

Christian Love in Action
Galatians 5:22; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7
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Christian love is not a passive, inactive concept, but is rather a working, active, giving engine of service. It is not a stationary trophy in your bookcase to be admired, but is rather the labor and hard work that won that trophy. It is not a mere photograph of a beautiful concept upon your mantel, but is rather a video of active service and giving to Christ and to one another. Dear ones, there may be nick-knacks that we simply place on a shelf in our homes that never move (except perhaps to dust around them), but Christian love is not one of those items.

Christian love is intended by God to work, serve, and give of ourselves to God and to our neighbor. Dear ones, Christ's love was not in mere profession. Christ's love was not dormant or inactive. Christ's love was not a mere trophy or photograph. Christ's love was a living, serving, and sacrificial giving to the point of the cursed death of the cross in order to powerfully love us who had nothing to commend ourselves to Him by way of goodness, righteousness, or love for Him. And dear ones, it is this very love that has been implanted in our very souls by the Holy Spirit as a fruit of the Spirit. The love of Christ in the life of a Christian will evidence itself to be living, growing, acting, serving, and sacrificially giving to our God, to our brethren, and to our neighbor. Dear ones, just as faith without works is a dead faith (James 2:26), so love without labor is a dead love (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

This Lord's Day we continue our study of the Fruit of the Spirit, still plumbing the depths into the ocean of Christian love. For the first and chief fruit of the Spirit that summarizes all of the other fruit of the Spirit (in Galatians 5:22-23) and from which all of the other fruit of the Spirit flow is identified by the Apostle Paul to be that of "love" (*agape*): "But the fruit of the Spirit is love" (Galatians 5:22). As we have noted in past sermons, this Christian love (*agape*) is of divine origin ("for love is of God", "for God is love" 1 John 4:7,8), and is the very life of Christ (the DNA of Jesus, the Son of God) that is shed abroad by the Holy Spirit in the life of every true Christian (Romans 5:5). Although we are declared righteous before God by faith alone in Christ alone, there is no evidence of that glorious justification in one's life where there is not Christian love (*agape*) in serving and sacrificially giving of ourselves to one another because Christ has sacrificially given Himself for us (1 John 3:14—from the sentence of death to the sentence of life).

As we consider what the Spirit of God teaches about Christian love (in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7), we will see that there are 15 verbs of action used to describe the labor, service, and sacrificial giving of Christian love (*agape*), which we can place under the following three questions for the sermon this Lord's Day: (1) What Christian Love Does (1 Corinthians 13:4a)? (2) What Christian Love Does Not Do (1 Corinthians 13:4b-6)? (3) What Christian Love Overcomes (1 Corinthians 13:7)?

I. What Christian Love Does (1 Corinthians 13:4a)?

A. Before considering what Christian love does, let us briefly review the background and context to the inspired words we find here in 1 Corinthians 13.

1. Contention, jealousy, rivalry, and division were rampant within the Church of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10).
 - a. There were personality and stylistic cults (Paul, Apollos, Peter—1 Corinthians 3).

- b. There was libertinism (a “freedom” to commit and to tolerate immorality—1 Corinthians 5).
- c. There was a profaning the Lord’s Supper (the rich eating—the poor not eating at the love feast and drunkenness at the Lord’s Supper—1 Corinthians 11).
- d. There was a self-centered use of spiritual gifts (exercising gifts in order to exalt oneself rather than to edify one another—1 Corinthians 12,14).

2. Although the Apostle Paul corrects by doctrinal instruction these and other errors that were causing division within the Church of Corinth, he realizes that all of the pure doctrine stated will be fruitless in bringing the Church of Corinth together if one thing is missing: Christian love (1 Corinthians 12:31). For Christian love will take them from a self-centered Christianity (which follows their own desires, their own views, and their own advancement) to a Christ-centered Christianity (which which leads to a love for God’s will, a love for Christ’s doctrine and practice, and a love for the edification of the Church and giving oneself to one another).

B. As Paul approaches his inspired teaching about Christian love in overcoming the conflicts, rivalries, and divisions within this Church, he begins in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 by making clear the absolute necessity of Christian love to be exercised by those who are truly Christians. Paul takes the gifts upon which the Corinthians prided themselves, and affirms that all these are useless if love does not regulate their operation (whether speaking in languages never learned, whether prophesying and giving God’s revelation, whether knowledge of all the doctrines of Scripture, whether having faith to move mountains, whether giving all one has to feed the poor and needy, or whether laying down one’s life for what one believes). Paul pleads with us just how far a man may go in religion, and yet be nothing.

1. Name what you consider to be the greatest spiritual gift that God gives to any person, and it is nothing without Christian love (and is worse than nothing, because it is just a bunch of noise without Christian love). Name what you consider to be the greatest earthly gift that God gives to any person (wealth, power, prestige, family, many friends, musical ability, physical strength, athletic ability, intellectual ability), and it is nothing without Christian love. Gifts are so often the criteria by which we judge one another, but that by which we should be judging ourselves and others is fruitfulness of the fruit of the Spirit (exemplified by Christian love).

2. Beloved, love for Christ and for our neighbor is the incense that must be mixed with our obedience, service, and gifts in order to make them acceptable and sweet-smelling offerings in the sight of the Lord (Ephesians 5:2). Though all Christians will not have such manifest and evident gifts, all Christians will have Christian love, will live Christian love, will serve in Christian love, will act in Christian love, will give sacrificially in Christian love, and will grow in Christian love, for Christian love is the life and DNA of Jesus Christ shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Without Christian love, there is no life of Christ. In each of these active video clips of Christian love (*agape*), we will see the love of Christ for us. But do we see in these video clips our love for Christ and others? Are these video clips of love demonstrated in our families and in our relationships with one another?

C. We now come to consider the first question (or first main point): **What Christian Love Does (1 Corinthians 13:4)?** Christian love is active and powerful. But what does it do? Paul states there are two positive acts of service that Christian love (*agape*) will exercise toward the brethren.

1. **Charity (*agape*) suffereth long.** Christian love is long (not short) in forbearing with the sinful weaknesses of others. It endures even long with the personal injuries inflicted by others. Charity is patient in face of provocations, and does not yield to bitterness, personal attacks and criticism, or eyeing personal revenge for wrongs suffered from others. God was longsuffering in restraining His just wrath against us for our active rebellion against Him (Romans 2:4)? Charity suffereth long.

2. **Charity (*agape*) is kind.** Christian love is good and gracious to others (even to the undeserving), even as God sends rain and sunshine upon the just and unjust alike. Christian love is always praying for and looking for the kindness that it can bestow upon others (even upon the undeserving). There is not a lock upon the heart and hand of Christian love, but in desire and in deed, there is an open heart and open hand to help where help is needed—not a fleeing from those in need because of a lack of time, but the heart of a good Samaritan. God was not only longsuffering (that by itself would have not saved us), but was kind to us in sending His only begotten Son (Titus 3:4-7). That kindness should begin in our homes toward one another (Galatians 6:10).

II. What Christian Love Does Not Do (1 Corinthians 13:4-6)?

A. Just as Christian love actively does certain works of the Spirit, so Christian love actively does not do certain works of the flesh (8 works of the flesh are mentioned). These are the very sins and works of the flesh that were leading to the conflicts, rivalries, and divisions among the Corinthian Christians. And the remedy to each of these destructive sins is Christian love.

1. **Charity envieth not.** Envy is the work of the flesh that looks at the gifts and graces of others, and despises them for the blessings they have, and would destroy those blessings (if possible). Envy does not necessarily despise certain people because it wants what others have, but rather despises certain people because they are superior in some way, whereas envy must have everything leveled (no one above it). Rivalry within the Church, family, or at work comes from envying the good and the promotion of others (even that which you deem to be undeserved). However, Christian love is so concerned with serving others and giving to others, there is no place to envy the blessings of others. Dear ones, do you genuinely rejoice in the gifts and graces of others?

2. **Charity vaunteth not itself.** Christian love does not boast about its own gifts and graces, or promotions and advancements, or successes and accomplishments. One who is all wrapped up in his/her own gifts and accomplishments is a very small package. Christian love waits to be praised by others, rather than praising oneself (Proverbs 27:2; 2 Corinthians 10:12). “It ain’t boasting if it’s the truth.” Wrong. It is boasting, even when (and especially when it is the truth). Otherwise, it’s not boasting, it’s lying. In an argument with your spouse, how often do we trumpet forth and list our praises to one another? How often do we mention what we have accomplished as a means of boasting (1 Corinthians 1:31)?

3. **Charity is not puffed up.** This work of the flesh is similar to the preceding one. Perhaps the difference between the previous and the present work of the flesh is that vaunting oneself yields to verbally boasting and praising oneself, whereas being puffed up is simply that pride, arrogance, and superiority that is captured in attitudes, looks, and gestures (even when not verbally praising oneself). We may not praise ourselves, but may simply be “stuck up” and look down our noses at others (who have not reached our height of knowledge or degree of financial security). Jesus, the Son of God, went among sinners to call them to Himself. He came to serve, not to be served (Philippians 2:5).

4. **Charity does not behave itself unseemly.** Christian love does not behave itself shamefully or humiliate others by belittling them in word or deed (as when the rich in Corinth brought their lavish meals to the love feasts for themselves and humiliated the poor who had little or nothing to bring, 1 Corinthians 11:22). It is certainly true that Christ put the obstinate Pharisees in their place for their self-righteousness and their despising of those who had not attained to their exalted heights of learning or outward exercises of religion (without love for God and man). However, Christian love does not speak or act inappropriately in the gutter language it uses, in the offensive way it speaks of women (or men), in the way it speaks of rich or poor, or of ethnic groups (in making prejudicial generalizations), or in the loud and boisterous voice that must talk over everyone else. Christian love does not seek out the chief seat at the table, but humbly takes the lowest seat, waiting to be exalted.

5. **Charity seeketh not its own.** Christian love is not self-centered. Christian love realizes that the world does not revolve around me—the world revolves around Christ, love for Christ, His gospel, His commandments, His revealed truth, and love for one’s neighbor. Life is not all about me, nor is it about pursuing my dreams and my ambitions. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. However, it is not sinfully seeking one’s own in seeking one’s won salvation, sanctification, and glorification, or in seeking God’s provision for our daily bread and lawfully enjoying the blessings God has given to us in this life (1 Timothy 6:17). Christian love does not seek its own to the hurt or damage of others. In fact, Christian love is willing to deny its own needs at times in order to give of itself to others.

6. **Charity is not easily provoked.** Christian love does not have a short fuse, but has a long fuse. An offensive word, a disrespectful attitude, a direct attack will not immediately set off a bomb in the emotional state and stability of Christian love. Christian love is “swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). If you know you have a potentially volcanic anger with someone or in a particular situation, follow the steps laid out by James, and walk away if necessary. Christian love knows nothing good will come of such angry explosions, but pursues the fruit of self-control. Which is the mighty man: the one who is easily provoked, or the one who controls his anger (Proverbs 16:32)? And where a righteous anger is present in our lives, it will be motivated out of love for God and for our neighbor.

7. **Charity thinketh no evil.** Christian love literally, “does not reckon or take account of the evil” i.e. it doesn’t take account of the personal evil done by others to us. We cannot wear our feelings on our shirt sleeves, so that anyone who brushes up against us hurts our feelings and causes great offense. When we are personally offended by the evil done to us by others, does it control our lives? Do the personal offenses of others against us become our misery instead of their misery? Christian love is not given to taking score of the personal offenses committed against us. Christian love does not live in bitterness or resentment (which is misery). Even when there is no repentance on the part of the offender (so that we can forgive the offender), Christian love always stands ready to forgive, waiting to forgive, when repentance comes (just as is true of God, Psalm 86:5). Are you keeping records of the personal wrongs committed against you, harboring that offense in your heart, repeating that offense in your mind and memory? That is a sure path to misery. Christian love realizes that bitterness and resentment is a foul sin for which Christ died. Seek His forgiveness, and realize that God’s mercy was extended to you for even worse offenses committed against Him.

8. **Charity rejoiceth not in iniquity.** Christian love is a holy love. Christian love does not rejoice in sin, in the breaking of God’s Law (whether in our lives or in the lives of others). Christian love, therefore, does not approve of what is immoral by being entertained by actors, composers, comedians, or athletes, by the wealthy, the educated, or the powerful who profane God’s name or who practice what is contrary to God’s Law (Romans 1:32). Christian love burns within one’s heart that Christ would be exalted and that sin (in all of its forms) would be destroyed (beginning in our own lives, our own families, our own church, and our own nation). Christian love loves what God loves and hates what God hates. Christian love will not set any vain or immoral thing before its eyes to indulge its lusts (Psalm 101:3).

B. There is one work of the Spirit that provides a contrast to the previous work of the flesh: **But charity rejoiceth in the truth.** To the contrary, Christian love rejoices and delights itself in God’s truth and righteousness. Christian love rejoices whenever God’s truth in doctrine, worship, government, and practice of God’s commandments is followed, obeyed (even the most despised truth, for the same divine authority that underlies those foundational truths of the gospel, also underlies all truth revealed in Scripture). Christian love, therefore, does not rejoice in the broad path of Churches today that tolerate and promote a big tent agenda of gathering as many people into one church under the banner of “love” (while denigrating and despising the biblical Terms of Communion of our faithful forefathers).

III. What Christian Love Overcomes (1 Corinthians 13:7)?

A. Christian love is powerful and overcomes the greatest obstacles that others may cast in its way. For Christian love is the victorious love of Christ that overcomes all obstacles in order to sacrificially give to the one loved.

1. **Charity beareth all things.** Christian love can face any and all obstacles, hardships for the sake of the one loved (1 Corinthians 9:12).
2. **Charity believeth all things.** Christian love presumes that one is innocent until proven guilty by sufficient evidence. It is not gullible to believe everything (regardless of the source), but at the same time, Christian love does not hastily rush to judgment before hearing the testimony of two or three credible witnesses.
3. **Charity hopeth all things.** Christian love looks with confidence for fruit in the lives of brethren with whom we pray to be reconciled or with whom we have been reconciled.
4. **Charity endureth all things.** Christian love does not give up on the one who is loved (even when a brother steadfastly resists the loving correction, rebukes, and discipline from Christ and His Church). Christian love perseveres through all circumstances (even when Christian fellowship must be withdrawn on account of obstinate rebellion). Christian love for others perseveres in doing what is good and right, even when it is not easy, comfortable, or pleasant, because Christian love is that which is begotten in our soul by the very love of Christ, which perseveres unto the end with those He loves. The love of Christ never gives up on His beloved bride, nor will Christian love (*agape*) in our souls.

That everlasting love of Christ for you, dear Christian, is manifested in promises like Psalm 50:15: “Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me.” Are you in a day of trouble? You are commanded to call upon your mighty God who has always loved you. God would not command you to call upon Him, if He didn’t love you or did not intend to help you (but to refuse you). He is not mocking you, but is loving you. His promise of love is this: “I will deliver thee.” That “I will” is a willingness of infinite love and power to come to your help. God is not a liar, and He does not make promises to His beloved ones that He will not keep. Exactly how He will come and when He will come is not our business (whether He comes to give grace to endure the day of trouble or whether He removes us entirely from the day of trouble, whether He comes today or tomorrow or delivers us with glory at our death). The unchangeable love of God will always deliver us at precisely the right time, for His timing is always most wise and most loving. His love is never late—it is always on time. This promise of love is for “thee”. You are not disqualified if you are one who is the day of trouble. It is the one who calls upon this amazing God of love and kindness who shall receive the promise of deliverance that trouble. Call today upon the God of everlasting love (especially if your trouble is your own sin). Call upon the name of the Lord and thou shalt be saved.

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