



This is Love Advent Study

Day 1

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

Introduction

Today's reading is one of the most beautiful passages of Scripture, deeply revered, often read at weddings. But, of course, it is much more than that: it is the divinely-inspired Word of God, given to us through the apostle Paul, telling us what love is. Over the course of this series we will be looking more closely at the various elements of love mentioned in our reading for today.

The word *love* is one of the most misused expressions in our vocabulary. We use it to express pleasure about most anything. In a sense that's not all bad, but it does discount the real meaning of the word. Paul tells us the depth, breadth, and scope of the word. In 1 Corinthians 12, immediately preceding our passage, Paul had written about the gifts of the Holy Spirit, bestowed on the followers of Christ that they might be Christ in their day...a tremendously powerful and significant teaching...but he ends it with "And now I will show you a more important way." He does so by telling us what love is and what it is not. We get the picture!

As I reflected on this passage today, it brought two images into my mind. The first had to do with the roughly 25 years of my early life when I did not know Christ. From childhood I had decided to live a moral life. I did good things and avoided bad ones. A model child. The problem was that I was behaving in this manner because that is what worked best for me...it was a purely selfish motivation. It totally lacked the love that Paul is talking about. When I became a Christian, I was confronted with my self-centeredness, confessed it, and was forgiven. But, at that point, I began to see my life as one of *obligation to Christ* for all he had done for me. I was still missing the mark; what Christ wanted from me was not trying to rectify my earlier behavior by a total focus on obedience. He wanted me to *love*, love God and love neighbor. Hopefully, I've gotten the message.

R&D *What does this passage of Scripture tell you about yourself?*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to live fully into the love of which Paul speaks.*

Day 2

Read: Acts 8:9-24

A Clanging Cymbal

"Fake it until you can make it" may work in some situations, but that is not what God had in mind for the Simon in our reading for today. Sorcerers and magicians were a common sight in the early days of Christianity. They worked wonders and seemed to perform healings and other miracles. Much of what they did may have been magic tricks, or the sorcerers could have been empowered by Satan (Matthew 24:24; 2 Thessalonians 2:9). Simon had gained a large following as a result of the wonders he had worked, but they were not from God.

When the people accepted the gospel through Philip's teaching, they believed in Christ and were baptized. Simon was sufficiently impressed to have been baptized himself. Then, when the apostles in Jerusalem heard what was going on in Samaria, they sent Peter and John so that the believers might receive the Holy Spirit. Well, of course, when Simon saw the powerful effect of the Holy Spirit on believers, he wanted that as well. "Everything has a price" is undoubtedly another saying that Simon might have had in mind. But when he tried to buy the power of the Holy Spirit, it brought upon him the wrath of Peter. The gifts of God are not for sale!

Imitations don't work with God. Love must be genuine, as Paul explained it in 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." Resounding gongs and clanging cymbals may make a lot of noise, but they signify nothing. Poor Simon wanted the effects without the cause. He was missing the person who *is* love and who manifests Himself *as* love. Too focused on himself, Simon didn't understand and therefore couldn't be enlightened *by* love. Only as we toss aside our resounding gongs and clashing cymbals is our heart ready to accept all that God has to give us...and He would give us love.

R&D *What could be standing in your way of fully accepting and expressing the love of God?*

Prayer: *Lord, quieten the distracting noises in my life that I may fully receive You.*

Day 3

Read: Acts 22:1-5

"I Am Nothing"

Paul has been arrested in Jerusalem and is facing trial. It is a process that will continue through the end of Acts. What we see in these few verses is the beginning of his defense. He will go on to tell the dramatic story of his conversion (vv.6-21, also in more detail at 9:1-31), but that is not our focus here. The important thing for us today is that Paul is giving his credentials, and they are impressive. But he could have ended these verses by saying, "I am nothing." Without Christ, all those achievements were now worthless to Paul.

In speaking about love, Paul is telling us the same thing in 1 Corinthians 13:2. "If I have the gift of prophesy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." There have been too many stories of Christian leaders who could impress us with their prophecies and knowledge, and the miracles that seemed to have been worked through them. Pillars of faith we would have thought. But then they are found to have engaged in selfish acts of greed or sexual immorality. They were too much in love with themselves and too little in love with God and neighbor. Their credentials are worthless.

Paul is setting a high standard for love. It is what we should measure everything against. We may not be facing the challenges that those disgraced leaders faced, but life is nonetheless a constant challenge for all of us. What is our root motivation as we make a decision or set out to accomplish some goal, as we deal with the confusion around us or simply try to survive the latest calamity? Are we thinking primarily about ourselves, or is love our focus? Despite everything, we have abundant life in Christ (John 10:10), and this life is an opportunity to love.

R&D *Reflect on whether, for the Christian, love is an automatic response or an acquired habit.*

Prayer: *All I know, Lord, is that without love I am nothing.*

Day 4

Read: Mark 12:41-44

“I Gain Nothing”

The wealthy people of Jesus’ day were apparently great tithers, but they were giving from their abundance. There was no real sacrifice in their giving. It was just something they did out of obedience to the Jewish Law. There was no apparent love involved. Yet Paul tells us, “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). These wealthy people could have been giving much more of their possessions, but if they weren’t doing so out of love, it had no value with God.

Their giving is contrasted with the widow who was giving all she had, though it was very little. Of course, the same could have been said for her: if she wasn’t giving out of love, even her sacrificial gift would have gained nothing. But, wasn’t she giving out of love? We would think so. She was totally dependent on God. We have a friend who says his wife has free access to his heart and every part of his life. Now that’s an expression of love! In a sense, that is the same thing the widow was saying about her love relationship with God.

When I was a young husband and father and was first approached about an annual pledge to our church I was a new Christian and ready to make a serious pledge. The man who called on us was a banker and cautioned us not to be overly generous in our giving. “You’ve got a mortgage on your house and a family to provide for, and the church doesn’t need your money.” As a result, we made only a meager pledge. When, years later, we learned about tithing and began to do so, it opened a wonderful loving relationship between us and God. Giving out of a sense of obligation gains nothing, but giving out of love is a tremendous blessing.

R&D How do you equate your generosity with your love of God?

Prayer: Lord, all I have is Yours; thank You for what You allow me to keep.

Day 5

Read: Genesis 29:15-28

Love is Patient

The love of Jacob for Rachel is one of the great stories of patience in the Bible. Jacob had to work for his Uncle Laban for seven years to be entitled to marry Rachel, only to be tricked into marrying Leah instead. Then he had to fulfill an obligation for another seven years of work in order to take Rachel as his wife. It is interesting to note that Jacob said it “seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for Rachel” (v.20). When Paul tells us that love is patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13:4) Jacob may be giving us a good example of this.

My wife and I are in the process of trying to sell our house. Everyone had predicted the house would sell in a matter of weeks, but it is now a matter of months! We are experiencing a constant battle to remain patient and kind...and loving. There is the temptation to blame the realtor for not doing a better job of promoting our house, or the few people who come to see it that they don’t have the discernment to realize what a wonderful house it is. Then there is the difficulty of living in what has for years been our home and now not knowing where things are because they have already been packed, as well as having to keep the house in perfect condition for each showing of it. God is definitely teaching us patience in the process.

Patience comes from living one day at a time, and realizing that time is in God's hands. It also comes from granting amnesty to everyone and everything that would otherwise irritate us. It's a matter of keeping things in perspective. If it takes forever for us to sell our house, so what? Can't God and I handle that? When we allow ourselves to be frustrated by the people and events around us, there is little room for love. Instead, being patient and kind is what God has in mind.

R&D How does being patient manifest itself in love in your life?

Prayer: Slow me down, Lord; help me to take a deep breath, look to You, and show love in trying situations.

Day 6

Read: James 4:1-7

Love Does Not Envy

James is concerned about quarrels and disputes between Christians. He has some harsh words for those who are guided by the ways of the world rather than led by the Holy Spirit. He contends that it is Satan who has control of us when we seek the world's ways, and that includes those instances in which we manifest envy. In verse 5 he is saying that, because of our fallen nature, we have a tendency toward envy. Without quoting Scripture, he is summing up teachings such as those in Romans 6:6-8 and Galatians 5:17-21.

Envy can strike us in different ways. We may want something someone else has. We may envy another person's looks or personality. We may not like the fact that they are smarter than we are, or are more popular with others. Regardless of the motivating factor, Paul tells us that love does not envy (1 Corinthians 13:4). If our focus is on love, what is there to envy? In fact, love would cause us to be delighted that others have what they have, are able to do what they do, and are recognized for their success. We're only answering to the plan God has for us, and that is a perfect plan (Jeremiah 29:11).

Although he was talking about jealousy (basically the same thing as envy), R. C. Sproul had these wise words: "I think one of the reasons jealousy is such a serious matter to God...is that at the root of feelings of jealousy toward other people is an unspoken, assumed criticism of God. We are, in a sense, expressing our dissatisfaction with the fact that God has been pleased to allow other people to have things that we do not have or to achieve things that we haven't achieved. Instead of being grateful for the things God has provided for us—gifts, talents, and possessions—in our jealousy we not only hurt other people, but we are silently attacking God in his sovereignty and in his mercy. I think we need to look at it in its fullness if we are going to have the impetus to overcome it." Overcoming our tendency to envy requires love.

R&D How much of an issue is envy in your life, and how do you deal with it?

Prayer: Lord, You have plans for me, plans to give me hope and a future; help me to rely on those plans and not to be envious of others.

Day 7

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

Love Does Not Boast

In our reading from Ephesians, Paul begins by sounding like James in our last lesson. He's describing the way we were before we came to Christ, and that was when we were living in accordance with the ways of the world. But Paul has very good news for us: by grace we have been saved. "And God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable reaches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (vv.6-7). Wow!

We are God's workmanship created in Christ to do good works. But that is not a reason to boast, because it's all a gift from God and not something of our own making. God's grace is the showing forth of His love; and, as Paul tells us (1 Corinthians 13:4), love does not boast. We'll be dealing with a similar theme in our next lesson, so let's take a moment here to consider the matter of good works about which this passage speaks.

There is a tendency today for many of the secularists who seem so prominent in our world to pride themselves on their good deeds. Although many of them are atheists, agnostics, or simply ignorant and uncaring of God in their lives, it is as though they want to be in good with other people and to feel good about themselves. Maybe they are even thinking that, if there is a God, He will judge them on their good works. Some sincere Christians fall into the same error. We do not do good works to earn God's favor. We do good works because the love of God within us impels us to do them.

R&D Think about the good works you regularly do. What is your feeling about them in relation to God?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for the good work You, in love, have done in me. May my life be an outpouring of that love to others.

Day 8

Read: Matthew 8:5-13

Love Is Not Proud

Think of the major step the centurion was taking in coming to Jesus and asking for help... a person who would be regarded as an oppressor of the Jews coming to an itinerant Jewish preacher and asking him to perform a healing miracle. The act alone tells us volumes about the man's humility and loving care for his servant. And though a leader, instead of referring to himself as such, he points out that he is one *under authority* (v.9). He is a classic example of what Paul meant by "love is not proud" (1 Corinthians 13:4).

We use the word *proud* today almost as carelessly as we use the word *love*. The dictionary says that proud means "having or displaying excessive self-esteem." That's hardly what we mean when we are proud of something a friend did or how successful our sports team may be. Those things really have nothing to do with ourselves. Real pride, on the other hand, is what C. S. Lewis called "the complete anti-God state of mind." It has its focus on ourselves rather than God, and that is no dwelling place for love.

As Christians, there is no room for pride in our lives. God can accomplish wonders through us, but it is His doing and not our own. Even our natural talents are God-given. In thinking about the giving of our possessions I mentioned earlier that, when we come to realize that all we possess

really belongs to God, we can be grateful that He lets us keep so much. The same is true with regard to our very being. We have been “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) because of God’s love for us. Those things we might say we are “proud of” are the result of God’s grace; love is thankful, not proud.

R&D Will today’s study cause you to re-think your use of the word “proud”? Why or why not?

Prayer: Thank You, Holy Father, for all You have given me. Help me always to remember that it is Your grace and not my accomplishments.

Day 9

Read: Matthew 15:21-28

Love Is Not Rude

The passage I’ve chosen to illustrate Paul’s point that love is not rude (1 Corinthians 13:5) may raise some questions in your mind. The disciples were clearly rude to the woman (v.23) and Jesus seems to be as well. This woman, a Gentile, was desperately in need of love; her daughter was suffering terribly from demon-possession and the only solution she could imagine was whatever mercy Jesus could show her in the situation. But the disciples want her sent away and Jesus first ignores her and then seems to be testing her. Fortunately, she passes the test and Jesus heals the child.

Let’s look at the disciples’ reaction first. In fairness to them, they were protective of Jesus. Everyone seemed to want his time and attention. Furthermore, Jesus has just engaged in a teaching to the Pharisees (and then to the disciples) about inner purity (vv.1-20); and it is possible to become so tied up in spiritual matters that we miss the practical needs of those around us. Love is open to all the situations and circumstances around us at any given time. The disciples had missed that.

Jesus, on the other hand, was trying to get the Gentiles to understand his mission to them. Jews were to have the first opportunity to accept the Messiah because God wanted them to present the message of salvation to the world. That was the direction God had been moving from creation, although the Jews seemed unable or unwilling to reach out effectively to the Gentiles. Jesus wasn’t rejecting the Canaanite woman; he was either testing her faith or using the situation as an opportunity to teach that faith is available to all people, in love.

R&D The next time you are tempted to give an off-putting response, how might you, instead, show love?

Prayer: Help me to see you, Jesus, in all people.

Day 10

Read: James 2:1-4

Love Is Not Self-seeking

At our Men’s Bible Study last night, we were considering Acts 24 in which Paul was on trial before Felix. The Jewish historian Tacitus describes Felix: “in savagery and lust he exercised the powers of a king with the disposition of a slave.” Yet, as the lawyer Tertullus presented the charges against Paul, he begins by flattering Felix. His words—“We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation”—are laughable in their self-seeking. Most of *our* self-seeking is perhaps more subtle.

As James points out, many of us have a tendency to show favoritism in one way or another. I have had to do a lot of fund-raising for ministries over the years, and have to admit that I probably am more attentive to those who have given generously than to those who have not. That's not necessarily wrong, but it is not a showing of love. It's not so different from James' illustration of giving the best seat to the wealthy person and shunting off the poor man to a lower station. It's like inviting those people over for dinner who you know will return the favor. These are things we do without realizing we are doing them.

Love works differently; Paul says that love is not self-seeking (1 Corinthians 13:5). Love sometimes even does things anonymously. At other times it focuses on what we could do for another person in need at a time when we have worries of our own we are dealing with. It is thinking about how to help the poor rather than how to win favor with the wealthy. Love is not self-seeking; it is God-seeking, seeking what God would have us do.

R&D Can you identify some self-seeking in your life? How might you show love instead?

Prayer: Forgive me, Lord, for the many ways I tend to manipulate others to reach my goals in life. Help me to love the way Paul tells us to love.

Day 11

Read: Matthew 5:21-26

Love Is Not Easily Angered

Today we have Jesus' teaching on anger. He is talking about anger in the normal sense: getting riled up over something that has been said or done to you or someone you love. Jesus is not talking about righteous anger, the sort of thing that has motivated Christians down through the centuries to stand up against evils in society such as slavery. There are some injustices to others about which we should be angry and should do what we can to alleviate them. In those cases, it may well be love that causes us to be angry.

Jesus is talking about selfish anger that leads to hate and can result in violent action. There is no room for that in love; Paul says that love is not easily angered (1 Corinthians 13:5). Jesus even compares anger to murder, meaning that anger can be like murder in our heart. He then gives us ways to deal with our anger. Even if we have taken our gift to the altar and then realize we have shown anger to a brother, we need to stop on the spot and go get reconciled to that brother. And we are told not to let disputes reach the point of having to go to court about them; it's better to settle the matter with our adversary from the start than getting others involved.

I wish I could say that, when faced with similar situations, I have always acted out of love. In fact, when the Holy Spirit has touched my heart that I need to get reconciled to someone with whom I am angry, I have found it beneficial to do so, and have gotten wonderful results. Potential enemies have become friends as a result. I'm not sure I was always motivated by love, however. Once God prompted me to action, it just seemed the logical thing to do. I'm hoping that God's love that did the prompting in the first place poured over at least a little bit into the action that resulted.

R&D How have you handled anger in the past? How might you handle it now?

Prayer: May love be the compelling force in all we do, Lord. It's much better than anything else.

Day 12

Read: Matthew 6:9-15

Love Keeps No Record of Wrongs

Having included in the Lord's Prayer that we, in asking God's forgiveness, need to forgive others (v.12), Jesus then goes on to talk about the critical issue of forgiveness. If we refuse to forgive others, God won't forgive us. If we are not willing to pardon someone who has offended us, we are placing ourselves above God, we are making ourselves the ultimate arbiter of judgment and mercy. That leaves us without standing before God in seeking His mercy. And unforgiveness is certainly unloving. Paul tells us that love keeps no record of wrongs (1 Corinthians 13:5).

Years ago the core leadership of a Christian congregation of which we were a part felt betrayed by our clergy. By the grace of God, rather than being bitter and resentful, we simply formed a new congregation. Also by the grace of God, we were given a new pastor who identified with our pain, and was also free of any need for revenge or hard feelings. God was giving us a new start, and that was reason to be grateful. We started out with about 25 folks worshiping on a large screened porch. This past Sunday we just celebrated our Tenth Anniversary as a parish, a stable and growing congregation in an ample facility. God seems to have directed us each step of the way.

To say that we were not hurt and in pain in those early years would be unrealistic. There was a lot of healing that needed to be done. But because we kept no record of the wrongs we believed had been done to us, we did not carry the added burden of unforgiveness. Instead, we just loved one another. Although over the years more than half of the original members have moved away and the rest of us have been far outnumbered by new people, what we learned in the early days of our formation remains our guiding light. The result is a congregation that seems more loving and forgiving than any parish of which we have ever been a part.

R&D Is there someone about whom you continue to hold resentment? What will you do about it?

Prayer: Lord, may I forgive others as You forgive me.

Day 13

Read: Psalm 1

Love Takes No Delight in Evil

My parents died when I was a young man. Fortunately I had a grandfather who stepped in and became like a parent to me for the rest of his life...and he lived to be almost 105! He was, above all things, a godly man. I once marveled at how Psalm 1 seemed to describe him perfectly. He did not walk in the counsel of the wicked and his delight was in the law of the Lord. Whenever I was in need of guidance of any kind, I knew I could count on him to give me good advice, and always to support me in everything I did.

God judges us on the basis of our faith in Him and our response to His will. Those who try to obey God are blessed. The result is life like a healthy, fruit-bearing tree with a strong root system (Jeremiah 17:7-8). And God watches over those who walk in His ways rather than the way of evil. By His Holy Spirit He guides our lives. In contrast, those who walk in the way of the wicked waste their meaningless lives. The choice is ours.

Paul tells us, "Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (1 Corinthians 13:6). If our focus is really on loving God and neighbor, we are to steadfastly avoid getting involved in those things that would lead us astray. Walking with one foot in heaven and the other in hell just

doesn't work. It is too easy to get caught up in the ways of the world that surface our evil desires. Instead we walk in truth, being guided by Scripture that is God's truth written and Jesus who is God's truth demonstrated. The psalm tells us how to do it and the good results we can expect as opposed to what happens when we go the other way. Again, the choice is ours.

R&D Think of someone who influenced your life for good because he or she exemplified the teachings of Psalm 1. Thank God for that person.

Prayer: Lord, I thank you for _____ who did not walk in the way of evil but rejoiced in truth.

Day 14

Read: John 10:11-18

Love Always Protects

“I might as well do it myself,” we might say when we have hired someone to do something for us and it isn't done properly. That is similar to Jesus' thought when he says that the hired hand will abandon the sheep when the wolf comes along. The hired hand just isn't that committed. He isn't willing to put his life at stake on someone else's behalf. If the sheep were his own, it would be a different story. When it comes to standing in a life or death situation, we need to be there ourselves.

Fortunately, regardless of the situation we face, we will always have someone there with us whom we can count on to do the job even better than we could ourselves. That's the Good Shepherd who lays his life down for the flock...and for each individual sheep. Jesus isn't just doing a job; he is fully committed if we are committed to him. Jesus showed that love in that he went to the cross that we might be forgiven of our sins and reconciled to God. That is the love of God fully demonstrated!

Paul says that love always protects (1 Corinthians 13:7). Whatever our position in life, there are those we are called on to protect. It may be our spouse and our children. It may be those we supervise in our vocation. It could be members of a committee we chair or those in a class we teach. It certainly would include anyone to whom we are a mentor in the faith or in life in general...those looking to us for guidance and protection. If our focus in doing so is love, we are being good shepherds and following the example of *the* Good Shepherd.

R&D How good a protector are you in your life situations? What could you do better?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are my Good Shepherd; help me to be a better shepherd to those who are in my care.

Day 15

Read: Acts 9:19b-31

Love Always Trusts

There was plenty of reason to distrust Saul (Paul)! He had been a leading persecutor of the Way, and had only recently been converted when he came to Jerusalem. Barnabas gives us an example of “love always trusts” (1 Corinthians 13:7). He was willing not only to affiliate himself with Paul, but to give assurances to the other Christians that Paul could be trusted. Barnabas gives us another example of trust when he stands by Mark (later the author of the gospel) when Paul himself could not do so (Acts 15:36-41). Admittedly, the disagreement between Barnabas and Paul

may not have been solely a matter of trust, and later Mark became vital to Paul's ministry (Colossians 4:10). In any event, Barnabas was a living example to Paul of the trusting nature of love.

Generally speaking, trust is something people earn. Trust is built up over a period of time as a result of our experience with the other person. One interesting feature of prayer/Bible study groups is how the trust level between the participants builds. When we are comfortable with one another, we are willing to be vulnerable in expressing our opinions and telling our stories. However, when a new person is added to the group, the trust level usually drops until that person is also found to be trustworthy.

Our question might be: does love trust blindly? Paul may have shown a lack of trust in the Mark situation, but he certainly showed trust in the many instances in which he placed his life in God's hands through the hands of other people. Maybe the issue is really one of trusting the Lord. God may guide us away from a harmful situation in which blind trust in someone might have led us. But love always trusts the guidance of the Holy Spirit within us.

R&D What guides you in living with the idea that love always trusts? Explain.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the example of Barnabas. Help me to be more trusting by the guidance of Your Holy Spirit.

Day 16

Read: Psalm 33:17-22

Love Always Hopes

The reference to the horse (v.17) has to do with military strength. The psalmist is making the point that we cannot trust in physical power to save us, our hope needs to be in the Lord. Hope is tied to our relationship with God. It builds upon our thankfulness for what God has done for us in the past. Our faith in His love for us gives us increasing reason to hope. Hopeless people are those who forget to remember...to remember God's loving care over the days and years. That's why the Jewish people of the Old Testament kept going astray, falling into despair and sin. They forgot all that God had done for them.

Well, Paul tells us that love always hopes (1 Corinthians 13:7). In the tension-filled world in which we live today, what better blessing can we give another than love that is grounded in hope? Hopeful people inspire hope in others.

In the early days of our fledgling church referred to above, we had moved from the screened porch to a small section of a large building in a commercial area. As we grew, we hoped for larger space, at which time the county's senior center decided to move out of the building and we were able to take over the space they vacated. That was a great blessing, but we needed more of the building. So, one Sunday morning after our worship service, we did a "Jericho March" around the building, claiming the entire space in it. Now, seven years after that march, we have the entire building for our growing congregation. I'll admit that there were times when I did not believe it would happen, but others continued to maintain the hope that it would. It was God's plan, God is love, and love always hopes.

R&D Recall an instance in which your hopes were fulfilled by the grace of God's love.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for all You have done for me in the past; it is the reason for my hope in the future.

Day 17

Read: Hebrews 10:32-39

Love Always Perseveres

The writer of Hebrews was encouraging people who faced danger and deprivation. He was telling them that, by the grace of God, they were to persevere in those difficult circumstances because they would be rewarded with everlasting life...something that greatly outweighed the troubles they were in. But in difficult times, we need reminding that God is with us and that it is worthwhile to persevere, and that is what the writer sought to do.

Think about the nature of perseverance. We have to have conviction and determination to persevere; we have to feel it is worth it. It means standing strong in the face of opposition, disappointment and testing. Someone who perseveres is one we can rely upon. There is courage and strength of character involved.

Paul tells us that love itself perseveres (1 Corinthians 13:7). What does that mean? It means that the kind of love Paul is talking about is not a temporary feeling. It is the kind of love God has for us. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). That assurance of God's love is to be reflected in our own lives as we persevere in the situations we face. Our showing of persevering love can embolden others. It's the sort of thing we are to do as disciples of Christ.

R&D In what situations are you showing, or need to be showing, persevering love today?

Prayer: Lord, in times of testing, mold us strong; is clay enough to move these feet along?

Day 18

Read: Hebrew 12:1-3

Love Never Fails

Paul tells us that love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8). In the Corinthians passage he goes on to tell us things that will fail: prophecies, speaking in tongues, and the gift of knowledge (gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12). These are spiritual gifts God provides for His people to empower them to do His work in the world. The point is that, as important as these gifts may be, they are nothing compared to love. Love is in the very nature of God and, when manifested within us, will be carried into eternity with Him. Here we take the perseverance of love and carry it forward. If we persevere in God's plan for us, we will not fail.

That is what the writer of Hebrews is telling us in our reading for today. We are to run the race, fulfill the plan, that God has for us. It won't be easy, but if our eyes are fixed on Jesus as our example and as our salvation, we can do it. Thereby we show our love for God and we become examples for others by our love of them. Can we "not grow weary and lose heart" (v.3) for those to whom we are to show God's love?

I mentioned earlier that my wife and I are learning some things about patience as we try to sell our house. A member of our congregation had us very much in her prayers for that reason. But she also had severe heart trouble and knew we were praying for her. She went into an operation knowing she had only a 50/50 chance of survival. Despite that, she took the time to call us the day before the surgery to let us know she was praying for us and to encourage us. You can imagine

how that never-failing love affected us! She did not survive the surgery. Her heart may have failed her, but her heart for God and for others showed a never-failing love that will be with us always as she is with Him.

R&D *Do you have an example of someone with never-failing love? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, we fail You, but You never fail us. Help us to begin to love as You love.*

Day 19

Read: 2 Peter 3:10-18

The Imperfect Disappears

As Paul nears the end of his treatise on love (1 Corinthians 13), he shifts from talking about the characteristics of love to the time when love will be fully revealed to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears” (v.9). He is talking about the time when we will see Jesus face to face, and that is Peter’s theme in our reading for today.

At that time, “what kind of people ought you to be? (v.11),” Peter asks. He answers with: “You ought to live holy and godly lives.” He goes on to say, “make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him” (v.14). Then Peter warns about being misled by those who distort Scripture, and concludes with “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (v.18). He is giving us a formula for what life in Christ is all about because that is what love is all about.

I have the pleasure of serving as an online missionary for Global Media Outreach. As a result, I am daily in touch with people from all over the world who are making a first commitment to Jesus Christ, exploring that possibility, or attempting to grow in their faith. Often, it is a matter of leading the individual back to the basics. For me that is being regular in worship, prayer, Bible study, and service of others in the name of Jesus. It seems to me that is the essence of the Christian life. It is the way to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ and to avoid being led astray. It is how to show, as best we can in our imperfect ways, that we love God and neighbor until our imperfect disappears and we are in the eternal presence of God.

R&D *What is your formula for growing in the love and knowledge of Christ? How are you doing in following it?*

Prayer: *Lord, my “imperfect” isn’t disappearing as fast as it should; help me to grow in the perfection You want for me.*

Day 20

Read: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Putting Childish Ways Behind

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:11 and in our reading for today, is speaking of the same thing: spiritual immaturity. In one he mentions being like a child: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.” In the other he refers to the Corinthians as infants in the faith, fed on milk rather than solid food. Paul is being realistic about the nature of human beings, even those who profess allegiance to Jesus Christ. For us to understand what love is all about, we’ve got a lot to learn...a long way to grow.

The situation that, in today's reading, gains his attention is quarreling within the congregation over non-essential matters. I was reminded of a church of which we were a part many years ago. It happened that the congregation was made up almost wholly of people who came from different parts of the country and from a great variety of ideas about churchmanship. Those people couldn't agree on anything! But, isn't it too often true that, in many congregations, there is division over non-essentials? Well, it was happening in the early church, and Paul was not happy about it.

When the way of love is the focus, the whole situation changes. What matters is our care and concern for one another, not our differences. In love, we can even begin to see the value in our differences—our view is broadened and we become more accepting of other points of view. And, yes, it is a maturing process. As we grow in the love and knowledge of Jesus Christ, we quit behaving in childish ways. We're ready to move from milk to the solid food of spiritual growth.

R&D How would you grade your worship community from a standpoint of love verses division over non-essentials? What might you do to make things better?

Prayer: Lord, make us ever needful of the minds of others.

Day 21

Read: Revelation 21:1-4

Knowing Only in Part

The theme of what will be continues in 1 Corinthians 13:12. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." Paul, in his treatise on love, is looking to the time when we are with God forever. Do you wonder, from time to time, what heaven is like? I do, and I am always overwhelmed at the thought. It is so incomprehensible to me. In a sense, this may be what Paul is saying. Now we only know in part—a really tiny part!—but the time will come when we know as we are known.

Our reading for today gives us a picture of what love eternal will look like. The new Jerusalem is dramatically described. God is there among His people. The picture is one of God coming down to meet us just as He became man in Jesus Christ and lived among us. Where God reigns there is peace, security, and love. Especially touching are the qualities of life in this special place. God will wipe away every tear from our eyes...though I wonder if they wouldn't be tears of joy. There will be no more death, crying, or pain.

One of my pains here on earth is over those who will miss this wonderful blessing that God has waiting for those who love Jesus. What can we do about that? Many years ago Rosalind Rinker and I wrote a book called *Sharing God's Love*. That, of course, is the answer: we are to share the love that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13 with those around us. There are unlimited ways to do it, and each of us is equipped to show that love in special ways.

R&D With whom might God want you to share His love today? How will you do it?

Prayer: Lord, make me ever mindful of the needs of others.

Day 22

Read: Matthew 9:18-26

Faith

In Paul's treatise on love, he comes to what he calls the three that remain: faith, hope, and love, with love being the greatest of the three (1 Corinthians 13:13). In our reading for today, we look at faith demonstrated, and the loving results. Now let's consider what others have said about the importance of faith.

"It does little or no good to argue or 'reason' Christianity with another. Faith alone is the answer, and faith can be 'proved' only by the example set by the faithful. We can 'sell' Christianity only by what we, as Christians, are." *Author Unknown*

"Once I heard a man say, 'I spent twenty years trying to come to terms with my doubts. Then one day it dawned on me I had better come to terms with my faith. Now I have passed from the agony of questions I cannot answer into the agony of answers I cannot escape. And it's a great relief.'" *David E. Roberts*

"We have to remember that we shall never have *this* life again. We shall pass to other conditions, but in this life we have a unique opportunity of serving God and our neighbor in a particular way, and that will never come to us again. It is well for us to remember that we have our opportunity here and now to witness to God in this world and to do our part as well as we can while there is time. This life is the opportunity of faith. When we can see God, we shall be able to give Him our worship and our love, but we shall no longer be able to give Him our faith. That belongs to our period here." *Father Andrew*

R&D *Reflect on what faith means to you.*

Prayer: *I would be lost, Lord, without faith in You. Thank You for all You have done and still do that makes faith possible for me.*

Day 23

Read: 1 Timothy 6:17-19

Hope

Earlier in this series we looked at what Psalm 33 says about hope, and today what Paul told Timothy about what we are to hope in (God) and not in (riches). The result is life that is truly life; and, in the end, treasure in heaven. Now let's once again look at what others have said about hope.

"An atheist has a reason, but no hope for his reason. A hypocrite has a hope, but no reason for his hope. A Christian has a reason for his hope and a hope for his reason. Life in Christ is an endless hope; without him, it is a hopeless end." *Parish Bulletin*

"Hope always looks to the future, it's always on tiptoes." *Charles R. Swindoll*

"Upon the sick, God shines the ray of healing. To the bereaved, He gives the promise of reunion. For the dying, He lights the flame of resurrection. To the confused, He offers the light of Scripture. God gives hope." *Max Lucado*

"You have a God who hears you, the power of love behind you, the Holy Spirit within you, and all of heaven ahead of you." *Max Lucado*

"To live in hope is to lean on God and expect everything from His mercy." *William McNamara*

R&D *Reflect on what hope means to you.*

Prayer: *Lord, there are gaps between our needs and the answers to those needs; help me to live in the hope that You are the connection between the two.*

Day 24

Read: Matthew 26:36-45

Love

Love was never more evident, at any time in this world, than in our reading for today. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus offered up himself for us...and everyone else. No more love could one have than this: that he lay down his life for others. When faith and hope are no longer significant, this love remains. It is forever. Now let's look at what others have said about love.

"I have become convinced that the things which keep us from a live relationship with Christ are often not the 'bad' things in our lives, but the good things that capture our imaginations and keep us from focusing on Jesus Christ. I think this accounts for a good bit of our frustration as Christians. We look around in our lives and say, 'No stealing, no murder, no adultery! Why, God, am I so miserable and frustrated in my Christian life?' But we have not seen the fact that we have never really offered Him the one thing He requires...our primary love." *Keith Miller*

"We can write over the manger, 'So God loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life,' and that ought to have been sufficient. But since it was not sufficient to write those letters in the whiteness of the innocence of Christ, they had to be written in the redness of the agony of His sacrifice, God using that precious blood that He took for the love of us and that our sins caused to flow, to underline the declaration of His love for us." *Father Andrew*

"Finally, there is that height of Calvary, the highest place of all, where man did his worst and God did His best. Jesus had said, 'I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto me.' How high could love ever get? No higher than this!" *Donald M. Hultstrand*

R&D *Reflect on what love means to you.*

Prayer: *Help me, every day, to learn a little more about what it means, Lord, to love with Your love.*

Day 25

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

Conclusion

It seemed, having looked at the various elements of Paul's treatise on love over this month, it might be helpful to read it again in its fullness. Although the verse appears at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul begins our look at love with the statement, "And now I will show you the most excellent way." Indeed he does!

It has been said that our reading for today is a passage or pathway between two vital points Paul wants to make. It is the path between spiritual gifts (chapter 12) and effective ministry and worship (chapter 14). He wants to encourage us to realize that we are all equipped and called to ministry through supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit. But he also wants us to exercise our use of them "decently and in order." Love is the key. In 1 Corinthians 14, for instance, he spends a large portion of the time talking about the gift of tongues and how to keep that gift in perspective rather

than misusing it to the confusion of others. He then goes on to cover issues of worship. Again, vital issues that need to be surrounded by love.

This quote from the *Life Application Bible* provides a fitting end to our study: “Paul wrote that love endures forever. In morally corrupt Corinth, love had become a mixed-up term with little meaning. Today people are still confused about love. Love is the greatest of human qualities and an attitude of God himself (1 John 4:8). Love involves unselfish service to others. *Faith* is the foundation and content of the message; *hope* is the attitude and focus; *love* is action. When faith and hope are in line, you are free to love completely because you understand how God loves.”

R&D *What has been most helpful to you in this study of love? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord, the greatest thing that could ever be said of us is that we are examples of love in action. May it be so with each of us.*

by Harry C. Griffith

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