

How Can I Express Love? I Corinthians 13:1-13

John MacArthur had the best notes and illustrations on this chapter. I believe his notes will help you this week.

It's sad to say that love--as urgent, as important, and as divine as it is--is very frequently missing from God's own people, the church. One great illustration of that is the church in the city of Corinth--a church in which existed the multiplicity of spiritual gifts, a wealth of human teachers ranging all the way from the Apostle Paul to Apollos, the finest of teaching, a great grasp on doctrine, and a great facility for reaching the lost in a strategic city. But even with all that going for them, Paul adds it all up to zero. Why? Because love was missing...and anything minus love equals zero. So, in 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul points out the absolute necessity and urgency of love--love that was tragically absent in their community of believers. And strangely enough, even as important as it is, it's still very difficult for the church to truly experience love.

I The Centrality of Love. I Corinthians 13:1-3

The Greek word *agape* (love) seems to have been virtually a Christian invention—a new word for a new thing (apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is almost non-existent before the New Testament). *Agape* draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit ([Gal. 5:22](#)). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike—[Matt. 5:44-48](#)). It is the basic element in Christlikeness.

The word that is used throughout 1 Corinthians 13 for "love" is the Greek word *agape*--the strongest, the most grandiose, the loftiest, the most fully defining word to speak of this particular characteristic. There have been many definitions, many books, many songs, many poems, and many discussions about love. But when you've said it all, and you've read it all, and you've sung it all, and you've heard it all, you haven't even scratched the surface until you've looked at 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. These verses contain the most complete description of love ever penned. I say that because this is God's own personal definition of love.

II. The Nature of Love. I Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient (Gk. *makrothumeo* [vb.] or *makrothumia* [n.]). This word is used again and again in the New Testament to describe patience with people. It isn't a word that concerns itself with circumstances or events, it concerns itself with people. It is the ability to be wronged and wronged again, and have the power to retaliate, but never even think of it. Chrysostom, the early church father, said, "It is the word which is used of the man who is wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself but will never do it." That's the word. It is the spirit which never retaliates. It describes the person who never ever gets angry.

Illustration:

Robert Ingersoll, the brilliant atheist of the last century (if any atheist could be classified as brilliant), stopped in the middle of one of his lectures against God, took out his watch, held it up to his audience, and made the following challenge: "I'll give God five minutes to strike me dead for the things I've said." Well, he wasn't struck dead, so he just continued to mock God. Somebody related incident to the great Christian, Theodore Parker, who smiled and said, "And did the gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of the eternal God in five minutes?"

God is patient, isn't He? Aren't you glad? If He wasn't, we all would have been wiped out a long time ago. I've heard people say, "Oh, but how can I be patient? He's wronged me again and again." That may be true, but God could say that about you, couldn't He? Think about the story of Israel--the record of a patient love on the part of God for a rebellious, disobedient, sinful, disloyal people. You say, "Yeah, they were really horrible!" Well, before you say that too loud, it sounds a lot like our biographies, too. If God was impatient, we'd all be long gone. But God is a long-suffering God--a powerful feature of love.

Effect Patience Has on Hate:

When you deal with people, patience (a lack of retaliation) has a tremendous effect. A great example of this concerns Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln made a lot of friends, but he also made some enemies. One of his most outspoken enemies was a man named Stanton. Stanton just despised Lincoln. In fact, in print he called him "a low, cunning clown." On one occasion, he nicknamed him "the original gorilla," and said that it was ridiculous for people to go to Africa to find a gorilla, when they could easily find one in Springfield, Illinois. He was very bitter toward Lincoln, but Lincoln never replied to any of Stanton's attacks. He never said a word to him. However, when it came time to choose a war minister for the United States government, Lincoln chose Stanton. When asked why he chose someone who had opposed him so vehemently, Lincoln replied, "Because he's the best man for the job."

The years wore on until that fateful day of Lincoln's assassination. His biographer writes, "The night when the assassin's bullet tore out Lincoln's life, in the little room to which the President's body was taken, there stood that same Stanton. Looking down into the silent face of Lincoln in all its ruggedness, he spoke the following words through his tears: 'There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.'" He never accepted Lincoln's politics, but he couldn't resist the nonretaliating spirit of the man. Love forgives seventy times seven when it's been wronged.

Love is Kind: In the Greek, the root word for *kindness* means "useful." So Paul is saying, "I will do anything that will be of use to another--even my enemy. I will live my life to benefit others." That's what Paul means when he says that love is kind; it's useful to other people. Love is not an abstract concept; it's a deed of kindness, a deed of generosity, an act that you do for someone who has a need. The kindness Paul is talking about isn't the sweet attitude that we often connect with the word, it's the idea of being useful to others. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies..." (Mt. 5:44a), He didn't say, "Feel good about them." However, in that same verse, He did say, "...do good to them...."

Incidentally, Paul is not describing love in ideal surroundings, by any means. He's not talking to a group of people who have a warm affection for each other and wonderful friendships. These people in the Corinthian church are at each other's throat. So Paul says, "In the hard surroundings of a sinful, selfish church; and in the hard environment of an evil world that brings negative influences to bear on love, that's the atmosphere in which the true character of love will really shine."

Illustration:

Two men going opposite directions on a narrow mountain trail meet each other head on. With a precipice on one side and sheer rock on the other, they are unable to pass. They push and squeeze, but are still unable to continue their separate journeys. Finally, without saying anything, one of the men simply lays down flat on the trail, and the other man walks over him. Now that's love. Love doesn't mind getting walked on...if it's going to benefit somebody else. That's the spirit that Paul is after in the Corinthian church. He says, "If you would only minister in a nonretaliating, self-sacrificial manner--returning kindness instead of always avenging yourself--then your spiritual gifts would mean something."

Love is not Jealous: Another word for envy is jealousy. Shakespeare called it "the green sickness"; Solomon called it "rotteness of the bones" (Prov. 14:30b); an old Latin proverb called it "the enemy of honor"; and someone else chose to call it "the sorrow of fools."

Superficial jealousy says, "I want what you have." For example, let's say my neighbor gets a new car and I respond in the following way: "Oh, I wish I had that. How come he gets a new car? How can he afford it? He doesn't make any more money than I do. People see me driving around the neighborhood in my old car, and they don't think I'm successful. And if I just get it fixed up and painted, they'll know I'm trying to appear successful." Superficial jealousy, then, says, "I want what he has." But that's not the deepest level.

Deep Rooted jealousy: The deepest level of jealousy says: "I wish he didn't have it." The first level of jealousy is wanting what someone else has, but the second level is resenting that they have it. William Barclay described it this way: "Meanness of the soul can sink no further than that." Deep jealousy is not just that you want something, it's that you don't want anyone else to have it.

Jealousy Discussed:

It's easy to be jealous, isn't it? Somebody will give me a tape of someone and say, "John, you've got to hear this guy. He's fantastic!" Well, my first inclination, once I begin listening to the tape, is to say, "He's not bad, but I've heard better." But if he's really good, it's hard for me to handle, because sometimes my ego gets in the way. Now there are lots of men that are better preachers than I am...I just don't buy their tapes. That's not totally true, but you understand what I'm talking about, don't you? It's very difficult to rejoice over somebody who does exactly what you do, but does it better. I remember as an athlete how hard it was to play second string to a guy I knew was better than me. Sometimes I wished that he'd break his leg, or I'd think, "Why did his father marry that mother and make a combination that turned out so good?" And there were times when I'd have horrible thoughts like, "Why couldn't he have had polio when he was a kid?" Jealousy causes us to say and do strange things, but it's something that we all can relate to, isn't it?

Jealously Displayed: The root word for envy, in the Greek, means "to boil." It refers to an inner boiling, seething, or steaming over something somebody else has. This is precisely what the Corinthians were doing. In 12:31a Paul says, "But covet earnestly the best gifts...." In the English, it's translated as a command, but it would be better translated to read, "But you are coveting the showy gifts." Let me show you why: The Greek word for "covet" in 12:31 is the same word for envy in 13:4. One of the principles of hermeneutics states that when the same word is used in the same context, it means the same thing. That's why I believe that Paul is being negative in 12:31. He's not saying, "Covet certain gifts," he's saying, "The problem with you is that you're envious of certain gifts." It's the same thought. They were envious. If you doubt that, take a look at 1 Corinthians 3:3a, where Paul says, "For ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions...." They were suffering from what Solomon called "rotteness of the bones" (Prov. 14:30b).

Jealousy Disarmed: Love does not envy. When love sees somebody who's prosperous, popular, or powerful, it is glad...it rejoices. I always think of Philippians 1:12-18, where Paul writes and says, "Yes, I'm in jail. And there are some new young preachers coming along that are being accepted by the people. These young preachers, however, are saying, 'Paul's in jail because he blew his ministry. He's not useful to the Lord, so the Lord put him on a shelf.'" In verse 16 he says, "The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds." In other words, "It isn't enough that I'm in chains, they want to add more injury."

How does Paul react to them? Is he jealous that they're in the limelight? Is he jealous that they're the new breed of preachers? Is he jealous that they are doing what he used to do, only they're getting all the flowers and all the hurrahs? No. Look at his response in verse 18: "What then?...whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in that I do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice." You see, Paul had the spirit that says, "I don't envy anybody who does what I do--even if they do it better and get more applause." Love just rejoices in other's success and usefulness.

Jealousy Documented: Jealousy is such a destructive thing. I once started a little Bible study on this, and quit after only a few minutes, because I realized that it could take me a month. As I began to chart the sins that were connected to jealousy, I had a hard time getting out of Genesis. For example:

Eve: The first sin in the Bible is a sin of jealousy. In Genesis 3:5, Satan said to Eve, "Wouldn't you like to be like God?" Eve must have thought, "Yeah, I sure would. Why should He be the only one with the knowledge of good and evil? I don't want to be left out. I want to be like God!" Jealousy spawned Eve's sin, and the race fell.

Cain: The next sin specifically stated in the Bible is murder. Cain killed Abel. Why? Because he was jealous--jealous of the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice over his own.

Joseph's Brothers: I didn't get very far in Genesis, until I ran into a man named Joseph whose brothers sold him into slavery. Why? Because they were jealous.

Jealousy Denounced: a. **Proverbs 27:4**--"Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous, but who is able to stand before envy?" Envy is "hatred without a cure." It destroys the insides of a man.

b. **James 3:14-16**--James had some words to say about jealousy and envy: "But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not [i.e., you don't have anything to be proud of], and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, demoniacal. For where envying and strife are, there is confusion and every evil work."

Every evil work spawns itself out of envy and jealousy. It's hard to conquer, isn't it? When somebody in your job gets a promotion over you, or when somebody right near you does what you do better than you...it's hard to take. I used to go through that in school. I'd work real hard, but everybody would get better grades than me. And that would get me jealous. Jealousy works its way into every dimension of life. The only thing that can conquer it is love.

Jealousy Defeated: There once was a king whose name was Saul. King Saul had a son named Jonathan, who was perhaps next in line to inherit the throne. Along comes a fair-haired, Hebrew singer by the name of David. And not only was he a singer, he was also a lion tamer, a giant-killer, handsome, articulate, poetic, a supreme musician...all kinds of abilities. One person with so much talent could be a very unpopular fellow. And with Saul, he was. Saul hated him, didn't he? He hated him because of his abilities and because of the threat that the throne could someday go to him. One day, in a fit of fury, Saul grabbed his spear and threw it at David, trying to kill him.

Now, we don't know anything in particular about Jonathan except for the fact that he shot an arrow fairly well, right? That's about it. We don't know anything about his musical ability, or his articulation, or anything else about him. Scripture does say one important thing about him, though: Jonathan never ever had any jealousy over David. You say, "Well, he didn't stand to lose as much as Saul." Yes he did. He was in line for the throne, and from the human perspective it could have one day been his. But the Bible says this about Jonathan: "And Jonathan...loved him [David] as he loved his own soul" (1 Sam. 20:17). Do you know what made the difference between Saul and Jonathan? Love did. You see, Saul was jealous and Jonathan was not. Jonathan loved David, and love can't be jealous.

The Bible tells us that there's no place in the life of a Christian for jealousy...none at all. Satan's going to work on us in that area because it's such a subtle thing. We don't think it's all that evil to be jealous, but it's rotten right to the core. We all fight it. We look at the blatant, flagrant, outside sins--but the sin of jealousy can gnaw and eat at the heart.

Satan's Attack on Saints: Oscar Wilde once told a story that went something like this: The devil, while crossing the Libyan desert, came upon a group of his demons who were trying very hard to cause an old hermit to sin. Now this saintly hermit had taken his vows, been set apart by the church, said no to everything in the world, and taken his cross and gone to the desert. The demons tried to involve the hermit in sins of the flesh, tempting him in every way they knew how...but to no avail. Steadfastly, the saintly man resisted their suggestions. Finally, after watching their failure in disgust, the devil whispered to the demons, "What you're doing is too crude. Permit me one moment." And then the devil whispered to the holy man, "Your brother has just been made Bishop of Alexandria." A scowl of malignant jealousy crossed his face. "That," said the devil to his demons, "is the sort of thing I recommend."

Do you get the point? If Satan can't get us in one area, he'll get us someplace else. And jealousy is a good place to get tripped up in. There's no better way to test a man than this: Let someone beneath him, or someone on his level, begin to succeed beyond him. Then, see how he handles it.

How To Be a Fool In One Easy Lesson: A story is told about two great Italian symphony conductors, Toscanini and Mascagni. Mascagni was a proud, egotistical, unbelievably terrible character. Just to give you an idea of what he was like, he dedicated one of the operas he wrote to himself. Well, Mascagni resented Toscanini because of Toscanini's popularity. One day, a committee in charge of putting on a music festival in Milan (to honor the composer, Verdi), inquired as to whether Toscanini and Mascagni would lead the orchestration. Mascagni was so jealous of Toscanini, that he didn't even try to hide it. So he said, "I will conduct on one condition--that I am paid more money than Toscanini." The management agreed, and at the close of the festival, Mascagni received his fee--one lira. Toscanini had conducted for nothing, and Mascagni came out a fool.

III. The Permanence of Love. I Corinthians 13:8-13

Pondering the Principles

1. The first property of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is patience, or long-suffering. It specifically refers to someone who never retaliates or gets angry when wronged by another person. It isn't a word that concerns itself with circumstances or events, it refers more to having a

long fuse with people. Now the principle to ponder is this: How patient are you with the members of your family, with your colleagues at work, and with those in the body of Christ? Are you easily offended, or do you have a long fuse? Do you seek retaliation when wronged, or are you quick to forgive? If you have a problem with patience, remember this: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering..." (Gal. 5:22a). What, then, is the only way to deal with a lack of patience? To walk in, and be filled with, the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 25; Eph. 5:18; cf. Col. 1:11). This involves confessing your sins (1 Jn. 1:9), continually surrendering and submitting yourself to God, and letting "the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16a).

2. Having evaluated patience and its presence or absence in your life, let's look at kindness. Kindness takes patience one step further, and not only endures the offenses of others, but strives to meet the offenders' needs. To be kind literally means "to be useful." Are you useful to others...even to your enemies (see Mt. 5:43-48)? When someone hurts you or gets angry at you, is your first thought to do something kind for them? Do you think that others characterize you as being kind? Ask God to make you into a man or woman of kindness, and ask Him to show you practical ways to be useful to those around you.

3. Is there somebody who does the same thing that you do--whether it's your job, your ministry, your sport, or your hobby--but they do it better? How do you feel about that person? Do you admire someone who is better than you at what you both do, or are you jealous over their expertise? When a friend gets something that you have had your eyes on for a long time, but you couldn't (and still can't) afford, do you become genuinely happy for them, or do you become disappointed and feel sorry for yourself? Do you ever get jealous over someone who owns more than you, is more attractive than you, has a better job than you, is more eloquent than you, is smarter than you, is thinner than you, wears nicer clothes than you, drives a more expensive car than you, has more friends than you, has a happier marriage than you, gets better grades than you, etc.? At what level does your jealousy usually manifest itself--superficial (wanting what they have) or deep-rooted (not wanting them to have what they have)? All jealousy is wrong and needs to be confessed as sin. However, the deeper level of jealousy is much more destructive, and more indicative of the sin of discontentment. Honestly evaluate your life, in terms of jealousy or discontentment, and confess all of it to God. Then read and meditate on Philippians 4:11-12 and 1 Timothy 6:6-11.