

LOVE IN ALL SEASONS

1 Corinthians 13

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PROLOGUE

Edwin Markham speaks to the power of redeeming love with this bit of verse:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.

SCRIPTURE

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. {2} And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. {3} If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. {4} Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant {5} or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; {6} it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. {7} It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. {8} Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. {9} For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; {10} but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. {11} When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. {12} For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. {13} And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

1 Corinthians 13 is often called the "Love Chapter" of the Bible. It is one of the most popular passages in all of Scripture. After all, most everyone agrees that love is the most important thing in life.

1. THE WONDERFUL STAGE

Paul presents an idea of love that is rather wonderful. It is preeminent over all things.

Enthusiastic speech, deep intellect, dynamic religion, even sacrificial service are all commendable but without love they are nothing.

It is because love is so wonderful that it inspires people -

It inspires poets. Elizabeth Barrett was bed-ridden for many years. Robert Browning came to see her. It was a delightful experience. So much so that she managed to raise her head from the pillow. Upon the second visit she was able to sit up in bed. On the third visit they eloped.

Helen Steiner Rice has written:

The more you give,
The more you get.
The more you laugh,
The less you fret.
The more you do unselfishly,
The more you live abundantly.
The more of everything you share,
The more you'll always have to spare.
The more you love, the more you find
That life is good and friends are kind.
For only what we give away
Enriches us from day to day.

Love inspires patriots. Nathan Hale, the American soldier and Revolutionary War officer who was hanged by the British, remarked, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

Love inspires song writers. Some years ago, popular recording artist Michael Bolton came out with his smash hit, "Love Is A Wonderful Thing" a portion of which goes like this:

Love is a wonderful thing
Make ya smile through the pouring rain
Love is a wonderful thing
I'll say it again and again
Turn your world into one sweet dream
Take your heart and make it sing
Love, love is a wonderful thing

However, we have subsequently learned that love may not have been Michael Bolton's only inspiration. The Isley Brothers successfully sued Bolton for stealing from their 1966 hit of the same name. Love may be a wonderful thing but claiming someone else's song as your own is not. You might even say there was no love lost between the brothers and Bolton.

Love does funny things. One February, some elementary school students of various ages were asked their thoughts about love:

- Arnold, age 10, said, "People in love are mooshy . . . like puppy dogs . . . except puppy dogs don't wag their tails so much!"
- Wendy, age 8, "When a person gets kissed for the first time, they fall down and don't get up for at least an hour."
- Billy, age 6, "I look at it like this: Kissing is fine if you like it, but it's a free country and nobody should be forced to do it."
- Dave, age 8, "Love will find you even if you're trying to hide from it. I been trying to hide from it since I was five, but the girls keep finding me"
- Jill, age 6, "Love is foolish . . . but I still might try it sometime."

And love makes us do things for which there may be no other explanation. A husband asked his wife, "Tell me, Dear, have you ever been in love before?" She thought a moment and replied, "No, Darling. I once respected a man for his great intelligence. I admired another for his remarkable courage. I was captivated by yet another for his good looks and charm. But with you, well, how else could you explain it, except love?"

2. THE IMPOSSIBLE STAGE

But there is something more in 1 Corinthians 13 than just the idea of love. Paul is writing to a church that is deeply divided. They had lots of talent but little compassion. They were rich in resources but poor in love.

In verses 4-7 of this chapter, Paul defines love using fifteen verbs. A verb is an action word. Indeed, the most frequent use of love in the Bible is not as a feeling but as an action. Love is something you do. Paul is asking us, in effect, "How are you *doing* at love?"

In order to answer this question we need to personalize this idea of love. One way to do that is with an exercise I sometime use with couples getting married.

Look at verses 4-7 and place yourself in the passage. For example, to use my self:

Jeff is patient; Jeff is kind; Jeff is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Jeff does not insist on his own way; Jeff is not irritable or resentful; Jeff does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Jeff bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Try that yourself some time. It does not take long to realize that there is something wrong. I am not always patient and kind. I can't say I have never been selfish or irritable or resentful. I regret that there have been times I have been happy that something bad happened to someone I did not like, and slow to commend whatever good they had done. I do give up, my faith falters, hope shatters and I have allowed my patience to become razor thin.

In fact, when it comes to taking this idea of love personally, it seems downright impossible. Do you know of anyone who can place his or her own name in this passage instead of the word "love" and not become convicted of how far short of love they fall? The idea of love is one thing, to practice it as the Bible defines it appears impossible.

3. THE REDEEMED BY GOD STAGE

But then, that is the whole point of the Christian faith. We have not loved God or neighbor or self as we were intended. This is why we need a Savior. This is also why Jesus Christ *is* that Savior.

Jesus Christ gave himself for us so that we may be redeemed from sin and selfishness and be capable of love in the fullest sense. We receive the benefits of Christ's death by faith and so are declared not guilty. We receive the benefits of his life and so are declared righteous. We are not yet righteous but we are treated as though we are righteous. By faith we also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who enters our existence and begins the transformation into actual righteousness. In other words, God may accept us as we are but he does not leave us as we are.

The Holy Spirit frees us from bondage and enables us to choose (see 1 Thess 1:1-8). The capacity to choose is what makes love possible. Love is a decision before it is an action. You can choose to love regardless of your mood or circumstance. You can choose to love in any and all seasons.

The more you cooperate with the Holy Spirit the greater your capacity to choose, the greater your capacity to love. The Holy Spirit enables us to choose to love God and helps us to be loving persons, all in response to God's love for us. For you see, it is God who is patient and kind; God rejoices in the truth; God never gives up. God is love.

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them (1 John 4:16 NRSV).

When love is an idea it is wonderful. But when it becomes personal and we try to practice it then it seems impossible. Yet through faith we know God is love and he has sent his Son to be the means by which we can truly love God and neighbor as ourselves.

Not that this happens over night. It is God's plan that we work at learning how to love. There is an old joke about a tourist in New York City stopping a taxi driver and asking, "How can I get to Carnegie Hall?" The driver replies, " practice, practice, practice!" In a sense, this is God's message to the church. It takes a great deal of forgiveness, patience, and grace to learn how to love. We are to come to church with the idea that we are to practice, practice, practice.

CONCLUSION

These then are the three stages of love: the wonderful, the impossible, and the redeemed by God.

William T. McConnell III tells about a woman in his church who was helping her son with some schoolwork. He writes:

Sean proudly handed his mother an essay he had written and asked her to read it. An educated lady with a master's degree, she read the paper with pen in hand. As she read she corrected the grammar and spelling and handed the paper back to him. Sean looked the paper over and noticed all of the corrections. With tears in his eyes he looked up at his mother and said, "I didn't want you to fix it. I just wanted you to like it."

I wonder how often we try to "fix" those around us, correcting what we think are their mistakes and bad habits, when, in reality, all they really want is for us to like them?