

# A Bible Study about Love

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Scientists tell us that the two groups of the most basic building blocks of the universe are quarks and leptons. But the Bible tells us of something even more basic. In this study, we are going to learn about one of the most important and powerful things in the universe. It is love.

## What Is Love?

All of us may think we know what love is until we are asked to define it. What is love? Certainly there are forms of love that come naturally to people. Children often think of love as affection—hugs and kisses. Many people think of love as the romantic attachment or even the physical attraction between a man and a woman. This has been popularized by many writers, such as William Shakespeare, who said, "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" (*As You Like It* - act 3, scene 5) and, "Love is blind" (*The Merchant of Venice* - act 2, scene 6). Perhaps he was closer to the mark when he wrote,

...Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O no! it is an ever-fixed mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken....

"Sonnet 116"

Others will point out a mother's unflagging care for her children as an example of one of the purest forms of natural love. In fact, a mother's love can help us understand and sort love out from affection and romance. A mother loves her children even when they misbehave. She loves them

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when they are miserably sick, look pallid, and are unable to return affection. It shows us that love is an unselfish choice to be dedicated to someone else's good, no matter what the other person is like.

The Bible also speaks of love that does not come naturally, but as the supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love...." (Galatians 5:22). Love is found throughout the Bible. But no chapter of the Bible gets down to the nuts and bolts of what love is more than 1 Corinthians 13. Because of this, this chapter is called the "love chapter." Read 1 Corinthians 13:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become as sounding brass or a clashing cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I give away all my possessions to feed the poor, and though I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. Love is patient, love is kind; love does not envy; love does not boast, is not puffed up; does not behave disgracefully, does not seek its own, is not provoked to anger, thinks no evil; does not rejoice over unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they shall pass away; whether there are tongues, they shall cease; whether there is knowledge, it shall pass away. Now we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is partial shall pass away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, I reasoned as a child; but when I became a man, I put away the things of the child. For now we see through a mirror by reflection, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

*English Majority Text Version* used throughout unless otherwise noted

The first three verses tell us that it does not matter how great we are in other areas of life, it means nothing if we do not have love. Love is most important. The Bible tells us that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16) and that "God

so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). We then ought to be thinking about what love is and how to express it.

When we are born into this world, we are naturally selfish. And, since everyone in the world around us has been born naturally selfish, we are continually trained in selfishness just by living in the world. So, we develop a habit of selfishness. Even after we are born again as Christians, we do not necessarily know exactly what love is or how to show it. And we still have our habit of selfishness. We may now have a desire to love others, but, just like anything else, we need to be educated. God realizes this, and so, beginning in 1 Corinthians 13:4, God begins to tell us what love is. These verses are a lesson in love. As with all lessons, they need to be studied and practiced.

Doing these things does not make us Christians. God makes us Christians by giving us belief in his Son, Jesus Christ, as our Savior. Galatians 3:26 says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." If we believe, we can know that we are God's sons. Nevertheless, Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Notice that Jesus says "one another." Yes, there is a way that we are to love all others, even our enemies (Matthew 5:44). But the love Jesus is specifically talking about in John 13:34-35 is love for our brethren, fellow believers. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13, is also writing specifically about love for our brethren. How do we know? The context of the chapters surrounding 1 Corinthians 13 is Paul teaching us how to behave and fulfill our roles as members of the Body of Christ. In discussing spiritual gifts in chapter 12, Paul leads directly into chapter 13 by saying, "But strive for the better gifts. And yet I make known a more excellent way" (verse 31). The love he speaks of in chapter 13, then, is the more excellent way. This is the best way to serve in the Body of Christ.

Our love for our brethren is an identifying sign to others that we are Christians. Also notice that Jesus commands us to love. It is one of the commands of the New Covenant. We read this again in 1 John 3:23-24: "And this is His commandment: that we should believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and should love one another, just as He gave commandment. And the one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.

And by this we know that He abides in us, from the Spirit whom He gave us." His commandments are to believe and to love. So, it is very important not only that we learn the Gospel, so we can believe it, but that we also learn love and practice it.

All of our lives, we have been practicing what comes naturally, which is selfishness. By doing this, we have formed bad habits. Many of them are no doubt deep-rooted. But now is the time for us to begin practicing the habits of love. These will probably not seem natural to us. They go against the habits we have already formed. But this is good, because the more we purposely practice the habits of love, the more we will block, stifle, and eventually kill the habits of selfishness.

### *Agapē*

The word Paul uses for love in 1 Corinthians 13 is *agapē*. Preachers commonly make the claim that *agapē* means "God's love," or "godly love," or "God's kind of love." This sounds convenient. All we would have to do is find *agapē*, and we would know the writer is talking about God's kind of love. Unfortunately, examining just a few Scriptures using *agapē* and its verb form, *agapaō*, is enough to prove that this is just a trendy, pulpit myth.

In Luke 11:43, Jesus tells the Pharisees: "Woe to you Pharisees! Because you love [*agapaō*] the first seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces." Obviously, God's love would not cause the Pharisees to want something that prompts Jesus to say, "Woe to you." The love here is expressing selfish motives.

John 3:19 says, "And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved [*agapaō*] the darkness more than the light, because their works were evil." Could men love darkness with the love of God? No.

John 12:43 tells us that people were concerned for what the Pharisees might think because "they loved [*agapaō*] the praise of men more than the praise of God." Could the love of God motivate men to sinfully value the praise of men over the praise of God? To think so would be blasphemy.

Paul, in 2 Timothy 4:10, says, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved [agapaō] this present world." The love of God would not have led Demas to love this present world.

In 2 Peter 2:15, Peter tells us of "Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved [agapaō] the wages of unrighteousness." Again, Balaam was surely not inspired by the love of God to love the wages of unrighteousness.

What, then, does *agapē* mean? At its base, it simply means something that one has a liking and deep desire for. It is very similar to "love" in English. We use the same word to say, "I love God," "I love my wife [or husband]," "I love my children," "I love chocolate," "I love roller coasters," "Oh, I love that movie!" It's the same word, but context tells us that it may not mean exactly the same thing in all of these cases. Hopefully, our love for God is deeper and involves more than our love for chocolate.

Similarly, context tells us what the writer means by *agapē*, whether he means it to be a synonym for *philia* (the New Testament's other common word for love) or to mean something different, whether it is a godly love or an ungodly love. First Corinthians 13 is, itself, a definition of what Paul in that chapter means by *agapē*. He may mean something else by it elsewhere, but the following is what he means by love in 1 Corinthians 13. This is the love we should strive for.

#### **Love in 1 Corinthians 13:4**

*"Love is patient, love is kind; love does not envy; love does not boast,  
is not puffed up..."*

The first definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4 is, "Love is patient." The Greek word translated "patient" is *makrothumei*. It means "long-passioned." What is meant by this is to not lose heart, to patiently endure through suffering or persecution or offense, and to not get angry or seek vengeance.

The next word Paul uses to describe love is "kind." The Greek word is *chrēsteuetai*. This word is based on the Greek word for hand and refers to something, such as a tool, that fits the hand easily. Jesus used a similar word when He said, "My yoke is easy" in Matthew 11:30. He meant that His yoke was not a burden, and it did not cause a problem when used. Thus, what Paul means in 1 Corinthians 13:4 is that the person who loves serves

without being a problem. He fits easily into serving. "Useful" might be a good English translation.

Next, Paul says, "love does not envy." The Greek word *zēloi* means to be hot or boil. It is sometimes used in a good way for a good zeal or desire. But here, Paul means that someone who loves does not burn with envy over the blessings or possessions of someone else. When someone is blessed, we should rejoice with him or her, not be jealous. In Romans 12:15, Paul tells us to, "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep"; and in 1 Corinthians 12:26, he says, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." This is love.

Paul then says, "love does not boast, is not puffed up." These two ideas are tied together. The word "boast" is from *perpereuetai*, which means boast or brag. "Puffed up" comes from *phusioutai*. It means to inflate. In other words, someone who loves does not puff himself up by boasting. If someone tells you he knows more about something or has better things than you, or can do something better than you, does this make you feel good? No. When people say things like this, they are only thinking of how good it makes them feel, and not of how badly it makes you feel (unless, of course, they have a goal of making you feel bad). It is not love. Someone who loves will not exalt himself. He will ask you about yourself and take an interest in what you have done. You can then show love in return and ask him about himself and take an interest in what he has done.

In Part Two, we'll finish our study of 1 Corinthians 13 by continuing to look at Paul's detailed definition of love and seeing that Paul links love to maturity, seeing clearly, and knowing fully.