

Love is the Greatest

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (CSB)

¹ If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, ⁵ is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. ⁶ Love finds no joy in unrighteousness 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 in part, and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect 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 a man, I put aside childish things. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. ¹³ Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love—but the greatest of these is love.

Love is the greatest, so says the Apostle Paul. He gives all sorts of reasons as to why this is the case. He starts out by saying that if he could speak in hundreds of different languages, even the language of angels, but does not have love, then he's just making noise. If he was the best preacher, the wisest, smartest man ever or the most religious and faithful man who could do miracles all the time but did not have love, then he is nothing. If he could cure cancer, end world hunger, stop all wars, give absolutely everything of himself but has no love, he has gained nothing. Abilities, accomplishments, knowledge, faith – these mean nothing if you don't have love because love is the greatest.

If love is the greatest, then we better know what love actually is. The word "love" is not well defined in the English language mostly because English is not very precise in defining love. We say that we love pizza, long walks on the beach, our dogs or cats, and people, but these loves are not the same. Even among people love is not the same. How we love a son or a daughter is different from how we love a friend which is different from how we love a grandparent which is definitely different from how we love a husband or a wife.

Thankfully other languages are a bit more precise when it comes to defining love. In the Greek language, the original language of the New Testament of the Bible, there are four main words for love. You have "storge" love, which is an affection along with a hint of obligation, like you have with that cousin or aunt or uncle that you maybe don't fully get along with or agree with their political views but they're family, so you love them. There is "philia" love, or friendship love, the kind of love where someone stays at your side through thick and thin, who knows your faults and flaws and weaknesses and still stands by you. There is an "eros" love, a passionate, feelings based love, one that is often expressed in physical intimacy. Lastly, we have "agape" love. Agape love is the kind of love spelled out and defined here with Paul's words to the Christians in Corinth, the kind of love that Paul calls the greatest.

How do you define this kind of love? Well, agape love is patient. Patience is long suffering. In other words, it suffers through a lot of things without losing heart, much like how verse 7 says love "endures all things." Agape love is kind, a word also translated as mercy. It's not just about being nice to someone. This love treats us not as we deserve to be treated; it treats us better than we deserve to be treated. It does not envy, meaning that it's actually glad for someone else's success and achievements and wants good things to keep happening to the person. Agape love does not boast. It isn't a windbag, looking to make itself important, have a higher estimation of what it actually is. It's not rude, indecent, disgraceful to other people. Agape love is not self-seeking but instead always seeks to serve other people. It's not irritable, meaning that it isn't easily angered or easily provoked. It's not Marty McFly losing it when someone calls him "Chicken." It keeps no record of wrongs, meaning that it will never bring up past sins in a fight or make a silent tally of all the times they are wronged. Agape love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth, which means that it will never lead you to sin or ask you to sin. The greatest love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (verse 7) It's quick to believe but isn't naïve. It has a confidence in things not seen, more than just an optimistic outlook on life. It stands its ground and maintains the proper course. When you put all that together, no wonder Paul says that this love is the greatest.

While it is good to focus on each of these descriptions and apply them into our lives, to love as outlined here, I think you can sum most of it up by saying that this love – which is the greatest – is service. The greatest thing you can do for someone else is serve them. This has helped me recontextualize what it means to love, especially in my marriage. Yeah, there is a storge, obligated familial love, and a philia friendship love, and a passionate eros love, but to love my wife in the greatest way is to ask how I am serving her.

I've been married for going on 17 years and just now am I starting to realize that when I say "I love you" to my wife, I have to think about what I am doing for her, how I am serving her. Suddenly I'm more externally focused instead of selfishly focused. Instead of saying, "I love you" because of how she makes me feel or because of what she does or because of how well we get along, saying I love you, if this is the greatest love, should be a statement that acknowledges that I serve her. This is godly, agape love.

Does this definition of the greatest love give you pause? I mean, even going through the list that defines this love as the greatest, did you see so many ways that you have fallen short? Does your lack of patience, your self-centered attitude, your demanding of others to serve you and care for you stand out over your service to someone else? As one person (and probably many others) have said, "Love is giving 100% of yourself to the other person and expecting nothing in return." Does this description call into question whether or not I truly love the people that I say that I love? Our focus on ourselves, our selfishness, has caused us to love ourselves instead of others. We have not exhibited this greatest thing, this love, as God described it to us. We have often failed to love in the greatest way.

Even though we lack loving in this greatest way and have fallen short, we have gotten to experience this greatest thing, this agape love. We have experienced perfect love because we know the love God has for us. God has been and is patient with us, not quick to anger or irritable. He gives days, months, years of patience in leading us away from sin and instead leading us to him because he does not want any of us to perish. He would rather endure our wickedness and pay for our sin himself than cast us quickly into judgment and damnation. This is mercy, treating us better than we deserve to be treated.

As agape love does, God doesn't envy us but instead is glad for us, rejoices over us when we're successful in our endeavors, when we resist temptation, when we hold to his Word. God doesn't boast but tells us who he is and what he does so that we are saved. He's not rude but comes to us in quiet whispers, not seeking accolades but saving us from ourselves.

His greatest service, his greatest love, is that he laid down his life for us, showing us a love that cannot be surpassed, a love that sacrificed himself for our good. Because of his sacrifice, he keeps no record of our wrongs. He forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more, removed it from us as far as the east is from the west. He never brings it up to us to shame us or put us in our place.

God's love for us has endured. He continues to believe that his Word works, even when we are faithless and don't believe in him. He has the confident expectation that people will come to faith in him and be forgiven. He endures all of our wickedness and rejection and wandering so that we and others can still know the truth and be served by him, saved by him. Because he has loved us in this way, this is our worth, this is our value. It can't be taken away. It can't change. All of these things come together so that we reach the same conclusion as Paul that God's agape love is the greatest!

You and I have experienced this greatest thing, this agape love. It's not something that we will only have in heaven, but it's something that we have right now. It's the greatest thing that we can share right here and right now. We can serve others, love with this greatest love so that others can experience the greatest thing ever. We can share how God served us, gave totally of himself to us so that we would be cleansed of all the times that we failed to love perfectly or have loved selfishly. This greatest thing, this service love, gives us our value. This is how we know that we are loved and that every single person we meet are just as loved by God. May we live and share this greatest thing, this agape love with everyone we meet. Amen.