

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 13:1-7  
Sermon Title: "Love Is..."

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More songs have been written about love than about any other topic.<sup>1</sup> Love has inspired some of the world's best, and worst, poetry. It has set on fire, and has broken, countless hearts throughout human history. Many things are said about love: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Yet for the final word on the topic, we turn to the Bible, specifically Paul's assessment of love in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Before we begin, we need to know what kind of love we are talking about. The New Testament of the Bible was written in the Greek language, and in the Greek language there were four different words for the one word: love. Many Eskimo languages have dozens of words for the word *snow*, but Greek only had four words for *love*.<sup>2</sup> There was *philos* for brotherly love; *eros* for appealing, attractive love; *storge* for affection, as a parent would have for a child; and *agape* for the unconditional, no-holds-barred love. Agape was the big love, the deliberate choice of a person to care for

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<sup>1</sup> *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> As an aside, for a wonderful article on the subject of Eskimo words for *snow*, look up [www.putlearningfirst.com/language/esearch/eskimo.html](http://www.putlearningfirst.com/language/esearch/eskimo.html).

another person, regardless of what he or she wanted for himself or herself. Agape goes beyond all loves, goes beyond all barriers. It doesn't even know what the word *selfish* means. It "goes against natural human inclination," which is to preserve oneself at all costs.<sup>3</sup> "To each his own" and "Every man for himself" are our sinful human inclination, when it comes to escaping a burning building or just giving a person some money on the street corner. Agape goes against the need to lift up our priorities over another's. Agape thinks of others first, responds with care and compassion, and never expect anything in return.

Can we sinful human beings ever express that kind of love? Is agape love something we can ever achieve and sustain throughout our lives, or is it just something we strive toward? Our sinful inclination is to win the argument, to make ourselves look better, to get everybody to follow our agenda. Just because we tend to act selfishly – non-*agape*-ly – too many times than we are willing to admit, it doesn't mean there isn't something in us to achieve selfless, honorable, big agape kind of love. Paul saw this in each human being, and in himself. God created us out of selfless, agape love. God instilled in us the ability to put ourselves to the side long enough to see another person in need, and to extend ourselves toward him or

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<sup>3</sup> *The Nelson Study Bible*, cf. 1933.

her.

Paul starts at an interesting place before describing what love is. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Some of us might wish we had powerful speech. We might wish we could talk loud enough and say the right words, in order to make people hear us. We want them to think we are so smart, and we want them to respect our thoughts, and do as we say. Anybody who saw the movie *The King’s Speech* may understand how important it is for us to speak, and to be heard, and to move people by what we say. Deaf people don’t have a verbal language like we do. A mental-challenged child cannot communicate like most of us can. We know how important speech is; and Paul says we could speak with such power as the angels have, but if we have no love, we sound no better than a person smacking a hammer against a bell. We might as well close our mouths and stay silent.

“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 do not have love, I am nothing.” I myself would love to visit anybody in the hospital, and say a word, and remove all the cancer and illnesses and health problems. We would love to

make things happen without much effort: make a broken marriage come together once again, give everybody a job that they like and pays well, straighten out the school districts so that every child will graduate, end violence, end racism, end negativity and rudeness and disrespect. Wouldn't it be great to have the wisdom that Solomon once had, in which people come to him all the time, looking only to him to solve their problems?<sup>4</sup> Wouldn't it be great to have the faith that Jesus once talked about, so that we could say to a mountain, "Move!" and it would skip to the left one or two places?<sup>5</sup> It would be great to do all those things, but if we have no love, we are nothing. Paul says that we would be worth nothing. If we had strong faith and powerful thinking skills and magical powers – or even if we didn't have those things, and most of us don't – without love we are nothing, nada, zilch.

“If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Talk about the ultimate in service. Giving away all our possessions to the poor. Spending every chance we get helping others with whatever they need. Being a proud martyr for our faith. These are the ultimate sacrifices we could make to show that we are true Christians. But Paul turns

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<sup>4</sup> I Kings 4:29-34.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 17:20.

such thinking on its head by saying, “Sure you could do all those things – tithe, donate, become a generous, charitable person – but if you have no love in your gifting, you gain nothing.” Keep your money in your pocket, and walk away.

Paul doesn't end his discussion about love with nothings and being worth nothing. He continues to tell us something about love. “Love is patient.” Love has an enduring spirit, Paul is saying. It perseveres through the hardships, and bravely faces any trouble with unwavering strength. So when somebody upsets us, love helps us get over the disappointment, so that we may not stay frustrated and hurt. When somebody doesn't do what we want, love helps us to work with the person, doing what is best for both of us. When a child wrecks the car or fails a test, love is there to help us give more direction and encouragement, and to work out every problem. Love never fails. Even when we might not feel loving or feel like being loved, love never stops moving us, moving others, moving through every pain and problem, joy and triumph. Benjamin Franklin once said, “The only things certain in life are death and taxes.” He should have added a third: love.

“Love is kind.” Of course it is: we talked about how kind love is, always thinking of the other person, always hoping to work with people through any

situation. How unkind we can be, though, when working with people. How frustrated and miserable it can be to deal with certain people. Love reminds us to be thoughtful when others are not. Love shows us how to be sympathetic, when nobody cares a hill of beans about anybody but themselves. Love puts the best foot forward in order to bring God's light to any situation.

“Love does not envy.” What are we jealous about? The neighbor's new car? The neighbors new power tools? A friend's new, big home? A friend's new TV or gaming system or clothing or hairstyle? There is a lot to be jealous about, because life isn't fair. We all don't have the same stuff, and even if we all got the same stuff, we would be jealous about somebody having more than we do. Love doesn't care about the stuff we have – love cares about the people. Love looks past what people have or don't have, and sees the heart of a person, a heart in which Christ wishes to make a home.

“Love is not boastful.” “Look at me! Look at me!” no, love says. Look at the other person. See him or her as a child of God, and extend yourself to him or her every way you can. “Love is not proud.” A man's number one sin is to be proud: “I can do it on my own. I can handle it. Just give me time.” A man who is proud is hiding something he doesn't want others to

see. Any of us who are proud are not willing to admit that we are fakes: that we cannot do everything right, and that we don't always say the right thing. Pride wants to make us fake, bogus. Love wants to make us genuine, real. Real people don't fake it or hide away. Real people admit they need others – they also need God – and so they open themselves to receive love from others and God.

“Love is not rude.” There is a lot of rudeness in the world, isn't there? People cutting each other off on the road, employees not giving customer service to shoppers, shoppers demanding the employees respond to their every whim, people on reality shows calling each other names and fighting over each other about stupid things. Sadly we add to the rudeness with our own rudeness: the way we say something wrong, the way we cut people off on the road and in conversations, the way we ignore or degrade people. The rudeness spreads from our ill-conceived words and actions, and others share their rudeness because if everybody is rude they might as well be too; and eventually it comes back to us, and we complain that there is so much rudeness in the world. Love is not rude. Love behaves itself accordingly. Love confronts rudeness sometimes with silence – love bites its tongue – because it isn't worth saying anything mean. Love

confronts rudeness sometimes with clarification. We don't understand why somebody is going off on us, why they are so upset with us. Love gives everybody the chance to speak, not spew venom but to speak calmly. Love gives everybody the chance to hear and to understand, so that the wrong may become right, and everybody develops deep relationships with each other.

“Love is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.” Oh, how we love to keep records of the wrongs people have committed against us. We love to replay the videotape in our heads of those things people did, so we can become easily angered with them, and we can remind those people of how evil they were toward us, and thus make them feel bad. The need to keep records of wrongs is like trying to find our way through a dark and thick forest, and we keep walking past the same boulder on the left. We think we are getting somewhere, and there is that same boulder. It gets tiring after awhile.

Keeping records of wrongs gets us nowhere. Love hates going nowhere. Love wants to get somewhere. Love wants to move forward and carrying us alongside. When we are moving forward there is never any time to keep records, or even to review them. There is always a new, positive history to write with others.



“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” *Schadenfreude*: it is a German word that we are all familiar with. *Schadenfreude* is the pleasure we get by observing other people’s misfortunes.

*Schadenfreude* occurs when a kid drops his lunch tray in the cafeteria, and all the other kids point fingers and laugh. It occurs when we hear about something bad happening to somebody, and we respond by saying that they deserved it. It occurs when Christina Aguilera messed up her singing of the National Anthem, or when an athlete is caught having an affair or using drugs. *Schadenfreude* is delighting in evil, especially when the evil happens to somebody else.

Love has nothing to do with *schadenfreude*. Love prays for people, no matter who they are, who lose balance in their lives and go off to do something that will harm them. Love hopes God has the answers they need. Love never says, “They deserved it.” Love never revels when others grovel.<sup>6</sup> Love finds ways to pick people up without saying, “It told you so.” Love is always interested in protect others.

Love trusts, love hopes, and love perseveres, which brings us back to the first thing Paul said about love, that it is patient, long-enduring, never giving up.

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<sup>6</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*, cf. 1684.

Is the love that Paul talks about anything we could achieve in our lifetime? Does the love that God instilled with us become a tall order to meet? There are days we feel loving, and other days we don't feel loved, and yet the love that God gave us still endures. It still moves through us and around us. Who cares if love is a tall order to fulfill? It is a great adventure every day to try and fulfill it. The excitement is in the journey to expressing the love God has for us every day, and feel our heart expand, and watch others grow closer together.

## *The Assurance of Pardon:*

Hear the good news! Christ Jesus lives and reigns in heaven above, holding the keys to death and death's dominion. Christ reigns in power with God the Father as Lord of all creation, and he tells us to not be afraid. God our Father forgives all sin, large and small, secret and revealed. We are saved from death, and life is our reward. Believe this good news. You and I are forgiven through Christ our Lord. Amen.

