

“Love’s Best Card”
1 Corinthians 13:4
June 9, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

In our summer study of 1 Corinthians 13, the love chapter, we saw last week that love is the inevitable result of faith in Christ. Many things about Christianity can be faked, but no one can truly love apart from divine enabling. On Judgment Day, it is love that will endure. All of us can point to earthly accomplishments for which we are thankful. But on that day, the only thing that will count for anything is love. It will not matter how faithful you have been in church attendance if there was no love in the heart. It will not matter how successful you were in accumulating a nice nest egg for your retirement if your life was not characterized to some degree by love. It will not matter how many career advancements you made if you had no love for those with whom and for whom you worked. Love is what will count on that day. That is the force of Paul’s opening paragraph in this chapter. No matter what we accomplish, even if it excels everyone else in that area, it is nothing without love. In his translation of this passage, Eugene Peterson says it like this: “So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I’m bankrupt without love”

The final paragraph of the chapter makes another point, taking us beyond Judgment Day and into eternity. **“Love never ends”** (v. 8). It is love that will characterize life in heaven. Faith, hope and love endure forever, but love is the greatest of these three. As D. A. Carson said in a quote I mentioned last week, “The greatest evidence that heaven has invaded our sphere, that the Spirit has been poured out upon us, that we are citizens of a kingdom not yet consummated, is Christian love.”

For the rest of the summer, we will be focusing our attention on the middle verses of the chapter. These verses describe this love that will be the theme of heaven. It is the love God possesses, and it is the love we are to possess as his image bearers. It opens with two positive qualities of this love, followed by qualities stated negatively and then ending with five more positive descriptions. We’re going to begin today with these two qualities of patience (or long-suffering) and kindness. These seem to be an odd way to start this description of love. As love confronts evil in the world and in people, it responds in an underwhelming way, simply by putting up with things for a long time and by kindness.

Wendy and I sometimes play a card game called “Spades.” It’s a game played with four people in which the high card takes the trick, unless it’s trumped by a spade. One of the plays in spades is to offer a low bid, which means that you plan to take no tricks at all. If you can pull it off, your team is

awarded one-hundred points. When a player gives a bid of low, it is up to his partner to play her high cards first, in order to cover the low-bidder. You know you're in trouble if the first card played by this partner is a low card. It would seem that love opens with a low card here. As Lewis Smedes wrote, "Love, it would seem, holds a poor hand if longsuffering is one of its best cards." So let's begin by looking at these surprisingly weak cards love plays first.

I. Love Is Long-Suffering

It is sometimes difficult to translate one Greek word with only one English word. That is the case here with the word that our Pew Bibles translate as "patient." It is the Greek word *makrothumeo*, which appears here as a verb instead of an adjective. "Patient" is a good translation. A patient person is willing to wait for something for a long time. They don't get agitated and anxious for the object of their waiting to come, but wait for however long it takes. But there are two different kinds of waiting. Imagine a young man and woman waiting at a bus stop. It's at the end of a day that has been marked by beautiful weather, a day they have spent together early in their courtship. They are still enjoying one another's company, and they are not anxious for the day to end. They are waiting, but the waiting is a welcome thing, not a difficult thing. Then imagine another scenario. Someone else is waiting at a bus stop. It's freezing cold outside and he's hungry. It's been a long day and all he wants to do is get home, get something to eat and go to bed. This kind of waiting is far more difficult.

The kind of waiting this word has in view is the second kind, waiting that is accompanied by suffering. That's why some translations opt for a different word, the word "long-suffering." This is the waiting of a parent for a beloved child who has wandered from faith in Christ. The parent is patient, waiting on God and his timing, when the whole time there is pain in the heart of the parent during the waiting. It is the waiting that is typical of almost all marriages. There is no husband or wife who is everything he or she should be, with the result that the spouse must suffer from that lack. I asked Wendy the other day what she would change about me if she could change anything at all. Her reply was that she wanted me to be less defensive. My defensiveness brings pain to my wife. She loves me, so she is patient with me about this.

This love marked by patience and long-suffering has a depth to it that contrasts with the shallow kind of love known by many. A young man named Tommy had a picture of his girlfriend, Diane, in his room. On the back of the photograph was written this message: "My dearest Tommy, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I'm yours for all eternity." She signed it, "Love, Diane," but then added the following postscript: "If we should ever break up, I want this picture back."

We can better understand this quality of love by considering the alternative to patient, long-suffering love. I think there are two alternatives: control and withdrawal. The attempt to control another person is a failure to love. It says, in effect, "I need you to be a certain way, and I will not rest until I bring about that change in you." So a husband's anger at his wife's occasional financial irresponsibility is an effort to control her and a failure to love her. A wife's attempt to manipulate her husband to get him to do what he should do, either through her words or her actions, is an attempt to control him and a failure to love him. Controlling people destroy relationships. They can be destroyed quickly, for example, when a husband's anger rises to the level of abuse. Or they can be destroyed slowly, such as when a parent becomes too controlling of a child, leading the child eventually, as a matter of survival, to stop including that parent in his or her life in any significant way.

Withdrawal is a second way we fail to show patient, long-suffering love. It is rooted in self-protection. Instead of a willingness to suffer long for the sake of another, it says, "I choose not to allow you to bring pain into my life any longer; so I am withdrawing myself from you." This withdrawal can happen physically, through simply choosing not to see another person ever again. Or it can happen emotionally, which sometimes happens in a marriage when a spouse just gives up but doesn't seek a divorce. The spouse stays in the relationship physically and legally, but leaves it emotionally.

To be long-suffering requires trust in God. We want to know how long we are to keep suffering as we wait on a person to change. We have given up trying to bring about that change ourselves and we have determined not to withdraw and remove this person from our lives. So we simply stay in the pain until God releases us from it, and we don't know when that will be. There is a freedom in this giving it up to God because we have put it in God's hands.

How can we learn to trust God like this? We do so by seeing this as the way he loves us, seen in the perfect love of Jesus. Jesus came to fight the evil in the world. He could easily have kept himself aloof from it and stayed in heaven. Or he could have come to confront it head on through judgment. He did neither. He came to fight it by becoming its victim. He conquered evil not through a show of power but through a show of weakness. God continues to show such patience today. Peter wrote of that in 2 Peter 3:9. Peter has been talking about the seeming delay in Jesus' return. Why doesn't God send Jesus immediately to put things right in the world and bring in his kingdom of peace and righteousness? Why is he taking so long? **"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."** God is long-suffering. His delay does not come without a cost to him. Just as Jesus wept over unrepentant Jerusalem, so God grieves over his fallen world. But he is staying in that pain, and Peter tells us why. He is giving space for repentance.

It is when we realize that we are the beneficiaries of God's patient love that we then begin to be able to extend that same long-suffering toward others.

To see God as the ultimate patient lover also helps us answer an important question. Are there limits to our long-suffering patience? Is there an appropriate time to draw the line and refuse to allow another person to keep hurting us? For example, what about the woman married to an alcoholic, abusive husband? There is a time to draw the line and say, "Enough." We know that because God does that, and he loves perfectly. In Romans 1, God says, "Enough," and turns people over to their sin. They didn't want God in their lives, and God said "Okay" and left them to themselves. His patience does come to an end. In the same way, there are times when God releases us from this obligation of love. There are no clear rules that tell us when we can do so. Wisdom is required to know when to draw that line, and I think that is why we should seek the counsel of others in this.

II. Love Is Kind

This second feature of love keeps us from being too passive in our view of love. It is not merely bearing up with patience and long-suffering, but actually does something. What it does is summarized by the word "kind." This is a word that includes an idea of action. One lexicon defines the Greek word used here as "to provide something beneficial for someone as an act of kindness." The German philosopher Nietzsche hated Christianity because of its emphasis on kindness. He believed that love weakened the strong by causing them to spend their time on lepers and the disabled. He wanted to rid the world of faith in Christ because he thought that was the way the world might produce the supermen that were needed. He wanted the strong to get stronger and the weak to die out.

There is a sense in which I can understand Nietzsche's point. Like all normal people, he wanted to make things better, and kindness just seems too inadequate a response to the problems facing this world. To respond to these problems, including great evil, with something as weak as these two qualities of patience and kindness, feels like trying to drive a nail with a teaspoon.

According to the Bible, kindness is a mighty sword in our fight against evil. Consider Proverbs 25:21-22: **"If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you."** Opponents to Christianity may find our kindness painful because it robs them of the confirmation that their contempt for us is justified. Or consider Romans 2:4, where we read that the kindness of God is meant to lead people to repentance. Kindness has the power to do something nothing else will—to humble a proud sinner and lead him to the transforming power of Christ.

Kindness is also a powerful pushing back against the darkness in the lives of those who are called to endure great suffering. The Gospel Coalition website this week had a story of a Christian woman who suffered from a neurological disorder called trigeminal autonomic cephalalgia, known more commonly as cluster headaches. Here's how the author described her pain.

The pain from these headaches comes on fast and furious, often waking me in the middle of the night. It's like a burning hot screwdriver jammed into your eye socket and twisted around by a mad gorilla for a couple of hours. The pain is so fierce you can't sit still; you have to pace around the room or rock back and forth holding your head and screaming out for mercy. Physicians often describe it as the worst pain known to medicine. Once the pain passes—after around two hours—you feel like you have fought a war with your face and given birth through your eye but have no cute baby to show for it. You're physically exhausted and an emotional wreck. But there's no time to catch your breath, because the next attack is coming soon, usually within a few hours. The clusters have a notorious nickname—"suicide headaches"—because the suicide rate for people who suffer from them is twenty times the national average.

How would you seek to help someone who is experiencing that level of suffering? Many times, people feel such discomfort at this degree of suffering that they just stay away. We don't have any answers, so we just try to ignore the situation. The author goes on to suggest a better response, and it's found in simple acts of kindness. She said that her biggest problem is believing the lies of the evil one, lies such as "If God really loved you, he'd heal you." Or, "It would be better for everyone if you just ended your life right now." She went on then to describe the power of kindness to push back the darkness. People would serve in practical ways like making meals and picking up groceries. She says, "They were doing more than meeting my physical needs. They were fighting this spiritual battle with me. They weren't just picking up a spatula; they were picking up a sword."

CONCLUSION:

Do you remember those well-known words from C. S. Lewis? "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." *The Four Loves*. We begin with love by playing these two cards of long-suffering and kindness. They turn out to be strong plays after all.