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WHAT IS REAL LOVE?

I Corinthians 13:4-8

Everyone is looking for love. But what is the love we all want and need? What does real love look like? How will we know when we've found it?

Some think of "being in love" as an unexplainable feeling that we "fall in and out of." But the Bible, in its timeless wisdom, gives us a more meaningful and enduring approach.

In the following pages, pastor and Bible teacher Bill Crowder helps us take a fresh look at the inspired words of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Those who share his confidence in Scripture will find that what songwriter Bob Lind called "the bright elusive butterfly of love" isn't so elusive after all.

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WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW

When Jackie DeShannon sang, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love,” much of her generation sang with her. According to her song, the world doesn’t need any more mountains to climb or rivers to cross. What we need is love, “not just for some, but for everyone.”

The theme of this hit song of the 60s strikes a note that resonates in all of us. Each year we buy millions of roses and boxes of candy for Valentine’s Day. We raise relief money for communities devastated by hurricane, fire, flood, or earthquake. And we applaud the actions of people like 75-year-old Russell Plaisance. He tried to help a troubled family whose plight had been

described in his local paper. Thinking he could show a little love, Russell brought money, food, and toys to a local motel where the family was staying.

*If love offered was
always returned,
there would be
enough to go
around.*

Unfortunately, Russell’s kindness was repaid a few days later when the father of the family pulled a knife on him and then made off with his wallet and his car.

Russell’s experience helps explain why the world is in such need of love. If love offered was always returned, there would be enough to go around. If love always won the day, many more of us would be inspired to act lovingly even in the toughest

circumstances. But love is not always returned.

And sometimes when love is returned, it is redefined to fit our own interests. Love often means different things to different people. Depending on who is doing the talking, love can mean:

- a feeling that may not last
- a euphemism for a sexual relationship
- self-sacrificing action on behalf of others
- acceptance without criticism
- being more honest than nice

*Is love really never
having to say
you're sorry?*

Love Is A Many Splendored Thing. Even in common conversation that we all understand, we use the word *love* to refer to

a variety of things. For example, I might say that:

“I love to play golf.”

“I love my computer.”

“I love my wife and children.”

“I love the Cleveland Browns.” (Well, I used to!)

It's obvious that love means different things to different people and that we all use the word in various ways. The danger is that when a word can mean so many different things, it can end up meaning nothing at all. Two people might commit themselves to love each other but have different ideas of what it means.

An equal danger is to assume that because love is so unpredictable, there are more important things to think about. But on this point, the wisdom of the Bible is clear. Writing to people torn by anger and conflict, the apostle Paul wrote:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

These words were written to people who knew the importance of personal commitment and sacrifice. The Corinthian readers of this letter knew the importance of faith, knowledge, spiritual gifts, strong leaders, and inspiring messages.

The problem was that

the people of the city of Corinth were much like us. In the process of trying to look after their own interests, they lost sight of the goal of their faith and knowledge. They forgot that

***Without love,
our words are
noise, our spiritual
gifts amount to
nothing, and our
greatest sacrifices
lose their meaning.***

it is possible to study the Scriptures and pursue the gifts of the Holy Spirit while missing the heart and mind of God. In their desire for fulfillment, they had forgotten what they needed most.

A CITY IN NEED OF LOVE

Imagine one of the most corrupt, heartless cities on earth. Think of a city where love is given a bad name, where relationships are intentionally self-centered, and where lives are routinely destroyed. That was the quality of life in the first-century city of Corinth—home of the first Christians to read the lofty and inspired words of 1 Corinthians 13.

It might seem paradoxical that one of the most beautiful descriptions of love the world has ever known would be associated with Corinth. On a closer look, however, nothing could be more appropriate. If ever there was a people that needed the principles of real love to change their lives, it was the people of the church in Corinth.

People In Difficult Circumstances. Even by today's standards, the Christians of Corinth had a lot to overcome. Their culture was morally decadent. The primary religion of their city was the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love whose temple employed 1,000 prostitute priestesses.

Wealth posed another challenge. Corinth's prime location on the Isthmus of Corinth, which connected northern and southern Greece, provided a commercial prosperity that contributed to moral decline. Materialism, along with a sexually oriented religion, produced a culture and a climate based on personal pleasure.

Corinth became so well-known for its moral corruption that people in the Greek world who were guilty of gross immorality and drunken debauchery

were said to behave like Corinthians. This was the environment of the church that received Paul's classic description of love.

People With Failing Spiritual Health.

Tragically, as often happens in our day, the church in Corinth began to reflect the condition of its environment. Consider the variety of problems that Paul had to deal with in his first letter to them:

- division in the family of God (chs.1–3)
- pride and spiritual arrogance (ch.4)
- sexual promiscuity (ch.5)
- lawsuits between believers (ch.6)
- troubled marriages (ch.7)
- abuse of spiritual liberty (chs.8–10)
- confusion of gender roles (ch.11)
- abuse of the Lord's Table (ch.11)
- misuse of spiritual gifts (chs.12,14)

- neglect of doctrinal basics (ch.15)

*If love could
change lives in
Corinth, love can
change lives
anywhere.*

On top of all their other problems, some of the people in Corinth resented the apostle Paul. As troubled as they were, they didn't see their need for his teaching. Paul's letter makes it clear that he was dealing with a people who could see someone else's problems more clearly than their own.

People In Need Of Spiritual Insight.

What was the solution? According to Paul, his readers in Corinth needed to understand that there was more to following

Christ than the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and supernatural power. He wanted them to know that all of their eloquent arguments and speeches and right doctrine and expressions of faith and sacrificial giving would actually drive others away if they didn't rediscover the real meaning of love. With a series of contrasts in 13:1-3, Paul showed what really happens when we attempt to do good things without love:

the Spirit living in us, without caring the way He does for the people in our lives. It's possible that we see clearly how people are wrong, without seeing that without love we are not right either.

Such insight is not to condemn us. If we are condemned, it is by our own self-centeredness. First Corinthians 13 is not meant to knock us down. It is meant to lift up those of us who have lost our way in mountains of biblical and

W I T H O U T L O V E

ELOQUENT SPEECH ➤ **IS LIKE LOUD NOISE**
SPIRITUAL INSIGHT ➤ **AMOUNTS TO NOTHING**
PHILANTHROPY ➤ **HAS NO PERSONAL PROFIT**

The insight the Corinthians needed is important for all of us. It's possible that we too have amassed mountains of information about the Bible without sharing its heart. It's possible that we have

religious knowledge. It is meant to help us realize that we can't afford to let the failures of our relationships and attitudes ruin our reputation. We can't afford to let arguments over our own interests

reflect poorly on the credibility of our Lord.

We've all heard it said that people won't care much about what we know until they see how much we care. It's true. Others are not likely to find our beliefs credible unless they see that we are as concerned about them as we are about ourselves. Without the love of Christ compelling us:

- Evangelism becomes judgmental.
- Doctrinal purity becomes pharisaical.
- Personal commitment becomes self-righteous.
- Worship becomes routine and mindless.
- Bible study becomes proud intellectualism.
- Service to others becomes tiring obligation.

People In Need Of Spiritual Renewal. If the truths of 1 Corinthians 13 show us our spiritual poverty, it is so that we can

be rich in concern for those around us. If Paul's words show us how full we are of ourselves, it is so that the Lord can empty us of that which is ruining us. If this passage shines a light on us, it is so that we will examine our lives and follow Christ more closely.

What we need to keep in mind, however, as we read the following pages is that God is not merely calling us to higher ground, He is offering to change us from the inside out. He is not merely offering a higher standard of living, He is offering to lift us above our own natural way and to do a work in us that we could never do for ourselves.

The challenge before us now is to submit ourselves to the Lord and to His truth so that He can produce in us the real love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13.

THE MARKS OF REAL LOVE

From the stage of the Ed Sullivan Show, the Beatles exploded onto the American scene. With a bold new look and sound, they stirred a whole generation to sing “all we need is love.” Eventually they split up, and for years fans dreamed of a reunion.

When a repeat performance was finally arranged, the Beatles still sang of love. In their much publicized studio reunion, the key song was titled “Real Love.” But the lyrics of John Lennon’s song expressed a note of sadness. While describing real love as his goal in life and his prize at the end of the race, the song ends with the mournful thought that he was “only to be alone.”

John’s lyrics describe the experience not only of his generation but of our own

as well. We look for love, think we have found it, then find ourselves disillusioned when the feelings go away.

What is the love that seems so elusive? If we had lived in the days of the apostle Paul, the Greek language would have helped us clarify the kind of “love” we were looking for.

The Greek word *epithumia* spoke of desire that found its fulfillment in sexual love. *Eros* was a term used to describe romantic love. *Storge* was a word used by the Greeks to describe a strong love that protects and makes secure. *Phileo* represented the brotherly love of family or friendship. And then there was *agape* (most often used to speak of God’s love) that described love in its most profound and pure form.

Since Paul chose the word *agape* for his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, it appears

he wanted us to see that it is the highest kind of divine love that gives lasting meaning to all other expressions of love. Using *agape* to describe this love from our Creator's point of view, the apostle wrote:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

When we consider the different elements of this lofty love, it becomes clear why *agape* love is real love—the love we all want and need.

Real Love “Suffers Long.” It is patient. The Greek word meant “long-tempered.” Vine’s *Expository*

Dictionary Of New Testament Words says that this word describes “that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation that does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish.” It is the quality of having a long fuse. One commentator defined it as “slow to become resentful.” This means that real love does not retaliate in kind, or seek to get even. It does not embrace bitterness, but patiently loves—even when experiencing serious heartache.

In our day of domestic violence, sexual unfaithfulness, and broken relationships, this kind of love is vital. It recognizes and deals with the heartaches it faces, but it never turns in vengeful response.

Sometimes this quality of love enables a person to do what others say they could never do. This was Joan’s case. Her husband had been

involved in a lengthy affair, eventually abandoning the marriage and family they had established. The marriage finally ended in divorce. Yet, in all the hurt and pain Joan had experienced, she never forgot how, and why, to love her husband.

Real love can suffer the pain of betrayal, separation, and irreconcilable differences without ceasing to work for the good of the other person.

After months of hurt, sorrow, and rebuilding her life alone, she received word that Charles, her ex-husband, had been injured at work and had been

hospitalized. God used the suffering of that accident to get the attention of a man gone astray.

One day Charles contacted Joan and asked if there was any hope for their broken marriage to be restored. What a huge question! And what an open door for further hurt and sorrow! But in spite of Joan's obvious concerns, she and Charles entered months of biblical counseling.

Two years after Joan had been forced to deal with one of the most severe pains and losses a woman can know, she was remarried to Charles. Another woman in a similar situation might have felt compelled to lovingly decline remarriage. But Joan's love refused to be resentful, and it had the grace to "suffer long." In spite of the pain and sense of abandonment she had experienced, Joan took the risk of remarriage to the one

who had hurt her so terribly.

Such willingness to resist becoming resentful does not mean that past sins are easily or painlessly forgotten. But real love doesn't give way to bitter resentment. It truly "suffers long."

Real Love "Is Kind."

Kenny Rogers sang a love song titled, "You Decorated My Life." His lyrics celebrated the way our lives are enhanced when we are loved. But when Paul said that real love is kind, he was describing a love that is more than ornamental. According to Greek scholar A. T. Robertson, the Greek word translated "kind" can also mean "useful or gracious." Young's *Analytical Concordance* defines the word, "to be useful, beneficial." In other words, love acts in a way that is kind, gracious, useful, and beneficial.

If we keep in mind that the purpose of real love is to

seek the welfare of the one loved, then we see why real love must not only be patient but gracious. Kindness, not harshness, is more apt to encourage good in another person. Just as Proverbs says that "a soft answer turns away wrath" (15:1), so love that is practical and useful is skillful in bringing out the best rather than the worst in the one loved.

***Real love is strong
and truthful
without being
harsh or rough.***

Being gentle and "full of grace" is a Christlike quality (Jn. 1:14). Look at the way Jesus described Himself to those in need of His help:

*Come to Me, all you
who labor and are heavy
laden, and I will give you*

rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Mt. 11:28-29).

Here is a description of the strongest and most loving Person the world has ever known—strong enough to create the universe and wise enough to stand against the hypocrisy and self-centeredness of the most powerful people of His day. Yet He did so while being full of both truth and grace.

Jesus reminds us that while love calls for truth, truth expressed without kindness is not loving. He reminds us that while love calls for patience, patience without kindness is not loving either.

Real Love “Does Not Envy.” Continuing his description of love, Paul said that real love does not resent the blessings, successes, or well-being of

another. Love does not say, “If I can’t have what I want, I don’t want you to have it either.” Instead, real love says, “I can be happy for you, even if I never achieve the accomplishments, recognition, or comforts that you are enjoying. While I might wish myself more, I could not wish you less.”

This “no envy” nature of real love hits us where we live. How many times have we been passed over for a promotion or seen our achievements fall through the cracks of life unnoticed? How many times have we seen other people prosper while we struggle to get by? Even Jesus’ own disciples repeatedly argued among themselves over who should have the most significant places of honor.

No one said that loving others without envy and with patience and kindness in an unfair world would be easy. The Scriptures don’t say that

we should be able to lose a job without disappointment or a relationship without pain. Paul doesn't say that if we have love we won't have feelings of personal loss or sadness. But he does say that if we have real love we will not envy. If we have real love, our own personal pain will not be an excuse to feel ill will for those who for the moment appear to be getting a better break than we are.

We can continue to love, even when we experience loss, if we put our faith and hope and trust in our provider God.

How can we love with such grace? Only with the enablement of the Spirit of Christ. The secret of goodwill in disappointment is to have a deep confidence

in a provider God who is also our Shepherd and Father. Disappointments will come. Unfair circumstances will test our faith as well as our love. Yet, we can be disappointed for ourselves and still love others—if we have learned to trust in God.

Real Love “Does Not Parade Itself.”

Love does not brag about its accomplishments. It is not given to self-display, not even to carefully worded statements of subtle self-promotion.

This concept finds ancient roots in the Bible. King Solomon said it well when he wrote, “Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth” (Prov. 27:2). Simply put, real love doesn't push itself into the spotlight.

This fourth description of love is the other side of the coin from a love that is not envious or jealous. Jealousy wants what someone else

has, but bragging tries to make others jealous of what we have. Jealousy puts others down, but bragging builds ourselves up.

Real love not only applauds the successes of another, but it knows how to handle its own wins when they come. I've heard it said that "for every 100 people who can handle adversity, there are only 10 who can handle prosperity."

This mark of love raises questions in a competitive environment. Self-improvement books tell us that if we want to get ahead in life we need to assume the look of success, blow our own horn, and play up our own talents.

What, in this light, does the "no boast" principle of real love mean for followers of Christ? Is it wrong for a Christian job applicant to list his strengths in a résumé, put on his best clothes, and assume the

posture of someone who would make a good hire?

***When we're down,
love does not envy;
and when we're up,
love does not boast.***

When the Florida Marlins baseball team won their first trip to the World Series, the press began to shower praise on manager Jim Leyland. When congratulated on winning his first National League pennant, Leyland responded, "I didn't win anything. I didn't throw a pitch, or make a play, or score a run. The players won this—not me." What a great attitude of humility! Few things are more noticeable to a watching world than those who are gracious not only in defeat but also in victory.

Real Love “Is Not Puffed Up.” The Greek word Paul used here means, “to puff oneself out like bellows.” In describing this opposite characteristic of real love, he chose a term he had used earlier in the same letter when he encouraged the loveless Christians in Corinth not to “be puffed up on behalf of one against the other” (1 Cor. 4:6).

In this earlier section of his letter, Paul described the Corinthians as being so full of themselves that they had no room to feel the pain of others. Here in chapter 13 he used the same word picture to show that the arrogance that makes us unwilling to receive the help of others also makes us insensitive to those who need us.

William Carey, who is often referred to as the father of modern missions, illustrates the kind of love that is not puffed up. He was a brilliant linguist and

was responsible for translating parts of the Bible into at least 34 different languages and dialects. Yet his accomplishments grew out of humble beginnings that remained in his heart. He was raised in a simple home in England and worked as a cobbler in his early years. When his efforts for the gospel led him to India, he was often ridiculed for his “low” birth and former occupation. At a dinner party one evening another guest, seeking to call attention to Carey’s humble beginnings, said, “Mr. Carey, I understand that you once worked as a shoemaker.” “Oh no, your lordship,” Carey replied, “I was not a shoemaker, only a shoe repairman.”

By contrast, puffed-up people, full of themselves and having an exaggerated opinion of their own importance, are likely to assume that their happiness,

well-being, opinions, and feelings are the only things that really count. Puffed-up people find it easy to dismiss the needs and feelings of others.

With an inflated sense of our own importance, we listen only for the echo of our own voice and look only for the reflection of our own interests.

The New Testament's view of real love does not teach us to neglect our own needs. It just teaches us to remember that our interests are not more important than the interests of others. Even though we often have to give priority to the needs of our own families and homes, we

should also be concerned about the interests, families, and homes of others.

The first place we might look to see if we have a puffed-up sense of our own importance is in our prayers. Do we pray only for ourselves and our own interests, or do we also pray for the children, spouses, and concerns of others?

The simple truth is that real love does not allow us to assume that our health, our prosperity, our home, or our family is any more important than our neighbor's.

Real Love “Does Not Behave Rudely.”

Various translations give the meaning of this phrase as “not behaving unseemly, unbecomingly, rudely, unmannerly, or indecently.”

The only other New Testament occurrence of this expression is found in 1 Corinthians 7:36, which describes the relationship

between an unmarried couple. While emphasizing the highest priority of devotion to God, the apostle went on to say that if a man and a woman found themselves faced with sexual temptation, they should marry rather than “behave improperly.”

How does “behaving improperly” relate to the principle of real love referred to in 1 Corinthians 13? It reminds us that the honorable nature of real love will never make inappropriate demands of others. Real love will never prompt an unmarried person to say, “If you love me, you’ll prove it by giving yourself to me.” Those who love will never ask others to prove their loyalty by lying, cheating, or stealing for them.

By not behaving rudely, real love does not use the “love” of a friendship to pressure anyone to do

something that is contrary to the principles of conscience or faith, or to the moral principles of God.

Heaven only knows the demands that have been placed on children, wives, husbands, students, and even church members in the name of love. The worst acts of sexual indulgence, the

***Real love will
never ask others
to prove their love
by doing something
that is wrong.***

most hideous acts of cover-up, the most depraved secrets of family, mob, gang, group, or friendship have been held under the misused name of love.

Real love, according to Paul, never pressures another person to do

something that is wrong. Real love seeks the best for the one loved—not the personal gain, pleasure, or control that manipulation is often designed to achieve.

Real Love “Does Not Seek Its Own.”

This is a favorite expression of Paul to describe selflessness. It speaks of the person whose focus is outward, not inward. It describes the heart that is not so consumed with its own interests that it cannot show concern for the needs and interests of others.

In Philippians 2, Paul expressed the same principle of real love this way:

If there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also

for the interests of others (vv.1,3-4).

These verses show that Paul’s great passion for those who have taken the name of Christ is that they be of one mind. Yet this oneness will never be a reality in a church, a marriage, or any other kind of relationship until we look out not only for our own interests but also for the interests of others. Paul even went so far as to say that real love will put the needs of others ahead of our own.

This self-sacrifice flies in the face of our human nature. It does, however, express the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5). He humbled Himself to leave the throne of heaven, to live in the limitations of a physical body, to walk the earth in poverty, to be a servant to people who would reject Him, to wash the feet of disciples who would abandon Him, to die on the

cross for the sins of people who did not deserve Him.

Nowhere do we find a better example of real love than in Jesus Himself. He showed the kind of real love that is able to look beyond its own interests and embrace the concerns of others.

No one is a better example of selfless love than the One who left heaven to come to our rescue.

Real Love “Is Not Provoked.” The next word Paul used in his definition of real love describes a heart that is not easily driven to irritation or “sharpness of spirit” (A. T. Robertson). In other words, real love does not have a short fuse. It is not touchy or irritable. This is the flip side of the first

characteristic of love—a negative way of saying that love suffers for a long time.

How easily we can forget this important quality of real love. After a few years of mutual disappointment, husbands and wives become easily provoked with each other. Exasperated parents shout unkindly at their children in frustration.

Workers show a quick temper when an employer or fellow worker fails to give the consideration that not only is deserved but has been agreed to. Citizens become incensed when public servants use their office to violate the public trust.

Why do we get provoked? Sometimes we simmer and boil inside because we want what we want, when we want it—and we won’t take “later” for an answer. Sometimes our temper provides evidence of our own selfishness.

There is, however,

another side to the picture. While love is not easily provoked for selfish reasons, there is a time to be emotionally upset and agitated. For instance, in Acts 17:16 we read:

While Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols.

In this instance, Paul's provocation was both called for and loving. As he waited, he did a slow burn. The more he saw and thought about the idolatry of the city, the more concerned and upset he became in behalf of those who were being hurt and misled by such false religion.

Jesus also was deeply provoked when He turned over the tables of the temple money changers. He was loving enough to be angered by the commercialism that was disrupting the Court of the Gentiles in His Father's House of Prayer. He cared

for those who had lost a quiet place to pray (Mt. 21:12-13).

Jesus was not expressing the kind of touchiness and irritability that signals a lack of love. When He was provoked, it was only because He was thoughtfully and lovingly aroused to take action against practices that were hurting the people He loved.

The example of Jesus' love is not that He didn't get angry, but that He was not easily angered.

Paul's experience in Athens and Jesus' actions in the temple remind us that there is a time to be angry. This anger, however, needs to be expressed in love, and without sin (Eph. 4:26).

Real Love “Thinks No Evil.” This mark of love is not meant to cultivate ignorance. Paul is not writing in the spirit of the three mythical monkeys who “see no evil, hear no evil, and speak no evil.” The Greek word translated “thinks no evil” is an accounting term. It means “to count up, to take account of as in a ledger or notebook.” The “evils” referred to are the wrongs or hurts received at the hand of others.

*Real love has
no place in its
heart for evil.*

Saying that love “thinks no evil” means that it won’t keep records of unkindnesses with the intent of someday getting even. In other words, real love will not hold bitter grudges or

allow longstanding resentments against others, even when the wrongs done against us are real.

When we keep track of wrongs with the intent of making others pay, we ourselves pay more than we can afford. I know of people who worship in the same church every Sunday but haven’t spoken to each other in more than 25 years. And they have absolutely no intention of ever resolving their differences.

It has been said that a person is never more like God than when he or she forgives those who have admitted their sins and asked for forgiveness. If that is true, then we are never further from the character of the God who has saved us than when we hold bitter grudges against those who have admitted their wrongs and asked for mercy. “Keeping score” with an opponent is great for sports,

but it doesn't belong in the game and work of love.

Real love does not keep a record of wrongs, because it finds its security in the presence and provision of God. We don't need to keep a record of wrongs to protect ourselves when we know that God Himself is in control of the outcome, and when we know that He is looking after our needs.

Real Love
“Does Not Rejoice In Iniquity.” Here is a summary statement about what love does not do. Paul already said that love does not find satisfaction in being impatiently demanding of others. It does not enjoy treating others unkindly. It does not feed on envy, proud self-promotion, rudeness, selfish ambition, vindictiveness, or a quick temper.

Now Paul says in summary, “Love does not find delight in anything God

says is wrong.” Neither does love take secret satisfaction in the moral failures of others. Love does not hide evil by keeping secrets that need to be exposed. Love does not pass along a “juicy morsel” of someone else's failure just because it tastes good to do so. Love does not gossip to break the monotony, or to appear knowledgeable, or to feel better about itself by publishing the news of someone else's shame. Breaking the news of sin must be for the good of others rather than to promote a “feeding frenzy” around someone else's embarrassment and pain.

Irish writer Oscar Wilde said, tongue in cheek, “I like persons better than principles, and I like persons with no principles better than anything else in the world.” We smile at such a quote because we know that for the moment, sin is more

entertaining than moral principle. In the short run, the kind of love that Paul is describing can sound as painful as it is noble.

Real love, however, cares about the long-term damages of sin. It cannot rejoice in evil while anticipating the look in people's eyes and the anguish in their faces when sin's harvest finally comes in.

*Real love knows
that evil planted in
mindless moments
of pleasure will
be harvested
in a profound
consciousness
of regret.*

Real love knows that evil planted in mindless moments of pleasure will be harvested in a profound consciousness of regret. Sins

planted as seeds of careless foolishness will be harvested in heavy loads of lost opportunity and missed benefits. Love knows that sins planted as something everyone is doing will one day produce the fruit of separation, isolation, and loneliness. Sin planted to pass the time will result not only in a harvest of lost time but in losses for eternity.

Real love cannot rejoice in iniquity because it cares not only about today but also about tomorrow. Real love can't treat evil as an innocent option.

Real Love “Rejoices In The Truth.” Paul just said that love does not rejoice in iniquity. Now we read what love *does* rejoice with. It rejoices with the truth. Why did he say “truth”? Why didn't he say, “Love rejoices with righteousness”?

One reason for Paul's choice of words is probably

the inherent relationship between righteousness and truth. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of those who will be judged because they “did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (2 Th. 2:12).

***It is the person
who does not
believe the
truth who
takes pleasure
in unrighteousness.***

Paul’s words to the Thessalonians give us a clue why he said “love rejoices with the truth.” He wants us to think about the profound relationship between what we *believe* and what we *do*. On one hand, what we believe determines what we do. On the other hand, what we

want to do determines what we are willing to believe.

This is why the Bible puts such an emphasis on right beliefs. Good doctrine is right thinking about God, ourselves, and others. Right thinking, in turn, allows us to love one another in truth rather than in a setting of self-deception.

All unrighteousness denies the truth. All wrong behavior is rooted in a misbelief about reality. All immorality is rooted in a process of self-deception that says, “I know better than God how to further my own interests and the interests of others.”

It is by lies rather than real love that infatuated people attempt to rob their dates of sexual purity. It is by lies and misbeliefs about the truth that people rob banks, kill, cheat, envy, and gossip. It is by the lies of self-deception that people assume that the sins of

consenting adults hurt no one but themselves.

Paul had good reason for saying that love “does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth.” The opposite of iniquity (unrighteousness) is not only righteousness. The opposite of unrighteousness is truth. It is believing the truth about God and others and ourselves that can enable us to enjoy more than the discovery of faults in others. Putting away our self-destructive misbeliefs can enable us to rejoice when we find moral courage, integrity, patience, and faithfulness even in those who are doing better than we are. That is real love.

On the foundation of both righteousness and truth, Paul is ready now to move to the heights of his portrait of love.

Real Love “Bears All Things.” The word *bears* comes from a Greek word

that means “roof.” The point is grand in its simplicity.

Love covers and protects like a roof covers a house and protects it from storms. Love bears up and continues to work for the good of others regardless of what happens. Love bears the storms of

*Love provides a
place of shelter
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imaginable.*

disappointment, the rains of failure, and the winds of time and circumstance. Love provides a covering that shields from the extremes of cold winters and hot summer sun. Love provides a place of shelter that can withstand the worst circumstances imaginable.

Love cannot protect

others from the harsh realities of living in a broken world. Neither can it protect others from the consequences of their own choices. But love does give broken, hurting people a place to find someone who cares for their good and well-being. Love gives even unrepentant people an advocate and intercessor who prays for their ultimate well-being. Love offers even the worst sinners a place to bring their repentant hearts.

We must keep in mind that “bearing all things” does not mean that love passively bears all sin in the way that a doormat passively takes the feet of its users. What it means is that love never stops caring and never stops offering a place of forgiveness. Love doesn’t get to the place where it begins hating and despising and condemning another. Love cares enough to keep praying, to take every

opportunity to patiently endure the sin of others, to confront when necessary, and to forgive when there is repentance.

This is where the image of a roof is limited. Such unconditional, bearing love is not a passive protector. This love is an active, ever-changing dynamic that initiates and responds in ways that are appropriate to the choices of the other person. While love’s character never changes, its strategies and tactics are constantly changing to seek the well-being of the other person “in all things.”

Real Love “Believes All Things.”

At first glance, this next characteristic of love might leave the impression that those who care about others must learn to be gullible or naive. That was not Paul’s point. Neither was he saying that love *always* gives others the benefit of the doubt.

Sometimes a loving teacher, coach, counselor, or friend must be “unbelieving” in order to get to the bottom of a matter.

No, Paul was not saying that love is blindly accepting of what others say. Rather it seems he was celebrating the foundational relationship between faith and love. First Corinthians 13 reminds us that real love is fueled by our faith in God. Real love grows and is sustained by faith as we believe “all things” God tells us about Himself, about ourselves, and about one another.

If we doubt what God says about His love for us, we will lose a strong incentive for loving one another. If we doubt God’s assurance that He is patient and kind to us, we will not be as apt to be patient and kind with one another. If we doubt that God is able to provide for our needs, we will not be as inclined to be

generous with others.

The truth that “love believes all things” is central to our understanding of Christlike love. Real love is rooted and grounded in faith. Faith, in turn, is rooted and grounded in what God has said in His Word.

***Real love is
rooted and
grounded in
the right kind
of faith.***

Without faith in God, love quits and dies. Unless we continue to “believe all things” God has said, our love will not survive the disappointments, rejections, and insults of life. Unless we build our love firmly on the Word of God, love will throw in the towel. Only by faith in God can love remain strong.

Real Love “Hopes All Things.” This flows out of the previous statement. If we are living with a confident trust in the words and sovereign plan of God, we will also have reason to “hope all things.” Our faith in God’s grace means we can believe that human failures aren’t final. Real love can hope because of what God can do in a person’s life.

It wouldn’t make sense to think that Paul was asking us to hope indiscriminately, any more than he could be asking us to believe without discernment. But, of all people, only those who trust in the God of the Bible have a sound basis to be loving and hopeful in this present world.

The psalmist said of God, “My hope is in You” (Ps. 39:7). Paul wrote, “Hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:5). And Peter added, “Blessed be the

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who . . . has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3).

This is the power of love. It is fueled and sustained not by an ever-changing emotional or physical state, but by deep beliefs and hopes that are given by God to those who trust Him. Real love has a capacity to view life—and live it—with an optimism that is refreshing because of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

Real Love “Endures All Things.” Paul concluded his description of love where it began in verse 4, “Love suffers long.” The difference between that first description and this final one is found in the words Paul chose to describe this wonderful element of real love. With the insight that the secret of real love is in

right beliefs and hopes, Paul has given us a basis for saying love “endures all things.”

In verse 4, the Greek word focused on “suffering long” in the face of mistreatment at the hands of other people without becoming resentful. Here the emphasis is on how we respond to life in general. Love doesn’t give up. It doesn’t quit. It doesn’t walk away. It perseveres to the point where it “endures all things.”

***Love doesn't
give up, quit,
or walk away.***

Firmly etched in my mind is the image of the Swiss runner in the women’s marathon (over 26 miles) at the 1984 Olympic Games. Long after the rest of the runners had finished the

race, she came staggering into the Los Angeles Coliseum. She could barely stand, much less walk or run. To finish the race she had to complete one lap around the track. I remember watching as she staggered, often nearly falling, beyond the point of exhaustion. I also remember how the crowd stood and cheered for her—desperately wanting her to finish the race. As she came down the final straight-away, her coach walked at her side, careful not to touch her lest she be disqualified. Then, as she crossed the finish line, she collapsed into his arms, nearly unconscious.

What a picture of endurance! This is the kind of endurance that according to 1 Corinthians 13 is also a mark of love. Real love endures. It does not give up in the face of pain, but endures, knowing that the goal is worth it.

THE LOVE THAT NEVER FAILS

Lionel Richie and Diana Ross sang wistfully of what every young couple standing at an altar hope for: “Endless Love.” Unfortunately, that just isn’t possible apart from the love Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13. All these thoughts were reinforced in verse 8 when he drew his argument to a close: “Love never fails.”

Real love is a survivor. Because it finds its source and life in God, real love can endure anything.

Paul made it clear that other things (prophecy, tongues, knowledge) are temporary, incomplete, and unreliable. But not love. By the strength and grace of God, it can survive anything. Real love can survive betrayal and distrust. It can survive disappointment and moral

failure. It can rise above the insults and envy of people who consider us their enemy. It can survive criminal trial and imprisonment.

*Because it finds
its source and life
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Even when the nature of our relationships change due to unfortunate human choices, the love of God can cause us to pray and, where possible, to act in behalf of another person.

It is the love that reflects the heart of Christ and reveals the wonderful change that only He can make in a life. It is real love.

WHERE CAN I FIND LOVE?

If the question of your heart is, “Where can I find this real love?” let me share with you some good news. You already are loved. In the most familiar verse in the Bible we are told:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

To those who believe, Jesus described the scope of God’s love. To His disciples Jesus said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,

and all these things shall be added to you” (Mt. 6:31-33). It is only when we believe we are loved in this way that we have the security we need to take the risk of loving others.

Have you taken the first step of finding love in the Person and actions of Christ? Have you entrusted yourself to Him? Have you believed the Bible when it says Christ died for your sins?

This is the starting point. Acknowledge your sin and your need of Christ, who came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10). It is in Christ that we find the love of God, and it is in Him that we see what it means to live in the kind of love Paul described. He is the One who calls us not merely to a higher standard but to let Him live His life through us.

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