

1. Love Sublime - Agape

1 Corinthians 13:1-4

Introduction

A group of children were once asked, "What does 'love' mean?" Here are some sample answers:

- Rebekah, 8 years old, said, "*When my grandmother got arthritis, she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails. So my grandfather does it for her all the time—even when his hands got arthritis. That's love.*"
- Nikka, 6 years old, says, "*If you want to learn to love better, you should start with someone you hate.*"
- Tommy, 6 years old, says, "*Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.*"
- Jessica, 8 years old, says, "*You really shouldn't say 'I love you' unless you mean it. But if you mean it, you should say it many times.*"

Love is the greatest and most blessed manifestation of the character of God. Scripture declares that God is love. In 1 John 4:16 we read, "...*God is love, and he that dwells in love dwells in God, and God in him.*"

The simplest and most profound description of Christian character is love. It is sad to say that in some churches love has not characterized those who profess to be Christians.

Throughout history the church at times has not been a good example of love. Sometimes it is easier to be orthodox in theology than to be a loving person. Sometimes it is easier to be active in church work than to love sacrificially. Yet the supreme characteristic that God demands of his people is love.

1 Corinthians 13 is probably the greatest passage Paul ever penned. It has been called the "Hymn of love." It is a positive chapter in the midst of almost continual correction of wrong attitudes, and behaviors of the Corinthian church.

Many of the Corinthian believers were not walking in the Spirit of love. They were selfish, self-willed, and self-motivated. Most did everything to promote their own interests and welfare. They were doing their own thing with little regard for others.

The Corinthians did not lack in any of the gifts of the Spirit but they were deficient in the fruit of the Spirit, especially the fruit of love. The health of spiritual living is not reflected in spiritual gifts but in spiritual fruit, especially the fruit of agape-love (Galatians 5:22).

Agape

Agape-love is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but one of the most common in the New Testament. Unlike our English/Portuguese "love/amor", agape never refers to romantic or sexual love, nor does it refer to a pleasant feeling about someone or something. Agape does not mean close friendship or brotherly love.

The essence of agape-love is goodwill, and benevolence. Agape-love involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will. It is distinguished from the other types of love by its high moral nature and strong character. It is willing to sacrifice one's self for another. Agape-love is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Dr. Karl Menninger, famous psychiatrist once wrote that, “*Love is the medicine for our sick old world. If people can learn to give and receive love, they will usually recover from their physical or mental illness.*”

The problem, however, is that few people have any idea of what true love is. In my pre-marriage counselling I often ask couples to define love. I have found that most of them have a difficult time describing it.

Most people seem to think of love only in terms of nice feelings, warm affection, romance and desire. Sometimes when we say, “I love you”, we often mean, “I love me and I want you.” People have to admit that the love they feel sometimes can be selfishness.

Of course this is very opposite of agape-love. Agape is self-giving love, love that demands something of us, love that is more concerned with giving than receiving. This kind of love is rare in many Christian circles as it was in the Corinthian church. The reason it is rare is because it is so unnatural to human nature.

Our world has defined love as “romantic feelings” or “attraction”, which has nothing to do with true love in God’s terms. The supreme measure and example of agape-love is God’s love. God who loved the world (us) so much that He sent Jesus to die in our place for our sins of rebellion against Him. This agape-love is sacrifice of self for the sake of others, even for others who may not care for us and who may even hate us. It is not a feeling but a determined act of the will in self-giving to others.

Agape-love is a joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own. It leaves no place for pride, vanity, arrogance, or self-glory. It is an act of choice that we are commanded to exercise even on behalf of our enemies. Jesus said: “*I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 5:44-45).

1 Corinthians 13

In this passage we find the most comprehensive biblical description of the fullness of love. As we look at this passage it becomes obvious that we are defining a style of life that is beyond our reach at a human level—something absolutely difficult unless God’s Spirit dwells within us and helps us.

In this passage Paul is painting a portrait of love, and **Jesus Christ is sitting for the portrait**. In a sense this beautiful picture of love is a portrait of Christ. Christ exemplified this agape-love to the fullest. To follow it is to follow Christ.

In verses 4-7 Paul paints agape-love from his palette through 15 colours and hues. Each colour and hue gives a facet, or a property of *agape* love.

Unlike most English or Portuguese translations, which include several adjectives, the New Testament Greek forms of all these properties are verbs. They do not focus on what **love is** but on what **love does and does not do**.

Agape-love is active, not abstract or passive.

- It does not simply feel patience, it practices patience.
- It does not simply have kind feelings, it does kind things.
- It does not simply recognize the truth, it rejoices in the truth.
- **Love is fully love only when it does something.**

In 1 John 3:18 we read, “*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with **action** and in truth.*” As with all of God’s word, we cannot truly begin to understand love until we begin to appropriate it in our lives, through action.

Let’s look at how this agape-love is described in 1 Corinthians 13:4.

1. Love practices being patient, refusing to retaliate

Patience is the ability to be inconvenienced by a person and yet not be angry. It is the person who has been wronged and who has it in his or her power to avenge themselves, but will never do it.

In the ancient Greek world non-avenging patience was considered a weakness. Aristotle, for example, taught that a great virtue was refusal to tolerate an insult and to strike back in retaliation for the slightest offense. Vengeance was a virtue. The world has always tended to make heroes of those who fight back, who stand up for their rights above all else.

But that is not agape-love. It is much more willing to be taken advantage of than to take advantage of. Patience is the capacity to be wronged and not retaliate. Such patience is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. It can endure hurts, without being filled with resentment, or taking revenge.

It is not merely a feeble endurance, but a spiritual power that has its source in God’s love through Christ. Loving patience is to turn the other cheek. When a person makes an offensive remark, patience ignores it. Let me ask you a question, “How are you doing with this kind of patience?”

2. Love practices kindness, giving a blessing for an insult

To be kind means to be useful and serving others in a gracious manner. It is active goodwill and it not only feels generous it does something generous. It not only desires the person’s welfare but works for it. It reacts with goodness towards those who treat us badly. Beyond turning the other cheek, loving-kindness returns an insult with a blessing.

The first test of Christian kindness, and the test of every aspect of love, is in the home. The Christian husband who acts like a Christian is kind to his wife and children, and vice versa. Christian children are kind to each other and to their parents. They have more than kind feelings toward each other. They do kind helpful things for each other — to the point of self-sacrifice when necessary.

3. Love does not envy, it is not jealous

An envious person says: “*I want what someone else has.*” It means to have a strong desire for something. When love sees someone who is popular, successful, beautiful or talented, it is glad for him or her and never envious.

Envy has two forms. One form says, “I want what someone else has.” A worse kind says, “I wish they didn’t have what they have.” Agape-love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Envy harms relationships and alienates people from each other, but agape-love strengthens relationships.

Jesus manifested this kind of agape-love in His life. He was ever so patient, ever so kind and not envious of others. Let us follow His example.

Next week we will look at the other 6 qualities of agape-love found in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5.