

PREFACE

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a.

We now continue through the apostle Paul's characterization of *agape*: how it behaves; what it looks like; what actions it takes. And it is appropriate for us to be reminded of a couple of points.

- *Agape*, in particular, is not just a feeling, but 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.
- Chapter Thirteen is not a "hymn to love," but a 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 (on the surface, 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).

In our previous session we looked at how *agape*

- is **long-suffering**; it perseveres through trials, and "endures hardships and difficulties of all kinds over the long haul." *Agape* does not reject the company of brothers and sisters in Christ simply because they are inconvenient.
- is **kind**; the long-suffering and kindness as part of our "love of the brethren" is a measure of godliness in the body.
- is not **jealous**; *agape* does not jealously long for the betterment of oneself to the detriment of another.
- does not **brag** and is not **arrogant**; *agape* does not behave like a pompous, know-it-all windbag, and it is not puffed up with itself.
- does not **act unbecomingly**; *agape* does not behave shamefully, disgracefully, indecently.
- does not **seek its own**; true love does not insist on its own personal rights and liberties at the expense of others. If something it is at liberty to do will inflict harm to the faith of a brother or sister, *agape* will forego that right (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Now we're ready to continue in this passage.

...is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered,

[Love] is not Provoked

With this word, *paroxynetai*, Paul begins to speak less of the evil in oneself and more to how one responds to the evil in others (Bittlinger). At the same time, however, this word is a close cousin to the first in this passage: long-suffering. When this verb is in the *active* voice, it means “to arouse someone to anger”; here, in the *passive* voice, it means that *agape* “is not easily provoked to anger by others,” or to be easily irritated (ESV). Garland translates this, “Love is not cantankerous.”

My guess is that every one of us can find one or more of these character traits of *agape* in which we miss the mark, fail to meet this standard. Frankly, I’ve already found two for myself—this being one of them.

It is important to point out that this does not speak of what we might term “righteous anger.” Certainly Jesus exhibited such anger at times, as did Paul—but note that their anger, their provocation, was not sparked by a personal affront—or, as is often the case today in this detached, online society, by what is *considered* a personal affront—but by an affront against God, or His righteousness. They rose up in anger at things that anger God (MacArthur).

[Love] does not Take into Account a Wrong Suffered

In our previous study I lauded the original KJV for its translation of a couple of words in this list. I now need to balance the record—again, not that the KJV (and in this instance NKJV) is necessarily wrong, but just that it does not capture the fullness of the Greek with its “thinketh no evil.”

The image of *logizetai to kakon* is of “keeping records of wrongs with a view to paying back injury” (Garland). In his second (extant) letter to the Corinthians, Paul states (using the same word, *logizetai*) that God in Christ does the same for us.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:19.

So the idea here is not that we don’t think about or acknowledge a wrong done to us, but that we don’t, as it were, compose a list of wrongs with the idea of getting back at those who have wronged us. We would be super-human if we didn’t notice evil done to us, but we are to follow the pattern of our heavenly Father who forgives and forgets the transgressions—as Paul exemplified earlier in the same letter.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

v6

[Love] does not Rejoice in Unrighteousness...

Agape does not celebrate sin. The Greek word *adikia*, translated unrighteousness in the NASB, can mean iniquity or injustice—which might be a better companion to the second clause regarding “truth.” Any act of injustice will invariably include a measure of duplicity, shading the truth, or outright lying. If injustice, it may be that Paul refers back to Christians defrauding Christians in the secular (pagan) courts (6:1-11). If unrighteousness, he may be referring to the episode regarding the man living with his father’s wife (5:1-13). In either case, we are not to celebrate bad behavior, but rid it from our midst.

...but Rejoices with the Truth

“Rejoice” in the first clause translates the Greek *chairei*, while “rejoices” in the second translates *synchairei*, which means “to rejoice together.”

Read 1 Corinthians 12:26. (same word)

It is easier to illustrate the *opposite* of rejoicing in truth, because there are so many instances today of churches, even entire denominations officially rejoicing in preaching and teaching a false gospel—not just shaving off the sharp corners of God’s truth, but manufacturing their own brand of “truth” that actually runs counter to God’s word and Christ’s gospel. “Rejoicing with the truth” means—from the individual, to the small Bible study, to the local congregation, to the denomination—standing with, living, and celebrating the rock-solid truth of God’s word.

v7

...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Paul wraps up this paragraph with a staccato-like coda. It is rhythmic; it is forceful. The repeated word accompanying the verbs, translated “all things” in all but the NIVs, is the Greek *panta*. It can mean all or every, but can also mean, as it is translated in the NIVs, always (lasting, continually, continuously). “All things” is good translation, but leaves it open for the erroneous interpretation that Paul is saying that love is gullible (“love believes all things”).

Here is Thiselton’s interpretation: “Love never tires of support, never loses faith, never exhausts hope, never gives up.”

Here’s how *The Message* paraphrase renders v7:

Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

[Love] Bears all Things

The word translated “bears” (*stegēi*) in all but the NIVs *can* mean to cover or protect (as it does in the NIVs) but here it means to bear up under any circumstances; NEB: “There is nothing love cannot face.”

[Love] Believes all Things

This is not saying that love is gullible, believing everything it hears. The Greek here is *pisteuei*, which is from the common word in the NT for faith or trust, *pistis*. It means that *agape* trusts deeply, solidly, thoroughly; it does not lose its faith in God.

[Love] Hopes all Things

In the Christian life a close relative of trust and faith is hope (*elpizei*). This could refer to the hope each believer has in his or her eternal future—a “hope” better termed “confidence”—or *agape*’s hope in others.

[Love] Endures all Things

Nearly synonymous with the first verb, endures (*hypomenei*) refers to *agape*’s “ability to hold out during trouble and affliction (Garland).” *Hypo* means “under,” so the picture here is of love enduring as the heavy weight of troubles and hard times bears down upon it.

Gordon Fee: The first and fourth [verbs deal] with present circumstances, the second and third [look] to the future. Thus it is the character of love to “put up with everything.” . . . So too the final verb, “love always perseveres.” Love has a tenacity in the present, buoyed by its absolute confidence in the future, that enables one to live in every kind of circumstance and continually to pour oneself out in behalf of others. Paul’s own ministry was a perfect example of such love.

The enclosed verbs [second and third] reflect the other two members. . . . In saying “love always trusts” and “hopes,” Paul does not mean that love always believes the best about everything and everyone, but that love never ceases to trust God and thus leave justice in God’s hands.

In his conclusion to this passage, Fee suggests the manner by which every believer might make the best use of its exhortation.

Fee: It is often pointed out that in this paragraph Paul seems best to capture the life and ministry of Jesus. So much so that one could substitute his name for the noun “love” and thereby describe love in a more personal way: “Jesus is kind, is not easily angered, etc.” After doing so, however, one does not want to miss Paul’s point, which ultimately is description for the purpose of exhortation. Perhaps that point could best be captured by putting one’s own name in place of the noun “love” (Gordon is patient and kind—really?) and not neglecting thereafter to find a proper place for repentance and forgiveness. Indeed, rereading this section for a final edit came home once more as a bombshell from heaven, regarding the ease with which one falls into unloving behavior.

v8A

Love never fails;

Although it does technically belong to the next paragraph (vv8-13), I cannot help but include the statement “Love never fails” with vv4-7. In our next session we will dig deeper into this clause in its context, but I believe it makes a resounding final statement for the previous paragraph.

Taken as the end of vv4-7, the common translation, “Love never *fails*” could mean that love is never defeated, or persists even when rebuffed. If, however, it goes with vv8-13, and is translated from the alternate manuscript sources, it reads “Love never *falls*”—as in love never comes to an end (ESV, CSB), or becomes invalid, or always endures.

Either way it expresses *agape*’s permanency, its dependability. *Agape* will always be there, and it will never stop performing its purpose in the life of trust and faith in Christ Jesus.