

Sermon: Love's Definition

Text: [I Corinthians 13:1-13 ESV](#)

Gary L. Wackler

May 28, 2023

Introduction: Much has been expressed about love over the centuries. The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian Church breaks in on a discussion about spiritual gifts to tell them of a more excellent way ([I Corinthians 12:31b](#)) to relate to the Body of Christ.

Love is a common theme and topic throughout Scripture. [I John 4:8 ESV](#) 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

I have heard a lot of sermons and lessons on love just like you maybe. Almost everyone talks about the different Greek words for love and how the Greek language is much more precise than English. And to a great degree that is true.

Eros, normally deals with passion and desire. Over the years it has been associated with our word erotic, and has taken on a sexual connotation.

Storge – affection of family members for each other – parents and children. It is descriptive of human love and C.S. Lewis reminds us, “Human love prepares us to understand divine love.”

Philia, Phileo – Generally it means friendship. It has to do with a general attraction toward a person or thing, especially relatives and friends.

Agape, Agapao – was a bland word in the ancient world which meant to be fond of, to treat respectfully. From the OT to the NT, the word changes to be more about God's love for mankind. It has taken on the idea of a willful love generated in the mind and devoid of emotion.

Sometimes people say that if we are talking about God's love that is *agape*, and if we are talking about man's love – the best he can do is *phileo*. There is really not that artificial distinction in Scripture. God loves us willfully ([αγαπᾶω](#)), but also calls us friends. It is important to realize that in the OT *agape* love is used in connection with a husband's love for his wife and a husband and wife's love for their children.

In fact, by the time you get to the NT, *agape* love refers to not only the love of friends, but the love of enemies and love of the world. (Matthew 5:43-46) If you think about it there is a fine line sometimes between the intent of words. There are even double meanings. The God of the OT is described as a jealous and passionate God. Just a casual reading of the *Song of Songs* which is a collection of sensual love songs will bring clearer definition. The book of *Hosea* talks of a God who loves in spite of adultery. The NT lets us see the love of a father who longs for his prodigal son to return.

There most certainly is a distinction between desirous, passionate love, seeking only its own self interest, and self-giving love which seeks the advantage of the other. There is a difference between selfish love and selfless love.

BUT – “When love is merely a decision of the will and not also a venture of the heart, it lacks genuine humanity. It lacks depth, warmth, intimacy, tenderness, *and* cordiality. Christian charity often made little impression just because it had so little humanity.” (*On Being A Christian*, Hans Kung, Doubleday, p.262)

There are defining lines of appropriateness when it comes to love, but it clearly **MUST** be given.

Love can certainly be defined by:

I. Words

I Corinthians 13:4-8 ESV 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;[a] 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

Footnotes: [a] 1 Corinthians 13:5 Greek irritable and does not count up wrongdoing

Patient – Chrysostom said this is a word which is used for the man who is wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself and who yet will not do it.

Kind – Origen (an early church writer) said this word meant that love is “sweet to all.” It is easy to be critical. Many of us might have sided with the crowd and wanted the woman caught in adultery stoned.

Does not envy – this goes even to the point of begrudging what other people have.

Does not boast – some people are way too impressed by who they are and what they bring to the table.

arrogant – inflated ego, self-important

Not rude – there is a graciousness that involves courtesy, tact, and politeness that has gone out-of-style in many circles, today.

Not insist on its own way – there are, in this world, two kinds of people – those who are continually thinking of their rights and those who are continually thinking of their duties.

Not irritable – Rudyard Kipling said it was the test of a man if he could keep his head when everyone else was losing his and blaming it on him, and if when he was hated he did not give way to hating.”

Not resentful, *Keeps no record of wrongs (NIV)* – this is an accounting term. There is no ledger kept. This is the point. Christian love is about forgetting.

Does not rejoice in wrongdoing – no one should find pleasure in another’s problems.

Rejoices with the truth – the truth isn’t always easy, but it is best for all concerned.

Love bears all things – like a covering or roof. It can mean protect, or support as a roof, to bear up as to support a roof.

believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (perseveres).

Love can also be defined by:

II. Actions

I Corinthians 13:1-3 ESV 1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not 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 have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is more than words. In fact, where love is concerned the old expression: “actions speak louder than words” is true. It is not talk, but action, which makes clear what love is.

Mother Teresa wrote, “We must grow in love, and to do this, we must go on loving and loving and giving and giving until it hurts – the way Jesus did. Do ordinary things with extraordinary love; little things like caring for the sick and homeless, the lonely and the unwanted, washing and cleaning for them. You must give what will cost you something. This, then, is giving not just what you can live without, but what you can’t live without, something you really like. Then your gift becomes a sacrifice, which will have value before God. Any sacrifice is useful if it is done out of love. This giving until it hurts – this sacrifice – is also what I call love in action.” (*A Simple Path*, Ballantine Books, 1995, p.99)

For the Christian: *Love means forgiving* – Forgiveness is a requirement for worship. There is no reconciliation with God without reconciliation with your brother. (i.e. “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.)

Jesus says you can’t even calculate how many times you should forgive your brother. 70x7 is only the beginning.

Love means service – Being willing to serve is only following the model of Jesus. The last will be first. There is no place for office or position when it comes to ministry. It is not by accident that the title I take: Minister – means to serve. When we get to judgment day Jesus will not be asking us about our titles or offices held. He will be asking about the feet we have washed. He will be asking about the drinks of water we’ve dispensed, the prisoners we have been visited, and the widows and orphans we have aided.

Love means renunciation – we may have to give up things that are in our way of a good relationship with God, the Father. Jesus even said if our hand would cause us to sin we ought to cut it off. That’s pretty drastic. But we are not just giving up on negative things like lust and sin, but also on what some might perceive as rights or power.

Hans Kung says it well: “Typical of Jesus is voluntary renunciation without accepting anything in return.” This can be expressed in concrete examples in Scripture:

There is:

Renunciation of rights in favor of the other person: going two miles with someone who has forced me to go only one mile with him.

Renunciation of power at my own expense: giving my cloak also to someone who has already taken my coat.

Renunciation of counterforce (retaliation): presenting the left cheek to someone who has struck me on the right.

How do we love people? Do we share the good news about Jesus with them?

The gospel MUST be shared. Seth Wilson has said that Christianity is not so much I am right and you are wrong, but I love Jesus.

Love is most clearly defined by:

III. God

It was Jesus on the cross who demonstrated with his very life that God wanted to be reconciled to His creation. The ultimate test of love in action is after all: “Love of enemies.” Christ on the cross was sacrificing himself for those who stood as enemies of the cross and deserters of the faith.

Romans 5:6-8 ESV ⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

What does it mean to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and strength?

Just three chapters after our text this morning Paul says to the Church:

I Corinthians 16:22 ESV ²² If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come![a]

Footnotes: [a]1 Corinthians 16:22 Greek *Maranatha* (a transliteration of Aramaic)

To not love God FIRST and MOST is idolatry and a punishable offense.

I hope you understand what is at stake in choosing to love or not love God.

We are lost without Him. Life is meaningless without God. There is no future without God.

(John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, p.157) “The only way to understand the disappointments and frustrations of life, the loneliness, the suffering and the pain, is to see them as part of our loving Father’s discipline in his determination to make us like Christ.”

Hebrews 12:4-11 ESV 4 In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

I would pray that LOVE could be defined in our lives until Jesus comes for His Church. The most excellent way is LOVE!

Conclusion: At some point, Jesus will ask us the same type of question that was asked of Peter. **John 21:15 ESV** 15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” (Also see **Matthew 21:28ff**, *The Parable of the Two Sons*)

Faith is more than a belief statement or reciting a creed. Repentance involves a change of direction which includes behavior. Confession is more than just words, but an agreement that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Baptism is more than a moist experience. It is death and life caught in a moment of time. Life must be lived for God and shared with others (love coupled with action) to have purpose and meaning.

I Corinthians 13:8-13 ESV 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The best definition of love is not found in dictionaries or lexicons, but in lives fully committed to serving and loving God and others.

I Thessalonians 2:8 ESV 8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

May our friends and family and even our enemies find us loving them for Christ's sake. May the love of Christ transform us – and the world – for His glory. AMEN!