

## WHAT IS LOVE?

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Pontius Pilate may have famously asked Jesus, “what is truth?” but the one hit wonder artist Haddaway also famously asked, “what is love?” And, hoping I’m not infringing on any copyrights, today’s sermon is likewise titled “What is Love?”

Today we have gathered in the Lord’s house to commemorate two things. First of all, the institution of Holy Communion. We celebrate the Last Supper where Jesus took the bread and said, “this is my body,” and then He took the wine and said, “this is my blood.” But also to celebrate His “new command” that He gave to His disciples. I quote Jesus, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” This command is actually where we get the name for this Holy Day. In the Latin, the word for “commandment” is *mandatum*. And this Latin passed down into English from our French speaking conquerors back in 1066, eventually leaving us with Maundy Thursday. The two things which we recall today are linked quite closely, but more on that later.

Let’s dive right into what Jesus said. What does He want them, and by extension, us, to do? “Love one another.” How, or in what way? “Just as I have loved you.” Why, or to what effect? “By this all people will know you are my disciples.” It seems so simple. We are commanded to love one another just as Jesus loved us and by doing so show that we are Christ’s disciples. And that’s all well and good, but, what exactly does Jesus mean by love? Just as Haddaway asked, I too want to ask, “what is love” but with the stipulation, “what is love as Jesus meant it?” The Bible is full of passages and verses about love. In fact, the NIV translation has the word love appearing in one form or another over 500 times. Although, the Bible isn’t the only place where we find ideas on the word love. Popular culture has a lot to say about love. I could not even begin to put a number to the amount of love songs, romantic films, and other types of media which have something to say about love. It’s simply innumerable. I am sad to say that these

two sources often disagree about what, exactly, love is.

Love, as it depicted or thought of in our modern world, is a strange thing. It is nebulous and confusing. Some view love simply as “being nice” to whomever at all times. That idea is taken to extremes when some think that even reprimanding someone is outside the scope of love, and that if you really “loved” someone you would accept them for who they are. To others, love is actually conflated with feelings of lust or desire. We see this everywhere in the media nowadays. When someone says they “love” someone, what they’re actually saying is “I am attracted to them and want to sleep with them.” Or when the hero “gets” the girl, it ends in carnality rather than, say, marriage. There are, of course, both a far cry from the Biblical idea of love. The Bible is clear on the topic. There are two passages I want to bring to mind and consider to explain what Jesus meant. But before that, I want to make something clear. Biblical love, as Jesus meant it, is an action, it is a verb that you do. It isn’t a passive feeling. Butterflies in the tummy alone does not love make. If we were to entrust love to how we felt, it would subject to the wild ride that is our daily passions. That is, just as the Beach Boys once sang forlornly, it “is here today, and it’s gone tomorrow.”

First of the two passages, and the one that will be the bulk of my expositing is Paul’s writing in [1 Corinthians 13:4-7](#) “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” A beautiful and succinct passage that grounds Jesus’ command.

The first attribute of love that Paul notes is that love is “patient.” When we love someone, we are to be patient with them in all things. God described Himself as “slow to anger” and so must we be. If you find yourself snapping at your friends, family, and loved ones, take a step back and ask yourself “why?” Ask yourself if that’s how Jesus would respond to them. Take some breaths, recompose yourself, ask them for forgiveness, and slowly teach yourself to breathe and think before you unbridle your tongue. It’s not easy to unlearn knee-jerk reactions, and I know there are sometimes

extenuating circumstances like sleep deprivation or caffeine withdrawal, or even simply having a cold or the flu, but the true mark of a mature Christian isn't showing virtue during the easy days, but rather during the hard days.

Paul couples this patience with a requirement to be kind. And he is right to do so. Patience and kindness go hand in hand, though there is more to kindness. In kindness, there is this idea of hospitality. You help the individual out with their needs. When they ask for a cup of water though you just got back from the fridge, you go back and get it for them. Not only menial tasks like that, but your whole attitude towards them. You give them the benefit of the doubt, you speak well of them, and in all things you "build them up" as Paul noted love does several chapters previous. We see this humble kindness in Jesus' act of washing of the disciple's feet. The Zondervan Background Commentary notes that washing of feet was common for guests before events, but in Jewish tradition it was "too demeaning" for a Jewish individual to do, so it was to be done by non-Jewish slaves only.

Then he states that love doesn't boast or envy. It goes along with being kind. It is certainly unkind of you to boast or brag to your loved ones about something they don't have, and equally unkind to envy them for something they have which you don't. We are called to be content with the things we have. If you have something your loved one doesn't, offer it and share it as God has shared with you. And if your loved one doesn't do the same, be patient with them with regards to that matter.

Continuing on what love isn't, Paul says it is not arrogant or rude. He uses words similar and adjacent to the previous descriptors to really emphasize his point here. He really means what he is trying to make clear here.

Next he makes an interesting statement that love does not insist on its own way as the ESV puts it, but the NIV has a more straightforward rendering, "it is not self-seeking." This quality of love is key. With Biblical love, you seek the benefit of others, not yourself. You have a servant's heart towards the beloved. This point will be reiterated and magnified by the second passage that I will quote.

“Love is not irritable or resentful,” he says next. As mentioned previously, the first is much like being patient and kind. As for resentful, when you love someone, you no longer keep score of slights and offences. Just as God no longer remembers our former sins - He blots them out with the blood of Christ Jesus, so too must we not bring to mind the sins of those we love. Though, one thing of note, forgiveness does not automatically imply things will be the same. C.S Lewis once said, “Forgiveness means if someone lied to me, I must forgive the man, but it doesn’t mean I have to believe what he tells me next.” Sometimes actions, and sins, have consequences. If you broke someone’s trust, they don’t have to restore it just because they forgave you. But being forgiven means they can’t lord your sin over you. And sometimes that’s really hard. Humans, by our fallen nature, love to recall every single thing wrong that someone has ever done to us. Sometimes, without thinking, we can find ourselves keeping score. It’s important to remember that Biblical love precludes that and that if God Himself has promised to never again remember their sins, who are you to?

“It does not rejoice at wrongdoing.” When you love someone, you should never take joy in your sins against them or the sins of the other person. Sin is ugly. Sin is abhorrent. One of our biggest issues as fallen humans is the poor and improper perception of the weight of sin. One sin alone is worthy of eternal damnation, and yet so few of us can feel like that’s a proper wage. But yet Paul says it clearly in [Romans 6:23](#), “The wages of sin is death.” Why would you wrought such evil against someone whom you love, and on the other side, why would you sit idle as your beloved sinned and worked towards death? It is imperative that you admonish the one you love when they need it. I want to make this clear: it is not love to sit by while you know the person you say you love is living in habitual sin. I’m not saying you have to beat them up every time they slip up, but if there’s an on-going and unresolved daily sin issue, to love them means to help them understand the severity of their actions. Did Jesus keep His quiet when He saw sin? Of course not, He was the most outspoken about it. “Go, and sin no more,” He told the woman caught in adultery.

And so, if we rebuke in love when they sin, we must also rejoice when they continue

walking in the truth and abstaining from sins. It is part of love to support the other person in their attempts at holy living. Do not be a stumbling block for them, but rather at every junction help them and encourage them. Even if it's only small steps, day by day, still be there for them and share in their joy of sanctification.

Lastly, Paul says that love “bears all things, believes all things, hope all things, endures all things.” To bear all things means that loving someone is an action of mutual support. Imagine bricks in an archway. If you take away one and the others fall, whatever your loved one is going through, you too go through it with them. To believe all things means that you trust them and take them at their word. It means you defend them against slander and liable. To hope all things means that you look towards the future with them and for them. It means you help work towards the good for them too. And, lastly, “love endures all things.” This is one of the most powerful attributes of love. It is an idea that is included prominently in marriage vows, “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. . .till death us do part.” To endure all things means that you're not just a fair weather friend or companion. No matter what happens, you still love that person.

The second passage is much, much shorter and found only a few chapters further in our reading. [John 15:13](#) Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

This statement reveals that love is ultimately self-sacrificial. When we choose to love someone, we are choosing to lay down a part of ourselves to live for the other person rather than ourselves. Often times it isn't anything nearly as extreme as taking a bullet for someone or diving in front of a car for them, but the principle still stands.

So where does this leave us? What did Jesus mean? What *is* love?

Love is action where daily you choose to trust and support someone, to be kind to and gracious, to chastise when needed and to encourage likewise. Love is a daily action where you choose how to act towards someone, not a fleeting feeling. Love is where

you are willing to lay down your life if called to, but also regularly sacrifice when needed in support of the beloved. Love is a lifelong commitment that you institute day by day. And Jesus has called us to love another like this, every one of us. He has asked that the body of the Church be known as those who love one another. And what a beautiful sight it would be if we never erred in loving each other. When you prepare yourself before taking Holy Communion today, consider where you have failed to love those in your life. Resolve to change that and to follow His new command.

And, as we take Communion this evening, so too consider Jesus' love for us. I said both the Lord's Supper and the New Commandment were linked, and this is how. When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we recall the Lord's death until He comes. We are struck by His completely self-sacrificial and perfect love. We eat His body which was broken for us, we drink His blood which was spilt for us. We remember the Covenant of Forgiveness, of Reconciliation, the Covenant of Grace. Through Communion we should see in it reflected the love we are called to have for each other. And by the power of this refreshing gift of life, may we be ever more able and willing to love one another as you, O Lord, have loved us.

Let us pray for help in loving one another, and for those whom we love.