

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus Christ, Lord of all, the world in which we live is full of darkness as well as light, full of sorrow as well as joy, and full of trouble as well as peace. Give us the courage and discernment we need to live the Gospel message, which proclaims darkness turned into light, sorrow transformed into joy and trouble changed into peace. We ask this with conviction, because as Your people, You have prepared us and called us to this great task. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you remain close to Him this day; listen for His Word throughout the day

2. For your friends and family

Ask the Lord to protect your family and friends from temptation and from evil

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord to bless all those who, this day, will do the administrative work of the church, unseen by most and yet hopefully valued by all

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Ask the Lord to intervene wherever in the world children's lives are put at risk by greed and inhumanity. Ask the Lord to raise up people who will speak His words and do His will to protect the vulnerable in society

Meditation

A prayer of dedication, aspiration and hope

In the time you have given me to live and worship You,
May I take my stand for what is right, and against all evil.

May I put the Gospel into action in everything I say and do,
And show the same love to others as has been shown to me.

Remove from me all falsehood, domination, and secrecy;
And establish honesty and integrity deep within my heart.

Make me ready to forgive my brothers and sisters in faith,
And not stand back from the responsibility to love like Christ.

Give me the patience to wait for the fulfilment of Your Word,
And the courage to persist in faith through all earthly trials.

Show me when Your judgement is about to come on earth,
Opening up before all people God's righteousness and truth.

Then, bring me to a place of quietness, healing and peace,
Where I can rest in the promises of God and feel their power.

For having followed Your call through every part of my life,
My soul is finally liberated into the safety of Your love.

Bible Study

Bible passage – 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind; love is not jealous or boastful, or arrogant ⁵ or rude; it is not self seeking, it is not easily upset, it does not dwell on evil; ⁶ it takes no delight in injustice but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ Love protects all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Review

This wonderful passage is justifiably famous. For here, at the heart of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul describes the qualities of love in words that are so inspiring they are valued not only by Christians, but by people of other faiths and none. For example, we can hear this passage read both in church and in countless secular marriage ceremonies, year by year. We should therefore seek to reclaim this great text as a description not merely of human love, but of the divine love of God by which we are saved. We are called to show this same love in our own lives, day by day, so that others might come to know the saving grace and mercy of God.

This passage is certainly inspiring, beautiful and poetic, but if it simply describes love in terms that are beyond the reach of most, then it does everyone a disservice. We do not have so much trouble with what Paul says love 'is', for we can aspire to patience and kindness, but it is when Paul describes what love is 'not' thus we get into trouble. This passage challenge us by making us aware of our limitations; we know when we fail to love through dwelling on evil for example, or being arrogant. Somewhere in Paul's list of jealousy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, self-seeking and more, most of us find that we have tripped up. Our love does not match up to the high standards of God's love.

But we must be in no doubt, that when Paul writes, '*Love is patient, love is kind ...*' (13:4) he is not merely placing before us a counsel of perfection, a description of perfect love beyond the capabilities of most people. Although he does not say so explicitly, the inspiration for this passage is surely the life of Jesus, who shows us in His life the true loving nature of God the Father. The Christian can then read this text not merely with a sense of guilt about whether such love is possible, but with hope that the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will guide each believer in seeking to show the same love they have first found in Christ. Jesus called his followers to 'love God', and also to 'love one another' and 'love your neighbour'; here in 1 Corinthians 13, we are given details about what this really means.

The first two qualities of love are those of patience and kindness (13:4). These are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture, for example, where Paul speaks of the 'fruit of the spirit' in Galatians (5:22), but they have not been chosen at random from a long list of other good qualities. Patience and kindness are mentioned frequently in the Old Testament describing the quality of God's love for His people Israel. For example, Nehemiah says this of God;

'For many years You were patient with them. By Your Spirit You admonished them through Your prophets' (Neh 9:30)

In addition, the word 'kindness' occurs frequently in the Old Testament in the phrase '*loving-kindness*', which is a description of God's unique covenant love for His people Israel (e.g. Psalm 117:2). So it is not surprising that Paul should remind us of love's patience and kindness.

Two positive qualities are then followed by seven negative qualities; jealousy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, self-seeking, being easily upset, and dwelling on evil (13:4,5). Again, similar lists occur elsewhere in Paul's writing, where he highlights the power of evil to disrupt the life of the church, for example in his description of the '*Works of Flesh*' in Galatians (5:19-21). However, the list here in 1 Corinthians 13 is more well-known, possibly because this chapter is primarily a description of love. When reading it, most of us realise how quickly love is coloured by such things and our hearts are prompted by guilt.

Verse 7 turns to positive qualities again, reminding us of the benefits of ensuring that our motives are always those of love. The powerful sentence, '*Love protects all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things,*' appeals to us to believe that love will indeed conquer all evils and be victorious in life. Of course, this hope resides in Christ and in His death and resurrection. Paul could not have spoken like this unless he knew the love of Christ personally within his own heart; he writes this so that we might know the same.

Lastly, no part of this great passage of Scripture should be used to point the finger at others. All who read these words are challenged to apply them to themselves, to their own motives, and to our own deeds. This passage is no mere counsel of perfection, it is a challenge to all believers to live according to the love of God that has first been shown to them, and then placed within them by the Holy Spirit.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Patience and kindness (13:4)
- What love is not (13:4,5)
- Truth and justice (13:6)

Notes on the translation of the passage

V4 'love is patient ... love is not jealous ...'

The placing of the Greek word 'love' in this sentence is not easy to determine. The Greek has it placed three times, once with each of the first two items, and once with the following list of negatives. I therefore place the third 'love' at the beginning of the list of negatives, because it helps to emphasise this list and confirms the structure of what Paul says in the mind of the reader.

V5 '... it does not dwell on evil'

The phrase here is a little awkward to translate and you will find it differs considerably in most Bible versions; for example 'resentful' (ESV, NRSV) 'keeps no record of wrongs' (NIV). The Greek means simple 'record the evil', where the word 'record' could be some action such as 'reckon, consider, suppose, reflect on'. The sense of the verb here is of keeping a record of evil in the mind in some way, and 'dwell on ...' seems to me to capture this passage and this word well.

V6 'it takes no delight in injustice but rejoices in the truth'

It is obvious in Greek that the two 'characteristics' of love are connected, because the verb 'take delight in' comes from the Greek 'kairo', and the verb 'rejoice in' comes from 'suvkairo'. These two are linguistically related, and in addition, the two halves are joined by the Greek conjunction (joining word) 'de', meaning 'but'.

V7 'protects'

The Greek word 'stegow' has the basic meaning of 'covering', and the noun created from this word means 'roof'. The verb is certainly used elsewhere in the New Testament to mean 'endure', in the sense of staying in place, under cover, or perhaps 'standing firm'. Nevertheless, the idea of protective covering is also scriptural and worth using here because the sentence uses another word for 'enduring' at the end.

The fourfold analysis of these words gives the structure of our further studies in this passage. It is easy to think that we know what these words mean, especially when read by themselves. However, this is one place where the Greek word for each characteristic has much to tell us about what Paul may have meant, and the notes on text and translation may help us considerably with our understanding of true 'love'.

Patience and kindness (13:4)

As indicated above, patience and kindness work together as a pair of words to give an overall understanding of love ('agape'). Patience is surely an essential ingredient if we are to show that great 'agape' quality of giving preference to others and allowing them to be our priority and not ourselves. Equally, kindness is an essential property because it demonstrates love for another by deed. The word used for kindness here takes the same basic Greek word for kindness found in the list of the spiritual fruits (Gal 5:22), and makes out of it a verb, to fit in with the grammar of the sentence and the list. This all sounds very abstract and distant, but this particular word appears no-where else in the New Testament Greek, and in only one other known writing outside the New Testament! It is an example of the remarkable and 'polished' nature of this text that has had linguists marvelling over the text for centuries.

We can all agree that the two are both worthy expressions of love, but the truth is that these are some of the highest of qualities of God, and they demonstrate His love in bringing us salvation. Patience absorbs trouble, anxiety and all distress waiting for some good that is sure to happen, and this is the nature of God's love for His people. Because He has proved His patience with His people throughout the Old Testament, we can be confident He will be patient with us, though He has warned us that the nature of our finite lives means that we cannot keep Him waiting for ever, even if He is prepared to! In addition, God has shown great kindness towards His people despite their rejection of Him, and He gave them more as each generation went by until he gave His only Son Jesus, for our sins. This is God's kindness, which when added to patience, helps us see the loving 'heart' of God.

By explaining love in this way, Paul set before his readers the highest of standards in life and relationships, and one that may have seemed unachievable from a human point of view. We can only ever be patient and kind to a degree, because we have to consider our own needs! Of course, this can only be achieved in and through Christ. Love that is patient and kind is not so much a gift, but the outworking of the nature of Christ in the life of the believer. If we yield to Him, then He will make us patient and kind where necessary for the purposes of His Kingdom.

What love is not (13:4,5)

There is a long list of things describing what love is not, and it is best if we see them in list form:

- jealous,
- boastful,
- arrogant,

- rude,
- self seeking,
- easily upset,
- dwelling on evil

Some of the words here are specially interesting, and their basic Greek tells us some interesting facts about what they mean. 'Jealous' is the negative form of the same word Paul used to speak about 'striving' in the previous chapter ('you strive for the higher gifts ...' 12:31). The word 'boastful' is rather interesting, and the standard Greek dictionary tells us that the word used is rather uncomplimentary, perhaps something like a 'windbag', or someone who is full of 'hot air'! Unfortunately, even with considerable tolerance, those who speak too much about their own opinions do not advance the prospects of loving relationships in a group. People quickly tire of such behaviour! The word 'rude' is the Greek 'aschemoneo', and you may be able to spot within this the basic word 'schema'; rudeness is defined therefore as not keeping to the agreed 'scheme' of things. There may be times when it is necessary to depart from the standard, or get 'outside the box' as we might say nowadays, however, there are ways to do this that are reasonable, and ways that are rude. We need to be sufficiently socially aware to know the difference, especially if we are to preserve love!

Self seeking is a straightforward expression, but the Greek for 'easily upset' indicates irritability, or the capability of being quickly angered; perhaps what we call emotionally 'touchy'. The trouble with those who express such edginess is that it can be very hard for people to be loving whilst in their company; for they fear that at any moment a safe situation can turn into a difficult one, but no-one knows when! Lastly, the phrase 'dwelling on evil' is partially explained in the notes above. It seems to reflect thinking about evil or keeping a record of evil, or in some way allowing evil or what is bad to dominate ones thoughts. In reading this phrase, however, I was led to consider that it might mean something like 'thinking the worst' about someone or something, and though I cannot feel justified in using this expression as a translation, I feel that it best reflects what Paul was trying to say here. The reason is simple; love is fundamentally compromised if the mind constantly sees the worst in a situation or thinks the worst about the motives behind the actions and words of others; it is a destructive state of mind that is fundamentally opposed to love.

In keeping with our thoughts about the example of Christ, however, it is worth reading this list and reflecting on the life and witness of Christ. Indeed, he showed an amazing ability to stand above jealousy, boastfulness and arrogance. He did not have to stand up and say 'I am the Messiah', but this is what people clearly believed when they bowed down in worship to Him (e.g. the leper in Matt 8:1-4), and called out 'Son of David!' to Him (e.g. Matt 9:27, 20:30f. 21:9). Jesus' humility arose from his love of the people He came to save; and when He showed anger, it arose from the rejection of those who would not hear Him, but it did not compromise His burning desire that each should have the chance to receive the love of the Father and know the consequences of their rebellion. We could continue through the other items in this list, but we can hardly say that Jesus was 'self-seeking', or 'easily upset'; yes, He became deeply upset on a number of occasions in His ministry, but given the nature of what He had to do, hardly any of us could justifiably accuse Jesus of being too 'touchy'. Under the pressure he took, no other person would stand.

Jesus' love stood out against all evil and all wrong-doing, and when He died on the Cross, Jesus still blessed those around Him (Luke 23:28,34 etc.) and poured out love. It is only through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit that we can exhibit such love, without the frail human tendency to act with pride, self-seeking and arrogance. Christ is our example of the love of God, and He alone makes it real within us.

Truth and justice (13:6)

Verse 6 is a fascinating insertion into this list explaining the nature of love. Paul says that love 'takes no delight in injustice but rejoices in the truth.' Much of the Old Testament expresses the love of God in terms of justice and truth, cementing the covenant love of God for His people into the realities of their life on earth. In this way, Isaiah prophesied about the injustices of the nations of Judah and Israel (Isaiah 1,2) which were an insult to the God who wanted His people to be a 'light to the nations' (42:6, 49:6). As a consequence of their sin, Isaiah prophesied that the peoples of Israel and Judah would receive the worldly justice of the day, and be invaded by Assyria and Babylon (Isaiah 12-14). The rotten core of Israelite society made it 'easy pickings' for the powerful nations of the day, who sought to capture the land and use its strategic position at the heart of the known world. No one can read Isaiah, for example, and not realize that Isaiah prophesied with a powerful sense of the love of God for His people. God had been rejected by His people, and yet He was ultimately victorious and brought salvation to those who rejected Him with an extraordinary love that turned all worldly values upside down. Victory was won by a 'servant', not a King, and the means of love's victory was suffering (Isaiah 53), not warfare. Truth and justice were achieved not through human means but through God's indwelling of His people by His Spirit, and through a 'new covenant' (Isaiah 55:3, 56:4,6, 59:6,21, 61:8) full of the passion and love of God for His people, and their love for Him.

Undoubtedly, we need to be reminded from time to time that the love of God in Christ as found in the Gospel is best expressed in the language of truth and justice. A heart to fight ungodly injustice wherever it may be

found within the world, is a heart that has been motivated by God to act on the proper meaning of love for others. Jesus said 'I am the truth' (John 14:6), and the Gospels say that love rejoices in truth (John 8:56). It is an important lesson for us, especially when we are tempted to think that love can be expressed even when we hold things back, whether they be feelings, truth, information or justice. Love is always based on complete and utter openness between people, and those who have a completely open relationship with God know that He provides the pathway to such righteous love.

What love does (13:7)

The final four words expressing the nature of true love are impressive. There is some confusion over the words, however. The first word is sometime translated 'endures', but it comes (as explained above) from a Greek word meaning 'cover'. This is essential for us to grasp. According to this word from Paul, true love starts with 'covering' those things loved. This means that love offers protection and care (hence my translation) within a world that is full of evil and sin. The world does not always understand this notion of covering, or the fact that a man and a woman in marriage 'cover' one another, for example. Each offers the other protection not because of any domination of one by the other, but because this is a natural function of love. Each would give their lives for the protection of the other, not just in a worldly sense, but spiritually, and to protect the other from evil and sin. Each would do everything in their power to stop Satan from damaging the most precious gift of all, the unity they have with their husband or wife, in Christ.

Protection afforded by love is as applicable to the church as it is to my illustration of marriage above. A true man or woman of faith will love God's people and in so doing afford protection to the body of Christ. It is tragic that many people express a clear lack of love for the church, and it is no wonder that in some places, the church is open to attack from the enemy; it needs the protection of love! But in addition to protection, love 'believes all things and hopes all things'. Surely, we need to share this love within the church today, for as soon as we place aside all the problems, personalities and divisions, we quickly realise that absolutely nothing is impossible for the smallest group of God's people! Faith connects believers with the greatest power known, the Holy Spirit, and this connects us with the ultimate destiny of the world in the heart and mind of God. Why should we not hope in complete success, when trusting in the love of God?

To say these things fills the heart with a sense of glory and anticipation, and in the power of God we know it is possible to 'endure' all things; and the last word of this passage does indeed mean 'endure' in the normal sense of this word in English. What an amazing quartet of characteristics is found in the love of God through Christ Jesus! This great verse within 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us that true love belongs to God, and He has chosen to demonstrate this through His Son Jesus. Moreover, we can choose to accept this love completely, and be protected, and protect others, believe all things, and have hope for the greatest of visions and the most beautiful of dreams! This is how God's Kingdom comes on earth, as in heaven! Lastly, this love enables us to endure all that the world can throw at us by way of delay, prevarication, insult, persecution (and in extreme circumstances, martyrdom). All is tolerable when we know the love of God, and our ultimate destiny in His love, which is to be with Him in glory!

Discipleship

Application

There is so much for us to rejoice in within this passage, but it is not just that Paul has given us here a model of human love to which we may aspire, and perhaps achieve in part. This great vision of love comes from the love of God shown to us in Christ Jesus. Moreover, it is a love we may personally know in depth because of the presence of Christ within us. With this full assurance, we may be confident that we do not have to strive for these qualities as if they were some necessary response to God, and obedience to them was an alternative to the Old Testament Law! We need to know these words, because by knowing Christ and knowing that these are His words imprinted on our hearts by His love, we put love into action successfully. On the one hand, Christ works through us to achieve what we cannot, and on the other hand, we commit ourselves totally to a right attitude, and the 'checklist' of 1 Corinthians 13 is not there to condemn us, but to make sure we know where, in Christ's strength we should be heading.

We may indeed be at fault if we ignore such scriptures, and say 'oh yes' that's another wonderful thing about love in the Bible, and I hope it comes true'. Surely, each one of us must respond to a text like this and ask the Lord how we should receive His word, and apply it. It may be that we each need to take one item from this list and seek the Lord's help, so that our good intent to express love through faith may become a reality. Some of our own attitudes may need to be given over to Him so that He can work in us anew, in faith and hope. It may be that others are called to read these words each morning, because a gentle reminder every morning will ensure that we knowingly submit our more difficult characteristics to His grace and guidance.

Questions for groups

1. In your group, write down a list of what love is, and then compare it with what Paul says in this passage.
2. In you group, write down a list of what love is not, and then compare it with what Paul says in this passage.
3. Where would you go in the Bible (apart from this passage) to answer the question 'what is the love of God like'?

Discipleship challenges

- *Take time to ask the Lord how He wants you to remember this text, and use it to become a more loving and Christ-like person. If you ask Him, He will show you the way to use this text positively.*
- *Ask the Lord to help you maintain a life that is a demonstration of His love, and seeks to overcome all that is contrary to love in your own life.*

Final Prayer

We give You glory, great and powerful Lord;
We wait on Your word, Lord Jesus Christ;
We listen to You, Covenant Lord of all;
We do what You tell us, glorious Saviour;
And by so doing, our lives are complete.
AMEN
