

**“Love’s Context”**  
**John 21:15-19**  
**August 18, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We are looking today at verse 7 of the love chapter. **“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”** These four qualities of love teach us that love shines brightest when the one loved is difficult to love. Two of these qualities, bearing and enduring, assume suffering and hardship. The other two, believing and hoping, assume that there is a gap between what someone is and what they are supposed to be. There are those in our lives who are not so hard to love, and it is good to love them fully. For example, grandparents don’t have their love muscles challenged very much when they love their grandchildren. It is another thing entirely, however, to love faithfully and enduringly those who are not so lovable.

This is the mark of Christ’s love in us. The quality of Christian love is revealed most clearly when love is most difficult. It’s like being a roofer in Lima, Peru, where it never rains. Pretty much any old roof will do, as long as it doesn’t fall down. On the other hand, being a roofer in Seattle requires much more of the roofer, because in that city it rains an average of 150 days every year. Christian love is more like the Seattle roofer, able to keep loving in even the most demanding circumstances with the most difficult to love people.

It’s a good thing that the love being described in this chapter helps us love difficult people, for the simple reason that we are really all in that category. Rich Mullins captures this well in a song he wrote called “Brother’s Keeper,” which includes the following lines: *Now the plumber’s got a drip in his spigot/ The mechanic’s got a clank in his car/ And the preacher’s thinking thoughts that are wicked/ And the lover’s got a lonely heart/ My friends ain’t the way I wish they were/ They are just the way they are/ I will be my brother’s keeper/ Not the one who judges him/ I won’t despise him for his weakness/ I won’t regard him for his strength/ I won’t take away his freedom/ I will help him learn to stand/ And I will, I will be my brother’s keeper.* That captures well the truth of this verse. So let’s look at it in more detail and then consider the way Jesus was characterized by just this kind of love in his relationship with Peter.

**I. Love’s Challenge – Bearing and Enduring**

At first glance, these two words seem very similar. Is there a difference between bearing all things and enduring all things? In the original, these are two different words. The word that is translated “bears” has an interesting origin. It came from a noun that means “house.” So in its verbal form it means

to cover someone. Perhaps it's easiest to understand what that means by considering its opposite, which is to expose someone to shame. You shame someone by noting their weak points and deficiencies and taking every opportunity to uncover that. So to cover someone is to overlook their offenses and faults rather than always seeking to expose them. So it does mean to bear with someone in that sense.

But doesn't the Bible command us at times to confront others about their faults? Yes, it does. Jesus directs us in multiple places to do so, but even in doing so we are to attempt to keep the matter as private as possible. In Matthew 18, Jesus tells us that the first step in confronting someone is to do so privately, just one on one. Others are brought in only when the private attempt is rebuffed. How do you know when to overlook a sin and when to confront? Love is our guide. Sometimes love for another leads us to overlook and sometimes love leads us to confront. Out of trust in God, we simply consider the good of the other and let our actions pursue that good.

There is also another sense of this verb, and it means to carry another's burden. To love another is to be a burden-carrier. We are not meant to carry burdens alone, but to be with others in this. When Jesus came to the earth, he came to carry our burdens. The most significant of those burdens was the burden of sin. Isaiah 53:12 says that **"he bore the sin of many."** It is our great privilege to follow Jesus in this when we help others carry their burdens.

Love also **"endures all things."** The word was originally often used in a military context for enduring the assault of an enemy. So it means that you don't run away at the first sign of trouble. You "hang in there" with the people God calls you to love, even when it is difficult to do so. You stay loyal to your friends, not retreating at the first sign of difficulty. Sometimes people mistakenly think that this endurance looks like passivity. It is not loving to watch others destroy themselves while you passively sit on the sidelines and do nothing. Endurance with others is a combination of patience and courageously stepping in to help. It is exemplified in the work Mother Teresa started in Calcutta years ago. The first woman she helped was lying on a Calcutta street, her face half eaten by ants and rats. Mother Teresa took her in and did all she could to bring comfort and help. Someone once asked her how she could stand to do such difficult tasks as clean the stinking wound of a leprosy patient and bathe the urine-soaked body of those who have been neglected. This person went on to say, "I couldn't do that for the love of all the money in the world." Mother Teresa replied. "Nor can we. But we do it for love of Him."

## **II. Love's Gap – Believing and Hoping**

These two words both assume a gap between what we are now and what we should be. That gap is filled by believing and hoping. Let's look first at the

statement that love **“believes all things.”** That doesn’t mean that we are to be gullible. Proverbs 14:15 says, **“The simple believes everything.”** The answer is not to go to the other extreme and believe nothing. That’s what the cynic does, believing only that no one is worth believing. Lewis Smedes summarizes nicely this idea of believing all things.

Love does not turn its head away from facts. Love looks the ugly, cruel facts straight in the face. Love looks at the liar and calls him a liar. Love looks at the sadistic dictator and calls him evil. Love does not excuse the rapist, the looter, or the corrupt politician. Love just sees more than the honest eye can see. Love sees the person beneath the facts, the hardest facts, about him. And love *believes* that that person is of inestimable worth, is redeemable, and can become good.

Love also **“hopes all things.”** Again, it is helpful in understanding this to consider its opposite. The opposite of hope is despair, to give up on something. When we fail to hope all things for those we should love, we assume that the way they are now is the way they will always be. So we write them off and chalk them up to a lost cause. Love does not do that. It sees what a person could become by God’s grace. As Leon Morris says so well, it is “a refusal to take failure as final... It is the confidence which looks to ultimate triumph by the grace of God.”

One of the marks of the kind of love that hopes all things is that it refuses to exert control over others in its attempt to hang on to hope. For example, a parent keeps too tight a rein on a child in an attempt to keep that child from any improper behavior. The parent has to be present with the child in every situation. Love doesn’t seek to control others like this. Sometimes you have to let a loved one go their own way, even if that way is destructive. Remember the prodigal son. When he asked his father for his inheritance, a very unwise thing to do, the father agreed to do so. Sometimes love lets people do and be what they want to do and be. But it still holds on to hope as it does so.

So these two qualities of believing and hoping all things ultimately require us to trust God. We give up control, but we don’t give up on people. It’s easier to give up on people, because that protects us from being hurt by them. But we stay in the vulnerable position of believing and hoping all things for them, grieving when they fall short of what they need to be, all the while trusting God for the outcome as we pray for them. In a letter Francis Schaeffer wrote to Jackie, a woman who had spent some time living at L’Abri (the house that Francis and Edith Schaeffer operated for ministry to others), he encourages her about God’s deliverance of us from the messes we make of our lives. He writes,

Edith has an illustration that I like very much. There was a girl who was supposed to make cakes in the Les Melezes kitchen, and she got all messed up until she had nothing but a mess of goo. It would have seemed as though there was nothing to do but throw the whole mess out. But as you know, we don’t have

a great deal of money, and so Edith has learned to be very economical in the kitchen. Thus she sat down and figured out what was in the gooey mess, and by adding an extra ingredient was able to make it into the most marvelous noodles you have tasted in your life.

Jackie, we often do this with our lives, and then (following the illustration above) perhaps we can't be the cakes we could have been. But if we give ourselves into the hands of the Lord, He can very much reshape us to be something other than we would have been, but something with both usefulness and beauty." (*Letters of Francis A. Schaeffer*, p. 107-08)

### III. Love's Champion – Jesus

As we've seen previously in our study of 1 Corinthians 13, an example greatly helps. I find in Jesus' response to Peter after Peter's denial of the Lord an example of this kind of love. In John 21, the resurrected Jesus appears to Peter. Peter had returned to his occupation of fishing and it wasn't going well. He and his partners fished all night and caught nothing. They were returning to shore at daybreak and saw someone standing there. This bystander asked them about their success in fishing, and they told him of their completely unfruitful labors. He then told them to cast their net on the other side of the boat, after which they caught 153 large fish and then recognized that this stranger on shore was not a stranger after all, but Jesus. Peter jumps in the water and swims ashore to see Jesus. They all ate some breakfast together, and then Jesus turns to Peter and says, "**Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?**" (v. 15). A couple of different explanations have been offered for the "**these.**" Some see it as referring to the fishing implements around them. In other words, Jesus is asking Peter if he really does love Jesus more than this occupation of being a fisherman. The other explanation, and the one I think is the correct one, sees in this word a reference to the other disciples, those Peter had argued with about whose love for Jesus was the greatest and strongest. You may remember how Peter had boasted, "**Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will**" (Matthew 26:33).

But Peter did fall away, catastrophically so. All it took was a young servant girl to ask him if he was one of Jesus' followers. Three times he denied even knowing Jesus. That had not been Peter's first failure. There was another time when he had rebuked Jesus about Jesus' stated destiny of going to the cross, leading Jesus to rebuke him in the harshest language imaginable: "**Get behind me, Satan.**" There was another time when Peter had been privileged to go with Jesus on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. Peter didn't know what to say or think, so he opened his mouth and proposed a building project that made Jesus equivalent to Moses and Elijah. And then there were the repeated times when Peter had been caught arguing with the other disciples about which of them was the greatest.

Imagine how Jesus must have felt when Peter denied him. Here was the one Jesus had invested the most in, and he lets Jesus down in his moment of greatest need. Jesus responds here by pursuing Peter, not by writing him off as a lost cause. He asks Peter three times if he loves him. Peter no longer boasts. He has been humbled. So he simply appeals to Jesus' knowledge. **"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."** Jesus asks him this question three times so that Peter will have to say three times that he loves Jesus, just as he had said three times prior to this that he didn't even know Jesus.

It becomes clear that Jesus' purpose in all this is not to hurt Peter, but to restore him. The greatest evidence of that is his simple command to Peter, **"Feed my sheep."** Jesus is entrusting to Peter what is most precious to him, his sheep. This is the same Peter who had just recently used the sheep to feel better about himself, comparing himself to them so he could feel good about himself. "They may all abandon you, Jesus, but not me." Seems a bit risky for Jesus to entrust his sheep to the likes of Peter. But that's what love does. Jesus was bearing with Peter, enduring his many failings, believing in him and keeping hope alive for Peter.

The text concludes by Jesus telling Peter to follow him. Just as Jesus has loved Peter, so Peter is to love Jesus' sheep. The same love will be required of Peter that he has received from Jesus. It is not without significance that Jesus refers to his people as a flock of sheep. Of course, that's a metaphor with deep roots in the Bible. But it says something about us, too. John Stott, who lived on an island with lots of sheep, says this about the real thing. "For sheep are not at all the clean and cuddly creatures they may appear. In fact, they are dirty, subject to unpleasant pests, and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice, ticks and worms. They are also unintelligent, wayward and obstinate." We are all Peter. We are all stinky, obstinate, wayward sheep. Jesus perseveres in loving us, and now asks us to do the same.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I began with a song by Rich Mullins. Let me end with something he said about loving others.

I am a Christian because I have seen the love of God lived out in the lives of people who know Him. The Word has become flesh and I have encountered God in the people who have manifested (in many "unreasonable" ways) His presence—a presence that is more than convincing—it is a presence that is compelling. I am a Christian, not because someone explained the nuts and bolts of Christianity to me, but because there were people who were willing to be nuts and bolts. Through their obedience to the truth and not necessarily through their explanation of it, they held it together so that I could experience it and be compelled to obey. (*An Arrow Pointing to Heaven*, p. 203-4).