

THE PURE AND HOLY LOVE - IV

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13.

A. THE EXPRESSIONS OF HOLY LOVE (13:4-7).

Love is a word that can only be properly defined in terms of action, attitude, and behaviour. Paul has no room for abstract, theoretical definitions; instead, he wants us to know what love looks like when we see it. Thus, he paints fifteen separate portraits of love. Yes, that's right: in the space of four short verses Paul uses fifteen verbs, all of which have "love" as their subject. Our contemporary definition of love is that it is an emotion or a feeling—we love our jobs, we love football, we love pizza. In the biblical definition of agape, love acts, for love is an action, not an emotion. Verse 4 begins by summarizing the unselfish nature of love.

After eight sobering negatives come five glorious positives:

1) LOVE REJOICES WITH THE TRUTH.

When I was in seminary, I studied an ethical system Joseph Fletcher labelled Situation Ethics. Fletcher taught that any action—whether lying, adultery, or even murder—can be moral if it is done in love. However, I would argue that if an action does not conform to the truth of God's Word, it can't be done in love. Truth and love go together like hand in glove. Truth must make our love discriminating, and love must make our truth compassionate and forgiving. If our actions are in accord with agape love, we will always welcome biblical truth, never resist it.

2) LOVE ALWAYS PROTECTS.

The phrase "bears all things" comes from a Greek word meaning to cover something. It is related to the word for roof—a covering that offers protection from the hostile elements. 1 Peter 4:8 says that love covers a multitude of sins. That is precisely the meaning here. Love protects other people. It doesn't broadcast bad news. It goes the second mile to protect another person's reputation.

There are two very relevant applications: First, love doesn't nit-pick. It doesn't point out every flaw of the ones you love. Second, love doesn't criticize in public. This is perhaps Paul's primary meaning. Love doesn't do its dirty laundry for the entire world to see. That's why I cringe whenever I hear a husband humiliating his wife in public or a wife making snide remarks about her husband. I always think, if they do that in public, what do they do in private? As a friend of mine once told me, "There are many times in my life when I've been sorry I opened my mouth. But there has never been a time I've been sorry I kept silent." When it comes to needless criticism of other people, that's excellent advice.

3) LOVE ALWAYS TRUSTS.

Love believes all things. Love is always ready to allow for justifying circumstances, to give the other person the benefit of the doubt, to believe the best about people. Many of us have

developed a certain distrust of people because of negative experiences. We have heard stories about how the person who stopped to help a motorist in distress was robbed or even murdered. We have been warned never to loan money to someone without a legal document guaranteeing repayment, even if the other guy is a Christian. But there are worse things than gullibility—namely suspicion and mistrust. Love always trusts. It is also useful to remember that even in a court of law the accused person is always “innocent until proven guilty.” Love says, “I am willing to wait for the evidence to come in before making my decision. I choose to give you the benefit of the doubt as long as there is reason to do so.” Some of us treat our loved ones in nearly the opposite way: “You are guilty until you prove you are innocent.”

I do not tire of repeating that people tend to become what we believe them to be. They either live up to or down to your expectations. If you treat a man as trustworthy, he will strive to prove himself worthy of your trust. If you tell a child, “Take a big swing. You can hit that ball,” he’ll go to the plate and swing like Kohli. If you treat your wife as if she is the most beautiful woman in the world, she will be transformed before your very eyes. That’s what Jesus did. To vacillating Simon, He said, “You are a rock.” To a prostitute, He said, “Your sins are forgiven.” To a woman caught in adultery, He said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” It is the simple power of believing the best and not the worst about people.

4) LOVE ALWAYS HOPES.

The third phrase in 13:7 tells us that love “hopes all things.” This is simply a step beyond believing. The meaning is something like this: There are times in life when you face situations so difficult that faith is not possible. You would gladly give the benefit of the doubt but there is none to give. You search for the silver lining but the angry clouds overhead have no silver lining. Love has a positive forward look. Paul is not here advocating an unreasoning optimism, which fails to take account of reality. Nor is he just teaching the power of positive thinking. But he is suggesting that love refuses to take failure as final, either in oneself or in someone else. Love never gives up on people. And the reason the believer can take such an attitude is that God is in the business of taking human failures and producing spiritual giants out of them. And He can do it with you or your child or that impossible kid in your Sunday School class. Of course, “always hoping” doesn’t mean that we sit back and just watch God do His thing. Rather it means that we get actively involved in the process as He moulds the future according to His perfect plan. Love hopes and expects the best. Love never loses faith in other people and gives up on them but remain faithful to them, in spite of their shortcomings.

5) LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES.

Love endures all things. The word “endures” is a military term that means to hold a position at all costs, even unto death, whatever it takes. The battle may be lost but the soldier keeps on fighting to the very end. The word pictures an army surrounded by superior forces, being attacked and slowly overwhelmed on every side. One by one your comrades fall at your side. Through the noise of battle comes one final command: “Stand your ground, men. And if necessary, die well.” So, love holds fast to people it loves. It perseveres. It never gives up on anyone. Love won’t stop loving, even in the face of rejection. Love takes action to shake up an intolerable situation. Love looks beyond the present to the hope of what might be in the future.

No one can have a totally happy conscience after reading through these fifteen expressions of love.

We are the opposite of 13:4-7 on every point. However, this love list defines God's gift of Himself in Jesus Christ. If you go back through these verses and everywhere you find the word "love" substitute the word "Christ," all these statements will still be true. The kind of love being described is love that has its source in God, and as we look at each of the phrases it becomes obvious that we're defining a lifestyle that really is beyond our human reach. It is absolutely impossible unless we abide in Christ and ask Him to live His supernatural love in and through us. If you have never believed in Jesus Christ as your Saviour, will you do so today? Not only will He give you the gift of His eternal love, but He will allow you to love the way God intended.

[Love is greater than any spiritual gift and love is expressed by supernatural responses. Now we will see that...]

B. THE VALIDITY OF HOLY LOVE (13:8-13).

Love is an eternal gift. In these final six verses, Paul will discuss the temporary nature of the spiritual gifts and the eternal nature of love. In 13:8, Paul talks about the temporary nature of gifts when he writes, "Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away." When Paul says, "Love never fails," he means love never ends. The synonym for this expression is "love abides" in 13:13. These phrases serve to bookend this final section where Paul argues that the spiritual gifts will be done away with one day.

The reason that spiritual gifts like prophecy and tongues will come to an end is revealed in 13:9-10. Paul writes, "For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away." Paul explains that we are limited in our understanding, but this will not always be the case. A time of perfection is coming! The "perfect" refers to the returning of Christ. When we recall that 1:7 pointed out the ongoing role of the gifts until the return of Christ, there can be only one possible interpretation of "perfection"—it is the life in the world to come, after Jesus reappears on earth.

Paul explains himself further in 13:11-12: "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known." Paul explains that our understanding of God is indirect in this life. He uses two analogies: **childhood and a mirror**. In using the analogy of childhood, Paul is not suggesting that those who speak in tongues are childish and immature. Rather, he is adopting an eternal perspective and simply saying that there will come a time when the gifts of the Spirit will no longer be necessary.

The analogy of the mirror implies that our visibility of Christ is indirect. In other words, Paul is comparing the nature of looking in a mirror to the relationship we will enjoy with Jesus when we see Him "face to face." I enjoy looking at pictures of people, but if I had my choice I would prefer to spend time with the people that I am looking at in photo albums.

Paul concludes this chapter in 13:13 with these words: "But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love." For all eternity, we will enjoy these three attributes. We will experience God's incredible love, we will experience a deep love for God, and we will love one another with a perfect love. We will also continue to have "faith" in the Lord for all eternity. But what about "hope?" What could possibly be the meaning of hope when we are in an

eternity that has no pain or tears or sorrow? Will we hope for better days? Obviously not! There is one nuance behind “hope” that is applicable here, namely, a meaning of hope that is synonymous with “trust.” In eternity, we will continue to trust in God’s goodness in our lives and in His provisions for us. Hope in this sense “abides” or “remains,” as do faith and love. But the greatest of these is love, for love covers not only what we experience in our relations to others and to God, but what we experience from God Himself.

Today, how will you grow in your love for others? First, I would suggest that you cannot become the loving person you desire to be apart from a loving and vibrant relationship with God. This love relationship must be cultivated first and foremost. Second, you must love those nearest to you. This means that if you are married, you focus on your spouse. If you have children, you prioritize your children. If you are serving in a ministry, you love those children, teens, or adults. You strive to love your neighbours and co-workers. Once you have accomplished this, you will be able to better love the world around you. God has called us to love people. Jesus said that all people will know we are His disciples by the love that we have for one another (John 13:34,35).