

Gracious and patient love * 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

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A few years ago, Newsweek magazine ran a cover story with the headline 'Forget the Church, follow Jesus' – the idea being that the church, and the various people and concerns within it, get in the way of real faith. Forget the church, follow Jesus!

That's a fashionable idea these days – as long as your spiritual needs are being met, you really don't need to worry about other believers. As long as you are having a fulfilling relationship with Jesus, you don't need to worry about other Christians. It's the sort of thing that led Justin Bieber to say 'going to church doesn't make you a Christian – you're not a taco just because you go to Taco Bell.' Forget the church, follow Jesus.

Now, this is by no means a new idea. Frankly, the people in Corinth were dealing with the very same problem. They had a 'forget the church, follow Jesus' mindset when they came together for worship. They got it into their heads that their faith didn't really have anything to do with their relationships.

We're going to see in a couple of weeks that when they got together for church, some of them would intentionally start before everybody else arrived. And then when things did start, some people would start speaking in tongues, some would speak out, interrupting whoever was talking at the time and some people despised them all. The tongues speakers looked down their noses at everybody else, the prophets insisted that their message was more important than anybody else's, and the others either got jealous or thought the rest were all nuts. Church in Corinth was nothing like our orderly services here – I get the impression that going to church in Corinth was a pretty chaotic affair.

And it's not too hard to imagine – just last week they were willing to take each other to court at the drop of a hat, so it's no surprise that they're looking out for number one in their relationship with Jesus too.

They were all too eager to forget the church – forget everybody else – and follow Jesus.

Now here's the thing. If you want to follow Jesus - really follow Jesus – it means you can't forget the church! Following Jesus necessarily means that you love the other people that He died to save.

Paul actually goes so far as to say in Chapter 13, verses 1-3 –

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1Co 13:1-3 NIV).

Boil that down and what do you get? My most profound spiritual experiences with Jesus are worthless, unless they are accompanied by love for His people.

It's not that there's anything wrong with those experiences; in fact, Paul encourages Christians to pursue deep and meaningful relationship with Jesus, but he calls the Corinthians and he calls us to make sure that our faith is not just about loving Jesus, but also about loving one another.

And so to help in that, Paul spends three verses describing love. And of course, you've heard these verses a million times, haven't you, mostly at weddings and that's appropriate, because they do describe the sort of love that should be found in marriages. In fact, I'll take a minute at the end to apply these verses to marriage and romantic love. But we need to remember that when Paul wrote these words, he wasn't talking to a bride and groom. He was talking to a church. He was talking about the kind of love that should characterize the way we interact.

Now I say 'this kind of love' because Paul really doesn't define love here, does he? He more describes love – it's like he's holding love up like a diamond – and looking at its various facets – so we get like fifteen verbs that describe what love in the church should look

Rather than giving you a big idea right now, I want to dive into the list and unpack it a little before we summarize it. To keep things organized, let me just say that we can divide Paul's description into three parts – What love is, what love doesn't do, what love does.

Verse 4 – What love is... Love is patient, love is kind. The KJV put it 'love suffereth long' and that gets at the heart of it. The patience that Paul's talking about is not calmly passing time, but calmly bearing difficulty. There's an element of perseverance wrapped up in this kind of patience. A willingness to not retaliate when wronged.

Kindness is, well, you know, kindness – providing some benefit to another person.

I guess we could say patience is the ability to respond to the actions of others graciously and kindness is the ability to act graciously towards others.

I saw that dynamic at play in my kids this week; I picked them up from school and Anna had saved some of her popcorn from tuck shop. Every once in a while we'll send them with a loonie for tuck shop and Anna had picked popcorn and wanted to finish it on the drive home. Ben though didn't have any popcorn and all of a sudden my parent warning bells started going off – ok, how can we navigate this conflict. I tried to explain 'she's having it now because she didn't finish it earlier; if you want some after school, you can't eat it all during school.' Oh, but the grade 8s didn't bring tuck shop to his class. That doesn't help me at all. So Ben asked Anna to share with him and she said, no, it's my popcorn.

Now I expected that Ben would put up a big stink – but I want some! It wasn't fair – they didn't come to my class – make her share – but he didn't. He responded by moving on. And as I thought about it, I realized that he was exercising the patience that we're talking about here – rather than making a big deal about this perceived injustice, he just accepted it and moved on. That's this kind of patience.

And, to my great delight, we couldn't have been 100 m away from the school before Anna decided that she wanted to share. I didn't cajole her and guilt trip her or anything – she just legitimately decided to share with Ben and actually with me. I got some popcorn out of it too. That's kindness.

Now I know that that story about popcorn may seem like a silly little illustration but it's a picture of the love that we are called to show in the church and in the world. Take a minute right now to apply this in your life – what will it mean for you to act towards someone with kindness? What will it look like for you react patiently to someone who has inconvenienced you?

This is what love is – patient and kind. Let's talk about what love don't. What love doesn't do. Picking up in verse 4 -

Love does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. (1Co 13:4-6 NIV).

Each of those are fairly self-explanatory but let me just fill out a couple of them.

That 'not rude' one is about propriety – how you act. love doesn't behave improperly. Love doesn't push you to do things you don't think are right. That's what Paul meant when he wrote love is not rude;

Love is not easily angered – love is not irritable or easily provoked – you all know the people you have to walk on egg shells around – this is a call to not be that person.

And love keeps no record of wrongs – that's to say love is not resentful. Love does not keep track of all the ways it's been hurt, but forgives and moves on.

Now that's not to say that this is all easy but it's the goal that we aim for.

Now the really interesting thing – I think – is the fact that Paul's not just describing what love doesn't do – he's specifically calling out things the Corinthians do – do.

Think about what we know about the Corinthian church. When Paul says 'love doesn't do this' – he's pointing fingers – they are doing that!

Love doesn't envy – but the Corinthians do – they want each other's spiritual gifts – I think that's reflected in chapter 12 when Paul talks about each member of the Body of Christ having a part to play and being equally important (15). He knew people in the Corinthian church were envying one another.

Love doesn't boast – but boy, the Corinthians did. Chapters 12-14 exist because some Corinthians thought they were better than others. They were proud of their ecstatic spiritual experiences – but wait – love's not proud.

Love's not rude, but they sure were tolerating a guy sleeping with his mother in law. That's behaving improperly.

Love's not self-seeking, eagerly angered, or apt to keep record of wrongs – he's saying this to a church that's all too eager to sue one another.

Do you see – this love stuff is not just about how you treat your hubby when he snores all night and keeps you up – this is super relevant to the way that we act as a church. The call to love like this is a call to love one another as brothers and sisters saved by the grace of God.

I have to admit that I am grateful to be talking to YOU about this – you as a church live this out better than any other church I've been a part of – and I'm not just saying that cause I'm your pastor. I don't get the sense that you are boastful or easily angered. I don't stay up at night going 'oh that person is so resentful or self-seeking'; now I don't know what you're like in private, but I've prayed that you would carry the selfless love that I see in this church out and into the world. And that we would keep growing more and more selfless.

So love IS patient and kind; love DOESN'T envy, boast, seek its own way – what DOES love do?

7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1Co 13:7 NIV).

There is nothing that love cannot face (NEB).

Paul's done something kind of neat here that the NIV obscures – that first word – 'protects' – is better translated 'endures.' Back in chapter 9 (12), the NIV translates it 'endures' and same thing over in 1 Thessalonians – twice actually – so I'm not sure why they went with protect here instead of going with endure.

Because – I think Paul intended a parallel structure here to describe HOW love works – listen –
Love always endures
Love always trusts
Always hopes
Always perseveres.

You've got a double stuffed oreo here!

In the middle, you have trust and hope – spiritual anchors that rely on God, that look to God for provision,

And on the outside, you have endurance and perseverance – steadfastness that allows you to weather the storms.

And do you see, hope and trust empower endurance and perseverance.

Love ties it all together, allowing us to bear all things.

Now that doesn't mean that love should be gullible, or that love allows abuse – by no means. We've already seen that love rejoices with the truth – right? Love will stand up for itself in the face of abuse but in the main, love simply perseveres, trusting God's wisdom and provision in every circumstance. That's why John Calvin wrote–

“Love would rather be deceived by its gentleness of heart than injure a brother by deception. It is always ready to think the best, to put the most favourable construction on everything” (Calvin, in Jackson, 218).

Faith and hope allow love to persevere and endure.

What love is, what love doesn't, what love does – I think it's time for us to take a step back and summarize it into a big idea. If you look really close at these verbs, you can divide them into two categories – the things you do and the things that you do in response to what others do. How you act and how you react. I hinted at that with love is patient and kind.

So let's use that to form our big idea – Christian love means acting with grace and reacting with patience.

Love means acting with grace and reacting with patience.

Let's quick take a look at that – How do we act towards other people? This passage tells us that love means acting with grace. When an action begins with us, it should be characterized by grace. I'm using that as a catch all really – but look at the list – love is kind. Flip the 'what love doesn't do' and you have love is supportive. Love is humble. Love is selfless. All of that begins with us and moves outwards, Love means acting with grace.

And love means RE acting with patience. We respond with endurance when others act ungraciously towards us. Again, look at the list – love is patient, love isn't irritable, love isn't resentful, love endures, love perseveres. We can't control how other people act towards us but we can control how we React towards them. And love means Reacting with patience.

Now that's big, right? Christian love is a lofty standard that means daily dying to self and treating others with selfless generosity. That's hard. Where do you get the strength for that? What can motivate us to that end?

Friends, this is the love that God has loved us with. Patient and kind, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in faithfulness. This the love God has loved us with.

He acted towards us with grace, loving us before we knew we needed His love.

He reacted to our rebellion with patience – rather than condemning us, while we were still His enemies, He sent Jesus to die in our place.

God loved us with this kind of love and call us to extend that love to others.

As Gordon Fee writes “The life that is so touched by the never-ceasing love of God in Christ is in turn enabled by the Spirit to love others in the same way” (640).

Ralph Martin puts it like this:

“Love is what God in Christ has shown and done for [us] in [our] helpless plight and hapless estate as sinners. In love we take God's side, share his outlook and implement his designs, and we treat our neighbours as we know God has treated us” (Martin, in Blomberg, 259).

Have you experienced the love of God in your life? He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In love He created each of us; in love He sustains us everyday and when we fail to acknowledge that it's Him giving us life and breath, we do Him wrong. But rather than holding it against us, He took steps to forgive us – remember our kids story?

By this God showed us His love – He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Have you experienced it for yourself?

If you have, then it is up to you to extend it now to those around you. Justin Bieber was kind of right – you don't become a taco by going to Taco Bell, you don't become a Christian simply by going to church – you have to apply the message of the church – that God treated us with grace and patience – overwhelmed us with love – and that love now is the standard for us as we interact with others.

Let's take a minute to apply this in the church.

I want to bring us back to the very beginning of 1 Corinthians 13 – remember? If I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (1Co 13:2 NIV). All that we do as a church is nothing, unless we are characterized by love. All of our charitable givings are nothing unless we are charitable with one another! And of course the flip is true too! If we soak everything we do together in love, our efforts are incredibly valuable! Do it without love, it's nothing. Do it with love, and you are acting with the very power of God!

How do we act with that kind of love? I think the best way to start is with our own hearts. I remember in university I heard a speaker share a message kind of like what I've said, and then they said – now take these verses and apply them to yourself.

Can you honestly say to yourself that in your interactions with other believers –

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres (1Co 13:4-7 NIV).

Friends, God has loved us this way – let's love each other like this.

Now, since it's so close to Valentine's day, I can't help myself but to apply this to romantic relationships too – husbands and wives, dating relationships. Julie and I know someone who almost broke up with their long-time partner because they felt like the 'fairy tale' magic was gone. They had bought into the world's view of love which says that love is an emotion, a thing that makes you feel warm inside.

But love isn't just a warm feeling; it's love with the kind of love that God showed us. Love is a commitment to acting with grace and reacting with patience. Love means both sweeping her up off her feet AND sweeping the floor from time to time.

I came across a neat article online this week and it used an image that I thought was striking – so I want to share it with you:

Love is so much more than some random, euphoric feeling. And real love isn't always fluffy, cute, and cuddly. More often than not, real love has its sleeves rolled up, dirt and grime smeared on its arms, and sweat dripping down its forehead. Real love asks us to do hard things—to forgive one another, to support each other's dreams, to comfort in times of grief, or to care for family. Real love isn't easy—and it's nothing like the wedding day—but it's far more meaningful and wonderful.

That's true in relationships and in the church.

God has loved us with a love that patient and gracious – let us love one another by acting with grace and reacting with patience. Let's pray.

BENEDICTION

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1Jo 4:9-11 NIV).