October 25, 2026

# First Corinthians Thirteen
# II. Love Defined
# I Corinthians 13:4-7

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

We hear these words read most often at weddings – and appropriately so. For two souls about to pledge themselves to one another in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, for as long as they both shall live, these words defining love serve as an excellent and even necessary guide for how such great promises can possibly be kept. But we should not forget that, as fitting as these words are for a wedding, they weren't written for happy brides and grooms – they were written for a rather unhappy, divided, infighting congregation of Christians in the city of Corinth. In other words, they were written as an excellent and even necessary guide for how we are to live together as the Body of Christ.

I won't make you open your Bibles, but if you were to turn to the chapter right before I Corinthian 13, you would read Paul's great passage on the church being the Body of Christ in the world. And on how, like the human body, one part can't say to another, "I don't need you." The hand can't say that to the foot, to use Paul's illustration – nor can Christians say that to one another in the Body of Christ. Instead, as Paul tells the Corinthian Christians, and all Christians in all churches ever since:

> *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ . . . Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it.*[1]

And then that great chapter twelve on the church being the Body of Christ ends with Paul saying to this unhappy, divided, and infighting bunch of Corinthian Christians, *"Let me tell you how to be the Body of Christ; let me show you a more excellent way."*[2] And then Paul begins I Corinthians 13. Then Paul begins teaching them about love.

Last week, as John took us through the first three verses of I Corinthians 13, we heard Paul tell the Corinthians and us that love is the most important thing in the life of the church, in the life of a Christian – for that matter, that love is the most important thing, the greatest priority, in all of life. This week, he tells us what love is, what love looks like. He tells us how we are to love one another in the church, in our marriages – again, for that matter, in every relationship of our lives. Let me read Paul's definition of love again, using Eugene Peterson's translation, <u>The Message</u>:

> *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 swelled head,*
*Doesn't force itself on others,*
*Isn't always "me first,"*
*Doesn't fly off the handle,*
*Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,*
*Doesn't revel when others grovel,*
*Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,*
*Puts up with anything,*
*Trusts God always,*
*Always looks for the best,*
*Never looks back,*
*But keeps going to the end.*[3]

And that, says Paul, is love – the love we are meant to have for one another in the Body of Christ, in our marriages, and in every relationship of our lives.

*"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude . . ."* Hearing those words – I mean really hearing how we are to love, the love we are supposed to have for one another, supposed to have in every relationship of our lives – hearing those words, I suppose the first question is simply this: is this how we love? Are we loving one another like that?

Here's a little experiment to help us answer that question – you can do it with me. Where Paul uses the word "love," let's substitute our own name. I'll say it with my name first, and then you say it using your name.[4] Ready? "Bill is patient and kind" – you say it with your name. "Bill does not envy or boast" – you say it. "Bill is not irritable or resentful" – you say it. Shall I keep on going – or have we already gotten the point? I mean, is anyone here still thinking that we have got that love thing nailed down and mastered? Is anyone feeling that they have passed Paul's love test with flying colors? And remember, we didn't even get to that last part about love bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

What Paul is describing – let's just admit it – is a love which we do not possess. We try to love like Paul describes – but we fail again and again, don't we? Even in relation to those whom we love most. Paul is describing a way of loving that is, quite frankly, out of reach for poor mortal sinners like you and me – something we can never, on our own, perfectly obtain. One commentator jokingly suggests that if we were to really, truly take seriously the meaning of these words when they are read at weddings, the occasion would be marked less by nuptial bliss and more by groveling repentance and prayers for mercy. He even imagines how the wedding write-up would appear in the society page of the local paper: *"The bride was dressed in sackcloth and the groom in a hair shirt, while the wedding party groveled on the floor in the conviction of sin. The reception was held at the Farmington Country Club."*[5]

*"Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way . . ."* No, this is not love the way we practice it, not even love the way we practice it when we are trying really hard to love. This is a love which is beyond us. And, in fact, that is precisely Paul's point here in I Corinthians 13: that the love which we are to live in the Body of Christ, in our marriages, in all our relationships – the love which we learned last week is our life's priority, and which we will learn next week is the only thing we can take with us when we die – this love which Paul defines in I Corinthians 13 is a love that is beyond us in every way.

But what this love is – and the here's the Good News of the Gospel part of Paul's message here – this I Corinthians 13 love is the very definition of the love which has come to claim us in the form of Jesus Christ our Savior. I Corinthians 13 may not define the way we love one another, but it most definitely describes the way God loves us!

Let's do our little experiment, our little test, again. I'll say it, and then you repeat it – but this time we'll put the name of Jesus in place of the word "love." "Jesus is patient and kind" – now you say it. "Jesus does not envy or boast, is not arrogant or rude" – you say it. "Jesus is not irritable or resentful" – you say it. "Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing" – you say it. "Jesus bears all things" – you say it. It fits this time, doesn't it? The love Paul is describing in I Corinthians 13 is not the way we humans love each other, even at our best. But it is the description of how perfectly God loves us. This is God's love which Paul is describing, which Paul is using as the very definition of love. This is John 3:16. This is Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well[6], Jesus with Peter after his three denials[7], Jesus with the woman caught in adultery[8]. This love which Paul describes is Jesus Christ upon the cross – dying for the sake of, dying on a cross out of love for sinners such as you and me. Jesus rising from the dead for the sake of, rising from the dead out of love for sinners such as you and me – so that He might keep on loving us forevermore. Paul, in I Corinthians 13 is not describing our sinful human capacity for love; but rather the way God, in Christ, has first and will forevermore love us.

But in telling us that, in telling us how we are perfectly loved by God, Paul is making another point to those fractious and fighting Corinthian Christians, another point to you and me so imperfect in our ability to love. What Paul is telling us is that because we are so perfectly loved by God, because God's love for us is, in fact, the very definition of love, because the love of God has come into this world to embrace us, to redeem us, to hold us close forevermore – because of the love by which God has first loved us, we are now actually able, it has now become entirely possible, for us to start loving one another more and more like I Corinthians 13 – more and more like the way God in Christ has first loved us.

Because God in Christ has first loved us as Paul describes in I Corinthians 13, that love of God let loose in our hearts, running free through our mind and spirits, is even now enabling us to love one another more and more deeply, and more and more often, in that very same way that God has first loved us – love that is patient, kind; not envying or boasting, not arrogant or rude nor irritable or resentful. Loving one another here and now out of that divine love which has entered our hearts through Christ – love which really can and does enable us to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, even endure all things. Once the love of God has entered our hearts, our hearts discover a new capacity for how, and how well, we can begin to love one another.

The elderly man and his wife sat together talking in the front seat of their car out in the garage. They were sitting and talking, as they had done so often over the past sixty years of their married life together. But the wife had Alzheimer's now – and so often her mind would leave the present and fixate on some moment in the distant past. On this particular occasion, she was insisting that she needed to go back home to take care of her father. Her husband, very gently, said to her, *"Now sweetheart, do you know what I am going to say to you?"*

> *"Yes," she replied, "you are going to tell me that Dad died fifty years ago. But I feel it in my heart that he will be waiting for me. I'm not getting out of the car until you take me home."*
>
> *"But sweetheart," her husband insisted, "we <u>are</u> home. We have a nice apartment here with our son."*
>
> *"No!" she answered firmly – "not here, home!"*
>
> *So the conversation went, until eventually their son came home and found them sitting out in the garage. "How long have you been here, Dad?" he asked.*
>
> *"Oh," his father said, "about two hours."*[9]

*"Love is patient."*

During the 2009 pennant race between the Philadelphia Phillies and the Washington Nationals, diehard Phillies fan Steve Montforto was sitting in the upper deck with his three-year-old daughter Emily, watching a game between the two rivals. A hitter sent a foul ball curving in their direction, and Montforto leaned over the railing and made a perfect catch – the first foul ball he had ever caught, and at such an important game as well! It was every true fan's dream. He handed the ball to three-year-old Emily for her to look at it. The Jumbotron camera had been following this little moment, which meant that the entire stadium was watching when Emily, having received the ball from her dad, immediately threw the ball over the railing and down to the lower deck. The whole stadium gasped together – a prized relic gone, just like that. Montforto was as surprised as everyone else in the stadium when Emily threw the ball away. But, with the whole stadium watching, what he did next was not to get angry; instead, he did what every loving father should do: he wrapped up in his daughter in a tender and laughing embrace.[10] *"Love is kind."*

Ed Leap, who was a physician in Greenville at the time, some years ago published a column in <u>The Greenville News</u> about his wife's battle with cancer. He began by describing the first time he laid eyes on her at a college Halloween party. He describes her as a *"black-haired, blue-eyed beauty dressed as a mime."* He describes how they hit it off, two *"poor, skinny college kids who loved to laugh and eat cheap pizza. We went to free movies on campus and met one another between classes. I still see her, bouncing across the grass, a red hat and cape on a cold day, walking on legs that could make a guy weep, coming to meet me for lunch. She was beautiful . . . and remains so to me years after our first date."* And then he describes the ordeal they have been going through, the diagnosis of her cancer and now the treatments. But he writes of something more than just the suffering, of something deeper than just the sickness:

> *We have learned, as never before, what the vows mean by "in sickness and in health." We have discovered that intimacy and passion merely change form during times like this. Holding hands during fever and weakness is strangely romantic, and praying out loud for the one you love sounds more passionate than the most contrived sonnet. This is a lesson difficult to convey; sadly, it is often learned only by traveling through the "valley of the shadow of death" . . .*
>
> *When we are married, when we truly love that spouse, we perpetually see them as unique and wonderful. Scars and wrinkles and sickness are things that may appear tragic or transformative to outsiders. But to us, to the ones who know the stories of the scars, who knew our loves well and whole, before and after, well those things are mere superficialities, that have little consequence to our deeper connection. And things which certainly do not change the essence of the person who is our other half.*

*"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."*

But then, and quite profoundly in just that God's love enables our love meaning of I Corinthians 13, Leap then ends with this:

> *I suspect that's why the church is referred to as "the Bride of Christ" in Scripture . . . It means that we are loved regardless of our condition, our situation, our appearance. It means that we, "the bride," cannot be unloved by God, no matter how hard it gets, or how long it takes. It means we will never appear undesirable to the One who made us, held (and holds) us in our brokenness and looks forward to our complete healing, sometimes temporal, always eternal.*[11]

Because we are so loved by the One who is the very definition of love, so we are indeed, truly, more and more and day by day made able to love one another. In the church, in our marriages, and in all our relationships – to love one another more and more and day by day with the very same love with which God has first loved us. A love which bears all things. A love which endures all things. A love which never ends.

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[1] I Corinthians 12:12, 27.

[2] I Corinthians 12:31.

[3] Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), pp. 2085-2086.

[4] I borrowed this exercise from Paul N. Walker's sermon, "All You Can't Leave Behind," in Faith Once Delivered (Charlottesville, VA: A Mockingbird Publication, 2019), p. 49.

[5] Walker, p. 49.

[6] John 4:1-26.

[7] John 21:15-19.

[8] John 8:1-11.

[9] Phil Ryken, Loving the Way Jesus Loves (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2012), p. 75.

[10] Ryken, p. 58.

[11] This and the above, Ed Leap, "Sickness can show the depth of a couple's love," Greenville News, Sunday, February 27, 2011, p. 7A. This article can be found on-line at Sickness can show the depth of a couple's love - EdwinLeap.com