

# Love - I Corinthians 13

by J. Oswald Sanders

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*J. Oswald Sanders explores the profound and challenging nature of love as described in I Corinthians 13, emphasizing its essential role in the Christian faith and life.*

**Duration:** 33:28

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 13:4

**Topics:** "Love"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of love as the motivating factor behind all actions. He explains that even if one were to give away all their possessions or sacrifice their own body, it would mean nothing if it is not done out of love. The speaker then goes on to describe the characteristics of love as outlined in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, highlighting how Jesus exemplified these qualities. He challenges the listeners to strive for these qualities in their own lives, as they are the qualities that God expects to find in His children.

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## Transcript

I want to speak to you this morning about Paul's hymn of love, about which we read in our United Reading. It's a lyric of only 250 words, just a very small passage, and yet it was said of that passage that it's perhaps the noblest assembly of beautiful thoughts clothed in beautiful language in the world today. It's a very beautiful passage, and yet it's a very awful passage.

It's a devastating passage. You may wonder what makes me say that. Well, perhaps we'll see that it might be so.

Many years ago, a friend of mine was preaching on this chapter, and he said, have you ever read the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians every day for a month? He said, if you haven't, I'd suggest you try it. Well, my wife and I decided we'd try it, and when we went to bed at night, we would either read it or recite it together. And at the end of the first week, the beauty of the chapter gripped us more than ever.

But at the end of the second week, I wasn't quite so sure it was so beautiful. It was getting decidedly awkward, really. And at the end of the third week, I was quite sure that it wasn't a very beautiful chapter.

You see, I would find myself perhaps being a bit selfish, and while I was just about to do that thing, all of a sudden it would come into my mind, love seeketh not her own. And if I was doing something else, I found

myself with an attitude in which love was absent, and then immediately this chapter would speak to me, and I found that it was very vocal and challenged my life on many counts. And it may be that it might do the same to you.

It's a very beautiful chapter, and the qualities that are attributed to love in it, you will notice, are just a picture of the Lord Jesus. Everything that's said about love here is exactly true of Him. Indeed, you can read the word Christ for love, and it makes perfect sense.

I'll read for you from verse 4. Christ was very patient. He was always kind. He was never jealous, never boastful.

He was never arrogant or rude. Christ never insisted on His own way. He was not irritable.

He was not resentful. He never rejoiced at anything that was wrong. He always rejoiced in what was right.

Christ bore all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things. Christ never failed. That's very beautiful, isn't it? Isn't it true? Every one of those things was true of Him.

And I want to read it again, just make a little change. See if you can follow it with me. I am always patient.

I am very kind. I'm never jealous. I never boast.

I'm never proud. I'm never rude. I never insist on having my own way.

I'm never irritable. I'm never resentful. I never rejoice in anything that's wrong.

I always rejoice in what is right. I bear all things. I believe all things.

I hope all things. I endure all things. I never fail.

A bit of a difference, isn't there? Do you understand what I mean when I say that this chapter is not only a very beautiful chapter, but also it is a tremendously challenging chapter? Now, these qualities that are spoken of here are the qualities that God expects to find in His children in increasing measure. The word love as it is used today in literature and in books and on TV and movies, that word love has been sadly debased. Practically all its connections are with the erotic or the romantic.

But the word love as it means here, as it signifies here, is not that kind of thing at all. Love was the outward going, the sacrificial side of the nature of God, the self-imparting quality in God. God so loved the world that He felt wonderful inside His heart.

Does it say that? It doesn't. God so loved the world that He plucked out His heart and gave His only Son. And that's the kind of love that is spoken of here, a love that is sacrificial, a love that is self-imparting, a love that is like the love of God.

In the first three verses of this chapter, Paul shows the supremacy of love over several things. He shows the supremacy of love over spiritual gifts. He says, I can speak in the tongues of men and of angels.

I can have ecstatic utterance. I can have wonderful rhetoric. But if I have not love, I'm just like the noisy gong that they could hear sounding in the heathen temple while Paul was writing.

Love is supreme over any spiritual gift. Any spiritual gift is of value only as it is prompted by and exercised in love. Then he speaks about its supremacy over certain intellectual qualities.

He says, if I have prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing. These absolutes of Paul are terrible, aren't they? If I'd been writing that, I'd have said, now, if you have prophetic powers and you understand all mysteries and all knowledge and yet you don't have love, you won't be nearly as effective as you would otherwise be. That's the way we would say it.

But what does Paul say? He says, if you can have all this knowledge, you can know your Bible backwards, you can have that kind of faith that gets wonderful answers to prayer, but if you have not love, you are a spiritual non-entity. You don't count. My, how strongly he puts things.

He says, I am nothing. I'm not trying to denigrate prophetic powers. I'm not trying to denigrate understanding all mysteries and all knowledge and having faith that can remove mountains.

Not that. But what Paul is saying, that all those things must be motivated by love or they are spiritually barren and I am a spiritual nobody. He says, you can go further.

He speaks about its supremacy over material sacrifice. He said, you can dole out all your goods to feed the poor until you've got nothing left. You can even go as far as those Buddhist priests did a few years ago in Saigon when they drenched themselves with petrol and set themselves on fire and gave their bodies to be burned.

He says, you can do all that and yet if it is not love that motivates it, you gain nothing. All the money you've given is not entered into your credit in heaven unless it is motivated by love. You gain nothing.

This is a devastating chapter, isn't it? How important then that our lives be filled with and characterized by the kind of love that is set out here. Now let's think a little about the characteristics of love set out in verses 4 to 8. You notice here that love is personified, speaking as though love were a person. Love is very patient.

Love suffers long, it says in the King James version. It's rather interesting that the first quality of love he speaks about is what love can suffer. Love is long-suffering and the word there means very patient with people and people are not always easy to be patient with, are they? Love is very patient, long-suffering.

Love is capable of great self-restraint. Peter came to the Lord one day. I think the other apostles had been giving him rather a rough time.

Peter rather lent himself to it, you know. I think they'd been giving him a bit of a rugged time and he came to the Lord. He said, Lord, how often shall my brethren sin against me and I forgive them? Seven times? I think he thought he'd made a great concession to forgive them seven times.

What did the Lord answer? Yes, Peter, that's wonderful to forgive them seven times, but I suggest that you try seventy times seven and then come and see me again. Seventy times seven. How patient am I? How many times do I forgive someone who does something wrong? How many times do I get impatient with my children? You see, love is very patient.

When I am impatient it's because there is a shortage of love, that's why. Love is very patient. Love is kind.

What a nice word that is. Aren't kind people nice? Isn't it lovely to have kind people about you? What are kind people anyway? A kind person is someone who is always looking out for the opportunity of doing something good or nice for somebody else. They're lovely to have about.

Rather striking that in Acts 10.38 when it speaks about our Lord Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, what was the effect it had on him? Does it say he went about preaching wonderful sermons and doing great miracles? No, it doesn't say that at all. It says he was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power who went about doing good, being kind, just looking for opportunities to help people and whenever the opportunity came immediately he took it. Love is kind.

It's that disposition to put yourself at the disposal of other people, to forget yourself and to lose yourself in their interests and trying to help them and make them happy. That's what it is to be kind and love is just like that. Love is never jealous, never envious.

Love never envies somebody who is more gifted or more attractive or more successful or anyone who is richer or got things that we haven't, cleverer than we are. Love doesn't do that. Do we find it very difficult to envy some people? Isn't it part of our nature? Do we see them? I wish I had that.

Is not the greater part of our TV programs and so on cast along this line to make us envy what others have got so that we want that too and we want something better all the time? They play upon this covetous streak in our nature that makes us envy other people. But love is not like that. Love is content with what it has.

Love is content with what God has given in personality or in anything else, in possessions. Love is not envious. I think of John the Baptist as one of the most remarkable examples of a man who was not jealous.

He had been the very center of the Jewish nation, the religious life. They came to him from north and south and east and west for him to baptize them. He was the most popular man.

If he wanted a crowd he didn't use TV. What did he do? He went out into the desert and they followed him there. What a remarkable man.

Then suddenly a rival appears and Jesus comes on the scene and John finds his congregation leaving him and going to the church around the corner. No pastor enjoys that. But what was the reaction of John? Was he jealous? He said, This my joy is fulfilled.

I love to hear the bridegroom's voice and I'm listening to it now and my joy is fulfilled. He must increase and I must decrease. Love is not jealous.

How wonderful. That was not something of earth. That was something that came down from heaven.

Love is not proud, arrogant, puffed up, conceited, self-important. Who of us is not proud? Pride seems to be inborn in us. A man said to his friend one day, You know, I've got many faults but I thank God I'm not proud.

His friend said to him, Well, of course I can understand that because you've got so very little to be proud about. He said, Haven't I? I've got just as much to be proud about as you have anyway. How subtle these hearts of ours are, aren't they? Pride is like an onion.

You take off one skin and you come to another one. And another one still and it makes you weep too. Pride is an abomination to the Lord.

He'll abase the proud. He'll exalt the humble. The only person who ever trod this world who had the right to be proud humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Love is humble. My brothers and sisters, that is not something which grows as a native plant in my life or in yours. It's an exotic.

It comes down from heaven. It's implanted there by the Holy Spirit. Love is not rude.

You know, there is an etiquette about the Christian life. Love doesn't forget its manners. I don't think there's as much stress played on manners today as there used to be.

I think we've lost something by it. Love never forgets its manners. Love is never rude, never crude, never sarcastic, never vulgar.

Love is not rude. Love does not insist on its own way. King James says, love seeks not her own.

But you know, it's as natural for you and for me to seek our own interests as it is for us to breathe. Paul cried out, he said, every man seeks his own and not the things which be of Christ. He was overwhelmed by it.

Everywhere he went, everybody was looking after their own interests and they weren't thinking about the things of Christ and the people. And this is so natural to us. We seek our own.

But what did Jesus say? He said, I seek not my own. I seek not my own glory. He never sought anything for himself.

He didn't insist on having his own way. And yet, that is something which is one of the most disruptive things in a home. When one member or another insists on having their own way, they will have their own way.

A friend of mine had a little girl and he said, she came to him one day, she said, Daddy, I do like to do what I do like to do. Yes, there it was, just the natural expression. We like to do what we like to do.

We like to have our own way. But love doesn't insist on having its own way always. You know, one of the marks of growth in spiritual maturity is when we are able to give in and to give in graciously.

I'm not speaking about where there is principle involved. I'm speaking about in the ordinary things of life. If in the home we learn to give in to one another, it's rather striking that in Ephesians 5.18 where it says, Be filled with the Spirit, it goes on to say how it will manifest itself.

And how does it manifest itself? Submitting one to another. Doesn't one person insisting on having their own way and be the domineering and dominating person in a home or in a community or in a church? It's submitting one to another, learning how to be mutually submissive. My, that makes the wheels run very smoothly in a home and in a community when there is a mutual willingness to give way to the other person.

Love does not insist on having its own way. It's rather interesting that in the Vatican manuscript, when if you read it, you'll find that it says this. Love does not seek what is not her own.

I don't know what happened, but apparently the copyist who was copying out that manuscript thought that there must have been a mistake. And so he put in an extra not. He said, I never seek what's not my own, but I insist on having my own rights.

But that's not what it says. The second not's not there. It says love does not seek what is her own.

I don't insist even on what are my rights. I'm willing to make way and give way in the interest of harmony and of sweetness. Love does not insist on its own way.

Love is not easily provoked. When I was reading that chapter every night, I used to breathe a sigh of relief. I was reading it in those days in the King James Version, and it says love is not easily provoked.

Well I said, well I'm not easily provoked either. Thank the Lord for that. But when I looked it up in the original, I found that the word easily is not there at all.

It just says love is not provoked. Love is never irritable. Love never gets exasperated.

Love never loses its temper. Rather an awkward passage, isn't it? Do you? Are you irritable? When you come down in the morning, do the rest of the family look to see which way the wind is blowing today? I see that's familiar. Love is not irritable.

Love is not provoked. How many times you've sung Francis Ridley Havergill's wonderful hymns, and aren't they wonderful too? Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee. Like a river glorious is God's perfect peace.

And you would say, Francis Ridley Havergill must have been a wonderful woman. She was. But when she was a younger woman, she had a very quick temper, the kind that used to come up and then explode.

It used to happen, and she'd be overcome, mortified, that she'd lost her temper. She'd go and confess it to the Lord, and then she'd go and do it again. And one day there'd been an extra bad explosion.

And she went into her room and threw herself down by her bed, and she wept before the Lord. She said, Lord, must it always be so? Will I always have this temper to keep me humble before you? And while she was there on her knees, the Lord injected a verse of scripture into her mind that was a very strange one. The verse of scripture was this, The Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will see no more forever.

Can you see any connection with getting irritable in that? Well, at first, Francis Ridley Havergill couldn't see what this verse had to say to her. And then she remembered the context in which those words were spoken. Those words were spoken by God to Moses when the Egyptians from whom they had escaped were pursuing them and wanting to take them back into bondage again.

And she saw, why, this temper of mine, this is the way in which Satan is coming after me and wants to pull me back into bondage again. And the Lord says, The Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will see no more forever. She said, Lord, could it be forever? And it seemed to her as though the words came back from the Lord.

Yes, no more forever. Her sister said, From that day forward, Francis never again lost her temper. She believed God.

And God did a miracle. Do you believe that God can do a miracle in you? Do you believe in the supernatural? Or is that just an item of creed and not something that could affect your life? Do you believe that God could do that for you? He did it for her. Love is not irritable.

Love is not resentful. The Good News Bible translates that. Love does not keep a record of wrongs suffered.

When somebody does something against you, you don't store it away. You say, Oh, I'll remember that against you. Love doesn't do that.

Love forgives and love forgets. When I was a youth, in the church I went to, there was a man who used to have a notebook. And when we young fellows did things which we oughtn't to have done, and I think we were fairly normal, and said things that probably we oughtn't to have said, he would just take a note of these things and he'd have it in his notebook.

And then at the very awkward time out would come the book and you'd be faced with what you'd said. Well, I was preaching on that one morning and I said, Now, love doesn't do that. Love doesn't keep a record of wrongs done or suffered.

Love forgets. Well, after that service, I was walking home with a friend of mine who was a university professor and his son. The son happens to be my doctor now, by the way.

But he was only a boy of nine or ten then. And as we were going along, I was talking to my friend, and then a little boy butted in. He said, Daddy, if Mr. Sanders had been doing what he preached about this morning, he wouldn't have remembered that that man kept that little book, would he? No, he wouldn't have remembered that that man kept that little book.

The preacher caught out. I'm remembering it now just to tell you. But this is true.

Love doesn't keep something in the mind and hold resentment. Now, I'd be very surprised if in a congregation of this size there are not some people in whose hearts there is some resentment against someone else, and you've got in the back of your mind the memory of something that is done to you that you have never forgiven, and you've never put it away. Is that true? Resentment, like jealousy, is a cancer of the soul.

It can only harm you. I would plead with you, if you're in that position, put that out of your heart. Go and put it right.

Forgive the person. How wonderfully God has forgiven us. Let us just be as forgiving as he is of us.

Love bears all things. I don't know why they use that word, because it doesn't give the sense of it at all. The meaning of the word really is love is slow to expose.

Love knows how to be silent about other people's faults. Love covers. You know, if you do something that's rather out of order, don't you like it when nobody talks about it? When they're silent about it and just pass it over? And yet, how easy it is for us to pass it on in gossip and just talking.

Did you hear what so-and-so did? We pass it on in that way. Love doesn't do that. Love is slow to expose.

Love always covers another's weaknesses. I believe that if this aspect of love was in our hearts, there'd be a wonderful warmth of fellowship, much deeper than we know and experience at present. Love knows how to be silent.

Love delights not in revealing other people's faults, but in concealing them. It's told of St. Augustine that he had a large dining table and on it he carved a motto. The motto was in Greek, but the English equivalent would be something like this.

Who loves another's name to stain, he shall not dine with me again. Who loves another's name to stain, he shall not dine with me again. Well, on one occasion he had a table full of bishops and they were having dinner together.

And they had been discussing different things and then one of the bishops began to speak derogatorily of somebody else. And after he just said a little, St. Augustine didn't say a word, but he just directed his attention to the motto. Who loves another's name to stain, he shall not dine with me again.

And never again was that bishop invited to Augustine's table. How many times a table says, who loves another's name to stain, he shall not dine with me again. Love doesn't do that.

Love delights to cover, not to expose, but to conceal. There isn't time to go into the others. Love believes all things, hopes all things.

Love is always optimistic about the object of his love. Love always hopes the best. Love endures all things.

Love will stand anything. Then it says love never fails. The word there is a picture word.

It's a picture of a flower. Love's flower petals never fall. They never fade.

You have your beautiful flowers, there they are, and you go in two or three days time, there they are all droopy and dropped. Love's flower petals never lose their freshness. They never lose their fragrance.

Love is something that is perennial. That's why it says the greatest of these is love. The other things pass away, but not love, it's perennial.

What a wonderful picture it is of the life God wants us to live. But if you're anything like me, I think that after what I've said you'd feel a little bit discouraged, because I'm sure that God has revealed to you some areas of life in which there's room for a little improvement. True? Well, I wouldn't be kind if I left you there, would I? And I don't intend to leave you there.

I want to read that passage again. Will you listen? Christ in me is very patient. Christ in me is always kind.

Christ in me is never jealous, never boastful. Christ in me is never arrogant or rude. Christ in me does not insist on his own way.

Christ in me is not irritable, not resentful. Christ in me does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Christ in me bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Christ in me never fails. Does that give hope? If you read in 2 Corinthians 13 and 5, you'll find Paul saying this, what? Did you not know that Jesus Christ is in you? Did you not know that? Did you not know it? Did you not know that Jesus Christ is in you? That's not a figure of speech. That's a glorious truth.

Jesus Christ is in you. Paul says Christ in you, the hope of glory. He says, it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me.

And Christ is love personified. All these things we've been speaking about are in him. And he is in you.

And the Holy Spirit is in you to take these things that are of Christ and to make them real in your experience. As you go out into the new week, will you reckon on this being true? Jesus Christ is in me. He is love.

His love is there available for me to enable me to conquer these things that I've seen that are so unlike him. I do trust that you will give the Holy Spirit the opportunity of working out in you as I want him to work out in me these qualities which were seen in all their loveliness in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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