

The Quest for Character: Love

We are in a series called *The Quest for Character* and anchor verse for this series is Romans 8:29: *For those whom he [God] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* God is at work in your character and mine, making us more like Jesus.

If you want to measure something accurately, you need to use the correct unit of measurement. We don't measure a house in gallons, we measure it in square feet. When baking a cake, we don't expect the recipe to call for a square foot of flour, we expect it to measure the ingredients in cups and tablespoons. There are specific units of measurement for length, distance, weight, mph, time, and so on. And then there are some pretty unusual units of measurement.

- For instance, the beard-second. The beard second was devised to measure incredibly small distances and is defined as the length an average physicist's beard grows in a second.
- Or do you know about the smoot? A smoot is a measurement of 5'7" and came about when, in 1958, some MIT students wanted to measure the length of the Harvard Bridge used a guy named Oliver Smoot, who happened to be 5'7". In case you're wondering, the Harvard Bridge turned out to be 364.4 smoots minus one ear. Their markings are there to this day and are repainted twice a year.
- What if you want to measure how bad something smells? For that there is "Hobo Power". Hobo Power rates stench on a 0-100 basis. An odor of 50 Hobo Power will have you hurling projectiles of vomit and 100 Hobo Power is fatal.
- Have you ever wanted to get a bead on how cool you are? Is there a way quantify coolness? For that there's the unit of measurement known as the Megafonzie. Mega meaning one million and Fonzie meaning Arthur Fonzarelli from Happy Days, better known as Fonzie or "the Fonz". The Fonz was so cool he could cause bullies to run and girls to swoon just by combing his hair. It leaves us all wondering where do I rate on the Megafonzie scale?

These units are all in fun, but on a more serious note how do we measure where we are in the process of becoming more like Jesus? What unit of measurement can we use to assess our progress in being more like Jesus? The answer is found in one of the most beautiful passages in all the Bible.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 1 Cor. 13:1-3

This is a beautiful passage, but it's also a passage about measuring.

- If we measure how much like Jesus our character is by our spiritual gifts, Paul says we're in danger of being more like a noisy cymbal than like Jesus. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (vs. 1)*
- It doesn't matter how much power and Bible knowledge and faith we have, if we don't have love,

we're nothing: ² *And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. (vs 2)*

- Even things that seem to define love like sacrifice and philanthropic giving, if done without love, leaves us empty: *If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (vs 3)*

How can we measure God's work of engraving Christ's character upon our character? The primary measuring unit has to be love.

God is love and the gospel is love

1 John 4:8 declares that God *is love*. Love is at the very core of who God is, at the core of God's character. Love is also at the very core of the gospel: God so *loved* the world that He gave His only Son. Jesus said, *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. (John 15:9)* and Paul reminds us that we live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20)

The enemy of our souls wants to distort our view of God's character by slandering Him as unloving, unkind, not caring, distant, judgmental. It's true that God is holy and just. God can't allow sin to go unpunished. But we distort God's character if we emphasize those things without emphasizing that God is love. He sent His Son out of love. Jesus gave his life on the cross out of love. If you're not a Christian, you need to know that God loves you and Jesus invites you to open your heart to the love of God by faith and let Him into your life. When you believe in Jesus, God forgives you of your sin, washes all your guilt away, and welcomes you into His family as a son or daughter. The gospel is an invitation to accept God's deep love for you.

When we receive Christ by faith, we receive God's love for us and then God begins to engrave the character of Jesus into us and since God is love, love will be the first and most important character quality He works into us. See, we can't receive God's love for us and then refuse to give God's love to others. If our hearts are full of God's love it will overflow to others – it can't help but overflow to others. If we have God's love, we will give God's love.

So how do we measure Jesus' love in us? How do we know if we're getting closer or farther away from having Jesus' love in us? Let's read on in 1 Cor. 13: 4-8

⁴ *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ⁸ Love never fails. 1 Cor. 13:4-8*

Love is all about the good of others (4-7)

As Matthew's graduation gift, Matthew, Janice, Jared, and I went to see John Mayer in concert on Friday night. John Mayer may not be a theologian but he has a song that says, *love ain't a thing, love is a verb* and he's got that right. Paul lists 15 verbs to describe love - seven positive verbs (what love does) and eight negative verbs (what love doesn't do). Love isn't being mushy or sentimental. It isn't about only saying sweet, positive words – sometimes love has to say and do hard things. But the overarching

characteristic of love is that it seeks the good of others. The agenda of love is genuinely acting for the good of the person you love. Love ain't a thing, love is a verb.

These 15 verbs help us to measure more accurately God's work of making us a more loving person. A more Christ-like person. Let me break these 15 verbs into four action categories and consider how Jesus modeled them perfectly in his life and ministry.

a. Love is compassionate

Love is patient and kind...(vs. 4)

Patience and kindness guard us from damaging people. Impatience and unkindness hurt people. I got word on Thursday that a Christian ministry that provides vehicles to missionaries wrote to Luke and Lauren to say they accidentally gave the van they had set aside for them to someone else and they had no alternative to offer. We reserved it in February! We gave them a deposit! How could they let us know a week away from when it's needed that they gave it away?

So this feeling began to boil in my heart. Pretty sure it wasn't love. I grabbed my phone to call them...but the Lord reminded me of these verses. Love isn't a pushover. It stands up for itself in healthy ways. It seeks justice. It holds people accountable. But it avoids flamethrowing words and actions. It's patient and kind. Even in tough situations – even when someone lets us down, love seeks to protect them from harm and damage.

The word that undergirds this in my mind is compassion. Compassion is feeling empathy for the other person, feeling their pain, not wanting to cause them pain. Impatience and unkindness come from not caring how the other person is affected. Patience and kindness want to protect them from damage.

Many times in the gospels we read how Jesus was moved with compassion. In a fallen world where people fail and fall, love is patient and kind. It gives people room to fail and time to grow. Love isn't harsh and quick to write people off - it gives people grace when they mess up.

b. Love doesn't make it all about me

Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way...(vs. 4)

All five of these verbs have this in common: they indicate a heart that's self-centered. A perspective that sees ourselves as the most important person in the room. The word for "boast" could be translated "windbag". Pride literally makes a windbag out of us. Pride makes it all about me.

By the way, "love doesn't insist on its own way" tells us that love is not manipulative or controlling. When our agenda is more important to us than love, we will try to manipulate or control people into doing what we want. Love set us free from being obsessed with ourselves and our agenda. The agenda of love is what is best for that person.

Jesus didn't come to get his own way. He says he came to do his Father's will. To lay down his life for others. His agenda wasn't self-promoting, it was self-denying for the good of others and the pleasure of his heavenly Father.

c. Love doesn't retaliate, it forgives

Love is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. (vs. 5-6) NIV

People are going to hurt, disappoint, and offend us. And when they do, emotions like anger and resentment can actually provide us with energy and motivation in the short term. If someone does something to offend or hurt you, you may well experience a burst of energy and power by feeling resentful, angry, and/or bitter. But in the long run those same emotions that provide short term energy drain us of energy and hope and joy. And as we sink into a feeling of listlessness and emptiness, we start to look for something that will put the spark back in us, and that something often becomes a fresh offense, a new reason to be angry, a new crime to be outraged about. Some people like feeling angry because they never feel so alive as they do when they're lit up. That's how we become angry, bitter people. Not good.

Love has a different power source. No one has ever been more wronged than Jesus was - but as he hung on the cross, nailed there by jealous, corrupt religious leaders, a cowardly crowd, and callous Roman soldiers, he didn't allow his heart to be filled with vindictive emotions. He didn't cry out "Father, strike them all dead!" Even at that moment his perfectly loving heart was filled with generous forgiveness: *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they're doing.*

We don't know that any of them repented of their sin or regretted what they did - but Jesus didn't sink to their level, he didn't let his heart get clogged up with anger and bitterness and a thirst for revenge. There are times when it is right to be angry, but God doesn't want us to live in that place. Anger is a God-given emotion to motivate us to make healthy and positive changes (where we can), and then move on, not staying in that place, not staying angry. Love doesn't retaliate, it forgives.

d. Love is relentlessly and realistically committed to building others up

Verse 7 almost seems like a set up for being hurt and taken advantage of: *always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (NIV)*. And then verse 8 makes this blanket statement: *love never fails*. These verses could leave us pretty discouraged and depressed if we tried to protect, trust, hope and persevere and it all seemed to fail. We did verse 7 but we didn't get verse 8.

And yet there is this unqualified measurement: love never fails. How effective is love? 100% effective. It never fails. Again, we need to look at Jesus' life and ministry. He had real enemies who never stopped hating him. He loved the rich young man who rejected his offer to become a disciple and walked away sad. Judas betrayed him, soldiers mocked him, religious leaders scorned him. Jesus loved perfectly and yet, if success is measured by how effective he was at reaching everyone, there seems to be a fair amount of failure.

But that's not how God measures success. Jesus was 100% successful in fulfilling God's will for his life. He was perfectly effective in transforming the lives that God had given him. And he was never derailed from God's path for him. As we pursue the excellent way of love, we aren't guaranteed that every relationship that we try to protect, trust, hope for, and persevere with is going to go the way we want it to, but we can know that God will keep our lives in His will and blessing.

What we do learn from Paul's use of *always* (*trusts, hopes, perseveres*) is that love goes the long haul. It doesn't give up easily. It doesn't bail on a relationship at the first sign of trouble. It recognizes that people are worth hanging in there for.

Sinful bitterness will have us spiraling into a life of selfish, vindictive, pessimistic attitudes that clog up our hearts and rob us of love. Love protects us from that. Love keeps our heart moving in a positive, hopeful direction, working for the good of others and that will never fail.

As a closing thought, just as we can't have God's love in our hearts without giving it, we can't give God's love without having it. God wants you to know His deep, deep love for you so that your heart is full of God's love till it overflows with God's love to others.

We can feel discouraged, like "I'm so far away from loving that way." Remember, God isn't giving up on you either. God is committed to conforming you into the image of His Son Jesus. And we need each other for this process. God puts us in a church family so we can learn and grow in love. We don't always do it perfectly, we will make mistakes, but love is learning to forbear.

- So what is going on in your life right now and what lessons does it hold for your heart to learn and practice love?
- Is there someone you need to show patience and kindness to?
- Is there someone who's hurt you and you want to retaliate? Let that go.
- Are you manipulating or controlling someone? That's never right, it's always wrong. And it shows you're more interested in getting your own way than in loving them. Lay that tendency down at the altar and ask God to take it away from you.
- Is there a relationship you're ready to give up on? Have you done all you can do? Is there more you can do? If not, pray. Pray for them.
- Even if they have no interest and never change, God will work His love in you and your life will be blessed and joyful. Love never fails.

Let's pray.