs. He bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things, all the way to a Roman cross. You could put the name Jesus in place of the word love in this chapter and it would read like a portrait of His life.

So this lesson is not really about getting better at being nice. It is about the very heart of becoming like Christ. If the goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Jesus, then love is not one item on the list; it is the center of the whole thing, the thing that holds the rest together and the thing that lasts when everything else has passed away. Read the chapter slowly. Let it stop being a wedding decoration and become what it really is: a mirror held up to your heart, and a portrait of the Lord you are being made to resemble.

Group Discussion: Paul says that a person could have impressive gifts, deep knowledge, great faith, even the willingness to be martyred, and still be nothing and gain nothing without love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). Why do you think we are so prone to measure spiritual maturity by visible abilities and accomplishments rather than by love? What would change in a church, and in us, if love really were the measure?

Personal Reflection: Read the description of love in verses 4 through 7 slowly, putting your own name in place of the word love: I am patient, I am kind, I do not envy, I keep no

record of wrongs. Where does that reading sting the most? Name the one line that exposes you, and ask the Lord to begin His work there.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

Study Questions

1. Paul begins by insisting that the most impressive spiritual gifts, eloquent tongues, prophecy, knowledge, mountain-moving faith, even sacrificial giving and martyrdom, all amount to nothing without love (1 Corinthians 13:1–3). What does it tell us about God and about the Christian life that love, not ability or achievement, is the one indispensable thing? Why is it not enough merely to do impressive things for God?
2. Paul says that without love he is only a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, all sound and no substance (13:1). Where in your own life have you been tempted to settle for the appearance of spirituality, looking the part, saying the right things, performing, while love was thin underneath? What would it look like to care more about being loving than about looking impressive?
3. The love Paul describes is agape, a chosen commitment to seek another's good, not a passing feeling or mere affection. Notice that every quality in verses 4 through 7 is something you can decide and do, being patient, being kind, refusing to envy or boast. How does it change our understanding of love to see it as something we choose and practice rather than something that merely happens to us (compare John 13:34–35)?
4. Paul says love does not envy or boast, is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on its own way (13:4–5). These are precisely the sins that were tearing the Corinthian church apart. Which one of these gets the firmest grip on you, the envy that resents another's blessing, the boasting that needs to be noticed, or the insistence on having your own way? Be specific about where it shows up.

5. Paul writes that love keeps no record of wrongs and does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth (13:5–6). How does this reflect the very heart of the gospel, in which God in Christ does not count our trespasses against us (2 Corinthians 5:19; Psalm 103:10–12)? Why is a love that refuses to keep score so central to the character of Christ?
6. Paul says love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:7). Think of one relationship right now that is testing your patience or your hope, perhaps a difficult family member, a friend who has wounded you, or someone hard to love at church. What would it look like this week to bear, hope, and endure rather than to give up or retaliate?
7. Paul declares that love never fails, but that prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will pass away, for they are partial and belong to the time before the complete had come (13:8–10). What is Paul teaching about the temporary purpose of the miraculous gifts in contrast to the permanence of love, and how does this fit with the truth that the completed New Testament is now our full and sufficient revelation (2 Timothy 3:16–17)?
8. Paul uses two images to describe growing up into mature love: setting aside childish ways, and moving from a dim mirror to seeing face to face (13:11–12). In what area of your life are you still loving like a child, easily offended, demanding your own way, impatient? What is one childish way you sense the Lord asking you to put away as you grow up into Christ?
9. Paul ends with the great summary: now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love (13:13). Why does love stand even above faith and hope as the greatest and most enduring of all, the one thing that will not pass away when faith

becomes sight and hope is fulfilled? How does this whole chapter, with its contrast between love that abides and gifts that cease, reshape what we should most desire and pursue in the Christian life?

10. Look back across the whole chapter: the emptiness of gifts without love, the patient and kind portrait of love in action, and the declaration that love is the greatest and most enduring thing. Name one specific way you sense Jesus wanting to form His love in you through this passage, and one concrete step you will take this week to love a particular person the way He has loved you.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 13:34–35, a new command to love one another as Christ has loved us, by which the world knows we are His; Romans 5:6–8, God shows His love in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners; 1 John 4:7–12, love comes from God and the one who loves is born of God and knows God; Galatians 5:22–23, love as the first fruit of the Spirit in the believer's life; 1 Peter 4:8, above all, keep loving one another earnestly, for love covers a multitude of sins.