

*The Greatest Is Love*

**1 Corinthians 13**

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Last year, PBS did an eight-part series called *The Great American Read* that explored America's 100 best-loved novels. A theme that showed up often in those 100 books is the quest for love. Here's what some literature experts said in their comments on the series and the novels:

Love is the driving force behind everything that we do. So I think reading about all these different types of loves and the ways in which they present, is one of the great human questions.

I love a good love story. I think everybody wants it. If you don't have it, you're trying to get it. If you have it, you're trying to keep it.

Every book on this list is about love and death. And finding love that transcends death. I mean, who's not going to love a love story?

(<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/september/question-for-love-endures.html>)

Love is still a theme of a lot of popular music as well. People want to know what love is and how to experience it.

The apostle Paul writes, "Without love, I am nothing." 1 Corinthians 13 is famously called "the love chapter." Paul opens with something that seems self-evident: we need love. But he emphasizes the need for love for a reason. He's trying to remind the Corinthian Christians that all their spiritual gifts—including speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, miraculous faith—are empty and meaningless if love doesn't guide them.

Here's a profound insight: the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians comes between chapters 12 and 14. My seminary education was not wasted! The point is that the content of chapter 13 governs chapters 12 and 14. Chapter 12 is about the variety of spiritual gifts and unity and diversity in the body of Christ. Chapter 14 is about how these gifts are

intended to build up the body of Christ and how to exercise the Holy Spirit's gifts in worship. Paul puts love right in the middle of all that and shows that love is the basis for our life together as God's people, that gifts alone without character are useless, that love is our guide in living as Christ's followers.

We can be involved in all kinds of "spiritual," churchy, religious activities, but if we don't have love, they're empty. They don't mean anything. Even sacrifices we make can be for our own glory instead of for love.

I can teach Sunday School, but without love I'm nothing. I can sing in the choir, attend church every Sunday, give financially, serve on several committees, go to every Bible study, volunteer to serve in the community, but if I don't have love, I am nothing. I can preach a sermon on 1 Corinthians 13, but if I don't have love, I'm nothing. All of those activities are good and important. But they don't take the place of love. We really do need love.

Our problem is that we need to know what love is. There's an online video where young kids were asked to describe to a professional illustrator what love looks and feels like. The illustrator then tried to draw the concepts on paper. Some of the kids' responses were as hesitant and bashful as some adults' responses would be. Others were profound in ways that only children can be. To some children, love looks like hugs, bubbles, or "a burger and fries." To others, love is scary. Or it's like a lollipop with a scorpion inside. Or it's like "Sprite...because it makes me tingle."

([www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/2052917.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/may/2052917.html))

We may think we know what love is, but what we call love may not be what it really is. What popular music and literature call love may be different from what Paul calls love. Another problem is that love's not really the kind of thing you can define. Dictionaries don't help us a lot when we're trying to understand love. But we can recognize love and we can describe love. That's what Paul's doing here. He's describing a certain kind of love, God's way of loving.

Last week, I mentioned the four words the ancient Greeks used for love. One is *agape*, divine love, God's kind of love. That's the word Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians.

The other three kinds of love are what we call affection, friendship, and romantic love. These natural loves aren't bad in themselves. They're part of God's good creation. They can be twisted, stunted, corrupted by sin and selfishness. But they can also be rich and lively and joyous. Natural love needs God's love to guide and empower it. Paul here describes God's love and he's actually describing God's character.

All through 1 Corinthians, Paul says that love "builds up." Earlier, Paul told the Corinthians, "Knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (8:1). We can get puffed up with pride at what we know that others don't.

I'm sure you've seen pictures of pufferfish. They can inflate into a ball to evade predators. They're also known as blowfish. They fill their stomachs with huge amounts of water, and sometimes air, to blow themselves up to several times their normal size. But those blow-up fish aren't just cute. Most pufferfish contain a toxic substance that makes them foul tasting and potentially deadly to other fish. The toxin is deadly to humans. One pufferfish has enough poison to kill thirty adult humans.

Pufferfish may be a picture of how people can blow ourselves up with pride and arrogance to make us look bigger than we are. And that pride can be toxic to our relationships

([www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/september/7090417.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/september/7090417.html)).

Paul says that instead of tearing down others or puffing ourselves up with pride, love builds up the community of faith, the body of Christ. It builds up healthy relationships.

The love that builds up is patient and kind. These are positive qualities of love and of God's nature. God is patient, long-suffering, forbearing with us. God is kind and actively good to us.

Now Paul moves to some negative descriptions. This is what love doesn't do. It doesn't envy. There's no desire to see others diminished so that we'll feel better about who we are and what we have. It doesn't boast, it's not proud or arrogant. Love isn't rude, it doesn't dishonor others. It doesn't need to put others down to lift itself up. It's not self-seeking,

insisting on its own way. It's not easily angered or irritable. It doesn't fly off the handle. It doesn't keep a record of wrongs done. It doesn't keep score. How easy it is to hold onto and feed memories of how someone has injured us, but love refuses to do that. Love doesn't delight in evil. It's not glad when someone else falls. It doesn't even delight in spreading the word about wrongdoing—it doesn't gossip. But love rejoices with the truth. The truth of the gospel is love's delight and all that opposes the gospel brings sorrow to love.

I came across a story that shows the impact of kindness. Patton Oswalt is a comedian and actor. One day he tweeted a sarcastic political comment. Someone from the other side that Oswalt mocked fired back with accusations and insults. Oswalt started scrolling through this person's timeline. He was surprised at what he saw and he tweeted this:

Aw, man. This dude just attacked me on Twitter and I joked back but then I looked at his timeline and he's in a LOT of trouble health-wise. ...He's been dealt some [terrible] cards—let's deal him some good ones. Click and donate—just like I'm about to do.

There was a link to a GoFundMe account dedicated to help cover the huge costs for the man's health problems. Because of Oswalt's efforts at donation and promotion, the campaign started trending on social media, and donations went way beyond the man's initial goal of \$5000. The man responded to Oswalt this way:

You have humbled me to the point where I can barely compose my words. You have caused me to take pause and reflect on how harmful words from my mouth could result in such an outpouring.  
([www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/february/comedian-hijacks-twitter-feud-with-kindness.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/february/comedian-hijacks-twitter-feud-with-kindness.html))

Paul goes on to talk about the permanence of love. Love bears all things and endures all things. It never loses faith and it never loses hope. It never fails—nothing ever brings it down.

So, there's love. There's God's character. We're commanded to love. We're to imitate God, which means to become like Jesus. Just put your name in those verses in place of love and see what you're to do or not do. Let's just get on with it. Just do it. But wait a minute! That's so much easier said than done. If we measure ourselves against this description of love, we come far short.

Earl Weaver managed the Baltimore Orioles for years. And he was great at harassing umpires. He was especially known for one particular taunt. When Earl disagreed with a call, often he would run out of the dugout, get in the umpire's face and scream, "Are you gonna get any better, or is this it?" (Julie Pennington-Russell, "The Greatest of These," [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/pennington-russell\\_4610.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/pennington-russell_4610.htm)).

We may find ourselves asking that question about the world, the church, and ourselves. After reading the description of love, we may wonder if we'll ever get there. Are we going to get any better, or is this it? How can we love like that?

We can't love that way on our own. We really need to look at this in a different way. 1 Corinthians 13 is not a legalistic checklist we try to live up to. Love acts like this. A little bit later, Paul says to "pursue love" (14:1). Then, as we "catch" love, as we're immersed in love, as it fills us and saturates us, we then find that we're actually doing these things. We become the kind of people who love this way. We become people who are patient, kind, free of jealousy and all the rest. Not out of our effort, but because our hearts are transformed (see Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* 183).

How can we love like this? We can't by ourselves. But let's bring in a couple of other verses. In Romans 5:5, Paul says that the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit God has given us. As people in Christ, we have the Holy Spirit living in us. And God's Spirit pours love into our hearts. God's love flows through us.

In Galatians 5:22, Paul says that the "fruit of the Spirit is love." The Spirit of God produces love in our lives like fruit growing on a tree.

This doesn't mean that we sit passively and wait for love to flow through us or grow in us. We actively participate in God's work in our lives.

The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts. Our heart is the control center of our lives. It's where we make decisions and where our feelings and actions come from. We cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, giving it a climate to grow and abound.

God gives us the ability to love. God fills us with love. But we still learn how to love and dedicate ourselves to being loving people. Someone may have all kinds of natural talent—like a musician or an athlete. But that doesn't mean they never need practice. They need to develop that talent and learn how to play on a team or in an orchestra.

Loving increases our capacity to love. The more we love, the more love we receive and the more we keep loving. I didn't know much about love when I got married. But I started learning to go outside myself, to consider another. I thought I'd really become very loving. Then we had our first child and I discovered love I'd not imagined. Then we had another child and another. And love kept growing. Now we have a grandchild, and love keeps growing. Love for one isn't diminished by loving another. Love grows and multiplies.

The more we open ourselves to the love of God, the more we give ourselves to loving God, the more love transforms us and fills us and enables us to love.

And this love never fails, it never ends. God's love is forever. It's both now and forever. It guides what we do now and it carries us into the future God has for us. Someday we'll enter fully into God's presence, we'll be in the fulfillment of God's new creation. Then, what's partial now—our knowledge, even our love—will be complete. Now our knowledge is indirect, but then it will be immediate and full. We will know then as God already knows us through and through.

Faith is trust in God. Hope is confidence in God. They remain, though when we enter directly into God's presence, they may take on a different tone. Faith will become sight and hope will be fulfilled. But love is the greatest because God is love and we'll live in God's eternal love. We'll always be loved by God and love God in return.

What does this eternal love of God look like in real life? It looks like Jesus, who lived the life of God under human conditions (C. S. Lewis, *The*

*Four Loves* 17). Jesus forgave sins, healed sicknesses, drove out demons, welcomed outcasts. He had compassion on people who were wandering around like sheep without a shepherd. He taught about God's kingdom. He prayed for people. He challenged religious people who had lost sight of what their faith was really about. Jesus hung on a cross, praying for God to forgive the people who crucified him. He died so we could live. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he showed that truly love never ends.

God loves us and God enables us to love with a love that never ends, never fails, but that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

This God kind of love shows up in our lives in many ways. Teaching Sunday School. Serving at Families Feeding Families or other opportunities to serve in the community. Going on a mission trip. A mother rocking a child. A husband or wife sitting by their spouse's sickbed. Parents praying for a wayward child for years, not losing hope and not giving up until God answers. The fierce loyalty that stands up for a friend. This love expresses itself in all the ways we give and serve and witness and care for each other. May the love of God fill us and flow through us to bless the world.

In 1997, Fred Rogers won the Emmy lifetime achievement award for *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. His acceptance speech included this:

So many people have helped me to come to this night. Some of you are here. Some are far away. Some are even in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are? Those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life. Ten seconds of silence. I'll watch the time.

Whomever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must be to know the difference you feel they've made.

Actors and actresses started tearing up after those ten seconds of silence.

All of us have special people who have loved us into being and into being children of God. Some are here. Some are far away. Some are in

heaven as part of the cloud of witnesses that cheer us on and encourage us ([www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/6022717.html](http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2017/6022717.html)).

I read that Fred Rogers wanted to have a minute of silence, but the show's producers didn't want that much dead air in their program. But we don't have that kind of limit. Would you take *thirty* seconds to think about the people who loved you into being, who helped you get where you are, who helped you come to know Jesus, who encourage you? I'll watch the time.

Thinking about the people who love us, will we be willing to love in such a way that we become that for someone else? Will we let God's love fill us and flow through us to touch another person's life?