

Perfect Love

“The Qualities of True Love”

1 Corinthians 13:4, 5

Big Idea: True love is not a feeling but an action.

In the first three verses Paul talks about the priority of love. Now in the next 2 verses he talks about what love does and does not do.

1. Love is patient

Love practices being patient or long-suffering, literally, "long-tempered" (makrothumeō). The word is used almost exclusively of being patient with people, rather than with circumstances or events.

Love's patience is the ability to be inconvenienced or taken advantage of by a person over and over again and yet not be upset or angry.

Chrysostom, the early church Father, said, "It is a word which is used of the man who is wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself but will never do it." Patience never retaliates.

Like agapē love, the patience spoken of in the New Testament was a virtue only among Christians. In the Greek world self-sacrificing love and non-avenging patience were considered weaknesses, unworthy of the noble man or woman.

Aristotle, for instance, taught that the great Greek virtue was refusal to tolerate insult or injury and to strike back in retaliation for the slightest offense. Vengeance was a virtue. The world has always tended to make heroes of those who fight back, who stand up for their welfare and rights above all else.

But love, God's love, is the very opposite. Its primary concern is for the welfare of others, not itself, and it is much more willing to be taken advantage of than to take advantage, much less to avenge. Love does not retaliate. The Christian who acts like Christ never takes revenge for being hurt or insulted or abused. He refuses to "pay back evil for evil" (Rom. 12:17), but if he is slapped on the right cheek, he will turn the left (Matt. 5:39).

Paul said that patience was a characteristic of his own heart (2 Cor. 6:6) and should characterize every Christian (Eph. 4:2). Stephen's last words were ones of patient forgiveness: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60). As he lay dying under the painful, crushing blows of the stones, his concern was for his murderers rather than for himself. He was long-tempered, patient to the absolute extreme.

The supreme example of patience, of course, is God Himself. It is God's patient love that prevents the world from being destroyed. It is His patience and long-suffering that allows time for men to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9).

As He was dying on the cross, rejected by those He had come to save, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Robert Ingersoll, the well-known atheist of the last century, often would stop in the middle of his lectures against God and say, "I'll give God five minutes to strike me dead for the things I've said." He then used the fact that he was not struck dead as proof that God did not exist. Theodore Parker said of Ingersoll's claim, "And did the gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of the eternal God in five minutes?"

One of Abraham Lincoln's earliest political enemies was Edwin M. Stanton. He called Lincoln a "low cunning clown" and "the original gorilla." "It was ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla," he would say, "when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois." Lincoln never responded to the slander, but when, as president, he needed a secretary of war, he chose Stanton. When his incredulous friends asked why, Lincoln replied, "Because he is the best man." Years later, as the slain president's body

lay in state, Stanton looked into the coffin and said through his tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." His animosity was finally broken by Lincoln's long-suffering, nonretaliatory spirit. Patient love won out.

2. Love is kind

Just as patience will take anything from others, kindness will give anything to others, even to its enemies. Being kind is the counterpart of being patient.

To be kind (*chrēsteuomai*) means to be useful, serving, and gracious. It is active goodwill. It not only feels generous, it is generous. It not only desires others' welfare, but works for it.

When Jesus commanded His disciples, including us, to love their enemies, He did not simply mean to feel kindly about them but to be kind to them. "If anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matt. 5:40-41). The hard environment of an evil world gives love almost unlimited opportunity to exercise that sort of kindness.

God is the supreme model. "Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4),

To Titus Paul wrote, "But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:4-6).

Peter tells us that we should "long for the pure milk of the word" and thereby "grow in respect to salvation," because we "have tasted the kindness of the Lord" (1 Pet. 2:2-3). To His disciples Jesus says, "For My yoke is easy, and My load is light" (Matt. 11:30).

The word He used for "easy" is the one translated kind in 1 Cor. 13:4. In His love for those who belong to Him, Jesus makes His yoke "kind," or mild. He makes sure that what His people are called to bear for Him is bearable (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

The first test of Christian kindness, and the test of every aspect of love, is the home. The Christian husband who acts like a Christian is kind to his wife and children. Christian brothers and sisters are kind to each other and to their parents. They have more than kind feelings toward each other; they do kind, helpful things for each other—to the point of loving self-sacrifice, when necessary.

For the Corinthians, kindness meant giving up their selfish, jealous, spiteful, and proud attitudes and adopting the spirit of loving-kindness.

3. Love is not jealous

first of eight negative descriptions of love. Love is not jealous. Love and jealousy are mutually exclusive. Where one is, the other cannot be. Shakespeare called jealousy the "green sickness." It also has been called "the enemy of honor" and "the sorrow of fools." Jesus referred to it as "an evil eye" (Matt. 20:15, kjv).

Jealousy, or envy, has two forms. One form says, "I want what someone else has." If they have a better car than we do, we want it. If they are praised for something they do, we want the same or more for ourselves. That sort of jealousy is bad enough.

A worse kind says, "I wish they didn't have what they have" (see Matt. 20:1-16). The second sort of jealousy is more than selfish; it is desiring evil for someone else. It is jealousy on the deepest, most corrupt, and destructive level. That is the jealousy Solomon uncovered in the woman who pretended to be a child's mother. When her own infant son died, she secretly exchanged him for the baby of a friend who was staying with her. The true mother discovered what had happened and, when their dispute was taken before the king, he ordered the baby to be cut in half, a half to be given to each woman. The true mother pleaded for the baby to be spared, even if it meant losing possession of him. The false mother, however, would rather have had the baby killed than for the true mother to have him (1 Kings 3:16-27).

One of the hardest battles a Christian must fight is against jealousy. There is always someone who is a little better or who is potentially a little better than you are. We all

face the temptation to jealousy when someone else does something better than we do. The first reaction of the flesh is to wish that person ill.

When love sees someone who is popular, successful, beautiful, or talented, it is glad for them and never jealous or envious. While Paul was imprisoned, probably in Rome, some of the younger preachers who then served where he had ministered were trying to outdo the apostle out of envy. They were so jealous of Paul's reputation and accomplishments that, with their criticism, they intended to cause him additional "distress" while he suffered in prison. But Paul did not resent their freedom, their success, or even their jealousy. Though he did not condone their sin, he would not return envy for envy, but was simply glad that the gospel was being preached, whatever the motives (Phil. 1:15-17). He knew the message was more powerful than the messenger, and that it could transcend weak and jealous preachers in order to accomplish God's purpose.

Jealousy is not a moderate or harmless sin. It was Eve's jealousy of God, sparked by her pride, to which Satan successfully appealed. She wanted to be like God, to have what He has and to know what He knows. Jealousy was an integral part of that first great sin, from which all other sin has descended.

The next sin mentioned in Genesis is murder, caused by Cain's jealousy of Abel.

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery because of jealousy.

Daniel was thrown into the lion's den because of the jealousy of his fellow officials in Babylon.

Jealousy caused the elder brother to resent the father's attention to the prodigal son. And there are many more biblical illustrations of the same kind.

"Wrath is fierce and anger is a flood, but who can stand before jealousy?" (Prov. 27:4). In its extreme, jealousy has a viciousness shared by no other sin.

James says "If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:14-16).

Selfish ambition, which is fueled by jealousy, is often clever and successful. But its "wisdom" is demonic and its success is destructive.

In stark contrast to many accounts of jealousy in Scripture is the story of Jonathan's love for David. David not only was a greater and more popular warrior than Jonathan but was a threat to the throne that Jonathan normally would have inherited.

Yet we are told of nothing but Jonathan's great respect and love for his friend David, for whom he would willingly have sacrificed not only the throne but his life. "He loved him [David] as he loved his own life" (1 Sam. 20:17). Jonathan's father, Saul, lost his throne and his blessing because of his jealousy, primarily of David. Jonathan willingly forsook the throne and received a greater blessing, because he would have nothing of jealousy.

Eliezer of Damascus was the heir to Abram's estate, because Abram had no son (Gen. 15:2). When Isaac was born, however, and Eliezer lost the privileged inheritance, his love for Abram and Isaac never wavered (see Gen. 24).

A loving person is never jealous. He is glad for the success of others, even if their success works against his own.

4. Love does not brag

When the loving person is successful he does not boast of it. He does not brag. *Perpereuomai* ("to brag") is used nowhere else in the New Testament and means to talk conceitedly.

Love does not parade its accomplishments.

Bragging is the other side of jealousy. Jealousy is wanting what someone else has. Bragging is trying to make others jealous of what we have.

Jealousy puts others down; bragging builds us up. It is ironic that, as much as most of us dislike bragging in others, we are so inclined to brag ourselves.

Charles Trumbull once vowed: "God, if you will give me the strength, every time I have the opportunity to introduce the topic of conversation it will always be Jesus Christ." He had only one subject that was truly worth talking about. If Christ is first in our thoughts, we cannot possibly brag.

C. S. Lewis called bragging "the utmost evil." It is the epitome of pride, which is the root sin of all sins. Bragging puts ourselves first. Everyone else, including God, must therefore be of less importance to us. It is impossible to build ourselves up without putting others down. When we brag, we can be "up" only if others are "down."

Jesus was God incarnate, yet never exalted Himself in any way "Although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and... being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself" (Phil. 2:6-8).

Jesus, who had everything to boast of, never boasted. In total contrast, we who have nothing to boast of are prone to boast. Only the love that comes from Jesus Christ can save us from flaunting our knowledge, our abilities, our gifts, or our accomplishments, real or imagined.

5. Love is not arrogant

The Corinthian believers thought they had arrived at perfection. Paul already had warned them "not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? (1 Cor. 4:6-8).

A few verses later the apostle is more direct: "Now some of you have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you" (v. 18).

Everything good that the Corinthians had came from the Lord, and they therefore had no reason to boast and be arrogant. Yet they were puffed up and conceited about their knowledge of doctrine, their spiritual gifts, and the famous teachers they had had. They were so jaded in their pride that they even boasted about their carnality, worldliness, idolatry, and immorality, including incest, which was not even practiced by pagans (5:1). They were arrogant rather than repentant; they bragged rather than mourned (v. 2). Love, by contrast, is not arrogant.

William Carey, often referred to as the father of modern missions, was a brilliant linguist, responsible for translating parts of the Bible into no fewer than 34 different languages and dialects. He had been raised in a simple home in England and in his early manhood worked as a cobbler. In India he often was ridiculed for his "low" birth and former occupation. At a dinner party one evening a snob said "I understand, Mister Carey, that you once worked as a shoemaker." "Oh no, your lordship," Carey replied, "I was not a shoemaker, only a shoe repairman."

When Jesus began to preach He soon overshadowed the ministry of John the Baptist. Yet John spoke of Him as "He who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie" (John 1:27). When John's disciples later became jealous of Jesus' popularity, John rebuked them, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30).

Like wisdom, love says,

"Pride and arrogance and the evil way, and the perverted mouth, I hate" (Prov. 8:13). Other proverbs remind us that

"when pride comes, then comes dishonor" (11:2), that "through presumption comes nothing but strife" (13:10), and that

"pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (16:18; cf. 29:23).

Pride and arrogance breed contention, with which the Corinthian church was filled. In such things love has no part. Arrogance is big-headed; love is big-hearted.

6. Love is not rude

The principle here has to do with poor manners, with acting rudely. It is not as serious a fault as bragging or arrogance, but it stems from the same lovelessness. It does not care enough for those it is around to act becomingly or politely. It cares nothing for their feelings or sensitivities. The loveless person is careless, overbearing, and often crude.

The Corinthian Christians were models of unbecoming behavior. Acting unseemly was almost their trademark. Nearly everything they did was rude and unloving. Even when they came together to celebrate the Lord's Supper they were self-centered and offensive. "Each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk" (1 Cor. 11:21). During worship services each one tried to outdo the other in speaking in tongues. Everyone talked at once and tried to be the most dramatic and prominent. The church did everything improperly and in disorder, the opposite of what Paul had taught them and now advised them against (14:40).

On one occasion Jesus was dining in the home of a Pharisee named Simon. During the meal a prostitute came and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and then anointed them with expensive perfume. Simon, embarrassed and offended, thought to himself, "If this man were a prophet He would know who and what sort of person this woman is who is touching Him, that she is a sinner." Jesus then told the parable of the moneylender who forgave two debtors, one for 500 denarii and the other for 50. He asked Simon which debtor would be more grateful, to which the Pharisee answered,

"I suppose the one whom he forgave more."... Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears, and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little." (Luke 7:36-47)

The primary example of love in that story is not the woman's, sincere and beautiful as it was. It is Jesus' love that is the most remarkable, and that is in such contrast to Simon's lovelessness. By His loving acceptance of the woman's loving act, as well as by the parable, Jesus showed Simon that it was not her actions or His response that was improper, but Simon's attitude. What the woman did and what Jesus did had everything to do with love. What Simon did had nothing to do with love.

William Barclay translates our text as, "Love does not behave gracelessly." Love is gracious. Graciousness should begin with fellow believers, but it should not end there. Many Christians have forfeited the opportunity for witnessing by rudeness to an unbeliever who offends them by a habit the Christian considers improper. As with Simon, sometimes our attitude and behavior in the name of righteousness are more improper, and less righteous, than some of the things we criticize.

Love is much more than being gracious and considerate, but it is never less. To the extent that our living is ungracious and inconsiderate it is also unloving and unchristian. Self-righteous rudeness by Christians can turn people away from Christ before they have a chance to hear the gospel. The messenger can become a barrier to the message. If people do not see the "gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:1) clearly in us, they are less likely to see Him clearly in the gospel we preach.

7. Love is not selfish

An inscription on a tombstone in a small English village reads,

Here lies a miser who lived for himself,
and cared for nothing but gathering wealth.
Now where he is or how he fares,
nobody knows and nobody cares.

In contrast, a plain tombstone in the courtyard at St. Paul's Cathedral in London reads, "Sacred to the memory of General Charles George Gordon, who at all times and

everywhere gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God."

Love does not seek its own. Here is probably the key to everything. The root evil of fallen human nature is in wanting to have its own way. R. C. H. Lenski, the well-known Bible commentator, has said, "Cure selfishness and you have just replanted the garden of Eden." Adam and Eve rejected God's way so that they could have their own. Self replaced God. That is the opposite of righteousness and the opposite of love. Love is not preoccupied with its own things but with the interests of others (Phil. 2:4).

Again, the Corinthian believers were models of what loving Christians should not be. They were selfish in the extreme. They did not share their food at love feasts, they protected their rights to the point of suing fellow believers in pagan law courts, and they wanted what they thought were the "best" spiritual gifts for themselves. Instead of using spiritual gifts for the benefit of others, they tried to use them to their own advantage.

The story is told of a chauffeur who drove up to a cemetery and asked the minister who served as caretaker to come to the car, because his employer was too ill to walk. Waiting in the car was a frail old lady with sunken eyes that showed years of hurt and anguish. She introduced herself and said she had been sending five dollars to the cemetery for the past several years to be used for flowers for her husband's grave. "I have come in person today," she said, "because the doctors have given me only a few weeks to live and I wanted to see the grave for one last time."

The minister replied, "You know I am sorry you have been sending money for those flowers." Taken aback, she said, "What do you mean?" "Well, I happen to be a part of a visiting society that visits patients in hospitals and mental institutions. They dearly love flowers. They can see them and smell them. Flowers are therapy for them, because they are living people." Saying nothing, she motioned the chauffeur to leave.

Some months later the minister was surprised to see the same car drive up, but with the woman herself at the wheel. She said, "At first I resented what you said to me that day when I came here for a last visit. But as I thought about it, I decided you were right. Now I personally take flowers to the hospitals. It does make the patients happy and it makes me happy, too. The doctors can't figure out what made me well, but I know I now have someone else to live for."

Jesus is our perfect model. He "did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28).

The Son of God lived His life for others. God incarnate was love incarnate. He was the perfect incarnation of self-giving love. He never sought His own welfare, but always the welfare of others.

8. Love is not provoked

The Greek *paroxunō*, here translated provoked, means to arouse to anger and is the origin of the English *paroxysm*, a convulsion or sudden outburst of emotion or action. Love guards against being irritated, upset, or angered by things said or done against it. It is not provoked.

The apostle does not rule out righteous indignation. Love cannot "rejoice in unrighteousness" (1 Cor. 13:6). To be angered by the mistreatment of the unfortunate or by the maligning and contradiction of God's Word is righteous indignation. But when it is truly righteous, indignation will never be provoked by something done against us personally. When Jesus cleansed the Temple, He was angered at the profaning of His Father's house of worship (Matt. 21:11-12). But on the many occasions when He was personally vilified or abused, He did not once become angry or defensive.

Like his Lord, Paul was only angered by the things that anger God. He responded strongly against such things as heresy, immorality, and misuse of spiritual gifts. But he did not become angry at those who beat him, jailed him, or lied about him (see Acts 23:1-5).

The being provoked that Paul is talking about here has to do with things done against us or that are personally offensive. Love does not get angry at others when they say or do something that displeases us or when they prevent us from having our own way (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21-24). Love never reacts in self-defense or retaliation. Being provoked is the other side of seeking one's own way. The person who is intent on having his own way is easily provoked, easily angered.

The great colonial preacher and theologian Jonathan Edwards had a daughter with an uncontrollable temper. When a young man fell in love with her and asked her father for her hand in marriage, Dr. Edwards replied, "You can't have her." "But I love her and she loves me," he protested. "It doesn't matter," the father insisted. Asked why, he said, "Because she is not worthy of you." "But she is a Christian isn't she?" "Yes," said Edwards, "but the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else could ever live."

Surely the number one reason both for mental and physical illness in our society today is the overwhelming preoccupation with our rights and the consequent lovelessness. When everyone is fighting for his own rights, no one can really succeed or be happy. Everyone grabs, no one gives, and everyone loses—even when one gets what he wants. Lovelessness can never win in any meaningful or lasting way. It always costs more than it gains.

We get angry when another person gains a privilege or recognition we want for ourselves, because it is our "right." But putting our rights before our duty and before loving concern for others comes from self-centeredness and lovelessness. The loving person is more concerned about doing what he should and helping where he can than in having what he thinks are his rights and his due. Love considers nothing its right and everything its obligation.

Telling our wives or husbands that we love them is not convincing if we continually get upset and angry at what they say and do. Telling our children that we love them is not convincing if we often yell at them for doing things that irritate us and interfere with our own plans. It does no good to protest, "I lose my temper a lot, but it's all over in a few minutes." So is a nuclear bomb. A great deal of damage can be done in a very short time. Temper is always destructive, and even small temper "bombs" can leave much hurt and damage, especially when they explode on a regular basis.

Lovelessness is the cause of temper, and love is the only cure.

Love that takes a person outside of himself and centers his attention on the well-being of others is the only cure for self-centeredness.

9. Love does not keep score

Logizomai (take into account) is a bookkeeping term that means to calculate or reckon, as when figuring an entry in a ledger. The purpose of the entry is to make a permanent record that can be consulted whenever needed. In business that practice is necessary, but in personal matters it is not only unnecessary but harmful. Keeping track of things done against us is a sure way to unhappiness—our own and that of those on whom we keep records.

The same Greek word is used often in the New Testament to represent the pardoning act of God for those who trust in Jesus Christ.

"Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account" (Rom. 4:8).

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Once sin is placed under the blood of Christ there is no more record of it. It is blotted out, "wiped away" (Acts 3:19). In God's heavenly record the only entry after the names of His redeemed is "righteous," because we are counted righteous in Christ. Christ's righteousness is placed to our credit. No other record exists.

That is the sort of record love keeps of wrongs done against it. No wrong is ever recorded for later reference. Love forgives. Someone once suggested that love does not forgive and forget, but rather remembers and still forgives. Resentment is careful to keep books, which it reads and rereads, hoping for a chance to get even. Love keeps no books, because it has no place for resentment or grudges.

Chrysostom observed that a wrong done against love is like a spark that falls into the sea and is quenched. Love quenches wrongs rather than records them. It does not cultivate memories out of evils. If God so completely and permanently erases the record of our many sins against Him, how much more should we forgive and forget the much lesser wrongs done against us (cf. Matt. 18:21-35; Eph. 4:32)?

