

## 1 COR 13: LOVE & PERSEVERANCE - TRUE LOVE NEVER GIVES UP

[Chelmsford 11 March 2012]

How would you define true love?

- According to a girl called Lauren: “*True love is not about the hugs and kisses, the ‘I love you’s’ or the ‘I miss you’s’, but about the chills that hit every part of your spine when you think about him*”
- According to Tana: “*You know you truly love somebody when they hurt you so badly, but all you can think about is the times when they made you smile*”
- While according to a girl with the wonderful name of ‘Lovely’: “*True love is not how you forgive, but how you forget; not what you see but what you feel; not how you listen but how you understand; and not how you let go but how you hold on*”

Thank God, my task this morning is not to pontificate on platitudes found on ‘True Love’ websites – but rather to expound God’s Word.

Today in our ‘Looking for Love’ series we have reached Week 5: **Love and Perseverance**, and in this context we are focusing on Paul’s definition of love as we find it in 1 Cor 13.

There we discover in summary that ‘*True love gives – keeps on giving – and never gives up*’

### 1. TRUE LOVE GIVES

Listen again to the words of Paul in 1 Cor 13.4-8a

We have already heard this passage read to us in the GNB

Hear it again in the fresh paraphrase of Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

**“Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, doesn’t have a swollen [lit. swelled] head, doesn’t force itself on others, isn’t always ‘me first’, doesn’t fly off the handles, doesn’t keep score of the sins of others, doesn’t revel when others gravel. [Love] takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best never looks back, but keeps doing to the end. Love never dies”.**

The love of which Paul speaks is not any kind of love - it is **Christ-like** love.

It is the love which sets out to give rather than to get.

It is what we Christians call **agape**-love.

Let me explain. Unlike English, Greek has a wide variety of words for love

- There is the Greek word **eros** from which we get our word ‘*erotic*’ - it denotes **sexual love**. I always find it strange that the work of the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was responsible for outlawing women and children going down into the mines as also banning children from acting as chimney sweeps, is commemorated by a statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus. But Shaftesbury was no paedophile – he was not motivated by eros.

He was motivated by agape love, Christian love. But, of course, within the right context, there is nothing wrong with 'erotic' love - sex is one of God's good gifts - but heaven help us if relationships are built on sexual love and nothing more - even a marriage could not survive on such a foundation.

- There is the Greek word *philia* - from which the American city of *Philadelphia* derives its name. *Philia* denotes *love between friends* - a love which can be enjoyed between a man & a woman, but a love which can also be enjoyed between two men or two women. One of the great sadnesses of modern life is that same-sex friendships are all too often presumed to have a sexual basis - what utter rubbish! There is all the difference in the world between erotic love and friendship love.
- The third Greek word is the word *storge* - this was the word used of *love within a family* - 'the blood that is thicker than water' kind of love - the love which normally we don't have to bother to cultivate, but rather the love which is just there
- But the Christian church didn't use any of these words to describe the love which God has for us in Christ. Instead it took a relatively unknown word, *agape*, and filled it with a new content. Agape-love came to mean '*self-giving love*'. It is this agape-love of which Paul wrote in Eph 5.25: "**Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church & gave his life for it**". It is this agape love of which Jesus spoke in John 13.34: "**And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another**". It is this Christ-like self-giving *agape* love of which Paul writes here in 1 Cor 13

Some years ago Colin Morris, a Methodist preacher, wrote a splendid book entitled, *Epistles to the Apostle*. These so-called 'epistles to the apostles' are how he imagined some Christians reacted to Paul's letters. Listen to one of these letters.

*"My dear Paul, You don't know me. There is no reason why you should. I rarely go to church, though I do try to be there when I hear that they are reading out one of your letters.... I was in church the other week when you gave us your exposition of the nature of true love - the love of Christ....."*

*I really thought I loved someone very deeply before you exposed my feelings for what they really were - sheer egotism and selfishness. I have been unwilling, or more likely, afraid to allow the one I love to be herself for fear that she would desert me. Far from being good-mannered and forbearing, our relationship has been one never-ending brawl, with displays of temper, jealousy and moodiness on my part. I thought that my bouts of fury were proof of the intensity of my love, but in fact I now see that they were devices to bind her to me. I was prepared to make any sacrifice for her except the one which really mattered, willingness to trust myself to her without any guarantees or safeguards. I was always wanting reactions to prove that my love was returned. I constantly put her to the test. I just didn't see that what I was demanding could only be given to me freely or not at all. In the name of my so-called love I have committed all kinds of sins: pride, envy, ill-temper, suspicion and lust. Eventually, she could take no more and has gone - where I have no idea"*

True love gives – true love gives not in order to get, or to retain, or to control or to manipulate. True love simply gives – just as Christ gave himself for us

## 2. TRUE LOVE GIVES AND GIVES

True love is not one-off display of love – it is not about spending £300 on a massive bouquet of flowers and then sitting back to see the reaction. True love is about giving and giving.

We see this in 1 Cor 13 where love is described as a constant activity.

For Paul here uses the *present continuous* tense

Paul is here describing actions & attitudes which are ongoing, which have become habitual, ingrained by constant repetition.

True love is about constant self-giving.

Paul begins with a summary sentence: “**Love is patient and kind**” (v4a).

Or with the present continuous tense in mind, we should translate: ‘*Love is always patient and always kind*’.

According to one commentator, these two attributes of patience and kindness ‘*represent respectively love’s necessary passive and active responses toward others*’ (Fee)

### i) **Love is patient**

It is, to use an old-fashioned word, “long-suffering” in the sense that it is prepared to put up with the most impossible of behaviour.

In the words of the standard Greek lexicon, to be patient is to ‘bear up under provocation without complaint’ (BDAG)

Morgan Derham, a former director of the old Writtle Pastoral Foundation & an acute observer of human behaviour suggested that this patience “*springs from being able to enter into another person’s feelings and to understand the conscious and unconscious forces that may be prompting difficult behaviour*”.

It is precisely because love is prepared to understand the other, that it is prepared to be patient.

### ii) **Love is kind –**

The kindness in question is kindness not just in thought, but in action.

To quote Derham again: “*kindness is a quality which adjusts to another person’s ability to cope & does not demand too much soon*”

“**it looks for a way of being constructive**” (JBP): i.e. it looks for ways in which it can help, in which it can do good even to those who would do harm.

***Love’s patience and kindness are demonstrated in the way love does not act***

Precisely because love always has the welfare of the other in mind, love is not jealous and conceited, proud and ill-mannered, selfish and irritable; loves does not keep a record of wrongs or take a perverse delight in the wrong-doing of others.

Love always has the other in view.

Along with 1 Cor 13, Romans 8 is another purple passage of Scripture. There in the context of there being nothing which can separate us from God's love in Jesus, Paul writes: "**If God is for us, then who can be against us?**" (Rom 8.31)

Love is being there for the other, come hell or high water.

Love is about giving our all for others.

There is no way in which love can ever be concerned for one-self – not even for a moment. For love is always patient and always kind. Love is always self-giving.

To make this clear, Paul then lists eight ways in which love does not act

- i) **Love is not jealous** (REB "**envies no one**") [NRSV: "is not envious"]  
Orange, not green is the colour of love.  
Love is always warmly disposed towards others, it is never envious.  
Love is not jealous when someone else is popular and is in the limelight  
Love is not jealous when someone else is given responsibility or privilege  
Love rather rejoices in the honour that is accorded to another (12.26)
- ii) **love is not conceited** (Peterson: "**love doesn't strut**") [NRSV: "boastful"]  
Love does not talk about its own achievements/successes  
Love does not brag : i.e. love has no trumpet of its own to blow - or if it has a trumpet to blow, then it is the trumpet of another.  
Love affirms the worth of another, not the worth of itself
- iii) **love is not proud** ("**arrogant**" REB/NRSV): literally "*love is not puffed up*"  
We might say: "it isn't swollen-headed"  
JBP: "**It does not cherish inflated ideas of its own importance**"  
Derham: "*When someone is at peace with himself or herself and at peace with God, content to do God's will, the need to cut others down to size or envy them never arises*".  
Where there is true security in God, there can be love.
- iv) **love is not ill-mannered** (REB/NRSV: "**never rude**")  
Love doesn't use 'abrasive' language nor does it set out to offend others.  
It doesn't ignore people's feelings, but always treats others with courtesy
- v) **love is not selfish** - "**it isn't always 'me first'**" (Peterson)  
Agape-love is the very antithesis of self-centeredness.  
Agape-love has been defines as 'other-regard'  
To love is to become aware of others, and to be concerned for their good  
"**it does not insist on its own way**" (NRSV)
- vi) **love is not irritable** [so also NRSV]  
JBP: "**love is not touchy**" - "**doesn't fly off the handle**" (Peterson)  
If someone rubs you up the wrong way, in the end it is your fault, not theirs - you shouldn't have a wrong way to be rubbed up.  
In this respect I ready of a medical experiment involving honeymoon couples.  
A doctor injected them with the virus of the common cold - but never once did the couple catch a cold. He concluded that if real love & joy are in the system, then this will protect the person against disease.

Similarly, love can protect us from an irritable or critical spirit

**vii) love does not keep a record of wrongs**

I'm told that in Polynesia it is customary for people to keep some reminders of their hatred. Articles are suspended from the roofs of their huts to keep alive the memory of their wrongs - real or imaginary. Sadly, it is not only in Polynesia that people nurse their wrath to keep it warm  
Love by contrast keeps no little black book - love allows the other to start afresh with a clean slate.

Love "**is not resentful**" (NRSV). Henry Ward Beecher: "*every man should have a fair-sized cemetery in which to bury the faults of his friends*"

If you find that difficult, then let me encourage you to write all those hurts you cannot forget on a piece of paper - bring it before the Lord - forgive them in his name - and then burn the paper!

**viii) love is not happy with evil** [NRSV: "it does not rejoice in wrongdoing"]

JBP: "**love does not gloat over the wickedness of other people**"

Alas, there is a streak in us what finds delight in hearing something bad about the other. We all love to have a good gossip - yet the basis of gossip is always wrong. Christlike love never gossips - it never gloats over the weakness of other people. It is sad, concerned, prayerful, when it sees things go wrong

Rather, says Paul, love is "**happy with the truth**" [NRSV: "rejoices in the truth"], in the sense that love rejoices when truth, as expressed in righteousness and holiness, wins out!

### 3. LOVE NEVER GIVES UP

Thirdly, the love that gives and gives, never gives up loving

At this point we come 1 Cor 13.7, a verse which is open to a variety of translations. The GNB reads: "**Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail**"

The NRSV adopts a more literal translation: "**Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things**"

The NIV is somewhat similar, but adopts a very different translation for the first phrase: "**Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres**".

Let's look at this verse in detail

**i) Love bears all things** (NRSV)

The underlying Greek phrase verb is capable of being translated in two very different ways. It can mean that love never gives in, it "**never gives up**" (GNB), "**love puts up with anything**" (Peterson). At this point I think of the way many parents love their children, even when their love is not returned – let's be honest, children can sometimes be very awkward, ungracious, almost 'brutish' individuals. Children can be incredible hurtful not just in what they say, but also how they behave. In such a context, it can be tough to love. Some parents give up – but true love, does not. It '**bears all things**'

But there is another possible translation: for one of the common meanings of the underlying Greek verb is ‘*to keep confidential, cover, pass over in silence*’. Hence the translation we find in the NIV: ‘**Love always protects**’. When things have gone wrong, true love does not spill the beans – it does not expose the wrong. It patiently bears all things, hoping that the day will come when things will come right.

ii) **Love believes all things** (NRSV)

What does this mean? At first sight, this could seem to encourage gullibility, if not incredulity. Does it mean that we always have to believe our children, even when their story conflicts with that of their teachers at school? Does it mean that we must always fall for the stories of con-men? Surely not. We have to be discerning. There are people who are not worthy of our trust. Augustine said: ‘*love believes the best*’; someone else has said: ‘*love is not unduly suspicious*’ (Ralph Martin). Love is never cynical.

I rather like the comment of Gordon Fee: “*Paul does not mean that love always believes the best about everything and everyone, but that love never ceases to have faith; it never loses hope*”. Hence GNB renders this phrase: “**its faith never fails**”; love “**trusts God always**” (Peterson). However much the life of our loved one may be in a mess, we never give up trusting that God will sort out the mess. This leads us into the very next phrase

iii) **Love hopes all things** (NRSV)

Fee: “*Love hopes to the end that God will show mercy in that person’s behalf*”

Ralph Martin: Love hopes – ‘*even when hope seems foolhardy and beyond credibility*’

Where there is love, there no case is every hopeless – even when there has been repeated personal abuse!

Love never gives up

iv) **Love endures all things** (NRSV).

Love endures all things, in the sense that it ‘perseveres’; or as the GNB puts it: ‘**Its patience never fails**’. ‘*Love never disappears*’ (RP Martin)

“*Like Christ on the cross, loves endures scorn, failure, ingratitude*” (Deluz)

“**There is nothing which love cannot face**” (REB)

There are times when parents are tempted to give up on the children, sometimes understandably so - but true love keeps loving, however undeserving the object of our love might be. This, of course, was supremely true of Jesus - though his disciples abandoned him and even betrayed him, Jesus love for them never faltered.

When I was 6 years old, I went to a school called ‘Cypress Road Primary Road School’. If the truth be told, it was a pretty grotty school, but it had one thing in its favour – it had a wonderful school motto, ‘*Persevere*’. True love perseveres – true love never gives up – “**love is eternal**” declares Paul (1 Cor 13.8)