

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.

For most human beings, “love” is a feeling, or emotion. We say we “love” someone because of the way we feel about them. *Agape*, in particular, is an *action* word, something that is demonstrated. It is not sufficient to *feel agape*; one must do something about it. Beyond that, here in this paragraph (vv4-7, with 8a), Paul personifies love. All the descriptive words that follow are not adjectives, but verbs: *agape* is someone *doing* something. (Realizing this, the old KJV word “charity” isn’t so bad after all—even in the twenty-first century. “Love” to us is a feeling, while “charity” is *doing* something for someone else. That is the idea here.)

Last week I pointed out that Chapter Thirteen is not a hymn to love. It stands as a integral, effective continuation of Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians, and a close examination of the words in vv4-7 reveals that the apostle is using irony (supposedly praising love) to actually blame the Corinthians for their behavior. All we need do is remove the “nots” to get a pretty accurate picture of the Corinthian church: they *are* jealous, envious, arrogant, they seek their own, they *do* take into account a wrong suffered, etc. “Rather than a hymn glorifying how wonderful love is, this text becomes a subtle commentary on what is rotten in Corinth” (Garland). Our take-away from this is to keep the lessons being taught here squarely in the body of Christ. We can make extended application to other relationships, but Paul addresses here specifically how love is to be enacted in the church—or put another way, what love is to look like in the church.

Finally, we could dedicate an entire session to demonstrating from God’s word—as well as our own experience—that all of these actions performed by the personified *agape* correspond perfectly to the actions of our gracious God. All we need do is look to Him and His Son for examples of this righteous behavior, His benevolent actions toward us.

v4

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant,

Love is Patient

I am in the habit of making the point that it’s not that we prefer the more modern versions of the Bible over the old KJV because the KJV is bad translation, but that so many of its word choices are dated, and don’t translate well for this century. But here, in the word translated “patient” in most of our common versions, we have precisely the reverse situation.

The word “patient” does not at all capture the depth of this word *makrothymei*. Patience (or *impatience*) in our vernacular is the husband waiting by the door with his coat already on as he waits for his wife to finish primping for the party. The KJV has it right: “Charity *suffereth long*.” The word means to be long-tempered, to persevere, long-suffering; it means putting up with (i.e., loving in spite of) the most egregious of difficulties (Fee). The first character trait of love pointed out by Paul is that love “endures hardships and difficulties of all kinds over the long haul.”

Love is Kind

If “patient” represents the passive response toward others, “kind” (*chresteuetai*) represents the active response, and the two together reveal the two sides of God’s attitude toward man: In His forbearance He holds back divine wrath toward man’s rebellion and sin; at the same time, His kindness is revealed in the manifold expressions of His divine mercy and grace.

Read Romans 2:4.

Thus the long-suffering and kindness as part of our “love of the brethren” (1 [Thessalonians 4:9](#)) is a measure of godliness in the body. “Kindness recognizes that everyone carries a heavy load” (Garland).

[Love is] not Jealous

After the two positive verbs—patient and kind—Paul points his finger directly at the Corinth church with a list of seven negative verbs, which is a thinly veiled condemnation of how they *are* behaving.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:2-3.

This word (*zelei*) can be either base or noble: When noble, it earnestly desires something nobler for oneself; when base, it jealously longs for the betterment of oneself to the detriment of another. Love does not behave in this base manner.

Love Does Not Brag (boast)

The next two verbs—brag and arrogant—are associates, much like the earlier patient and kind. This first means to “behave as a braggart,” or “to be a pompous windbag.” With this rare word (*perpereuomai*), first used here, Paul may be pointing his accusatory finger less toward the church members and more toward his rivals for their hearts and minds. Remember his earlier references to those of whom the church was becoming enamored, with their impressive presence and superior “wisdom” and “knowledge.”

Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-21.

[Love] is Not Arrogant

The next verb goes hand-in-glove with the previous. The word is *physioutai*, and means to be “puffed up.” Paul may be still referring to the speakers the church was listening to, but we have lots of evidence that of this he accuses the Corinthian body.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-8.

Garland writes, “Love is constructive. It builds up the building. The puffed-up spirit blows up the building.” *MacArthur*: Arrogance is big-headed; love is big-hearted.

v5

does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

[Love] does not Act Unbecomingly

Here once again we have the old KJV coming out with one of the better translations: “[Love] doth not behave itself unseemly.” The NASB comes in a close second with “unbecomingly,” but the versions that have translated this “rude” (ESV, NIV84, NKJV, CSB) miss the mark. The verb (*aschemonei*) means to behave shamefully, disgracefully, indecently. It can and often does include “rudeness,” but that doesn’t capture the word’s true depth and scope, which can include sexual or nudity overtones. Paul’s use of this word here points back to

- the gross impropriety of the man living with his father’s wife (5:1-2);
- the behavior of the women (and men) bringing shame on their “heads” by dressing and grooming themselves inappropriately for worship (11:2-16);
- the behavior of the “haves” at the Lord’s Table, humiliating “those who have nothing” (11:20-22).

In the grace of Christ—not to mention as citizens of the United States—we enjoy many liberties. But love dictates that we are never to abuse those liberties to the point that they bring dishonor, disgrace, shame or pain on others in the body.

Read Galatians 5:13-14.

[Love] does not Seek its Own

From Paul’s three-chapter treatise on “liberty” (8-10, “concerning things sacrificed to idols”), we have a pretty good idea that some in the Corinth church were more concerned with what benefited themselves than what benefited others. Since it was no stumbling block to their own faith to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, they had little concern for how their self-indulgence might be a stumbling block for the faith of others.

Read 1 Corinthians 10:23-24, 32-33.

To that Paul adds, in 8:11-13,

For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.

I agree with Gordon Fee who suggests this item—and I would include with it the previous (“does not act unbecomingly”)—may be the fullest expression of what Christian love is all about.

Fee: It does not seek its own; it does not believe that “finding oneself” is the highest good; it is not enamored with self-gain, self-justification, self-worth. To the contrary, it seeks the good of one’s neighbor—or [even] enemy.

That is how we closed our last session. It’s appropriate to do it again:

**Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.
(Philippians 2:3-4)**