

## WHAT LOVE DOES (PART 2) 1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-7

I have never had a love affair with politics; nor have I ever been enamored with politicians. But the low opinion I *did* have of our elected leaders took a near-fatal hit after the presidential debates a year and a half ago.

There were times, as I was watching the debates, when I thought I was dreaming. These “respectable” men and women were saying things to each other that I hadn’t seen or heard since I was in the sixth grade. What with all the, bickering, back-biting, name-calling, snide remarks, dirty looks, and verbal low-blows it resembled something more akin to Willy Wonka’s tour of the Chocolate Factory than a presidential debate.

And I must confess that I have still not recovered. Every time I see one of the candidates who participated in these childish shenanigans, I have a hard time taking them seriously, because I cannot separate what they said and did back then, from what they are saying and doing today.

Oh, I know, the reason they behaved so badly was because someone else on the stage was adept at pushing their buttons and getting under their skin. And I’m pretty sure some of them must regret the way they responded. But, I cannot help but wonder if what we saw come out of them was the *real* them, and what we see otherwise is just their public persona.

Which leads me to assert that a real test of character is how a person reacts when someone pushes their buttons or gets under their skin. It is also a test of real love.

For the past few weeks we’ve been talking about how important love is in the life of a Christian. Scripture tells us that love is the basic motive and the basic ethic of the Christian faith. Paul said in Romans that love is the fulfillment of the law, and that all the commandments can be summed up by the rule, “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” (Rom. 13:8-10). Love is *the* defining characteristic, *the* identifying mark of the believer. Jesus said, “*It is by this that all men will know that you are my disciples: If you love one another*” (John 13:35).

But this is not an ordinary kind of love. Jesus tells us that this is a love that enables you to treat even your enemies with respect and consideration. It is a love that wants and pursues what is best even for those who are out to get you. And it is a love that responds graciously and patiently even with those who push your buttons or get under your skin.

I repeat: It is not an ordinary love. In fact it is not even human. It is divine. But it is a love that has been made available to everyone who has put his/her faith in Christ, because when we put our faith in Christ His Spirit comes to live in us. The Holy Spirit becomes our new operating system, and the default mode of the Spirit’s operating system is love.

So, when we walk in the Spirit, when we allow the Spirit to fill us and control us, we are able to love with His love. We are able to love anybody, no matter who they are, what they are like, or what they have done.

Paul is reminding us about this in 1 Corinthians 13. He is writing to a church that was not living up to its potential in this area. Oh, they had a lot of good things going for them—they had some tremendous gifts and some terrific leaders. But when it came to their relationships, they were not operating in the Spirit, but in the flesh—their old operating system. That old operating system that we inherited from Adam is inherently selfish, and so instead of putting others first it was me-first. Instead of elevating each other they were putting each other down, and instead

of being kind and gracious, they were being rude and condescending.

As we began our study in 1 Corinthians 13, we learned that we may have spiritual gifts that enable us to say and do extraordinary things; we may have faith and knowledge that astounds people; we may make the most extreme personal sacrifices, but if these things are not motivated by love and exercised in love, they are worthless. It is *love* that gives value and substance to spiritual gifts and service and sacrifice.

We also learned that the word for love, *agape*, is not an *emotional* word but a *volitional* word—an act of the will. It refers to a deliberate choice and an enduring commitment to pursue the highest good of another. The focus of *agape* is the *person*. Not what the person says or does or doesn't do. But who the person *is*...in God's sight, and what the person is becoming. In fact, the goal of love is to help that person become everything God intended him/her to be—a person who is conformed to the image of Christ. And love is the catalyst that enables that transformation to take place.

That's the definition of *agape*. But, admittedly, it's an abstract definition, and abstract definitions don't always help us understand what it looks like in real life. That's why in verses 4-7 Paul tells us what love is by describing what love does. **Verses 4-7.**

<sup>4</sup> *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* <sup>5</sup> *It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* <sup>6</sup> *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* <sup>7</sup> *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

Paul divides this paragraph into three sections. The first is two basic attitudes which constitute a summary statement of love. He expands this with eight things that love does not do and five things that love does.

We focused our attention last week on verse 4. "*Love is patient.*" Love hangs in there with people who fail, disappoint, or don't improve as rapidly as we'd like. Love refuses to give up on people, even if they fail and disappoint and offend and hurt us over and over.

"*Love is kind.*" Or, better yet, "*love shows kindness.*" This is a reference to being *attentive* to a person—to their words, their feelings, and their needs. It is wanting what's best for another, and going after it. It is *active* goodwill.

"*Love does not envy.*" We get jealous when we compare ourselves with others, and what they are or what they have makes us feel inadequate or inferior. But love is not jealous because love doesn't focus on self. Love doesn't focus on a person's status or position or things or money. Love focuses on the other person's soul. Love wants the best for the other.

Paul goes on to say in verse 4, "*love does not boast.*" Boasting is an attempt to make others think that we are better than we are, or that we have something better than them. But it is incompatible with love because it is focused on self, not on others.

Finally, we looked at the phrase, "*Love is not proud.*" Pride is all about elevating oneself. Love is all about elevating others. That's why pride and love are incompatible.

Paul goes on in **verse 5**: "*Love is not rude.*" This particular word has reference to behaving indecently or in a shameful manner. It is the same word used in Romans 1 where Paul is describing perverse sexual behavior (1:27). There it is translated "shameful" or "indecent". So it is likely that when Paul used this word in 1 Corinthians 13:5 he is describing speech or behavior that has sexual connotations. It might help us to remember that Corinth

was a sensualized, sex-saturated city where its citizens had a world-wide reputation for being lewd and immoral.

Paul is saying, “You might live in that city; you might have once been desensitized yourself and engaged in that kind of indecent behavior. But that’s not who you are anymore. You have a different operating system—the Holy Spirit. And the default mode of that operating system is love.

Love is not crude or lewd. Love doesn’t give someone the creeps. It doesn’t make someone squirm or cause someone to blush. Love doesn’t act inappropriately.

To state it positively, love upholds a person’s honor and dignity. Love looks at a person and sees him/her as made in the image of God, and because of that it treats him/her with utmost respect.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “*Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity*” (1 Tim. 5:1-2). Paul is telling this young pastor to treat people in his church with the respect that he would give his closest family members.

That’s really a statement about love. Treating people with respect, making sure that we are pure in our motives and speech and behavior, is a way of elevating those people and upholding their honor and dignity.

As you know, inappropriate sexual behavior is making headlines these days. And even though it is disturbing to be made aware of these revelations, it is good that these people are being exposed. That kind of behavior is thoroughly demeaning to the person toward whom it is directed. It is a violation of their dignity and worth as persons made in God’s image.

Paul goes on in **verse 5**, “[Love] is not self-seeking.” Or, more appropriately, “*love does not insist on having its own way*” (ESV). The words in this phrase literally mean to *insist on* or *demand* something for yourself. The implication is that you are insisting on getting your way, or getting ahead, or coming out on top.

It is describing a “me-first”, “what’s in it for me,” “how can I get the upper hand” kind of attitude.

We see this in politics all the time. Do you remember at the NATO summit last year when President Trump famously shoved one of the other NATO leaders out of the way so he could position himself in front of all the others and take center stage? Or the famous handshake with the French President in which the firmness and longevity of their grip was an attempt to demonstrate their superiority?

Those may be obvious examples of a “me-first” type of attitude. But it doesn’t take much reflection to discover that all of us do this at times. I’ve noticed it in myself when I fly. Since I’m a frequent flyer I usually get to board the plane before most of the other passengers, and I always take advantage of that perk because besides being able to get situated in your seat without having to be concerned about elbowing the people in front or behind you, or having to climb over the person who is already seated next to your assigned seat, I am assured that my carry-on luggage can be stowed in the bin right above my seat, something that is not guaranteed for late boarders.

But I’ve realized that wanting to get on a plane before other passengers is ultimately about *self-interest*—how I can gain an advantage over those around me, or how it will benefit

me.

Self-interest and self-promotion are the motives behind many of the choices I make. It happens when I'm trying to find a parking space at Costco and I feel a sense of victory when I find one that's close to the entrance, even though someone else was vying for the same space. Or when I'm piling in a car with a bunch of people and I call out "shotgun!"

Some of us hear this and say, "C'mon Stan! You're over thinking this stuff. These kinds of things are just natural. It's natural to try to be first, it's natural to try to gain an advantage, it's natural to try and get the best or the biggest."

It is, indeed, natural...for the operating system we inherited from Adam. But here's the thing: That's not who we are anymore. When Jesus made us new creatures He gave us *supernatural* capabilities, because we now have His nature, and, therefore, we have His values and His priorities.

When Jesus was on this earth did He ever try to be first so that He could have some advantage over other persons? Did He ever try to position Himself in a way that He came out on top? Did He ever choose self-interest over the interests of others?

The answers are *no*. Jesus always put others' needs and interests ahead of His own. Jesus always elevated others.

And because we have His Spirit living in us, who became our operating system when we put our faith in Jesus, we are able to be like Jesus in this way. Because love is the default mode of the Spirit. And love is not pre-occupied with self. Love doesn't ask "what's in it for me?" or "how can I get the upper hand?"

Paul goes on in **verse 5**, "*love is not easily angered.*" Unfortunately, the *NIV* does not translate this word very well. The word literally means "provoked", and so it should be translated "[love] is not provoked." The word is used in a metaphorical sense of repeatedly being poked with a sharp object by someone.

As you know, people being people have quirks and idiosyncrasies that can get on our nerves. People have edges on their personalities that can get under our skin. People do things that rub us the wrong way.

If we're not careful, if we are not being controlled by the Spirit, we can get irritated or exasperated with such people. We can forget that these people are made in God's image and that He made their personalities and loves them for who they are. We can actually come to resent or despise such people.

In his marvelous book, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis describes, through his characters, a simple yet effective way that a Christian's testimony can be destroyed. The senior devil, Screwtape, is writing to his protégé, Wormwood, about how to bring down his charge, who has just become a new follower of Jesus. He says,

*"When two human beings have lived together for many years it usually happens that each has tones of voice and expressions of face which are almost unendurably irritating to the other. Work on that. Bring fully into the consciousness of your patient that particular lift of his mother's eyebrows which he learned to dislike in the nursery, and let him think how much he dislikes it. Let him assume that she knows how annoying it is and does it to annoy—if you know your job he will not notice the immense improbability of the assumption. And, of course, never let him suspect that he has tones and looks which similarly annoy*

*her. As he cannot see or hear himself, this is easily managed” (C.S. Lewis, Screwtape Letters, p.13).*

Our reaction to other people’s shortcomings and failures and idiosyncrasies often leads to our own downfall. Because these things can easily get under our skin and stay under our skin. And when they stay under our skin it’s hard to focus on those persons’ God-given dignity and honor. It’s hard to move toward them or want what is best for them or treat them as more important than ourselves. We would rather put some space between ourselves and them.

But, because we have the Spirit of God living in us, we are able to overlook these things and continue to love them. Because the Spirit gives us *His* love—*agape*—which doesn’t get easily irritated or exasperated. It is a thick-skinned love, and doesn’t get hurt easily, even by repeated poking.

And this love is powerful, for it not only survives difficulty and disappointment, it changes them. It is the catalyst for healing and resolution.

That’s what Paul talks about in the last part of **verse 5**. *“Love keeps no record of wrongs.”* This is a good translation of this phrase, because the word is an accounting term. It was used with reference to registering items in a ledger so one can keep track of them. Here it refers to keeping track of offenses that have been committed against us.

I want to remind you that people are inevitably going to hurt us. People are sinners. It’s in their nature to fail, to disappoint, to offend. That’s not the issue. The issue is how we respond to those wrongs.

Please understand, love doesn’t ignore the wrongs that have been committed. Love doesn’t sweep offenses under the rug and pretend they never happened. That’s not love, because there is never any resolution in those methods.

Love almost always deals with offenses head on. It doesn’t minimize them and it doesn’t make them bigger than they really are. Love faces issues squarely in the eye and calls them what they are—real problems, real hurts, real barriers that need to be broken down. But in the process of dealing with them honestly and openly there can be resolution, and that resolution is called *forgiveness*. Forgiveness is the opposite of keeping a record of wrongs.

Let me ask you something: Are you holding a grudge? Are you harboring resentment? Are you keeping score? There is perhaps nothing so incongruous as a Christian who won’t forgive.

Here’s why: we are what we are by the grace of God. And those who won’t forgive are either strangers to His grace or they’ve forgotten what it’s all about. They’ve either lost touch with the ugliness and filth of their own sin, or they’ve never really seen the offensiveness of that sin before a holy God who was under no obligation to forgive, but had every right to send them to everlasting punishment. *“But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our sins. It is by grace that we have been saved” (Eph. 2:3-4).*

It is absurd to think that I could hold a grudge against someone for a relatively minor debt, in comparison with the debt God pardoned for me.

Please don’t take this lightly. If you are holding a grudge or harboring resentment, let it go. Confess it to God and repent. Get out pick and shovel and start digging a hole, for love buries a multitude of offenses.

You say, “Man, I just can't!” Yes you can. If God's Spirit lives in you, you can indeed. You see, your forgiveness of others is a supernatural response to God's grace in forgiving you. You are capable of being just like Jesus who, when He was being abused and shamed upon a cross, said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

But that kind of forgiveness is only possible when God's Spirit lives in you and you are functioning under His influence and power. Because we, in and of ourselves, do not have that kind of ability. We cannot generate or contrive that kind of love. It is divine love. It's not just something you possess, it's something that possesses you, because it is Him expressing it through you.

Earlier I said that a real test of character is how someone reacts when someone else pushes their buttons or gets under their skin. That is also a test of real love.

We've looked this morning at what real love does, and what real love looks like. It is a kind of love and a quality of love that is out of this world. We need God to give it to us. He gives it to us when we ask Him to fill us with His Spirit, for the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. Be filled with the Spirit, and keep in step with the Spirit. When you do, this is what you'll look like.

## What Love Does (Part 2) 1 Corinthians 13:5

**Main Idea:** Love is a deliberate choice and an enduring commitment to treat all others with utmost consideration, respect, and graciousness

**Who's the real you?**

The Holy Spirit—our operating system

Love—the default mode of the Spirit

**What love does not do**

Love does not behave indecently or shamefully

The meaning of the word

The sensual culture of Corinth

Love does not insist in getting its own way

Love is not provoked

Love does not keep a record of wrongs

The meaning of the word

The implied imperative—forgiveness

## **Application Questions** **What Love Does (Part 2)**

### **1 Corinthians 13:5**

In verse 5a Paul is describing indecent or shameful speech and behavior, which would include such things as coarse joking, foul language, innuendo, and inappropriate gestures and touching.

*How do all these things demean the people who are exposed to them? Why is this incompatible with love?*

*Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity... for these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk, or coarse joking...” (5:3-4).*

*Will you evaluate your life, Monday through Friday, at work or with friends? Is there any hint of these things in your speech and behavior? How can you be set free from this?*

In verse 5b Paul says that love is not self-centered and egocentric. It doesn’t have a “me-first,” “what’s-in-it-for-me,” “I’m going to get the upper hand” kind of attitude.

*Evaluate your life. Now think of what your spouse or siblings or closest friends and family members think about you. Are you others’ centered? Do you put the needs and interests of others (all others) ahead of your own? If not, what is the remedy?*

In verse 5c Paul says that love is not provoked. Love has a thick skin. It doesn’t get easily offended or easily hurt.

*Evaluate your life in relation to this description of love. If you are easily offended or easily hurt what is the remedy for this?*