

## How Do You Love?

By J. Oswald Sanders

Paul's hymn of love in 1 Cor. 13 is a short message, a lyric of only two hundred and fifty words. It has been called perhaps the noblest assembly of beautiful thoughts ever clothed in language. It's a beautiful passage—and yet a devastating passage.

Many years ago my wife and I decided to read this chapter every day for a month after a friend suggested this in a sermon. Every night when we went to bed we would either read it individually or recite it together.

After a week the beauty of the chapter gripped us more than ever. But after the second week, reading it was getting decidedly awkward. And by the end of the third week I was quite sure it was *not* a very beautiful chapter. For I would find myself during the day with attitudes in which love was absent, and immediately this chapter would speak to me, challenging my life on many counts.

But it is a beautiful passage. The qualities attributed here to love are a picture of the Lord Jesus. Everything said here was exactly true of him. Jesus was patient. He was always kind. He was never jealous, never boastful, never arrogant or rude. Jesus never insisted on his own way. He was not irritable. He was not resentful. He never rejoiced at anything wrong; he always rejoiced in what was right. Jesus bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things. Jesus never failed. This is very beautiful—and very true.

But let me put it another way, and see if you can follow: I am always patient and kind. I'm never jealous. I never boast. I'm never proud. I'm never rude. I never insist on having my own way. I'm never irritable. I'm never resentful. I never rejoice in anything wrong, and I always rejoice in what is right. I bear all things, I believe all things, I hope all things, I endure all things. I never fail.

Quite a difference, isn't there? You can understand with me how this chapter is not only beautiful, but also tremendously challenging.

The word *love* as it is used today in literature and movies and on television is being sadly debased. Its connections are mostly with the romantic and the erotic. But in the Bible we see love as the sacrificial, self-imparting quality of God's nature. "God so loved the world that he felt a warm glow in his heart"—no, the Bible doesn't say that. God so loved the world that he plucked out his heart and gave his only Son. That's the kind of love spoken of in 1 Cor. 13.

In the first three verses of this chapter Paul showed the supremacy of love over other things. Love has supremacy over spiritual gifts. Paul says he can speak in the tongues of men and of angels, he can have ecstatic utterances and wonderful rhetoric, but if he has not love he is like the noisy gong they could hear sounding in the heathen temples. A spiritual gift is of value only as it is prompted by and exercised in love.

Paul says love has supremacy over intellectual powers. He says if he has prophetic powers and understands all mysteries and all knowledge, and if he has all faith so as to remove mountains, but has not love, he is *nothing*.

These absolutes of Paul are devastating. If you or I had written that second verse, we would have said, "If you have prophetic powers, if you understand all mysteries and all knowledge, if you have all faith, and yet you don't have love, you won't be nearly as effective as you otherwise would be." But Paul said you can know your Bible backwards and forwards, yet without love

you are nothing. You can have the kind of faith that gets wonderful answers to prayer, but if you don't have love you are a spiritual nobody—you don't count.

Paul isn't trying to denigrate spiritual gifts or knowledge or having the faith that moves mountains. But he says all these things must be motivated by love or they are spiritually barren.

He goes further. Love has supremacy over material sacrifice. You can dole out all your goods to feed the poor until you have nothing left. You can go so far as to drench yourself with gasoline and set yourself afire. Yet if love does not motivate this, you gain nothing. All the money you've given isn't entered to your credit in heaven unless your giving is motivated by love.

In verses four through eight of this chapter is a personified list of love's qualities. The first is patience. People are not always easy to be patient with, are they? But love is capable of great self-restraint.

Peter came to the Lord one day, perhaps after the other apostles had been giving Peter a rough time (I think he tended to lend himself to this). He said, "Lord, how often should my brethren sin against me, and I forgive them? Seven times?"

I suppose he thought he'd made a great concession to forgive them seven times, but what did the Lord answer? "Yes, Peter, that's wonderful to forgive them seven times, but I suggest that you try seventy times seven, and then come and see me again." Seventy times seven!

How patient am I? How many times do I forgive someone who does something wrong? How many times do I get impatient with my children? Love is patient—and when I am impatient, it's because there's a shortage of love.

Love is kind. A kind person is someone who is always looking out for opportunities to do something good for others. In Acts 10:38, Peter speaks about the Lord Jesus being anointed "with the Holy Spirit and power." What was the effect of this anointing? Does the passage say Jesus went about preaching wonderful sermons and doing great miracles? No—"He went around *doing good*." He looked for opportunities to help people.

Kindness is putting yourself at the disposal of other people, forgetting and losing yourself in their interests, trying to help them and make them happy. Love is just like that.

Love is never jealous, never envious. Love never envies someone who is more gifted, more attractive, or more successful, someone who is richer or owns more, or who is more clever. Isn't it part of our nature to say, "I wish I had that"? Doesn't our culture play upon this covetous streak in us and make us envy what others have, so that we want something better all the time? But love is content with what it has. Love is content with what God has given, in personality or possessions or in anything else.

I think of John the Baptist as one of the most remarkable examples of a man without jealousy. He had been the center of the Jewish nation's attention. He went out to the desert and the crowds followed him there from every direction. Then Jesus came on the scene, a rival, and John found his followers leaving him and going after Jesus. He found his congregation going to the church around the corner, so to speak—and no pastor enjoys that.

What was John's reaction? He said, "My joy is fulfilled. I love to hear the Bridegroom's voice and I'm listening to it now. He must increase and I must decrease." Love is not jealous.

Love is not proud—arrogant, puffed up, conceited, self-important. Who of us is not proud? Pride seems inborn with us. A man said to his friend, "You know, I've got many faults but I thank God I'm not proud." His friend answered, "Well of course I can understand that, because you've got so very little to be proud about." Then the man replied, "O haven't I? I've got just as much to be proud about as you have!" How subtle are these hearts of ours.

Pride is like an onion: You take off one skin and you come to another, then another still—

and all the while it makes you cry. Pride is an abomination to the Lord. He will abase the proud and exalt the humble. The only person who ever trod this earth who had the right to be proud, instead humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Humility is not something which grows as a native plant in my life or in yours, but it's exotic. It comes down from heaven, implanted in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

Love is not rude. There is an etiquette in the Christian life, and love doesn't forget it. I don't think as much emphasis is given to manners today as in the past, and we've lost something by it. Love is never crude, never sarcastic, never vulgar.

Love does not insist on its own way. Yet for you and me to seek our own interests is as natural as breathing. Paul cried out, "Everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 2:21). This is especially disruptive in our homes, when one family member or another insists on having his way.

One of the marks of spiritual maturity is being able to give in graciously in the ordinary things of life. In Ephes. 5:18 we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. Three verses later we read, "Submit to one another." This submission is a mark of being Spirit-controlled.

Learning to be mutually submissive and mutually willing to give way to another will make the wheels run more smoothly in a home or in any group or community. In the interest of harmony, love doesn't insist even on its rights.

Love is not easily provoked or angered. Love is not irritable. Love does not get exasperated or lose its temper. Do you have your times of irritability? When you come to breakfast in the morning does the rest of the family look to see which way the wind is blowing today?

You've probably often sung one of Frances Havergal's hymns—"Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee," or, "Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace." You would say Frances Havergal must have been a wonderful woman, and she was. But as a younger woman she had a very quick temper, the kind that would explode. Afterward she would be mortified and would confess it to the Lord. But then she would lose her temper again and again.

One day after a particularly bad explosion she went to her room and threw herself down by her bed and wept. She prayed, "Lord, must it always be so? Will I always have this temper to keep me humble before you?"

While she was on her knees the Lord injected a verse of Scripture in her mind, a strange one: "The Egyptians whom you have seen today you will see no more forever." At first she did not see what this verse had to say to her. But then she remembered its context: These words were spoken by God to Moses when the Egyptians from whom Israel had escaped were pursuing them, and wanted to take them back into bondage again. She saw the verse as it could relate to her temper and the way in which Satan wanted to use it to pull her into bondage—and how God could take it away. She said, "Lord, could it be forever?" And it seemed to her that the words came back from the Lord, "Yes—no more, forever."

Her sister said that from this day on Frances Havergal never lost her temper. She believed God, and God did a miracle.

Love is not resentful. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love forgives and forgets. When I was a boy, a man in our church had a notebook in which he recorded wrong things which we young fellows did and said. Then later, at a very awkward time, out would come the book and we would be confronted with what we had done.

Years later I mentioned this when I was preaching one morning. I said love doesn't do that, since love keeps no record of wrongs. Love forgets.

After the service I was walking home with a friend of mine. His son, a boy of only nine or ten, was with us. While my friend and I were talking, his son spoke up: "Daddy, if Mr. Sanders

had been doing what he preached about this morning, he wouldn't have remembered that man keeping that little book, would he?" He was right. Love forgets. (I'm remembering it now just to tell you!)

Is there some resentment in your heart against someone? In the back of your mind do you remember something done to you that you have never forgiven and put away? Resentment, like jealousy, is cancer of the soul. It can only harm you. If you have resentment, I plead with you to forgive the person. How wonderfully God has forgiven us! Let us be just as forgiving.

Love bears all things—it is “slow to expose,” it always covers up, always protects. When you do something out of order, don't you appreciate it when no one talks about it—when they're silent and just pass it over? And yet how easy it is for us to talk about the mistakes of others. But love knows how to be silent. If this aspect of love was in all our hearts, we would know a wonderful warmth of fellowship, much deeper than we experience now.

Love believes all things and hopes all things. Love is always optimistic about its object. Love hopes the best. Love also endures all things—it can stand anything.

And finally, love never fails. That's why love is “the greatest of these”—greater than hope or faith. Love never passes away.

If you're anything like me, after looking at this passage you will feel a bit discouraged because God has revealed some area of life in which there's need for improvement. But let us look at verses four through eight once more, in a different way:

Christ in me is very patient. Christ in me is always kind. Christ in me is never jealous, never boastful. Christ in me is never arrogant or rude. Christ in me is not selfish. Christ in me is not irritable or resentful. Christ in me does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right. Christ in me bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Christ in me never fails.

Paul said, “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?” (2 Cor. 13:5). That's not a figure of speech, but glorious truth—as Paul says, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Christ is love personified—and he lives in you. Reckon on this being true. Give the Holy Spirit the opportunity of working out these qualities in your life.

» See Also: *On Your Own*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

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On Your Own

How can you practice more love? Use this chart to help you begin.

Below are listed the fifteen aspects of love mentioned in 1 Cor. 13:4–8. (The list is based on the various ways this passage is rendered by four contemporary English versions.<sup>4</sup>)

Select at least three of these aspects that you would like to consciously demonstrate in a stronger way in your life. For each of the aspects you select, write in the middle column the name of the person you want to show this love to, and in the last column write how you intend to do it.

Take your time. Pray through the full list, and ask God to reveal to you the ways he wants you to be more loving.

<b>Aspect of Love</b>	<b>Person</b>	<b>Action</b>
1. Love is patient.		
2. Love is kind; it looks for a way of being constructive.		
3. Love does not envy; it is not jealous; it is not possessive.		
4. Love does not boast; it does not brag; it is not anxious to impress.		
5. Love is not proud; it is not arrogant; it does not cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.		
6. Love is not rude; it does not act unbecomingly; it has good manners.		
7. Love is not self-seeking, it does not insist on its own way; it does not pursue selfish advantage.		
8. Love is not easily angered; it is not irritable; it is not provoked; it is not touchy.		
9. Love keeps no record of wrongs; it is not resentful.		

10. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth; it shares the joy of those who live by the truth.
11. Love always protects, it bears all things.
12. Love always trusts; it believes all things.
13. Love always hopes.
14. Love always perseveres; it endures all things.
15. Love never fails.