

# LOVE NEVER FAILS

*SERIES: THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE*



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1 Corinthians 13:4-8a  
3rd Message  
Steve Zeisler  
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In the last message (Discovery Paper 070211) we looked at 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, which repeats a serious warning about religious enterprise that lacks love, about empty noise, failed accomplishment, and a life amounting to nothing. In these passages Paul writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels ... and can fathom all mysteries ... If I give all I possess to the poor ... but have not love, I gain nothing.” Nothing useful has been accomplished. I amount to nothing.

But having raised the question of lovelessness, we see the awful indictment everywhere we look, don't we? All around us people long to be loved and aren't given love; they long to demonstrate love but can't. The history of the human race is replete with exercises that, looking back on them, have been a fruitless search for love, full of sad stories of falsehood, loneliness, and antagonism. The absence of love is the repeated sorrow of the human race.

In this message we turn to what is effectively a tutorial on love. What is the content of real love? What should we aim for if we choose it? Where will we find love that is life-giving, love that comes from God, love that transforms our feelings, strengthens our weakness, forgives the past, and opens doors to the future? This is not about cheering for love as a theory, but asking for insight with a willingness to be changed by what we read.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8a:

**<sup>4</sup>Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, <sup>5</sup>does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, <sup>6</sup>does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; <sup>7</sup>bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup>Love never fails....**

Phrase is piled on phrase in this description, and it's easy to get lost. I'll suggest a way for us to walk through these phrases, but first let me make some observations about the whole.

## Being like Jesus

As I've mentioned before, this passage uses one of the signature words of the New Testament, *agape*. *Agape* love is God's love, love that spends itself for another. Although it's not obvious when we look at the text in English, love is described in each of these phrases by a verb. These are all present-tense verbs in the Greek, which indicates that the action is ongoing.

These are challenges. Sometimes we hear sentiments like “Love is a rainbow on a morning in spring,” or “Love is the smiling face of a happy child.” There's nothing wrong with such sentiments, but they don't belong in the New Testament. Love, as we are being taught of it here, is something to understand and believe in, and it's something that will require us to make choices that will change us.

There is an historical tradition that suggests that what Paul is doing in these verses is describing Jesus. Wanting to make the case for what love is like, the apostle actually thinks of the Lord, His life, His words, His actions; and with that model in mind, he writes these sentences. It has been observed that we can put Jesus' name in place of the word “love” at every point, and it makes perfect sense. “Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind and is not jealous; Jesus does not brag and is not arrogant....” Jesus teaches us to choose love in a world like ours, full of stress and difficulty. Love is how He acted and thought, how He treated people, what motivated Him, and how He dealt with unexpected things when they came His way.

Additionally, we are told in Hebrews 4:15-16 that our Lord is a high priest for our benefit, that He was tempted in every way we are tempted, yet was without sin, so that He is able to come to our aid when we struggle in life. He is not only a model of love for us to observe, but He is also a help for us who long to give and receive love.

We want love to prevail in our experience, and we have the model of Jesus before us and the help of Jesus within us. That is how I suggest we approach this text—each of us asking the Lord to walk with us through this language. We'll consider each phrase, and some of them will seem more important in your own experience, but I suggest you ask the Lord to sit beside you in this examination, and ask Him for help. Ask Him, “Is this true of me, Lord?” Ask Him how your life might change.

You probably know someone who wears a WWJD bracelet. “What Would Jesus Do?” is a perfectly good question (although I think probably the phenomenon has gotten a little overdone). But it’s only the first question. The next and perhaps more important, question is this: “Jesus, will you help me see my world as You see it, and act as You would act? Will you make me the kind of person who would do what You do?”

An outline of these verses will help us. There are two statements to begin: Love is patient, and love is kind. I believe these are a summary of, and an introduction to, the whole. Most of what follows flows from what it means that love is patient and love is kind.

Then there is a series of eight negative statements. Love does not merely add positive emotions to an existing circumstance. Hard hearts must be softened, habitual selfishness acknowledged and rejected. Pretense must be done away. Surgery is required to make way for robust health.

Finally there are four short, forceful descriptions. Their effect is almost like trumpet blasts. Love in all things, at all times, is this way: It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. These are a positive insistence of love’s ongoing strength.

Now let’s go back and look at the introductory two words: “Love is patient, love is kind.”

### **Patience and kindness**

Both of these words are probably weaker in English than they ought to be. In the King James Bible, the statement “Love is patient” is translated “Love suffereth long.” That’s archaic language, but it captures an important idea. Longsuffering means that you will accept difficult things without flinching. Love doesn’t back down from what’s hard, or give up easily. Love suffers a long time.

There are people in your life who make demands on you that you’re tired of. They are unaware of how hard they are to be around, of how much they absorb of everybody else’s goodwill, or of how much it costs people to care for them. Some are unreliable. They make promises they don’t keep. Some are stubborn. Some are insensitive. But love suffers a long time. Love doesn’t flinch at the hard assignments.

Perhaps the hardest of all is suffering long with people who are self-destructive. You realize someone you love is both the victim of bad behavior and the perpetrator of bad behavior. You are assigned to care about them, but they’re destroying themselves. And it’s your call to suffer

along with them.

We’ve invited Jesus into our discovery of these things. “Lord, how can I suffer long? What should I do? How can I be who I ought to be in this circumstance?” We’re ready to yell at the top of our lungs, “I’ve had it; this has gone on long enough! I will not take it anymore! I’m done with this, Lord!” But why today? Love suffers long. Maybe long means until tomorrow, or maybe long means another week or another month. We ask the Lord for His word on our circumstance, because we aren’t capable of making that decision well. He needs to make the decision for us. “Lord, help me be patient in the circumstance where I’m called to love, and I am impatient and fed up.”

Love is also kind. Kindness is the partner of patience. Where longsuffering is willing to unflinchingly accept difficult circumstances, kindness extends itself positively toward a problem and tries to make a difference. It looks for a way of being a blessing. It alleviates another’s suffering, contributes to happiness, and soothes harsh conditions. Love notices the tears in another person’s eyes.

For many of us the enemy of kindness is routine. We tend to greet the same people at the same time, have the same sort of shallow conversations over and over again. But what we need from the Lord, if we’ll ask Him to walk through this with us and change us and teach us, is the insight that some days a routine conversation is not enough. The routine conversations were fine up to this point, but now it’s time for us to spend ourselves. We need the eyes of Jesus to see things that we would otherwise miss, to be able to react with His heart.

Now we come to the series of negative statements.

### **Competition, self-absorption, and brokenness**

The first pair might come under the heading, “Competition: Love is not jealous and does not brag.” There will always be people above us on the ladder, people who have advantages we don’t have. They get invited to places we don’t get invited to. They are comfortable in a circle of acquaintances that we want to join. We are very aware of these measurements. We are jealous of those who are measured at a higher level than we are, and we look down on those who are below us.

Paul is saying that love doesn’t do either of those things. It opts out of the competition. It doesn’t even acknowledge superiority and inferiority. And so we say to Jesus, “Lord, You know how very aware I am of everybody else around me, and how finely attuned I am to measuring such things.

Lord, help me.”

The next gathering of phrases could come under the heading, “Self-Absorption: Love is not arrogant, love does not act unbecomingly, and love does not seek its own.” The self-absorbed life is the opposite of the competitive life in some ways. It’s a life that never notices anybody else. “Arrogant” is translated “puffed up” in the King James Bible. We become so filled with ourselves that other people don’t even come into view anymore. We don’t have to acknowledge them, we don’t have to pay attention to them, and we’re our own universe.

Acting unbecomingly is being rude and contemptuous. It often fails to even acknowledge they are there, to take into account what it means to be them, because we’re too important. The Corinthian church, and other churches in the first century, often celebrated the Lord’s Table at what they called a love feast. The whole church would gather for a potluck supper, and they would sing and worship, pray, and enjoy one another’s fellowship. At the end of the evening they would partake in a ritual meal remembering the Lord’s sacrifice. But Paul had to write to these Corinthians about rudeness: “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk. Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (1 Corinthians 11:20-22a). The rudeness that love would always avoid was on grand display among them, and it is too much on display among us. Sometimes we don’t even notice whether people have enough. We’re elbowing the small folks out of the way. We’re too absorbed with who we are.

Love does not seek its own. There are many, again, who find it easy to be forever in pursuit of self-reformation. They are always finding some new guru, some new class, or some new self-help book to improve their life, make themselves better. They’re self-referenced at every point. It’s always some new thing I’m doing for me. But the apostle says love does not seek its own. It does not spend itself on itself.

So we need to say to Jesus, “Lord, help me not to be self-absorbed.”

Finally, there are three phrases under the heading: “Cycles of Brokenness: Love is not provoked; it does not take into account a wrong suffered, and does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth.” Think of relationships in which there is always an offense being given and an offense being taken, which leads to another

offense being given and another offense taken. I’m provoked, you’re defensive. The more defensive you are, the more provoked I am. The more provoked I am, the more defensive you are. Marriages and families are often hotbeds of provocation and reaction.

Love doesn’t act that way. Love doesn’t take into account a wrong suffered. Love doesn’t keep track of how many times wrong has been done. And finally, love isn’t naive—it doesn’t rejoice in unrighteousness. It embraces the truth in forgiveness, in avoiding provocation, in stepping back from hurt feelings, and in refusing to play a part in keeping the cycle going.

We’ve invited Jesus to walk with us in this. “Lord, am I defensive? Do I keep a list of all the wrongs that have been done to me? Help me not to be a person who creates an angry response in other people. I cannot do it myself. You know what it’s like to feel this way, but you also know what it’s like to stand against lovelessness.”

Now we come to these four great trumpet blasts: Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things!

### **Being strong for someone else**

In the first of these statements, the word “bears” is a word for a roof; love roofs over all things. In the last one the word “endures” is a word for a foundation; love undergirds all things. In the middle Paul says love has faith, or believes all things and hopes all things. I think what Paul wants us to do is look at the middle pair. It’s a Hebrew way of thinking to be drawn to the middle part of a list. In this house, with its roof and foundation, those who love will be a source of faith (belief) and hope for those who are weak and lost. When someone can’t believe anymore, they don’t know where God is, and they don’t know how to pray, you can have faith for them. When their hope is gone, you can hope for them. Love gets next to people who don’t know how to access God anymore. It keeps on hoping and keeps on believing, and refuses to let God be abandoned in the awful experience they’re having.

So we turn to the Lord and say, “Lord, how and where should I have faith for one who can’t believe, or hope for one who has lost their hope?”

We’ve invited the Lord to walk with us through this long list of phrases. I hope one or two at some point stood out for you, that the Spirit tapped you on the shoulder and said, “Listen to this.”

The first part of verse 8 is where we'll conclude (and it's also where we'll begin in the next message). It is this simple affirmation: Love never fails. That's an extraordinary statement, isn't it? What does it mean to say love never fails?

Remember what Jesus declared about the judgment day: Some will say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:37-40).

Many of our plans and best efforts will crash or wither. Our measurement of accomplishments will include much failure. But love never fails. Our choices to love at the direction of the Spirit will be received by the One who is love Himself. He will remember it and reward it.

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