



1 Corinthians 13:1-7. Known By Your Love

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John 13:35. *By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*

When we observe the societies and people of this world, we may come away disappointed in the violence and hatred that seems to be always increasing. Most identifiable people groups express bigotry and prejudice towards others who are not in that group. When we witness a worldly, secular, and pagan world view that fully surrounds us, it is quite normal for that behavior to seem normative. When those who have put their trust in the LORD continue to bring the attitudes of the loveless world into their faith they find the peace and joy that God promises to be overwhelmed by the stresses of the sins they continue to carry. When Christians adopt the world view of this loveless world, they fail to be identifiable in a crowd. When they profess a relationship with the LORD, the world sees them as presenting a testimony of belief that is in conflict with their demonstrated beliefs. Instead of demonstrating integrity, the world sees hypocrisy. We then wonder why our testimony falls on deaf ears.

The New Testament scriptures reveal that this same issue was quite relevant to the first century church that was still trying to establish itself in a likewise loveless world. Paul taught that the Christian life was one that was filled with potential giftedness¹ as the Holy Spirit empowers believers to serve the LORD and serve others using those gifts.

The church in Corinth had many gifted and talented people. However, they came to the church fellowship from a godless and sinful culture that shaped their world view, a set of ideas and preferences that also shaped their interpretation of spiritual matters. Some church members were from Jewish backgrounds, others from various pagan Hellenistic backgrounds. Consequently, the church was fragmented into several cliques, each in disagreement with others over almost every basic doctrine and polity in the church. God has given spiritual gifts to all believers, and many of their members were misapplying them. For example, some who were given the gifts of tongues looked down upon those who were not, despising them as less spiritual or less faithful. Some who had gifts of leadership or administration were trying to seize power, or get people to follow their self-assigned authority. People were utilizing their gifts and talents for their own selfish purposes, fragmenting the church and diminishing its usefulness to the gospel. God has a purpose for the gifts He has given us, and to express

¹ Chapter 12.

those gifts according to His will we need to understand more about what love really is. It is only when love is expressed within the context of God's purpose is the true measure of its blessing fully realized.

1 Corinthians 12:31. *But eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.*

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul discussed the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to individuals and the part that each individual has in utilizing those gifts to edify the Body of Christ. He discussed how different gifts are given to different individuals so that they can work together to completely meet the full set of needs of the church. He advises us to desire with eagerness the greater gifts, that is, those gifts that each individual can exercise with strength, vigor and holy confidence. The word translated as *greater* does not imply that the value of gifts is ranked, but rather that each individual should place their focus and interest on those gifts where they have been given the most strength. Areas of giftedness are evident in those skills and abilities that the individual has confidence and interest in.

The methodology that we use to exercise those gifts is of paramount importance. We must always remember that these are God-given spiritual gifts that are intended for application that promotes the kingdom of God. The natural response to gifts is to use them to promote one's own personal agenda. We see this in the success of celebrities and others who wield power as they have used their gifts for their own gain. The difference between applying gifts for one's own gain and applying them for God's purpose is simple and is consistent with Jesus' teaching on ministering one to another when He stated that the greatest commandment is to love the LORD with all of your being, and to selflessly love other. The difference is that one who is faithful to their calling of the LORD expresses their gifts in agape love for the benefit of God's purpose.

THE EXPRESSION OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 13:1. *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. (NIV)*

One of the first gifts that we recognize in one another is our ability to communicate. What we say and the manner in which we say it has a tremendous impact on the relationships we have with one another. When Paul speaks of tongues in this passage, he is speaking of a very highly-regarded gift: the ability to speak well, whether among one another, or in prayers to God. He speaks both of tongues of men, and tongues of angels. The latter of these may include "speaking in tongues," or *glossalalia*, the giving of one's speech over to the Holy Spirit during times of prayer. Because of its showy nature, the Corinthians were using the gift of tongues as a badge of faith, considering it to be

the most important of gifts. This problem was so subtle that Paul spent a good portion of his writing addressing this problem alone. When exercised in public it tends to confuse, to intimidate, or insult those who do not understand, and to instill a selfish pride in the speaker. For this reason, Paul condemns its use in public worship and advises care in its use in anything other than personal prayer.

In this verse he also includes the tongues of men, so not only is he referring to speaking in a form of *glossalalia*, but also to simply being a skilled speaker, a gift that he holds in much higher regard than *glossalalia*. Some people are gifted speakers and have the ability to present inspiring words. Some may be gifted in counsel, some in speaking words of encouragement. Some may be able to speak confidently in public, sharing the truth of God's word, and leading in prayer.

Paul states that words spoken either in tongues or spoken eloquently are simply noise when spoken without true, unconditional agape love. Words have power. God spoke the creation into existence. God's word has authority, and when we speak God's word it has power only when led of the Holy Spirit in love. It is only then that our speech has authority. Without love, words have no use to God's kingdom; they have none of God's authority or power. Consequently, words spoken without love have no more value than the shrill and annoying clang of a gong or cymbal that intrinsically conveys no message at all.

We can understand from Paul's statement that Christians are called to speak to one another in love. Words spoken in love, whether words of encouragement or words of rebuke, can be received in love. However, such words uttered without love are little more than noise, and carry no such authority.

1 Corinthians 13:2. *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 have not love, I am nothing. (NIV)*

There are several important gifts of the Holy Spirit described here, gifts that we tend to greatly respect when we see it in one another. What are these gifts? Paul describes some of these using a form of hyperbole to state simply that, these gifts, as magnificent as they may be applied, are worthless when they are not expressed in agape love.

(1) **Prophecy.** Biblical prophecy is the ability to hear God's voice and His will, and communicate it effectively and accurately to others. Examples include translation of tongues, interpretation of visions, the discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the interpretation of the written Word of God.

(2) **Wisdom.** "Can fathom all mysteries" is a reference to godly wisdom, the ability to apply knowledge in a manner that is profitable for God's kingdom, both in one's personal life and in the lives of those to whom one is called to minister.

(3) **Knowledge.** We may not think of knowledge as a gift when we contribute so much of our own time and resources to the task of learning. Yet the ability to learn and obtain greater knowledge is a gift, and some people seem to be particularly gifted in their ability to gain knowledge.

(4) **Faith** that can move mountains. How many of us have enough faith that we can instruct a mountain to move, fully expecting it to do so? We saw that faith in biblical history when Moses lifted his rod at the Red Sea, when Joshua instructed the priests to enter the Jordan River, when people were healed, etc. By referring to the moving of a mountain by faith, Paul is making a reference to a quote of Jesus Christ recorded in Matt. 17:20 that had become, and still is a common phrase to describe the great power of even the simplest faith. Yet, how many of us have the faith to move a mountain, a huge obstacle that is far beyond ourselves?

Taken together, one who is gifted to the extent that we see here would be one we all would admire and respect, and one to whom we would probably give great deference. We would think of the individual with the highest regard. However, even though we have all of these things, they are of absolutely no value to God if they are not expressed in God's agape love. Consider each of these gifts in the absence of love.

Clearly, love has priority over all of the gifts. Love is the foundation upon which all of the gifts stand. It is one gift that is given to all Christians which is to be the context of the application of all of the other gifts. Without the use of God's love in our actions, those actions are of no value to God, or His kingdom.

1 Corinthians 13:3. *If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

Some people think that they demonstrate love through philanthropic acts, acts of great giving and sacrifice. For example, how many people are willing to sell everything that they have and give it to the poor? Few ever get the opportunity to experience this. We would probably consider one's giving of all they have to the poor to be the highest form of generosity. Gifts given in agape love bring blessing to the believer, a reward that is a promise of God recorded in Malachi, Chapter 4. However, giving without love brings no reward, no gain at all.

A second act of philanthropy identified here is that of martyrdom. Giving one's life for a belief or principle is considered the ultimate act of selflessness. At the

time that Paul writes, as is also true today, Christians were routinely martyred for their faith. But again, what is the value of these acts when they are not done in love?

Clearly, for our words and actions to have any value to God's kingdom, they must be expressed in agape love. The next four verses describe agape love by illustrating some of its attributes. Note in these previous verses, the emphasis on self, as I is mentioned in each argument. The attributes of love are always selfless rather than selfish. They are applied for the benefit of others rather than self. Paul describes fifteen attributes, seven of these are what love is, and eight is what love is not.

THE EXAMPLE OF LOVE

1 Corinthians 13:4. *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.*

After establishing the importance of the expression of agape love in the life of the faithful, Paul describes the character of what is really true, unconditional, agape love.

Paul starts by stating that love is patient, or long suffering. This statement specifically refers to patience with people, not patience with circumstances. How do we demonstrate patience towards others? Patience is demonstrated in sensitivity to the needs of others, the trials and difficulties others face and their impact on themselves, others, and us. Love is patient because that same love that God demonstrates for us is patient. Consider the patience that God demonstrates toward us that, yet while we still sin, God loves us and cares for us.

We learn much from opposites. The pagan world is characterized by its opposition to the kingdom of God. The loveless world is characterized by **impatience**. When you look into your own spirit, is it characterized by a great patience with others, or are you more characterized by impatience? One can easily understand that the godly and loving response to others is one of patience.

Are you known for your patience, or for your impatience?

Kindness and patience are closely related. Where patience restrains us from negative actions, kindness motivates us to positive actions. Kindness is an active fruit of love, a spontaneous expression of one's unconditional care for another. One who demonstrates God's love in their life is characterized by kindness towards others.

The opposite of kindness would be **unkindness**. When you look into your own spirit, is it characterized by kindness to others, or is that kindness conditional? Do you reserve your kindness for one group of people, and withhold such kindness from others? Such a conditional kindness is the form the world expresses, is ungodly, and uncaring.

Are you known for your kindness, or for your unkindness?

Envy is the desire to have possession of something belonging to another. Since agape love truly cares for others, one who loves is pleased that others are blessed and will celebrate with them without thought of envy.

Are you known for your contentment with what you have, or for your desire to have more?

The word translated vaunted, or boasting, or puffed up refers to having an inflated sense of worldly self-worth. True love leads us to see ourselves as God sees us, and to see others as God sees them. When we take an honest look at ourselves we recognize that we have all fallen short of God's demand for righteousness and stand in need of His love and forgiveness. When we look at our true sinful nature, we find that there is no room for boasting or pride of any kind. There is only room for a desperately needed love. Despite our shortcomings, God loves us and likewise despite our shortcomings we can love one another. Because of God's righteousness and our inherent unrighteousness, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We are all brothers and sisters struggling together for a single purpose: to love and honor the God whom we serve.

Are you known for your humility, or are you known for your arrogance and pride?

1 Corinthians 13:5. *It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. (NIV)*

A more literal term for “unseemingly behavior” is **rudeness**. One who is rude demonstrates disrespect for others through impolite and uncivil behavior. Rudeness destroys one’s ability to establish and maintain loving relationships with others. Related to pride and arrogance, a rude spirit is self-seeking and is not concerned with others. Rudeness toward another is a clear indication of one who does not love another. Do note that we also have to be careful not to judge others. For example, sometimes the symptoms of a shy and diminutive spirit can come across to others as arrogance or rudeness.

Are you known by others for your rudeness, or do others see you as one who is polite and respectful?

Is not self-seeking. True love always seeks the benefit of others before one's self. A secular world view is best characterized by "looking out for number-one" as the self-centered cliché states. It is relatively easy for one to observe the behavior of another and determine how important other people are to the one observed. When we look at Jesus, or the redeemed Apostles, we observe people who were **self-less**, giving of themselves for others first before ever considering their own desires or their own needs. One who truly loves considers others to be "number one," and is known for their selflessness.

Are you known by others for your selfishness or for your selflessness?

Love is not easily angered, or provoked. One who truly loves others does not tend to be one who loses their temper or gets angry easily. If we truly love someone, we can even tolerate abuse because of the patience that true love motivates. As we love another, we become more concerned with other's needs, seeking to meet the needs of their heart rather than focus our attention on their actions.

Are you known by others for having a short temper, or as one who is temperate and self-controlled?

Also, love does not bear a grudge. True love is demonstrated in instant and unconditional forgiveness. The secular world does not understand the concept of forgiveness, using it as if it were a commodity that is given or withheld based upon choice. Many times, people of faith treat forgiveness the same way as the world does.

Love always forgives unconditionally, before any need for forgiveness arises. Those who have placed their faith in God are forgiven, period. God does not dispense and withhold forgiveness from the faithful based upon circumstances. Forgiveness is found through Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary. God's forgiveness of the faithful is unconditional, and He does not bear a grudge against us for missing the mark as we go through our daily lives.

Likewise, true love treats others this same way. True love cannot bear a grudge. There is no forgiveness where a grudge is maintained.

Are you known as one who bears a grudge, or as one who easily and readily forgives others?

1 Corinthians 13:6. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

Have you ever celebrated when the bad guy gets his "just reward"? We are exposed to this paradigm so much in the movies and TV that it is hard to separate this from the true expression of love. I have been in the movie theater where the people in the audience cheered when the bad guy was violently and brutally killed. "He got what he deserved" is the public mantra. The truth is that we should never forget that we are not receiving from God what we truly deserve. We can mirror God's love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Love seeks redemption and reconciliation for those who are lost, those who are caught up in the consequences of their sin. Love cannot delight in the destruction of those who God created for the purpose of loving Him.

Are you known as one who delights in retribution and punishment, or are you one who is quick to defend, pray for, and reach out to those in trouble?

Nor, does love celebrate lies, but rather rejoices in truth.

1 Corinthians 13:7. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love embraces the best potential in others, and in so doing, can bear many faults and frailties in others with the goal that the other will overcome and be blessed. Those who truly love are quick to defend others, to protect them against harm and injustice.

Are you known as one who is quick to defend, or are you quick to criticize and tear-down?

The exercise of unconditional *agape* love also involves trust. It motivates us to trust the untrustworthy, placing ourselves at risk, knowing that we will probably be disappointed, but trying to believe the best. This is what is meant by the KJV rendering of "believes all things." When one expresses true *agape* love, every opportunity for trustworthiness is granted to another. That takes a courageous love. This implies that there is always a hope that the other person will prove that the trust we placed in them was not in vain. Finally, when trust is expressed in this way, it outlasts temporal circumstances. It outlives the disappointment and sorrow that broken trust causes; love never gives up. No enemy can overcome love, and when we live in love, no enemy can ever overcome us. We are defeated by disappointment only when we are not living in love.

Are you known as one who trusts others without condition, or are you suspicious and untrusting?

A life of agape love is a life that is full of hope. When we fully understand God's love for us and His desire for our blessing, we find that there is a strength

in Him that transcends all circumstances. Rather than being beaten down by difficulties, we are challenged and strengthened by them that through them we can grow in our faith and trust in God. Those difficult circumstances serve to build the strength of our hope rather than tear it down.

Are you known as one who shows hope in the midst of circumstances, or are you one who easily expresses hopelessness and despair?

True love always seeks to persevere, to continue on, and is not easily discouraged when difficulties are encountered. We might think of Paul who persevered against a continual barrage of obstacles as he worked to spread the gospel message among the Gentiles of the eastern Mediterranean region. Paul knew perseverance, and he often spoke of it in his writings. Perseverance implies that one is progressing against some form of opposition, finding strength to keep on going. True agape love finds strength in God's purpose, and in the knowledge that the work of perseverance is done for the LORD and not for one's self.

Are you known as one who perseveres in love when faced with opposition, or are you known as one who is easily discouraged?

THE EXPECTATION OF LOVE.

Living in love is more than lip-service, it is life-service. Living in love is not self-service, it is service to others. We can gain an understanding of that life-service when we look at this list of characteristics of *agape* love and in examining our own lives, assess and give an account of ourselves.

- ***Are you known for your patience, or for your impatience?***
- ***Are you known for your kindness, or for your unkindness?***
- ***Are you known for your contentment with what you have, or for your desire to have more?***
- ***Are you known for your humility, or are you known for your arrogance and pride?***
- ***Are you known by others for your rudeness, or do others see you as one who is polite and respectful?***
- ***Are you known by others for your selfishness or for your selflessness?***
- ***Are you known by others for having a short temper, or as one who is temperate and self-controlled?***
- ***Are you known as one who bears a grudge, or as one who easily and readily forgives others?***
- ***Are you known as one who delights in another's punishment, or are you one who is quick to defend, pray for, and reach out to those in trouble?***

- ***Are you known as one who is quick to defend, or are you quick to criticize and tear-down?***
- ***Are you known as one who trusts others without condition, or are you suspicious and untrusting?***
- ***Are you known as one who shows hope in the midst of circumstances, or are you one who easily expresses hopelessness and despair?***
- ***Are you known as one who perseveres in love when faced with opposition, or are you known as one who is easily discouraged?***

This list certainly describes the difference between a spirit-filled life and a worldly life. It is the difference between two world view that are distinct and identifiable. It is this list of characteristics that separate the faithful in Christ from this pagan world, a list that should describe all who have placed their trust in the LORD. This is not a list of unachievable ideals. This is a list of characteristics of a love that all Christians can demonstrate by simply choosing to do so as one repents of worldly behavior and embraces the leadership of the Holy Spirit. As John states, “we will be known by our love.” People are watching and observing. If we are truly to be different from this secular and pagan society, that difference is found in our surrender to the LORD Jesus, and through the expression of *agape* love that only He gives.

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