

## What's Love Got To Do With It *I Corinthians 13*

### Introduction

Tina Turner's question "What's love got to do with it?" is very relevant to our study today in the letter of First Corinthians. This is often called the "love chapter" of the New Testament. It is printed on decorative plaques; it is used in wedding ceremonies; it is often quoted as a primary description of love.

But, what about its biblical context? There is the old saying: "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." What's the key in real estate? Location, location, location. The first thing we need to do with a Scriptural text is NOT to rip it out of its context, but to see how it fits within the context and then proceed to deal with application.

Paul is in the midst of addressing problems related to the public gathering of the local church – believers bound together in Christ, meeting for worship. In chapter twelve, Paul begins a discussion of the exercise of spiritual gifts. He notes that it is the Spirit who distributes these gifts to every believer for ministry and service. It is also the Spirit who places each one into the body of Christ, the church. That's what the baptism of the Spirit is all about.

The Corinthian church was filled with problems. In fact, you can tie every descriptive in verses 4-7 to one of these problems. There were divisions among believers, pride in what Paul calls their "worldly wisdom," arrogance in tolerating open sin in their midst, lawsuits, abuse of the communion celebration. In addition, they were misusing their spiritual gifts, some priding themselves in the exercise of the more public sign gifts: prophesying, healings, speaking in tongues.

One of the main points Chris talked about last week from chapter twelve was the attitude of superiority present in the church. Paul calls them to task about this and exhorts them to understand that they need one another.

Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter 13.

Notice how Paul concludes chapter 12 – **I Corinthians 12:31**. Now look at the first verse of chapter 14 – **I Corinthians 14:1**

There are some commentators who believe that this chapter is misplaced. But I think Paul has purposefully injected this marvelous teaching on love to bring perspective on the misuse of spiritual gifts. He is going to show them that without love, the exercise of their gifts are for naught; they are worthless. So he begins this chapter explaining that *Love is Preeminent*.

### **I Corinthians 13:1-3**

He chooses to illustrate his point with specific gifts mentioned in chapter twelve, namely tongues, knowledge and prophesy. Then he adds faith, giving and sacrifice. All of those things are noteworthy and of value to the church, but apart from love, they are nothing.

The principle is applicable to all that we do as a local church as well. You can give; you can serve; you can minister; you can worship; you can sacrifice of yourself. But if those things are not done for love and in love, they are of no eternal value to you.

Paul goes on now to show us that *Love is Practical*.

Love: what a popular word in our world today! I checked the book index from Amazon.com this week and discovered 38,188 book titles regarding “Heaven,” 110,047 for “Money,” 167,375 for “Sex,” 246,833 for “God,” and 373,297 for “Love.”

Love is one of the most sought after, talked about, and thought about concepts in life. It finds expression in so many different ways. Consider this love letter:

Dearest Jimmy,

No words can express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking off our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please, forgive me. I love you; I love you; I love you!

Yours forever, Marie

P.S. And congratulations on winning the lottery!!

Love, according to the old song, “is a many-splendored thing.” It may be that, but it is certainly a many-defined thing. Love is an interesting word – we use it in so

many different ways: “I love my wife; I love donuts; I love golf; I love books.” There are all kinds of definitions out there in our world today.

The love Paul is describing here in First Corinthians 13 is not simply a commendable human virtue. It is love rooted in the character of God. It is love modeled by the way God loves. God is patient and kind. God does not rejoice in wrong doing. God’s love is demonstrated in the cross of Christ. His love is an initiating love, a sacrificing love.

We, as God’s children, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are to love in the same way that God loves. In verses 4-7, Paul shows us what that looks like. There is a particularly interesting thing in these verses. Paul does not use adjectives to describe love, but verbs to show love’s actions. David Garland writes:

Love is not conveyed by words; it has to be shown. It can be defined only by what it does and does not do.

Love is an action – a choice. Love is a focused action; it is a choice we make to act in a certain way. We often think that love is something that just happens to us. We “fall in love,” sort of the way we fall into a ditch. Or we fall out of love just like we fall out of a tree.

But the Bible teaches us that love is something we can control. It is to affect the way we live. It is the fruit of the Spirit-filled and empowered life. You can fall into or out of a feeling but you can’t tumble into or spill out of love. We may choose to start or stop behaving in loving ways, but that choice is entirely within our power.

When you begin to apply this fact to relationships, you suddenly discover the incredible power and leverage in how we act and feel. Let me illustrate with marriage. A spouse decides they don’t feel like being married to the other person any longer. The feelings they once had for their spouse – the desire, the affection, the sexual attraction that once used to excite them and produced what they considered “love” – are no longer present. They might have been dulled by the passing years or habitual routine, unresolved conflict, lazy inattention or maybe even betrayal.

Because they don’t feel love anymore, they conclude that the marriage isn’t worth the effort to work for its existence any longer. Many choose the easy way out – just end it. “We don’t love each other any longer,” is the standard line.

Think for a moment what you are really admitting in those words. What the husband is really saying is, “I’ve stopped behaving in loving ways toward my wife.” The wife is saying, “I’ve stopped behaving in loving ways toward my husband.”

Some of you are old enough to remember the song by the Righteous Brothers: “You’ve lost that lovin’ feeling, whoa, that lovin’ feeling. You’ve lost that lovin’ feeling, now it’s gone, gone, gone...wooooh.”

But if love is not an emotion, but rather a way of acting towards another person, then I can love whether or not the “feeling” is there.

I want you to think about what might be a revolutionary thought: Loving someone when you don’t feel like it is a greater expression of love than loving someone when you do feel like it. Love is getting up in the middle of the night and helping a sick child when that’s the last thing you want to do. Love is being patient with a spouse when they’re irritable and downright grumpy. Love is when you do the right thing – the thing that God wants you to do – even when you don’t feel like it.

So, Paul describes love – the actions love takes or doesn’t take. Let’s take a look at these descriptive words in verses 4-7.

- **Love is patient** – This word is used to describe a situation where you have the power and ability to avenge yourself, but choose not to. It means to “suffer long” with people, to patiently work things out. How often are you tempted to get exasperated with someone else? Love doesn’t react to that; it is patient.

One of Abraham Lincoln’s earliest political enemies was Edwin Stanton. He called Lincoln a “low cunning clown” and “the original gorilla.” “It was ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla,” he would say, “when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois.”

Lincoln never responded to the slander, but when, as president, he needed a secretary of war, he chose Stanton. When his incredulous friends asked why, Lincoln replied, “Because he is the best man.”

Years later, as the slain president’s body lay in state, Stanton looked into the coffin and said through his tears, “There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.” Stanton’s animosity was finally broken by Lincoln’s long-suffering, non-retaliatory spirit. Patient love won out.

- **Love is kind** – This means to “show yourself useful.” If we love others, we will help others in need. There is also an attitude that goes along with this which is to be courteous, considerate and gracious to others. Take a look at the life of Jesus and you see how much of his life was spent doing kind things – simply helping people.
- **Love is not jealous** – This word means to “envy.” If I love others, I am not envious of what they have. Agape love lets me celebrate the blessings and successes of others without harboring jealousy.
- **Love does not boast** – The word means literally a “braggart.” It is used nowhere else in the Bible. It can also mean “wind bag.” What an appropriate description! If you are a person of love, you are secure enough in who you are and what you have that you don’t need to crow about everything you have or do. What does love have to do with it? Our bragging is often a way to set ourselves up above others – to be more concerned with our situation rather than that of the other person.

One of the essential ingredients for a loving marriage is good communication. Poet Ogden Nash hit on a formula for communicating effectively. In his witty style he wrote:

If you want your marriage to sizzle  
 With love in a loving cup;  
 Whenever you’re wrong, admit it,  
 Whenever you’re right, shut up!

- **Love is not arrogant** – This word means “to blow or to puff.” It would be similar to pride – being puffed up about oneself. We see that today related to educational success, business success, of attaining some measure of status or position or power.
- **Love is not rude** – The Greek word means that love does not “behave in an ugly, indecent or obscene manner.” It acts towards others in a worthy manner. Love refuses to sarcastically cut others down.
- **Love is not self-seeking** – Love does not require everything to revolve around you! Love puts others and their needs before your own. A tombstone in a small English village reads:

Here lies a miser who lived for himself,  
And cared for nothing but gathering wealth.  
Now where he is or how he fares,  
Nobody know and nobody cares.

In contrast, there is a plain tombstone in the courtyard at St. Paul's Cathedral in London which reads:

Sacred is the memory of General Charles George Gordon, who at all times and everywhere gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God.

Sometimes we fail in this regard because we consciously choose to elevate ourselves above others. While at other times, we are just so wrapped up in ourselves we don't even think of others.

If we love others, we don't do that. Instead, love focuses upon others. The 13<sup>th</sup> century religious philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas said: "To love is to will the good of another."

- **Love is not irritable** – The word means "not easily angered." If love is a growing character trait in your life, you will have a long fuse. You will not be easily stirred up or prone to anger toward others. This doesn't mean that you simply acquiesce to everything, particularly if wrong or false. But your spirit is tempered.

- **Love does not keep a record of wrongs** – Love means you don't keep score. This is an accounting term. It means you must not add up and itemize the wrongs of others. Many times couples fall into this practice when "discussing" or arguing about something. Suddenly there is an entire history of wrongdoing – real or perceived – that is brought into the mix. One writer puts it this way:

Instead of remembering everything that's ever been done to us, we should wipe out those wrongs by forgiving and by refusing to hold people hostage to what they've done in the past.

We need to learn to give grace to others by acting towards them in a loving way – by cutting them some slack.

- **Love does not delight in evil** – We should not delight to hear of the sin of others – of failings. Nor should we focus on the evil things that are happening in our world.
- **Love rejoices with the truth** – This is the flip side of the previous way in which love works. Agape love celebrates and applauds virtues and things that conform to Biblical truth. Love never ignores or turns a blind eye to truth. The call today in our culture is “just love.” But love must never operate void of truth. Biblical love always conforms to truth.
- **Love bears all things.** It never gives up. The idea here is of protecting. It is a word picture of a blanket that covers or hides things. Look at the perspective of the Apostle Peter:
 

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. –1 Peter 4:8
- **Love believes all things.** Love never loses faith in others even if they have hurt us or messed up. Love gives a second chance, and a third chance.
- **Love always hopes** – To hope means “to expect with desire.” No matter how dark things look, love always maintains an attitude of hope – waiting for things to be resolved, to get better. Hope is a powerful companion of faith.
- **Love always perseveres** – This word means literally “to remain under.” Love hangs in there with others over the long-term. It is a military term used of an army holding a vital position at all costs. Love does not stop loving. God’s kind of love endures. It doesn’t lose interest and bail out. Love lasts because it is based upon commitment, not circumstances.

The love that Paul describes is God’s love in action through us. The most distinctive thing about God’s love for us is that, in the words of D.A. Carson, it is “self-originating.” That is, God loves because he is love. He loves us not because we are loveable, not because we deserve his love or have done anything to earn his love. God loves because it is his nature to love.

That is the way we are to love. We should love because the love of God abides in us. It should be the nature of the Christian to love as God loves. It’s not because that other person is loveable, or deserving of our love.

It's not always easy, is it. There is a humorous video related to youth work that is a great illustration of this. Both guys in the video were once youth pastors and they give us a look at the challenges that are sometimes faced when it comes to loving others. Take a look: **Video – TAD**

We all have “Tads” in our lives – at home, at work, in our carpool, our neighborhood, our family. We are called to love them with a love that flows out of our lives through Christ.

The final thing Paul teaches about love in this chapter is that *Love is Permanent*.

### **I Corinthians 13:8-13**

The “perfect” in this context refers to the time when Christ returns. David Garland writes:

The “perfect” is shorthand for the consummation of all things, the intended goal of creation; and its arrival will naturally displace the partial that we experience in the present age. Human gifts shine gloriously in this world but will fade to nothing in the presence of what is perfect.

But they also will have served their purpose of helping to build up the church during the wait and to take it to the threshold of the end. When the anticipated end arrives, they will no longer be necessary.

Love though, Paul says, will abide forever. And it is to love that Paul calls the Corinthians. It is to love that we are called as followers of Christ.

In the context of spiritual gifts, Paul pauses to speak of spiritual graces. Often in Christian circles, the gifts of the Spirit are elevated above the graces of the Spirit. This seems to be Paul's major point to the Christians at Corinth about their “misuse” of spiritual gifts and the lack of love expressed in the church.

Now, just a few closing thoughts about love:

1) Love is the primary expression of our Christian character. Jesus said:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. – *John 13:34-35*

If we are committed to being a disciple of Christ and growing in that commitment, love will increasingly be a part of our character and conduct.

2) Love for others demonstrates that we know God. In his first letter, the Apostle John writes:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. – *1 John 4:7-8*

3) Love for others is evidence that we live in a state of salvation. If God has saved us and come to indwell our hearts through the Holy Spirit, his life must and will be evident within us. Our lives will be more conformed to his. His love will be displayed through us toward others.

It doesn't always work so well, does it? It is not our natural bent to be self-centered. Unless the power of the Holy Spirit is at work in my life and yours, producing the fruit of the Spirit, we will never be able to love as we ought to and as God has commanded us to do.