

Love Is...

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

As we look at Galatians 5:22-23, we see a list of characteristics of the Holy Spirit. Paul reminds us that when the Spirit of God is living and breathing in our lives, these are the characteristics the Spirit will manifest. They are not something we produce or do on our own, and we cannot will ourselves to be them. Instead, these 9 characteristics are the work of God and God's Spirit will manifest these attributes through us when we are willing to surrender control.

We know that surrendering is not an easy thing to do. Giving control of our lives over to God's will is counter to what human nature longs for us to do. We live in a culture that is constantly bombarding us to live out the mantra, "I want what I want, when I want it, and I want it now!" Or we pray things like "Lord give me [you fill in the blank] RIGHT NOW!" We have conditioned ourselves to believe that God's faithfulness is based on doing what we want, when we want it, and how we want it. We talk to God like he's some kind of cosmic Santa Claus.

In Galatians 5 we are reminded that we cannot produce these characteristics on our own. Only the Holy Spirit can guide our lives and

help us carry out God's good intentions. When we try to live out these characteristics in our own strength we fail miserably.

This thought brought me back to my years as a teenager in the early 1970's. One of my favorite comic strips was the black and white, single panel, comic titled "Love is..." Perhaps you remember the naked little boy and girl and the sweet sentiments each panel shared. Love was a popular topic for music in the 70's, as well. There were *so* many songs about romantic love, although there were also song titles like "Love the One You're With", "Love Hurts", and "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover." Perhaps not as uplifting as the "Love is.." comics, but it *was* the 1970's. The early 1970's was a turbulent time, there was the expansion of the war in Viet Nam and student protests on college campuses here at home. Whether a "hawk" or a "dove", people wanted what they wanted and they wanted it immediately. It's sad that the little black and white comic didn't have a greater impact in that time period.

Not surprisingly then that amid the turbulent 1970's, and today in the turbulent 2020's, people are looking for the fruits of the Spirit to be displayed, they seek hope in what appears to be a hopeless time. Paul told us that the greatest of these is love, so that seems like a good place to start our reflections on the fruits of the Spirit.

The church at Corinth, the recipient of Paul's letter, was experiencing turbulent times of its own. This was a church full of gifted people – those who spoke in tongues, prophets, generous souls who gave to the poor. Doesn't sound like it should be terribly turbulent, does it? But it was. Each one felt their gifts were superior to the others and tried to lord it over them. Those who gave to the poor did so to look good in the eyes of men, not out of true concern for those less fortunate. All these gifts, when offered without love to guide them, were shallow acts that spoke ill of the church to both those within and outside the church.

Paul did not condemn the members of this congregation, however; but rather chose to show the Corinthians that their behavior was contrary to the teachings they professed to follow. In the case of each of the traits Paul cited that love is, the Corinthians were doing the opposite. If they took his words to heart, they would convict themselves of the error of their ways.

Through the years these verses from 1 Corinthians have come to be used in both sacred and secular circles in relation to romantic love. Most of us when we hear these words today have an image of a beautiful young bride floating down the aisle to join arms with her charming young man as they recite their wedding vows. I will confess that a few years ago, my cousin asked me to share a prayer at her daughter's wedding, but to

not make it “too preachy”. What they got was a “translation” of 1 Corinthians 13 that I was told was a wonderful prayer and not “preachy” at all. It’s hard to go wrong with the classics!

So how do we reclaim these words of Paul’s in these turbulent days. As I was looking for Biblical references to love, I was reminded of the most basic understanding of love from 1 John 4:8, simply that “God is love.” Then I asked myself what Paul’s words would sound like if we substituted the word God for love in these verses and this is what it sounds like:

⁴ God is patient, God is kind. God does not envy, nor does He boast, He is not proud. ⁵ He does not dishonor others, He is not self-seeking, He is not easily angered, He keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ God does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ God always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ God never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Let’s take this a step farther. As Christ’s followers, we have the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit indwelling us and giving us the ability to live out the truth of Paul’s words. What happens when we put

our own names into 1 Corinthians 13? I'll give you a moment to do that. *(Pause)* We now have a startling picture of how we are to interact with our families, neighbors, and strangers on the street. **We** are the embodiment of God's love to others.

In turbulent times, amid political strife, with active wars around the world, stark poverty in our own country, and natural disasters at home and abroad, we are to be love in action. Some may look at these lofty goals and think, "What about me? If I become all those things, who will take care of me?" Matthew Henry in his commentary on these verses anticipated that response when he wrote these words: (please take note that he uses the word Charity in place of Love)

"Charity is an utter enemy to selfishness; it does not desire or seek its own praise, or honor, or profit, or pleasure. Not that charity destroys all regard to ourselves, or that the charitable man (or woman) should neglect himself and all their own interests. But charity never seeks its own to the hurt of others, or to neglect others. It ever prefers the welfare of others to its private advantage. How good-natured and amiable is Christian charity! ***How excellent would Christianity appear to the world***, if those who profess it were more under this Divine principle, and paid due regard to the command on which its blessed Author laid the chief stress! Let us ask whether this Divine love dwells in our hearts. Has this

principle guided us into becoming behavior to all men? Are we willing to lay aside selfish objects and aims? Here is a call to watchfulness, diligence, and prayer. “

Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, [*Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*](#) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 1 Co 13:4.

As professing Christians, we are called to exhibit a love that the world does not understand. We are to exhibit the love of God, not a romantic, all butterflies and unicorns' kind of love. God's love can be difficult to share, but it is necessary!

We have an example of God's difficult love in the story of the Prodigal Son. With God's love his father released him to find out what the world was like without the shelter of home. Then when the humbled son returned, he was welcomed back with God's love that keeps no record of wrong.

As we look around us, we can see what the lack of God's love in action has cost us as a society. To belong to God's church in the world today is to be an agent of God's love in the world, not seeking one's own advantage, but working on behalf of others. But as conditioned as we are by our current society, we may still find ourselves asking, “What about me?”

As early as 1908, as tensions mounted around the world prior to the start of WWI, Stillman and Civilla Martin penned these words:

Be not dismayed whate'er betide, Beneath His wings of love abide,
Through days of toil when heart doth fail, when dangers fierce
your path assail,

All you may need He will provide, nothing you ask will be denied;
No matter what will be the test, lean, weary one, upon His breast
God will take care of you!

We are to feel free to act as God's agents in the world. After all, he's got our backs. When we can see our neighbor, the one we don't always agree with, as one of God's own children and respond to them in the love of God, what changes might we see in today's world? May we all be humbled by the task set before us to live as God's agents of love in the world today. AMEN

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