

08. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8



1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Paul uses verbs throughout (and not adjectives). In true Semitic style he is telling us what love does and does not do.

⁴Love never stops caring [μακροθυμεω]

Love acts always in a kind way [χρηστευομαι]

Love does not act out of jealousy or envy [ζηλοω] [3:3]

Love does not brag or make a person conceited [4:6, 18-19; 5:2; 8:1]

⁵Love does not behave indecently or insist on its own way

Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs

⁶Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

⁷Love has space enough to hold and bear [στεγω]

everything and everyone [παντα]

Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes.

⁸Love does not come to an end.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love never stops caring [μακροθυμεω]

This is listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The focus is on our sharing in God's magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by opposition or suffering. It is often translated 'slow to anger'. This, however, is a negative way of rendering something which is very positive. 'Long-suffering' is better.

It features as a description of God in the credal statement found in Exodus 34:6 and repeated in Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2. It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring of God that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus 'loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love acts always in a kind way [χρηστευομαι]

Acting in a kind way is also listed by Paul as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever gifts of grace we may or may not have been given by the Spirit, the more excellent way is the way of love which can be recognised by the kindness with which we treat others: 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in the Messiah has forgiven you' (Ephesians 4:32).

Through the gift of love we share in the kindness of God (see Romans 2:4). God is frequently spoken of as 'kind' (χρηστος), particularly in the psalms (for example, Psalm 25:8). It is this same picture of God which is given us by Jesus, notably in his description of the way in which the father welcomed home his wayward son (Luke 15:20). It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34). This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus' breast (John 7:38).

Having described the love of which he is speaking in terms characteristic of the love of God revealed in Jesus, Paul goes on to say what love is not. Again he uses verbs, because he wants to point to what love does not do. His description is relevant to the way the Corinthian community has been behaving.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love does not act out of jealousy or envy (ζηλόω)

ζηλόω can be used positively or negatively, depending on which direction one's zeal takes. Paul has just used it in a positive sense when he encouraged the Corinthians to 'strive for the greater gifts' (12:31).

Here Paul is directing his criticism against those in Corinth who have what they consider important spiritual gifts and who apply their zeal in preventing others from sharing in them (hence 'jealous').

Paul is also critical of those who have their heart set on having these ‘spiritual gifts’ that give a person a certain prominence in the community, and who apply their zeal to acquiring them (hence ‘envious’). Paul has already accused the community of harbouring this vice (see 3:3), which he has listed elsewhere as one of the ‘works of the flesh’ (Galatians 5:20), and so as contrary to the fruits of the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love does not brag (περπερεύομαι)

This verb occurs only here in the New Testament

Paul has often had occasion in this letter to criticise those who are boasting of their gifts.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Love does not make a person conceited (φυσιόω)

Paul has criticised the Corinthians a number of times for being arrogant (4:6; 4:18-19; 5:2; 8:1).

1 Corinthians 13:5

Love does not behave indecently (ἀσχημονέω)

As used in this letter, the connotations of 'decent' are sexual (7:36; 12:23). There is a modesty, a tenderness and a delicacy which is proper to love in its sexual expression (see 6:12-20).

1 Corinthians 13:5

Love does not insist on its own way (ζητέω τὰ ἑαυτῆς)

Love does not seek its own way, nor insist upon it. According to Paul, it is because the Jews sought miracles, wanting proofs of divine power that satisfied their expectations, that they found the cross a scandal (1:22-23). It is because people were concentrating their attention on changing their state of life that they were failing to give unhindered devotion to the Lord (7:27).

We are reminded of Paul's earlier admonition: **'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other'** (10:24).

1 Corinthians 13:5

Love does not give way to irritation (παροξύνω)
or brood over wrongs (λογίζομαι τὸ κακόν)

While neither ‘giving way to irritation’ nor ‘brooding over wrongs’ occurs elsewhere in this letter, it is not difficult to imagine the behaviour of those in whom these feelings were aroused as they saw their freedom to behave as they wished being criticised by others in the community. We can imagine the feelings of irritation and resentment which some experienced at not being able to take people to court (6:1-8), or behave sexually as they wished (6:12-20), or divorce (7:10-16), or eat meat offered to idols (8:1ff), or wear any kind of hair style they wished (11:2-16), or dine well with their friends at the Lord’s supper (11:17ff). Nor is it difficult to imagine similar feelings being aroused in those who were pressured into eating meat against their conscience, or who came to the assembly only to find themselves humiliated.

1 Corinthians 13:6

Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

We think of Paul's statement to the Thessalonians about those who 'have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness' (2 Thessalonians 2:12). The truth, as always in Paul, refers to the ultimate reality of God as revealed in Christ on the cross. True love does not indulge in behaviour that is contrary to God's will (5:8), but only such as radiates the reality of God.

1 Corinthians 13:7

⁷Love has space enough to hold and bear [στέγω]

everything and everyone [παντα]

The Greek verb στέγω derives from the word for ‘roof’, hence the connotation of space and of containing. Love is about having space in one’s heart, space for people, space to hold problems, disappointments and pain, as well as joys, hopes and dreams. Paul is thinking of the heart of God ‘**from whom are all things, and for whom we exist**’ (8:6). He is thinking of the heart of Christ ‘**through whom are all things and through whom we exist**’ (8:6). Their crucified Lord has space in his heart for all the members of the Corinthian community ‘**together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, both their Lord and ours**’ (1:2). He has space in his heart for the whole human race for which he offered his life (1:13; see also 9:2).

Paul continues to speak of the close union of love and faith (Galatians 5:6; 5:22; 1Thessalonians 1:3; 3:6; 5:8; 2Thessalonians 1:3). This is brought out nicely by the English word 'believe'. 'Lieve' is an old form of 'love'. To believe is to choose to place ourselves (to 'be') in 'love', in God's love. To believe is to be open to God's self-revelation, to accept what we come to know when we listen to God, and to act accordingly. 'Acting accordingly' is essential to genuine faith, as the word 'faithful' makes clear.

We recall Jesus' words: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

In the New Testament Jesus is portrayed as having perfect faith. He always acts towards God as Son, in perfect trust and obedience. In doing so he reveals who God is for us and how we are to respond to grace. He is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2).

To believe is to receive with an open heart the love which God is, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the eternal mystery of God's being and which he offers to us by pouring his Spirit into our hearts.

We have faith when, in accordance with who we are as creatures totally dependent on God, we listen to Jesus' word and open our hearts to receive the sharing in his intimate life of love with the Father. It is this love which he offers us. To share his faith we will need to trust him. We will also need to live faithfully the life he offers us, not independently, but as people who are 'born of God' (John 1:13), like branches which draw their life from the vine to which they remain attached (John 15:1ff).

To have faith is to let this divine communion transform us so that our lives, too, become radiant reflections of God's love reaching out to others and inviting them into the same shared communion.

God knows every one and every thing with the knowledge of one who loves. In other words, God continually believes in us and in our possibilities for good. God respects our freedom, even when we misuse it and find ourselves suffering from having locked God out of our lives (see 1Thessalonians 1:10). God persists in drawing us, through the realities of our life, to him and to each other. To this end he offers us the possibility of repentance when we fail, and believes in our capacity to be converted. Believing and loving are inseparable in God, in Jesus, and in us as well.

The word 'hope' occurs in 9:10. It is linked closely with faith and love also in Galatians 5:5-6 and 1Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8. One who loves is attentive to present communion with the one loved. But the present moment is not static or isolated; rather, it points to and opens up a future communion for which we long, and to which we are called. Our present union encourages us to leave the future confidently in the hands of him in whom we have placed our trust.

When Paul speaks of '**eagerly waiting**', and when he speaks of '**hope**', these are related, but not the same. There is a place for eager longing. There is also, and more importantly, a place for hope, where the focus is not on longing for something for which one is expectantly waiting, but on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one's confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

A perfect expression of **hope** is found in Psalm 131:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things too great
and too marvellous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, **hope** in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.

The Corinthians know their own frailty. They know how easily they fall back into sin. They know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. Paul is encouraging them to eagerly await the promised communion, but to trust that God knows their longing. It is, after all, God's gift to them. God is faithful. Let them believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving themselves to his Spirit. If they do this, they will find that the love which they see burning in his heart will set fire to their own, and this is all that matters: 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

This is not without importance in recognising the distinction between faith and hope.

Faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. In Paul, as we have seen, the objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus (1:12,16).

Hope speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can live in the present and entrust the future to God.

Love

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God's self-giving, a 'word' of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God's instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God's love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus' self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God's gift of self, to God's love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. Jesus' gift of love generates within us an imperative, urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners the Messiah died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as the Messiah loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

1 Corinthians 13:7

7Love endures whatever comes

This was a central theme in Paul's Thessalonian correspondence where a major concern was persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:4; 3:5). Endurance is linked with faith, hope and love in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Paul is speaking, for the only time in this letter to the community in Corinth, of the ability to remain faithful to love in the midst of opposition. The supreme example of this is Jesus on the cross.

1 Corinthians 13:8

Love does not come to an end

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