

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Greatest of These is Love

Love's Self-Portrait

(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Study #2

Introduction: Challenging challenges to love...

In the greatest sermon ever given - The Sermon on the Mount - (Matthew, chapters 5-7), Jesus said a lot of very interesting things. Among the most interesting are these -

[5:39]... "I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

So, you would say to the evil person, *"So, did what I say offend you? Would it help to hit me again? Will that draw you closer to God? Fire away."*

Then this - ***[5:40] "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also."***

Now, you'll have to use your imagination on a San Antonio June 19th for this one, but you would say to your opponent, *"It's cold out today. Are you sure my shirt is going to be enough for you? Maybe you would like my North Face jacket? I could go home and bring back a sweater and gloves, too, if those would help?"*

And this - ***[5:41] "Whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two."***

To the soldier who has forced you to carry his pack for the obligatory mile, you would say, *"Well, here we are at mile's end. Are you lonely? Would it help you if I just tagged along and carried your load for another mile or so? I could tell you about a Man who always walks with me..."*

I am as challenged by Jesus' words as others have been through the centuries, because He was clearly serious when He said these things.

We want to be careful to not water down Jesus' words and to not explain away what He was clearly saying.

Lots of people have put prayerful thought and consideration into the specific application of Jesus' words here. And I'll admit that applying these very challenging challenges to love is a tough task. But one thing is crystal clear. He was calling His disciples, then and now, to a radical kind of love that our world rarely sees and desperately needs.

Jesus showed radical love throughout His life AND on the cross and He calls you and me to follow in His steps.

He wants us to do that in our homes. He wants us to be known by love at work and at school. I believe that there is no more powerful witness to the Gospel of Jesus than a Christian who loves - unless it is a church that is known for love.

This is why I have wanted to speak to you from 1 Corinthians 13 over these three Sundays. I believe that there is nothing God wants more and there is nothing our world needs more than a loving church.

Now, love does flow here, and I'm grateful to God for the wonderful expressions of love I see week in and week out at our church.

This past week at Vacation Bible School, we saw lots and lots of love. Love shown to kids. Love expressed between the wonderful team of volunteers. Loving interactions with parents and grandparents. It was great!

Imagine if love flowed more freely, more fully, more constantly.

Imagine if all who entered here on Sundays were so well-loved and so lovingly engaged that they could fairly taste the love of God.

Imagine love radiating out from all of us who are here to such an extent that people identify us as the place where they learned of God's love, where their family was put back together, where their addictions were broken, where they learned to walk with God.

2016 is a high-tech world and everybody alive today needs high-touch love. All around us are hurt, wounded, lonely people. And Jesus calls you and me and us to apply His challenge to bloody-faced, short-on-clothes-on-a-chilly-day, second-mile love, to our own lives.

This radical kind of love is something we are each uniquely gifted to give because...we who have come to know God through faith in Christ have been perfectly loved by God.

And now we who are perfectly loved by God are to:

- shower others with that same love;
- pay what we have received from God forward; and
- express our gratitude to God for grace received by loving.¹

Last Sunday, we worked our way through 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, where we saw that love is that "certain something" without which everything else is nothing.

Any of us might have gifts of great eloquence, powerful prophecy, mountain-moving faith and even self-sacrifice. But absent love, even these rich graces are powerless.²

In what we are about to see in the next few minutes, I want us to remember that Paul was writing to a church.

Of course, the church at Corinth was a first-century church. But in all respects that matter - they were believers in Jesus and redeemed sinners - they were like we are. In the fullest sense possible, this is to me and this is to you and this is to us.³

Beginning at verse 4, Paul stops using the first person singular "I" and moves to list the works of love.

He's answering the question, "What is love?" And he answers that question in two ways. First, by addressing "*What does love DO?*" and second "*What does love NOT do?*"

So, he starts in on the first defining trait of the defining trait of the radical disciple of Jesus - love - and he lists patience.

Love - Active and Passive

The One Who Loves is Patient

[4] Love is patient

The word literally translates, "*long-suffering*."⁴ The patient person has a great capacity for endurance when times get tough. He takes the long view. She doesn't fly off the handle.

But, we can say more than this about patience.

As I have spent time with this word and have seen how it is used in a variety of settings, I have come to see that it primarily has to do with patience with people, and not with trying circumstances.

Further, this long-suffering-ness is best seen and most needed when someone opposes us.

¹ Far from being a digression from Paul's main theme of the proper exercise of spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14), this chapter gives us the only means by which spiritual gifts may be properly exercised in the Body of Christ - namely, via love!

² Clearly, bestowing all of one's possessions on another may be motivated by love (as may be speaking, prophesying, faith, and knowledge). Paul is just saying what we all know to be true. Charitable acts may be done from lesser motives, too.

³ Gordon Fee writes, "Some think that this listing is the giveaway that the whole chapter had prior existence as a self-contained unit. However, it is so tailored to the Corinthian situation that it would be quite impossible to reconstruct an earlier expression of it."

⁴ Greek, *μακροθυμία*.

I don't much need the grace of patience when people are respecting me, loving me, and treating me well. It is when someone is not treating me well that I need patience.

And I show love by patiently NOT repaying evil with evil and by being tender and gracious and soft.

The patient Christian doesn't deny how much it hurts to be hurt by someone, especially by someone they love. But while feeling the full weight of that hurt, the patient Christian says, *"I'll wait for God to right all wrongs."*

So, patience provides what we'll call the passive side of love. For the active side, Paul calls us to kindness.

The One Who Loves is Kind⁵

[4] love is kind

In any relationship, kindness helps. In a close friendship or in a marriage, multiplied kindnesses promote closeness and health. Everybody wins in the presence of kindness.⁶

But, the far greater need for kindness is when relationships are strained. When there is friction and tension or when there is outright hostility, there is a strong temptation to lash out in anger or to be sullen and withdrawn.

Paul says that the loving man or woman resists that temptation and is kind. They go out of their way to bless those who do them dirty. They are learning to say, *"I can give to others out of the resources Christ supplies."*

So, here are two introductory, summarizing comments about love.

⁵ cf. 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Titus 3:4-7.

⁶ How much damage is done when kindness is neglected. We say, *"He/She is taking me for granted."* The specialness of the relationship is gone. We no longer perform little, random acts of caring and kindness for one another. And in the absence of kindness, closeness fades.

People who love well are patient when they are wronged because they trust God to (eventually) right all wrongs. And, people who love well deal in kindness because they are drawing on their experience of Christ's love for them.

This is what love does. Paul follows that up with seven things love does NOT do. And this list seems to have been taken right out of The Corinthian Files.

For one thing, radical love means that we don't compare ourselves with each other. Comparing with others always leads to problems. And Paul says that love refuses to play the comparison game.

Love, Viewed Negatively....

No Comparisons

No jealousy

[4] and is not jealous⁷

I am to flee comparisons with those who are gifted or talented in ways I am not, because that will lead me to green-eyed jealousy.⁸

Jealousy violates love. Jealousy and love are mutually exclusive. Jealousy leads to division and strife.

There are actually a few things I'd love to be able to do that others are able to do. But I can't.

For instance, while I deeply admire people with artistic gifts, I'm not gifted that way. Colors and shapes aren't my thing. For evidence, I can point to the women's restroom in the upper end of our building.

⁷ Note 1 Cor. 12:31 for this word ("*jealousy*" translated there, "*earnestly*") in a good sense. Paul generally uses this word in a positive sense.

⁸ That is exactly what the Corinthians were doing with respect to spiritual gifts. One Christian wanted to be able to do what another Christian was gifted to do. He couldn't because God hadn't gifted him in that way. So, he got jealous.

Many years ago I was alone in the church when a paint contractor came by who needed an immediate decision on the paint color for that area. I looked at the paint swatches and chose a color. I chose poorly. (Kathy insists that the painter must not have followed my instructions, on the assumption that nobody, not even Dave, would have chosen THAT color.)

Again, I love music. And, since I became a Christian in the 70's, I played guitar. But I was never good at it. In college I had two roommates who were excellent guitarists and I deeply coveted their abilities. I even practiced, but marked improvement never came.

I watch our Praise Team members play and hear them sing and am blessed by the music that I could never produce.

I'd love to be good with colors. I watch with admiration as the VBS decorations went up. I'd like to have artistic gifts.

And maybe you would like to be able to lead group discussions like some can or to serve graciously like others can. And you can't. It's not your thing. You're not gifted/wired that way.

So, we're all learning to say to those who can do things we can't, *"I'm so glad that you're able to sing/play/serve/lead better than I can. Our church is stronger because of your giftedness!"*

So, comparisons "up" are dangerous, and we will always find things that others can do better than we can. But comparisons "down" are just as dangerous.

No bragging

[4]...love does not brag and is not arrogant⁹

And here is a timely word.

I count about twenty times in the two Corinthian letters where Paul had to call the members of the church at Corinth on the carpet for arrogant boasting.

They were proud of their wisdom (1 Cor. 3:21), of their superior spiritual insights (1 Cor. 8:1), of their ability to wield spiritual power (1 Cor. 4:18-19), of their reputation (2 Cor. 5:12).

But boasting, just like jealousy, works against love. At one point, exasperated, Paul asked them, ***[1 Corinthians 4:7] What do you have that you have not received?"***

When we boast about our giftings from God, it's like a kid boasting to his friends on Christmas about what he found under the tree, as if he had anything to do with those gifts.

If we are "gifted" arrogant boasting is silly. What's fitting is gratitude.

So, with respect to strengths and talents and abilities we have, we are learning to say, *"Any blessing I may be able to bring to others is the gift and the grace of God. I'm humbled that God would use me."*

Here's where love lands with respect to comparison.

You are God's child through faith in Jesus. So, you're not depressed about what you can't do and you're not arrogant about what you can do. You are content. And love grows in the soil of contentment.

Now, if you fight to find contentment, I recommend that you work hard to nurture the grace of affirmation.

Here's how it works. When you notice someone blessing others by what they do or say, affirm them. Say it out loud and tell them with words that you appreciate their service.

This ministry of affirmation is safe to practice at home and at church and even at work.

Affirmation dissipates a competitive spirit and it nurtures appreciation for others' giftedness.

⁹ The standard Greek lexicon of the New Testament refer to the braggart as "a wind-bag." (Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich)

So when you sense the ugliness of comparison - either “up” or “down” - coming on, tell a Praise Team member or a Missions Committee member or a youth leader or a Sunday School teacher, or a Deacon or an Elder that you are grateful that they use their time and energy and talents to serve.

To combat comparison-ism, you can tell them, *“I thank God for you and for the contributions you bring to my life, our family, our church!”* - and you’ll break the stranglehold of jealousy and arrogance.

And there are other dynamics that work against the growth of love in a church. Here’s one.

No Selfishness

[5] does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own.

We draw the conclusion, since Paul spoke against it, that **“unbecoming”** (indecent, shameful) things might happen in a church.

We see it in our own day, and Corinth saw its share of *“unbecomingness,”* too.

Corinth saw things like:
a man in an immoral relationship with his father’s wife (1 Cor. 5);
believer taking believer to a court of law to settle disputes (1 Cor. 6);
getting drunk at the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11).

And more, besides.

According to Paul, unbecoming as these were, they were, first and foremost, sins against love. And it was a sin against love, too, to not stop them.

The church that loves doesn’t engage in immoral behavior, doesn’t sue each other, doesn’t abuse alcohol while worshiping. And the church that loves is strong enough to take action against such

things. It’s more concerned to stop **“unbecoming”** behavior in the church than it is to *“go along to get along.”*¹⁰

It is obviously selfish to take advantage of others. It is less obviously (but no less truly) selfish to allow others to take advantage of others.

A full picture of love in our church will include not only affirmation of what is good but truth-telling about what’s not so good.

To be truly concerned for others is to be willing to say the hard thing, to take the difficult road of correction and reproof, to exercise discipline.

Love requires courage. And love also requires a willingness to forgive.

Love Forgives

Love is not touchy

[5] is not provoked

Frankly, I like the way that the King James Version translates this phrase: **“is not easily provoked,”** because it provides something of an “out.” Unfortunately, there is no reason for including the word **“easily”** in the phrase.

It just doesn’t exist in the original. Perhaps a translator with a short fuse was assigned this phrase and he couldn’t believe that Paul would say it so bluntly, **“is not provoked”** - period. So, he added an “out” - **“easily.”**

Paul said, **“is not provoked.”**¹¹

¹⁰ Bible scholar Gordon Fee has said of this phrase, *“In some ways, this is the fullest expression of what Christian love is all about.”*

¹¹ Note Acts 15:39, where Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement (same word as here - a *“provocation”*) over whether or not to bring John Mark on the Second Missionary Journey. Also, see Acts 17:16, where Luke tells us that Paul’s spirit was being **“provoked”** by the idols in the city of Athens. These examples are not to

This is the same word he used in Ephesians 5 when he told fathers to not **“provoke”** (as in *“don’t exasperate”*) their children to anger and frustration. The difference is that in 1 Corinthians 13, you and I are not the exasperators. We are the exasperatees.

Ready for the challenge? Even when somebody is trying to “get to you”, even when someone is poking you with a stick, you don’t give in to the provocation.

In short, love isn’t “touchy.” No, you are perfectly loved by God, so even when someone is baiting you, you aren’t threatened. You are still in control of your spirit.

Paul expands on this idea. And of all the facets of love we are looking at this morning, none of them looks as dumb as this one.

Love doesn’t keep a list

[5] does not take into account a wrong suffered¹²

Paul pictures you sitting in front of your Excel spreadsheet, adding up the wrongs you have suffered at somebody else’s hands.

You’re keeping score. You’re going to even the score.

Paul says that love doesn’t do this. Instead, you, who are committed to love, don’t keep a list. You forgive.

This is a tough assignment.

All of us have been wronged in life, some more cruelly than others. And for Scripture to tell YOU to **“not take into account a wrong suffered”** if the wrong you have suffered is **grave** may seem to be more than you can bear.

Now, I don’t think that Paul would tell a woman to remain in an abusive relationship without evidence of change on the part of the abuser. He would not counsel that children be forced to remain in a home where they are abused.

In other words, love doesn’t throw care for the victim out the window.

BUT, let’s face it. In the description of love we have in 1 Corinthians 13, the call to forgive is love at its most radical.

To forgive is counter-cultural and it seems to be counter-rational, whether we are responding to a grave indignity or to something more trivial (*“He cut me off in traffic!”*).

Forgiveness is extreme. Period. And when we water down forgiveness, we end up with something other than forgiveness.

To see how radical forgiveness is, take a look at the cross of Jesus, the scene of the most extreme exchange in history, where God ***[2 Corinthians 5:19]...was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them...***

What rightly could have been an insurmountable barrier between us and a holy God, God chose to righteously deal with, by having Jesus pay the penalty for your sin and mine. And now God can **“not count”** our trespasses against us.

And He did this because He wanted to bless us, the ones who by our sin, had offended Him.

Let’s understand that the rationale for forgiveness is that we want to bless the one who has hurt us.

Yes, of course, it is true that granting forgiveness will often be emotionally liberating to the one who forgives. But that is not the reason we forgive.

When Jesus said, from the cross, ***[Luke 23:34] “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”*** He wasn’t saying that for His own psychological health. He wanted to bless His enemies.

show that in either case Paul’s provocation was legitimate, but to give a broader understanding of what the word means.

¹² This grace (and the next) would have resolved the problem of lawsuits.

Like everything else about love, we grant forgiveness for the benefit of the one we are forgiving.

When I speak kindly to the person who cuts in front of me in the line at the grocery store, I am giving them a taste of love.

When you offer a gift to your spouse, intending to bless them, even after a particularly harmful interaction, you give them a picture of the forgiveness Christ offers on the cross.

When you have had a tension-filled exchange with a brother or sister here at church, or when they have wronged you, not taken you seriously, run roughshod over your feelings, been insensitive AND you treat them with the same loving engagement you would anyone else, looking to be God's instrument of blessing in their life - neither lashing out nor backing away - they have the chance to see the unconditional love of Jesus in living color, shining from you.

There is power in forgiveness. God uses the forgiveness you lovingly give to others redemptively. The leaven of those forgiving acts begins to leaven the whole lump of dough. Your forgiveness begins to transform a church into a community of grace.

The one who loves well doesn't try to even the score. The Christian who loves offers grace. He forgives. She forgives those who treat her badly while she cheers for the victory of righteousness.

Love Pursues Holiness

[6] does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth;¹³

The one who loves well, loves holiness and purity. Truth and love go hand in hand. There is no moral mushiness in love.

¹³ There is difference of opinion as to whether Paul means to refer here to "truth" in the abstract, general sense, or "truth" as it is known in the Gospel. I lean toward the view that says Paul is telling us that love rejoices in "truth," generally, as in truthfulness and integrity.

Traveling the path to love means that we are learning to say -

"The path of holiness is the path to blessing. Therefore, I will call my brothers and sisters to holiness. I will rejoice when they turn from sin, and I will grieve when they don't. And when they don't I'll keep calling them to holiness, and I won't back down! I will lovingly speak the truth even when they don't want me to. I will even risk rejection because it is only by truth and it is only by righteousness that anyone is set free."

Today's finale is an exercise in extremes - as if today's look at love hasn't been extreme enough already. Paul gives us four things that love always does.

We'll give thought to the middle two "alls" first and then conclude with the first and last "alls."

The "Alls" of Love¹⁴

Never Throws in the Towel

[7]...believes all things, hopes all things...

Paul is not calling us here to the ministry of gullibility. This is not a challenge to be deceived by the pretenses of others, or a challenge to believe that white is black if I tell you that white is black. And it's not a call to, *"Be more optimistic; look on the bright side!"*

No. Paul is telling us that if we want to love, we will have to open ourselves up to the possibility of being disappointed by other people. We'll be let down.

Love refuses to take another person's failure as the last word on the subject.

So, picture failure. Picture a personal failure of some sort. That shouldn't be too hard to do. Most of us have known failure at one thing

¹⁴ The final listing is a figure of speech called a *chiasm*. The first and fourth of these "all things" deal with present circumstances, the second and third look to the future.

or another, at one time or another. You may have in mind a failure of technique or a moral failure.

Now picture a friend failing. After your friend has fallen flat on his face, he'll be tempted to make a commitment to never risk THAT failure again.

"No thanks. I'll stay with those tasks I can do well. I'll avoid the hard stuff that makes another failure a real possibility."

But you, his loving friend, see him. You walk over to him. You extend your hand to him and tell him, *"This is not the end."*

Even if your friend's failure directly hurt you, you will overlook your personal loss, and speak encouragement to your friend who has failed.

"Don't throw in the towel. The game's not over yet. I believe in you. Trust God. Get up and walk!"

This, by the way, is exactly how Jesus dealt with His disciples during His earthly ministry.

He said on at least one occasion, **[Luke 9:41] "How long must I put up with you?"** and we get the impression that another Leader might have thrown in the towel on the twelve apostles and gotten himself another set of followers.

But Jesus never gave up on them. And today Jesus still puts up with His people, even after repeated failures. He doesn't throw in the towel on us.

And, as He presently models a loving tenacity that **"believes all things, hopes all things,"** if we would follow Him on the path of love, we, too, will learn to say, *"I won't be gullible, but I won't be a cynic either. I'll risk disappointment rather than communicating to someone that I think they are a 'lost cause.'"*

That is love. Love doesn't just have a long fuse. Love never reaches the end of its rope. And one more thing.

Never Gives Up

[7] bears all things...endures all things.

The Bible assures you that your life with Jesus will not be easy. You will face the inevitable hardships of life. You will face opposition and, perhaps, persecution.¹⁵

Through it all, you need never be derailed from the path of love. By God's grace and through the Spirit's power, you can love no matter what hardship comes.

There is nothing - not marriage difficulties, not persecution, not child-rearing struggles, not financial worries, not vocational worries, not health setbacks - that you can't face lovingly as we walk with Jesus.

Conclusion:

These words (vv. 4-7) capture the essence of who Jesus is. In fact, we could substitute His Name for each of these descriptions of love and perfectly picture His life.

What would happen, though, if you substituted YOUR name? If I put MY name by **"patient"** and **"kind"** and **"is not jealous"**?

Then, we would each hear Paul's strong challenge to change, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the loving disciples of Jesus we were meant to be.

¹⁵ See 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 3:3, 7; 2 Thessalonians 1:4, 6; Romans 5:3; 8:35; 12:12; 2 Timothy 3:12.