

“Now That’s Love”

Could two people be more different? He’s looked up to but she’s looked down on. He’s a church leader, and she’s a, well, sinner. He makes a living promoting standards but she’s made a living breaking them. He’s hosting the party but she’s crashing it.

Ask the residents of Capernaum to point out the more pious of the two, and they’ll pick Simon. After all, he’s a student of theology. He’s forgotten more Bible than she ever knew. Anyone would pick him. Anyone, that is, except Jesus. Jesus knew them both but he picks the woman. And he tells Simon why.

Not that Simon wants to know. He’s angry and doesn’t know whom to yell at first, the woman or the servant who let her in. After all, this dinner is a formal affair and by invitation only.

One of the lessons Simon learned that day was this: Don’t think thoughts you don’t want Jesus to hear. But Jesus did hear them, and when he did, he chose to share a few of his own. So Jesus told Simon the story we just read in Luke 7.

Simon invites Jesus to his house but treats him like an unwanted second cousin. No kiss of greeting. No washing his feet. No oil for his head. Or, in modern terms, no one opened the door for him, took his coat, or shook his hand.

Simon does absolutely nothing to make Jesus feel welcome. The woman, however, does everything that Simon didn’t. We aren’t told her name, just her reputation, most likely a prostitute. She has no invitation to the party and no standing in the community.

But people’s opinions didn’t stop her from coming. It’s not for them but Him she has come. She has no water but she has tears. She has no towel, but she has her hair, and she uses both to bathe the feet of Christ. As one translation reads, “*she rained tears*” on his feet (v.44 MSG). She opens a vial of perfume, perhaps her only possession of worth, and massages it into his skin.

You’d think Simon, of all people, would show such love. He’s the reverend of the church and a student of Scripture, but he’s distant. You’d think the woman would avoid Jesus, but she can’t resist him.

So how do we explain the difference between the two? Simple. I believe that she’d discovered one truth Simon had somehow missed: God’s love has no limits. We don’t know when she received it, but we do know she came hungry for grace.

Simon, on the other hand, doesn’t even know he’s hungry. People like Simon don’t need grace and they don’t request mercy. It wasn’t that Simon couldn’t be forgiven; he just never asks to be.

So while she has ample love to give, he has no love to offer. And why is that? Read verse 47 of chapter 7 again: “*A person who is forgiven little shows only little love.*” In other words, we can’t give what we’ve never received. And if we’ve never received love, how in the world can we love others?

Could it be we're missing a step here? Could it be that the secret to loving is receiving? The apostle John tells us that we give love by first receiving it. *"We love, because He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19).

We know what God wants us to do. He commands that we love each other, right? (1 John 3:23). But instructing us to love without others telling us we are loved is like telling us to write a check without ever making a deposit in our accounts. At least the apostle John makes a deposit before he tells us to write the check. First, the deposit: *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins"* (1 John 4:10).

And then John calls on us to pull out the checkbook: *"Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* (v.11). The secret to loving others, then, is living loved. Remember Paul's prayer? *"May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love"* (Eph. 3:17).

Now, depending on which translation you're reading, love is mentioned in the Bible somewhere between 300-600+ times. And chapter 13 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church is considered by most as the greatest love chapter in the entire Bible.

Everybody knows that love exists, but we find it difficult to define just what it is. And maybe that's because there's so many different kinds. There's romantic love. There's love for children, parental love. There's love of self, love of possessions, a love of neighbor, and a love of life, to name a few.

And much like us, the Greeks understood that "love" has different meanings in different contexts, but the word for love that the Greek translation of the Old Testament most often used to speak of God's love was "Agape."

And the New Testament writers, including Paul, picked up on this word and used it often to describe God's love for man by the sending of His Son. And so the word "agape" came to represent unconditional love, choosing to love another person regardless of one's feelings. As we study Paul's description, it becomes clear that "Agape" love is not something we feel but something that we choose to do or not to do, and God measures our entire life by it.

So first, Paul uses two verbs which describe positively what love is. He then gives a series of seven verbs which describe negatively what love is not. This is followed by a contrasting statement to describe love: love does not do this but rather that. And then, finally, he describes four things that love always does.

Look once again at today's Call to Worship. Isn't it interesting that the very first word Paul chooses to describe love is patience? The word here means "to bear patiently with other people's faults and offenses." So it's choosing to love another not because of who they are, but in spite of who they are, in spite of what they do to you or have done to you. It's a love which sees the potential in people and which continues to desire the best for others.

If we find patience hard to give, we might ask how filled we are with God's patience. Patience is a fruit of his Spirit, remember. If God is being patient with us, can't we pass on some patience to others? Because before love is anything else: *"Love is patient."*

Paul also places kindness toward the top of the pyramid when he writes, *“Love is kind.”* It doesn’t take much effort to be kind, but it does take intention. We need a lot more kindness in our hurting world; it can be a powerful medicine. Offer to mow somebody’s lawn. Give somebody a ride. Send a card or note to a shut-in. Many people will remember an act of kindness forever. So, we should praise God for His kindness and then be kind toward others.

Now for the seven verbs Paul chooses to describe what love doesn’t do. *“Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.” “It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”*

First, *“Love does not envy.”* We can envy many things – a person’s position in life, their possessions, or their appearance. But love is glad for what the other person has. There’s no rivalry or competition in love.

Secondly, *“Love does not boast.”* If envy is desiring what another person has, boasting comes from the desire for others to see what we have. The Greek word means to act and talk in such a manner that you draw attention to yourself. Paul says that one cannot boast and love at the same time.

And closely related to boasting is the issue of pride. *“Love is not proud.”* While boasting is pride acting outwards in relation to other people, pride acts inward in relation to oneself. It is the act of puffing oneself up in our own eyes until we feel so superior to others that we cannot possibly love them. Paul tells us: *“Regard one another as more important than yourselves.”* Christ did. He humbled himself because that’s what love does.

And when defining what love is not, Paul also put rudeness on the list. When he writes that *“love is not rude,”* he uses a verb which means to act disgracefully or dishonorably, or to make others feel uncomfortable. Paul is speaking here about common courtesy, love in relationship to society. As we reflect on Christ’s courtesy to us, we’ll be likely to offer the same to others.

Paul then goes on to tell us that *“Love is not self-seeking.”* This word speaks about putting ourselves before others, or in other words, plain ol’ selfishness. Love does not use people to gain its own advantage but takes the attitude of Jesus who came *“not to be served, but to serve...”* (Mark 10:45).

Now we come to *“Love is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.”* To be easily angered means to be easily provoked, to be irritated. We all have certain buttons which when pushed will trigger an unloving reaction. Push the right buttons on me on the wrong day, and I’ll probably end up owing you an apology. But Paul says that isn’t love.

“If You can forgive me for hurting You, then I can forgive them for hurting me.” Could that be why Paul writes, *“Love keeps no record of wrongs?”* Keeping a record of wrongs is the long-term decision to hold on to bitterness and resentment, to choose not to forgive. Are we waiting to settle a score? Do we have a habit of bringing up the past?

Paul goes on to describe love with a contrasting statement in verse 6: *“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.”* He means that true love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins. We must love people, but not ignore sin. True love never rejoices when God is dishonored, or when God’s law is disobeyed.

The contrast is that love rejoices when truth wins out, not evil. God always applauds what is right. He has never done wrong, led one person to do wrong, or rejoiced when anyone did wrong.

And finally, Paul wraps a huge ribbon around these six verses when he writes, *“Love always protects, always trust, always hopes, always perseveres.”* You might call this verse a DNA test for love.

When we cover someone with concern, we are fulfilling what Paul had in mind when he wrote the phrase *“Love always protects.”* The word Paul uses here is related to the Greek word for “roof,” meaning “to protect by covering over.” I bet that you never thought of the Good Shepherd as a clothier, did you? Adam and Eve sure did! Genesis 3:21 explains that *“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”* Now think about this: Isn’t it interesting that every clothing store in the world owes its existence to the first couple?

God does exactly what He did for our parents in the garden by offering the life of His Son, and dressing us with himself (Gal. 3:26-27). God’s love covers all things – every promise broken, every penny stolen, every cross word, curse word, and harsh word.

And love *“always trusts.”* It chooses to believe the best about people until proven otherwise. Love *“always hopes.”* It doesn’t dwell on the problems of the past, but looks forward to the future with confidence and grace. And love *“always perseveres.”* It never stops loving, but chooses to love people in spite of themselves.

God’s view of love reminds me of my mom’s view of the food she put on our table. When we love someone, we take the entire package. No picking and choosing. No large helping of good and passing on the bad. Love is a package deal. And Paul says that without this kind of love, we’re nothing.

You might be surprised to learn that Mark Twain was rather well-known for his coarse language. His wife, Libby, was a very proper lady who was always horrified at the amount of profanity her husband wove into his lectures and speeches. So one day she decided that she was going to cure him. While helping with his tie one morning before he left for a lecture, she looked him straight in the eye and began to swear, using every word she’d ever heard her husband use. Finally, she ran out of words, stopped and waited for his response. He looked down into her eyes and with a smile he said, “Libby, you’ve got the words, but you ain’t got the music.”

Maybe loving people isn’t always easy because we don’t have the music. Maybe we’re trying to give what we don’t have in our heart. Maybe we’re forgetting to receive God’s love first.

The woman in Capernaum didn't forget. She lavished love on Christ by bathing his feet with tears and drying his feet with her hair. She'd discovered the one truth Simon had somehow missed: God's love has no limits. So God's love meets the standard of our final passage. "Love," Paul says, "*never fails.*"

Even when we don't feel lovely or when no one else loves us, God loves us simply because He has chosen to do so. One pastor was quoted as saying this: "*If God had a fridge, our picture would be on it. If He had a wallet, our photo would be in it. He's just crazy about us.*"

And may we always remember, God could have spoken some words to make the nails fall off the cross, but he didn't. Now that's love! AMEN.