

Paul Wrote the Book of Love

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Reflections on 1 Corinthians 13

Greg Hildenbrand



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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my late brother, Wade. Our relationship was one of intense closeness and heartbreaking distance, not unlike all deeply-loving, long-term relationships. I regret allowing his illness to come between us. His love was sometimes well-concealed, but it was always there and always Wade. I miss you, bro.

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Paul Wrote the Book of Love

Reflections on 1 Corinthians 13

INTRODUCTION

The 1950's music group, The Monotones¹, asked the question, "Who wrote the book of love?" Six decades later, I answer the question in this book. The apostle Paul wrote it. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes a comprehensive essay on what love is and what love is not. No doubt, it was timely 2000 years ago when he wrote it, but it is still relevant today. Our society thinks too narrowly about love, usually limiting love to romance. While romantic love is one important and pleasing manifestation of love, it is far from the only or most enduring. All of us want more love in our lives, but until we know what we lack and what we desire, we cannot begin to find it. The purpose of this book is to help the reader find a true, lasting, dependable love.

Fr. Richard Rohr and other Christian mystics point out that we do not think our way into a new way of acting, we act our way into a new way of thinking. The same is true for love. We cannot intellectualize our way into love. Love is an action, so when we decide to increase the experience of love in our loves, we do so by intentionally *acting* in more loving ways. *Feelings* of love may follow, but feelings cannot lead, at least not in a dependable manner.

Therein lies the beauty of 1 Corinthians 13 – it provides a list of specific *actions* that define love. It provides some of the most straightforward guidance for how to become a more loving person, and in the

process become more worthy of receiving the love of others. We reap what we sow, and this truth is never more evident than in matters of love.

The first specific reference to love in the Bible occurs in Genesis 22:2, where God orders Abraham, “Take your son, your only son whom you *love*,” and offer him as a burnt offering (a fate that ended up not being required). A few chapters later, we find Jacob working seven years to be able to take Rachel as his wife “because of the *love* he had for her.” There are over 150 references to love in the Psalms alone – God’s love for us, our love for God, and our love for each other. As Moses details the laws of righteousness for the Hebrew people in Leviticus (19:18), he writes, “You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself.” This commandment to love others is repeated by Jesus in all four Gospel accounts, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34) Clearly, there are many variations of love recorded in the Bible, but throughout the Bible, love is non-negotiable. See the Appendix for a sampling of other biblical references about love.

Love is sacrificial in nature, meaning we hold what is dear to us loosely, willingly offering whatever we possess to our beloved. Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, was evidence of his love for God above all else. The story is immoral and inexcusable by today’s standards, but the lesson is sound – we may willingly sacrifice in otherwise unthinkable ways for the sake of love.

A word of caution as we begin: This book about relationships, but it is not intended to suggest that *all* relationships should be endured. Abusive,

unhealthy, one-sided relationships should be terminated, not withstood. An abusive relationship is perversion of how God intended us to treat each other and is *never* a loving relationship.

Paul wrote the book of love 2000 years ago, and it remains as profound and vital today as it was in his day. This book intends to help the reader apply the timeless wisdom of the original Book of Love.

Greg Hildenbrand, October 2016

1 Corinthians 13

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

- 1 Corinthians 13, NRSV

PART 1: The Gift of Love

“The deeper our faith, the more doubt we must endure; the deeper our hope, the more prone we are to despair; the deeper our love, the more pain its loss will bring; these are a few of the paradoxes we must hold as human beings. If we refuse to hold them in the hopes of living without doubt, despair, and pain, we also find ourselves living without faith, hope, and love.”

Parker Palmer²

The traditional Chinese character for love, 愛³, contains the symbol for a heart surrounded by acceptance. Love is described as a graceful emotion. The symbol is interpreted as “a hand offering one’s heart to another hand.” Many languages have various words that represent different manifestations of what we, in English, lump into the single word, *love*. It is a common mistake for us to limit the broad, inclusive reality of love to only one of its manifestations – romantic love. Because many of us are disillusioned by romantic love one or more times in our lives, we may avoid a serious consideration of the sheer practicality, necessity, and breadth of love. Understanding what love is and what love is not, we learn to live better – not only for

others, but also for ourselves. We are happier, freer, and richer by living a life in love than in any other way.

A Noisy Gong

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

1 Corinthians 13:1

To begin his treatise, Paul writes that we may speak fluently in the languages of man and angels, but if we do not do so with love, we are nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. I can identify a number of “noisy gongs” and “clanging cymbals” in my life (too often, one stares back at me in the mirror), and there is nothing musical or pleasing about them. I tend to shy away from loud, boisterous, self-glorifying people, so it is difficult for me to give any credence to anything they may say or do because I cannot get past their annoying presentation. In moments of compassion, I wonder what life experience in their past or present makes them feel they must communicate in bold, capital letters all of the time. When the manner in which we present our gifts is neither genuine nor gentle, our gifts cannot be received in love, regardless of the intent behind them. When I wonder why my wife sometimes does not receive my words and actions in the way I expect, the problem may be in my presentation. Perhaps the problem is in my motives, my words, or the manner

in which I am sharing them. Were my words really being shared in love?

Love is not something we achieve on our own; rather, it manifests in relationship to and with others. Most importantly, love originates in God. Love is a two-way flow – back and forth, call and response – not unlike electricity. For electricity to flow there must be a pole sending *and* a pole receiving the current. For love to flow, there must be a giver and a receiver. For love to flow freely, the giver and receiver must switch roles often. When love is flowing freely, immense power is generated – a *spiritual* electricity, if you will.

Motives matter. If we only *appear* to be acting out of love, our superficiality hurts our relationship

***For love to flourish, we must
learn to be delicately honest***

more than
if we were
overtly
acting in
unloving

ways. At least in the latter case, we are being honest. Intentional deception leaves no basis for trust and no ground upon which to build in the future. While honesty can be built upon, being honest is a double-edged sword. For love to flourish, we must learn to be *delicately* honest – respectful of the feelings of the other while also being truthful. In context of the laws of relationship, we have no right to blurt out whatever comes into our minds. The concept of delicate honesty is developed further in Part 2 of this book. Thoughtful, considerate communication encourages healing for struggling relationships.

Love is always other-oriented and never self-serving. When we treat others in ways that are

primarily geared to serve our own purposes, even when our actions are done well, we turn others away. We may feel we are making beautiful music, but we are only a clanging cymbal. We may have many talents, and we may speak eloquently, but if genuine love does not motivate whatever we do, we are just more noise in an already noisy world.

Wasted Power

*And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries
and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove
mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

1 Corinthians 13:2

Paul continues in verse 2 that we may develop impressive powers of prophesy and knowledge, but if we are not motivated by love, our talents count for nothing. Paul's message, clearly, is that nothing we do or accomplish will amount to anything worthwhile if love is not behind it. It does not matter what we learn or how far up the socio-economic ladder we climb. If love is not at the heart of what we do, our actions will ultimately count as nothing.

Love does not understand the language of intellect. College degrees, mathematical prowess, superior reasoning ability, religious fervor – none of these speak the language of love. Our external learning is just that – external. Love speaks and listens from a completely different center of intelligence; not the head, but the heart. There are at least three centers of intelligence within each of us: the head, the

heart, and the gut or instinct. Each is a powerful center of perception and understanding, although we tend to ignore the latter two in favor of the first. Love

***Love does not
understand the
language of intellect***

requires a deeper dive into the heart. If we try to understand love using only our minds, we will fail

miserably. Trying to understand love with the mind is like trying to read a novel by only reading every third word. We may catch the general drift, but we will miss context and depth, ending up with only a partial understanding of what the author is trying to communicate.

Consistent with the theme of this opening section of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul emphasizes that no matter how much we learn intellectually, or how faithful we become, our accomplishments account for nothing if they are not empowered by love.

Unfruitful Generosity

If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:3

Finally, in verse 3, Paul says that our generosity, no matter how sacrificial, counts as nothing if it is not motivated by love. Even our giving to others counts as nothing without love.

I consider myself relatively generous. My wife and I give significant portions of our income to our church and other causes we consider worthy. This is the current, common, first-world practice of sacrificial giving. I fear, however, this manner of giving is exactly what Paul points to in this verse. It is so much easier to write a check for a cause than to roll up our sleeves and join in the actual work. Do not get me wrong – causes desperately need financing. But worthy causes also need hands, feet, and hearts *working* for the cause, standing in the gap, and working at the site of the suffering.

What does love require of me in this situation?

Giving
of our money is
one thing.
Giving of our
time and

personal attention is quite another. What does love require? If one of my children calls to say their heart has been broken, what am I going to do – write them a check? No, a loving response to that situation demands my personal time and attention.

Paul suggests we examine our acts of generosity. Giving money is important, and it is sacrificial, but it is not always the most loving response we can give. When we are made aware of a need, Paul encourages us to ask, “What does love require of me in this situation?” Love may require a check. Love may require a few kind, encouraging words. Love may require getting dirty. Love may require a hug, a card, or a phone call. Love may, however, require an extended period of gentle listening and compassionate presence.

When we limit our acts of generosity to our checkbook, we limit and cheapen our experience of love. In the words of Paul, “(we) gain nothing.” Herein lies a secret of true sacrificial giving – we may set out to serve others, but in our sacrificial service, we also receive. When we write a check, we receive a tax writeoff. To receive more, we must give more (and give differently).

Part 2: Love Is...

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.

Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

Martin Luther King, Jr.⁴

Love is Patient

Love is patient.

1 Corinthians 13:4a

There was a popular saying not long ago that went, “Be patient with me. God is not finished with me, yet.” I am not a fan of maxims that oversimplify or trivialize complex or important concepts, or of those that seek to shift individual responsibility elsewhere. This saying, though, expresses a profound truth in simple terms – *God is not finished with us*. In that sense, we are equal because we are all in various states of *becoming*. No one is complete; no one is perfect.

Whenever someone is in a process of becoming, patience is necessary. Of course, with each earthly breath we take, we are in a process of becoming, so patience is *always* warranted. In

parenting, this is obvious. We do not expect a two-year-old to possess the conversational skills of a 22 year old, so we are patient with their limited dialogue. We do not expect a child in Kindergarten to be able to understand Algebra, so we patiently teach them basic numbers and counting first. There is a point in a child's growth, however, where we begin to lose patience. With adults, our patience is often very short. We forget that the process of growth is life-long.

Impatience is a product of unmet expectations – not meeting our own expectations and not meeting those of others. People simply do not behave in the ways we wish them to behave.

***Impatience is a
product of unmet
expectations***

Sometimes we show tremendous patience with certain people and very little with others. The person

we typically have the least patience with is our self. Most of us are aware of what we are capable of becoming and how we wish to behave, so when we fall short we forget we are in the process of becoming. We simply are not there, yet. Sadly, the other group we are most frequently impatient with is those we love the most.

Speed, or lack thereof, is often a trigger for impatience. Someone is not moving or *becoming* as quickly as we believe they should. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience."⁵ The same is true of love. Step one in becoming a more loving person is to become a more patient person – patient with ourselves, patient with others, patient with God. Clearly, patience should not

be confused with inaction, but we have our entire earthly lives to become what we can on earth, and we have eternity to finish what remains. There is no rush. Where love is the goal, there is always time for patience. A life of love is a patient life.

Love is Kind

Love is patient; love is kind.

1 Corinthians 13:4a,b

Plato, the 4th century BCE philosopher, is credited with saying, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a harder battle.”⁶ As we explore Paul’s definitions of love, we find that love is first *patient*, and then love is *kind*. Plato, 2500 years ago, nailed the essence of the need to be kind by saying that we cannot know the magnitude of the needs and struggles of others. We like to guess, but in so doing we place ourselves in what we believe to be the circumstances of the other and, in too many cases, incorrectly judge their situation to be more favorable than it is.

As in all instances where we compare ourselves to others, our vision is limited, biased, and

***Kindness is given,
not earned***

most often inaccurate. Everyone needs and deserves love, and love requires patience and kindness. In one of the

most straightforward biblical passages on what God expects from us, the prophet Micah (6:8) lists three things: Be just, be kind, and be humble.

What does it mean to be kind? The compassionate focus of kindness is on someone else and his or her situation and needs. When we are kind to someone because he or she *deserves* it, we are not being kind, but only giving the other what he or she has already earned. Kindness is *given*, not earned. In that sense, kindness and grace are related. Several years ago, a movement encouraged random acts of kindness – doing something nice for someone else for no reason other than to be kind. The thought was that if I perform a random act of kindness for you, you will be inspired to be kind to someone else, and at some point everyone will receive acts of kindness, making the world a nicer place for all.

We should be kind to others not because they deserve it, because they are kind to us, or because we feel sorry for them. Our motivation for kindness should rise from a loving center within us that understands that being kind to others enriches *our* life, too. It is a natural instinct to want to bless another from our own abundance. The blessing need not be expensive, extravagant, or well planned – a note, a hug, or a smile. A simple kindness is sufficient, and that is what loving people do as a matter of habit, almost unconsciously and often anonymously. We should never doubt that the kindness we share with another may be received as a loving and long-awaited sign from God by the other. A sign that they are recognized and valued; a sign that they are not alone or forgotten. Kindness is an important quality of love

and a habit that loving people cultivate. Kindness is an *action* we are all capable of executing.

Love is not Envious

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious.

1 Corinthians 13:a-c

Near the end of the classic movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, the Wizard gives the Tinman a heart and says, “Remember, my sentimental friend, a heart is not measured by how much you love, but by how much

***Envy is a feeling of
discontent with another’s
accomplishments,
successes, or good fortune***

you are loved by others.” The deeper we dig into Paul’s writings about love, the clearer it

becomes that love is only experienced through relationships with others. We cannot be a loving person – we cannot experience deep love – without first becoming a person who loves others. The Tinman loved his colleagues deeply and sacrificially, but he felt unworthy of receiving love from them because he did not have a physical heart. Paul writes that love is first patient and kind. He follows that with a list of things that love is not, beginning with love is not *envious*.

Envy is a feeling of discontent with another’s accomplishments, successes, or good fortune. It

orients us in a negative, covetous manner to another. It is impossible to freely love someone toward whom we feel envy or jealousy. One reason we have negative feelings for others is that we compare ourselves and our situations with others, which puts us in a confrontational position toward the other. One of us is always better looking, more talented, richer, smarter, better dressed, or more socially acceptable. Whenever we compare, there will be a winner and there will be a loser.

True love, on the other hand, is not threatened by the good fortune of the other. The Tinman was genuinely thrilled that the Scarecrow received acknowledgement for his intelligence, and that the Cowardly Lion was rewarded for his courage. When we compare ourselves to others, we feel threatened whenever something good happens to them that is not also happening to us. When our self-esteem is based on how we are better than others, something good happening to another feels like something bad has happened to us. That sort of immature, emotional (and all-too-common) response is narcissistic, making it incompatible with love.

This leads to the basic belief that underlies envy – that of scarcity. If we believe, even subconsciously, that there is only so much love and blessing to go around, then we will see the love bestowed on others as love we cannot get for ourselves. We become envious because someone else has something we fear we will never be able to have. God, however, is a God of *abundance*. Being envious shows our lack of faith that God will provide good things in our lives, too. One way we can reduce the envy in our lives is to recognize and name the

abundance we experience. Less envy results in more love.

Love is not Boastful or Arrogant

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant.

1 Corinthians 13:4

Two characteristics Paul lists as representing what love is NOT are *boastful* and *arrogant*. I address them together because they are similar traits. In general, one boasts out of one's arrogance. Election seasons are times when boasting and arrogance are on display in all their narcissistic glory! Obviously, these traits are not the exclusive domain of either political party, nor of a specific gender, age group, or ethnicity. All of us display these qualities to a greater or lesser extent; certainly, I know I do.

As a country, we want leaders who are accomplished and confident. Winning elections is about convincing voters that one's experience is evidence of his or her ability to do the job well, as well as selling one's vision of a better future. Educating an audience about one's accomplishments can easily deteriorate into boastful bluster, particularly when one is insecure about those accomplishments, or when others are questioning the value or reality of those accomplishments. In a similar way, our attempts to display confidence can quickly devolve into a show of blatant arrogance. There is a thin line between confidence and arrogance that many – including the

non-candidates among us – find ourselves crossing back and forth with regularity.

Yet, I digress. This book is about love, not politics. Even so, we live in a politicized world. What would a candidate who based his or her campaign on love look like? I am not referring to love of country,

***Love requires mutual
vulnerability***

as in patriotism,
but a genuine
love of
humankind – all
of humankind,

regardless of sexual orientation, race, gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion – *everyone!* I am talking about a *Jesus*-kind-of-love. Such a candidate would reach out to the poor, the sick, the lost, the lonely, and the sinners. Of course, Jesus also spent time with tax-collectors – likely the wealthy of the day – but never to the exclusion of the excluded. Our candidate of love would be patient and kind, even to and especially with his or her detractors. Would such a candidate have a chance of winning a national election? Sadly, I fear not.

Paul's writings about love make it obvious that becoming more loving requires becoming more vulnerable. A loving person will not brag about their own accomplishments because they have no need or desire to make themselves appear superior. They focus less on what has been accomplished and more on what remains to be done. Loving people are humble and recognize everyone has strengths and weaknesses. We are stronger when we stand together as one. Love requires mutual vulnerability, but vulnerability does not win elections. It does win

hearts, however, and it strengthens relationships. Boasting and arrogance only serve to isolate us.

Love is not Rude

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5a

One who is rude to another is not only unkind, but is *deliberately* unkind. After he lists two of the characteristics of love – patience and kindness – the apostle Paul begins his list of traits uncharacteristic of love. Envy, boastfulness, and arrogance begin the list of unloving qualities, followed by the declaration that love is not *rude*. It is one thing to hurt a person unintentionally; it is quite another to hurt someone on purpose. Many times I have said or written something that someone else received in a negative way that I did not intend. That is not rude. It may be careless or thoughtless, but it is not rude.

What motivates us to do something intentionally that we know will offend another? A common cause stems from our personal insecurity. We feel a person has more of something than they deserve and so we seek to cheapen their good fortune by surmising that they probably inherited their money, moved up in an organization in unethical ways, or they were born with superior genes. A less obvious manifestation of rudeness occurs in gossip – speaking poorly about a person who is not present. Gossip can be intentionally cruel when we say hurtful

things about another in their absence that we would never say in their presence.

Love manifests in relationship with others. It is a verb, meaning action is required. Even though love demands that we act in ways that are not harmful to another, I find myself most likely to be rude to those I profess to love the most. Love and rudeness are uneasy partners, although much rudeness stems from our inability to love as we should.

I will go out on a limb and proclaim that the number one reason many people act in rude ways is that they feel unloved and unworthy of receiving love.

When pain has been the primary outcome of our key relationships, pain is what we naturally give

Somewhere in their past their inherent need to be loved was shunned, perhaps repeatedly, and

they learned that being cynical is less risky than trying to reach out or respond in love. Such a person becomes like the Grinch in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*⁸. They gain a measure of pleasure in seeing others suffer. It gives them comfort to know that others hurt, too. When pain has been the primary outcome of our key relationships, pain is what we naturally give. Seen in this light, rudeness is a desperate cry for help. We are not offended when a baby cries out in the middle of the night. We recognize the need in another that they cannot yet express in a more loving manner. It should be no different with the adults in our lives – more difficult, certainly, but no different. Everyone needs and deserves love. Sometimes, we are called to love

through the pain of another, even and especially when they are rude.

Love Does Not Insist on its Own Way

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5b

The fifth behavior that does *not* characterize love is insisting on its own way. Most of us have had experiences dating back to childhood with others insisting on their own way. It might be a sibling, a bully at school, or a bossy cousin, but there is often someone who insists that whatever a group is doing be done in his or her way. (If this does not ring a bell, that person may be you!)

When we insist on our own way, we imply

***Would you rather be
right or happy?***

that we know best, or that we are the smartest -- thus, everyone else is dumber. It is selfish

and narcissistic, in most instances, to insist that our ideas are always superior. Certainly, we can and should express our opinion, but when we demand others always comply we cross the line into unabashed vanity. We become like the boss with the philosophy of “My way or the highway!” or a child

forever threatening to take his or her toys and go home. At least in a work setting, one is compensated to put up with that sort of disrespectful, unloving behavior. In general, when we always insist on getting our way we are telling others they are neither important nor are their opinions valued. That is not a solid basis for a loving relationship.

Love does not insist on its own way because love is *other*-focused. Even though there is often a return to us from our acts of love, that return is not our primary motivation. Genuine love is not conditional. It does not have to be earned or repaid. We act in loving ways toward another because we care about them, because we want good things for them, and because we love to love. Love is its own motivation, and acts of love spring from an internal sense of abundance that longs to be expressed.

A common cause of tension in relationships is the need to be right, which is a form of insisting on one's own way. Recently, I saw a post that said, "Would you rather be right or happy?" Being right and being happy are not always mutually exclusive, but when our need to be right tears down others in our key relationships, happiness will be impossible to achieve. When one person is right, by definition, another person must be wrong. It sets up a win-lose situation, which is not the ideal when mutual benefit is the goal. It is much better for us and for our relationships to swallow our pride and seek the greatest good for all involved. If the relationship or group we are in does not respect or recognize that which is important to us, it is probably time to find better company.

Love is not Irritable

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5c

Some people seem to have a natural ability to annoy me. I can name several who cause my blood pressure to rise just by entering the room. We can probably all do the same to others. Whether these people cause irritation intentionally, or whether it is a natural byproduct of the way they were created is a mystery to me. What I do know is that something about them causes me to respond in an irritable manner. In other words, something in *me* becomes irritable in their presence. This is an important distinction because the people that annoy me may have no such impact on others. In fact, they may *enjoy* their company. This is a humbling fact for me.

“Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves.” Carl Jung

The origin of the word *irritate* suggests an arousal to anger, excite, or aggravate.

Irritation can be emotional or it can be physical. For example, I like to tell others that shopping for too long – particularly for clothes or (ugh) shoes – gives me a rash. Of

course, I do not get a physical rash, but the emotional toll on me is similar. What I mean is that I am likely to display irritable behaviors when shopping for too long. An example of a physical irritation in nature is the annoyance caused by a grain of sand in the body of an oyster. The irritation causes a reaction within the mollusk that eventually creates a pearl. When we learn to turn our irritations into pearls of wisdom, we have transformed that which was irritating into something of value.

The famous 20th Century psychiatrist, Carl Jung, observed, "Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves."⁹ Personally, I find this quote irritating. When someone annoys me, I do not want the finger of guilt pointing back at me as the one with the problem. But of course, that is exactly what happens. When we are in a relationship with another, the other is often a mirror for our deepest, most repressed characteristics. The weaknesses, insecurities, and annoyances we recognize so clearly in the other are most likely reflections of our own weaknesses, insecurities, and annoyances. It is much safer and easier to project our shortcomings onto others than to have them exposed in ourselves. Is it any wonder we feel so irritated at times, with others holding up mirrors reflecting our most secret inner failings?

The bottom line is that when I am irritable, I am neither patient with nor am I kind to others, which are the first two traits Paul names when describing love. My blood pressure rises, my vision constricts, and my head hurts. Being irritable is not a loving behavior toward others. It is also not consistent with self-love. Acceptance of the

shortcomings of others is the first step to being more accepting of ourselves.

Love is not Resentful

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5

Resentment is an indignant feeling of ill will because of something regarded as a wrong, insult, or injury. The act associated with the resentment may or may not have been done intentionally, may or may not have been intended for the person who is now resentful, or may or may not have been an act that others would consider wrong, insulting, or injurious. Resentment is an individual *perception*, and as such is a

***“Resentment is like
drinking poison and
then hoping it will kill
your enemies.”***

Nelson Mandela

choice we make. We can be wronged or injured and choose not to become resentful, even though we may experience disappointment or

anger. When we do not address our feelings of anger or disappointment about something that truly bothers us, we repress those feelings and become resentful. Like an over inflated balloon, repressed emotions explode when exposed to heat.

In the context of a loving relationship, resentfulness is a double-edged sword, meaning it cuts both partners. Nelson Mandela, the South-African revolutionary, put it succinctly: “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”¹⁰ When we give another the *silent treatment*, we are likely resentful of something. We want him or her to repent of their sin(s) and treat us as we believe we deserve to be treated. Resentment is an immature, self-serving, passive-aggressive way to treat others, as well as an ineffective way to achieve what we want. Humans (especially husbands) are terrible mind readers. When we desire to receive an apology but we are not willing to expose the offending behavior, we are not very committed to building or maintaining a strong, healthy relationship; nor are we likely to be successful.

None of this is to say there are not behaviors worthy of resentment – intentionally cruel behaviors, for example. If we are in a loving relationship and the other person does not respond in positive ways to our sincere needs, the relationship is not a good one for us. In those cases, our resentment is more likely to hurt us than the other.

It is clear why the apostle Paul lists resentfulness as uncharacteristic of love. Love requires specific, positive actions we do for and with another. When our regular response to a relationship is resentment, the relationship is not a healthy or loving one for either party.

Love Does Not Rejoice in Wrongdoing

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing.

1 Corinthians 13:4-6a

The last of the unloving traits listed by Paul is to rejoice in wrongdoing. Most of the time when we do something wrong, we already feel ashamed. To have our shame be the reason for someone else's rejoicing multiplies our hurt and sadness. Likewise, to revel in something we did wrong to another is equally unloving, especially when it was something we did intentionally. Rejoicing in the misfortune of others is cruel, and yet it is all too common. Much gossip is of this nature. The competitive part of me enjoys seeing someone else make a poor judgement that allows me an advantage in a game. I do not believe that, in itself, is wrong. It would fall to the level of unloving, however, if I did a happy dance in front of the other.

Often, we rejoice in the wrongdoing of another as a way to lift ourselves up, particularly when it is a person we believe has a better life than we have. We think, "Ha! Now you know what *my* life is like!" None of us, however, can know the life experience of another. It is too easy to judge the circumstances of another through our own biases. Easy, yes, but seldom accurate.

The problem with lifting ourselves up at the expense of another is that we are intimately interconnected. None of us can truly rise above life's circumstances unless and until we all rise. It is like being in a boat with someone and laughing at the hole in his or her end of the boat. Ultimately, everyone in the boat is going down.

In marriage, two lives become one life. One

Often, we rejoice in the wrongdoing of another as a way to lift ourselves up

person cannot “succeed” in a marriage if the other is not also successful.

That would be

like saying my right hand lived a full, happy life, but the rest of my body failed miserably. The same is true in organizations, families, and groups of friends. We succeed or fail, rise or fall, together. In many of his letters, the apostle Paul refers to the church and its members as the *body* of Christ. He writes in Romans 12:4, “...we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” Finally, on his last night on earth in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that we all become one with him, just as he is one with God. Contrary to appearances, our fates are tied. Acknowledging our interconnectedness can solve many of the world's ills. Loving relationships require *unity*. If we rejoice in the wrongdoing of another, we cannot be in union with him or her. Love demands that we lift others up in their weakness, not tear them down because of it.

Love Rejoices in the Truth

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

1 Corinthians 13:4-6

Of the 15 characteristics Paul lists about love, seven are positive, or things that support love, and eight are negative, or things that inhibit love. I find the groupings interesting. He begins with two traits that characterize love, followed by eight qualities that do not, and closes with another five positive qualities. It seems to follow a common pattern of worship today – begin with a positive, uplifting tone, move to something more somber, and then end on a positive, encouraging note. It also follows a common pattern of our lives, where the good and not-so-good are always intertwined.

That “love rejoices in the truth” may seem obvious, at least at first. After all, why would love rejoice in a lie? Would not honesty be a prerequisite to love? Yet, what poses as “truth” is often harsh and not always true at all. Attempts to expose truth may take the form of a significant other being a little too honest with us, or a boss providing an all-too-candid performance review. In her book, Lean In,¹¹ Sheryl Sandberg writes, “Communication works best when we combine appropriateness with authenticity, finding that sweet spot where opinions are not brutally honest but delicately honest. Speaking truthfully

without hurting feelings comes naturally to some and is an acquired skill for others.” When we consider love in relationships, we often need to be “delicately honest” with the truth – not that we should lie, but there are many ways to speak the truth in an unloving manner. When we speak truth without a perceptible love for the other behind it, we simply make the other person defensive, or worse. Once that happens, the opportunity for a meaningful and healthy dialogue is likely lost, at least for a time.

On the other hand, Jesus says, “...and you

***What poses as “truth”
is often harsh and not
always true at all***

will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). Knowing the truth is supposed to be a

freeing experience. It seems contradictory to our experience to say the truth will *always* make us free, however. Is it always best to know how another truly feels about us? Is that truth? Is it best to know where we stand with our boss, or how our abilities rate against others? Probably, but that is not necessarily the whole truth. It is best to know these things *when we first know we are loved and accepted as we are and not judged for what we are not*. In an unloving environment, knowing the *truth* will not be a freeing experience at all. We will not rejoice – we will be devastated. The truth is found in the knowledge that who and what we are is good enough to be loved and accepted as a child of God – only then will the truth set us free. As a result of that truth, relationships become more genuine, love based in truth thrives, and there is much rejoicing! The foundational *Truth* is that we are loved

with an eternal, freeing, undeserved love that is beyond all comprehension; and for that we can rejoice!

Love Bears All Things

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7a

A vow recited in nearly every wedding ceremony I attend includes these words: "...for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part." It is a promise we make as a married couple to bear one another's burdens – together. The 12th trait of love, according to Paul, is that love bears all things. Of course, Christian love goes beyond the love and commitment of a married couple, but the expectation is the same for all relationships. Serious followers of Christ will not stand by and allow others to suffer alone. When we are in a loving relationship with another – and Jesus emphasizes that love is the expectation for all – we assume responsibility for that relationship. A part of that responsibility is to provide assistance, support, and companionship as needed and according to our ability.

One thing that is probably different today than in Jesus' day is our reluctance to ask for help when we need it. Our Western culture is rooted in a

fierce independence that can make it difficult to confess we are carrying too heavy a load to bear. Too often we believe we must pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and power through the current circumstances. We do not want to be a burden to others; our present condition is our own doing; we will get through this in time – the excuses are too familiar. That is, after all, the American way. It is not,

***Serious followers of
Christ will not stand by
and allow others to
suffer alone***

however, the Christian way. The Christian way is based in loving, nurturing relationships.

Assisting

another with a burden should not be a hardship; it should be a joy! I think of the “barn-raising” events of the past, where a family would need a barn, and neighbors and friends would gather over a weekend and build it together. They would work side-by-side, eat, talk, rest, and bask in the fellowship. Today, we hire a contractor. In our haste not to impose on others, we starve our relationships by not allowing space for the precious gifts of giving to and receiving from one another. What greater gift can we give another than a portion of our being? Our material wealth and our overflowing schedules have led us to a state of poverty in our social relationships.

We lack an integrated, interdependent worldview, where we recognize that your burdens are my burdens, too. Bearing one another’s burdens is what we do in community, and it is what we do when we live a life of love. Robert Greenleaf¹², an early proponent of servant leadership, said we must bear

unlimited liability for others. With the exception of abusive relationships, we are encouraged to bear *all* things, not just *some* things.

Love Believes All Things

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7b

In my late teens I dreamed of being a famous performer. Folksingers who told stories, played guitar, and sang in front of large audiences astounded me. I was certain that was my destiny. I spent countless hours learning my favorite songs, writing songs of my own, and practicing repeatedly. When I felt ready, I met with the owner of the club I had chosen for my debut. Her name was Elizabeth Dring, and her club was *The Windjammer*. It was located in a shopping mall in Topeka, Kansas. She booked me for a single night. To say my performance was terrible that night is a vast understatement. I was embarrassed that I subjected my poor audience to such an awful evening of poorly-done music. I decided to give up on my folksinger dreams. Three days later, Elizabeth called to schedule more dates. I was stunned. I told her I was awful and was quitting. She said, “You were nervous, but you have talent. You will get over the nervousness.” She believed in me, and I have

performed with my guitar – alone and with bands – for over four decades now.

There is no gift greater than someone's belief in us. There are few favors more loving than our belief in another's inherent goodness and ability. Those who see through the surface to the core of a person have an amazing skill. Elizabeth Dring believed in me, and my life changed as a result. Paul writes that love believes *all* things. Goethe wrote that our beliefs shape us. In a similar way, our expressed beliefs about others shape them, in both positive and negative ways. We shape others not in our own likeness, but in a way most becoming of who they truly are. In many accounts of Jesus' healings, he

***There is no gift greater
than someone's belief
in us***

explains, "Your faith (belief) has made you well." Belief has power. When we believe in another, when

we see beyond their uncertainty, we give a gift of love they may never receive from anyone else. It is as if God uses us to speak truth to another.

Of course, the realist in me feels obliged to add that no matter how strongly others and I believe I will become a professional sports star, it simply is not going to happen. That belief is incongruous with who and what I am. It also serves no ideal other than my own ego. Desiring to become something inconsistent with our inner nature is like trying to trim a plant created to grow round into a square shrub – we may force it into an uneasy square for a time, but it will always strive to regain its roundness. It is when our

belief and the faith of others meshes with the way we were wired at birth that magic will manifest.

Believing in others is a vital part of any loving relationship.

Love Hopes All Things

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things.

1 Corinthians 13:4-7c

Just as love is other-focused, so hope is future-focused. True hope, however, is not wishful thinking or daydreaming. Hope looks forward with a knowledge and optimism rooted in actual experience, projecting the future from the potential evidenced in the past. When we make time to reflect on our experiences and we look back over our lives, we recognize recurring patterns. Every time a situation looks dire, eventually, something (often unforeseen) happens to help the situation work out – not always in the way we wish, but always in a way that helps us grow. When we recognize this pattern of grace, we begin to develop – uneasily at times – a nebulous sense of hope. This hope is not rooted in a future vision we can specifically see or know, but in a faith that no matter what life brings, we will be loved and cared for, and we will come through the other side stronger and wiser. It is often easier for those of us in

the second half of our lives to experience this hope simply because we have more years from which to have proven the lesson.

In Romans 8:24-25, Paul writes, “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” If I hope to experience a beautiful sunrise today after the sun has risen, that is not hope because it already happened. I can hope, however, to see another beautiful sunrise in the future because I *know* from experience there will be more sunrises that are beautiful. I do not know the specific days or the frequency with which those will occur, but I have

***Hope looks forward
with a knowledge and
optimism rooted in
actual experience***

confidence they will happen. I wait *expectantly* for them, knowing they will manifest, and I do not need to know when.

My grandmother Hildenbrand saw a version of me she knew I could become, which was much different and more optimistic than the person I saw as myself. She looked beyond my flawed exterior, saw, and acknowledged a capacity that seldom matched the reality. Sometimes, I felt guilty and unworthy because I was not as good as she gave me credit for being – or was I? She may have been able to see what I would become better than I could envision. Perhaps it was *my* vision that was flawed. This is the amazing impact of hope on the object of our love – that someone sees beyond petty failings to the image of God from which we were created.

Someone who believes in us, who hopes the best for us, and who sees the heart God created and animated within us is someone who will inspire us to greatness. These are the people who understand the power of hope, and these are the people whose unfailing and unconditional love inspires us to love others with a similar hope for *all* things.

Love Endures All Things

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

The 15th characteristic of love, according to Paul, is that *love endures*. Love is persistent and determined. It does not give up easily. When we think of endurance, we often think of sports and the extended and extensive training required to achieve at the highest levels. Sports are not a bad metaphor for loving relationships. When we commit to *love* another – whether in marriage, friendship, or other committed relationships – we commit to being with and for them over the long term. We agree to support and accompany them in good times, in bad times, in boring times, and in all times in between. We vow to love them when they treat us well, when they treat us poorly, when they act in ways we wish they would

not, as well as when they treat us as if we were the only other person in his or her life.

That we remain committed to another does not mean we simply weather the difficult times, however. It

Enduring for endurance's sake is self-imposed torture. There needs to be a higher purpose.

also means we work to transform our relationship from those difficult times

into something rare and beautiful. Enduring for endurance's sake is self-imposed torture. There needs to be a higher purpose for our endurance; a purpose like love. I am told that wine made from grapes whose vines grow in poor, rocky soil and that endure challenging weather conditions have a depth and body that other wines lack. Some of the most beautiful things on earth require time and struggle; to persist over time requires endurance, and difficulty endured over time often makes the results more beautiful. The rings of trees record the relative ease or difficulty of the individual years of the tree's life. A weathered face reflects a life lived in the ever-changing elements. Friendships maintained for many years have a level of comfort and acceptance that simply cannot fully develop otherwise. Endurance is a blessing.

Where there is a foundation of mutual fondness, respect, and benevolence, endurance will shape a relationship in ways not otherwise possible. There is a saying in sports, "No pain, no gain," which suggests we must endure difficult practicing and training in order to reap the benefits of athletic

achievement. The same can be said for loving relationships – the benefits come from a diversity of experiences over time with the other, not by only accepting the good and rejecting the less-than-good.

Part 3: Love Never Ends

“You see, love is one. Love is the whole. Love is an endless sea that you fall into. And once you fall into it, you can’t fall out. It’s not something you do. It’s something that is done to you, and all you can do is let go.”

Richard Rohr¹³

The second section of this book focused on the characteristics of love that Paul lists in the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians. Like the annoying salespeople on television, however, “Wait, there’s more!” There is a concluding paragraph to this series, verses 8-13, that is worthy of our attention, too. That paragraph begins with the line, “Love never ends.” That statement is followed with, “the partial will come to an end.” Our conscious experience of love may wax and wane throughout our lives, transforming us and others as only love can do, but love will always be as constant and ever-present as oxygen.

Love is Eternal

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

1 Corinthians 13:8

The last of the specific characteristics of love is that *love never ends*. Love is eternal. It existed before we were born, and love will continue beyond our individual lives. This endless flow of love allows us to participate, or not, as individuals during our life on earth, but the flow does not depend upon our participation. Love endures, which is an expression of its flowing and eternal nature. Just because an object of our love moves on to another lover or to another stage of life does not mean that love has ended, only that one particular expression of love has taken another shape, painful as that can be.

As we explore Paul's writings about love, it becomes increasingly clear that love permeates every aspect of our being. Love animates every part of creation.

***Love is always
expansive in nature***

Because God *is* love, love is ever-present, everywhere, always, and forever. Too

often, we limit love to an emotional expression we feel and share with a limited subset of people. In reality, how we love any one person is how we love everyone. Love is a state of *being with*, not a transient state of feeling.

It may seem I am making love out to be cold and impersonal, but love is *intensely* personal. Love recognizes and celebrates our individual natures, but true, lasting love is a celebration *in communion* with others. It is not that we are not special and unique creations in and of ourselves, but so is everyone else! We are special and lovable in relation to and with others. Remember, love requires relationship; it is not a reward for individuality. When we do not feel the love around us, it does not mean we do not live surrounded by love. It only means we are not in a state of being to recognize or accept it. Sometimes our lives become so consumed by our busy-ness or by our self-centered distractedness that there is no room in our awareness for love to penetrate. We seek love in the wrong places, or our understanding of love is too limited to perceive it. Love is always *expansive* in nature, seeking to include more of others and of ourselves.

Love never ends, just as God never ends. Our individual lives will end, but our loving relationships continue to impact generations after us. I believe, at physical death, our soul gratefully enters this eternal flow of love that we only sense dimly from earth.

It is a blessing to be participative co-creators in the river of love that is always and ever available to us.

The Partial Will End

For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

1 Corinthians 13:9-10

Few, if any, of us have experienced love in a way that is consistent, unconditional, and life-long (or eternal). Even the best of friendships rub nerves raw at times. The best of marriages struggle through difficult times. Long-adored soul mates pass on. The children who once worshipped our every move grow into teenagers who often cannot tolerate having us anywhere near them. Does that mean the love we experienced ended? I do not believe so. I think it means the love we experienced was only experienced in part – a wonderful part, perhaps – but in part nonetheless. If love never ends, then love must encompass more than just the good and easy times. Nothing of the earth is always good or easy.

As has been noted elsewhere in this series, we tend to consider love too narrowly. If our understanding of love is of something we only experience with one other person, or a small group of people, then how can we begin to grasp the love of a God who loves everyone? If we reject the pain, frustration, and disappointment that accompanies the love, acceptance, and joy of relationships, we cannot expect love to endure. If love is all-inclusive, then

***We tend to consider
love too narrowly***

love must include the good *and* the bad. When we accept only in part, the whole will

elude us. Our lives on earth are mired in paradox – light and dark, hot and cold, black and white, wet and dry, happy and sad. All are manifestations of the same reality, however, and we cannot know one side of that reality without also knowing the other. In fact, the

two sides define each other, as in darkness being the absence of light.

Elie Wiesel¹⁴ writes, “the opposite of love is not hate, it is indifference.” Indifference is consumed by the presence of love just as darkness recedes in the presence of light. Even so, we appreciate love all the more by also having experienced indifference. As light is not diminished by the number of people accessing it, so love includes and is sufficient for all in its presence. If our perception is that love has ended, the experience we called love did not encompass love in its entirety. Only when our boundaries for what love is are too narrow, will love appear to end. Love, in all its fullness, does not end.

Paul writes, “When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.” When love appears to have ended in our life, it is much healthier to believe one *chapter* of love has ended. The ending of one chapter, however, sets the stage for the next chapter in the larger story. The love story of our existence necessarily has a happy conclusion. There will be twists and turns, struggles and challenges, and tears and disappointments before we arrive at that happy ending. When the partial – the chapters – end, however, the complete story will be richer for the difficulties.

When I Was a Child

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:11

On the surface, the passage about speaking and acting like a child seems to have little to do with love. It also seems to contradict Jesus' teachings about our needing to become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Childish love, however, is 100% conditional, as any parent of a 2-year-old knows. As long as the child is receiving everything he or she wants, in the way he or she wants it, and at the time he or she wants it, love is given freely and abundantly. At the first sign of not meeting what the child thinks he or she needs at any given moment, however, that loving

***When we believe we
know as much as is
worth knowing about
life and love, we lose
our curiosity***

bundle of joy can turn into a hateful, selfish demon who loathes your very being. There is an enormous difference between childish love and adult love (although some

adults barely grow beyond a childish understanding of what love requires). Until we understand that love is an *action* we must either initiate or participate in, love will remain only an emotion that will come and go like waves crashing on the shore. Here is one way to understand Paul's line above: If we think and speak with childish reasoning, our thoughts will not be mature. As we learn and grow, our understanding of love should deepen. Thus, as we reach adulthood we should put away our childish understanding of love as being conditional.

On the other hand, we have Jesus saying things like, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) Jesus is talking about certain traits of children many of us lose as we become adults. Specifically, he refers to a loss of humility. Many of us give ourselves credit for being far wiser than we actually are. When we believe we know as much as is worth knowing about life and love, we lose our curiosity, our ability to continue learning, and our ability to love freely and trust completely. We retain the narcissism and other self-centered traits of childhood and become immature adults. In Paul’s words, we do not put away our childish ways. Rather, we put away the very characteristics of childlike love that prepare us for entry into the kingdom of heaven.

The resolution for this paradox of becoming like a child, but also putting an end to childish things, seems to be in retaining key elements of childhood innocence and vulnerability, while tempering them with the insight and perspective of adulthood. That combination will lead us to a deeper and more complete experience of love.

In a Mirror Dimly

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 Corinthians 13:12

It should probably not be a surprise that one of the most profound statements in the Bible, in my opinion, is found in the “love” chapter. Paul writes that during our life on earth we “see in a mirror, dimly.” While this may not be obvious, it explains a lot – not just about love, but about life in general. The reality is that our vision is inadequate for making sense of much that happens in life. We often find our circumstances shrouded in mystery and beyond our ability to understand. How can a loving God allow the horrible events that happen on a daily basis? We cannot see directly or clearly to the essence of what underlies our experience.

The reality is that our vision is inadequate for making sense of much that happens in life

Paul’s reference to seeing in a “mirror” is particularly interesting. The first actual mirrors (as opposed to water reflections or polished

metals) likely appeared about the time of Paul. But the image in even the best of mirrors is not an identical recreation. We call it a *mirror image* because everything is reversed – the right side is now left, foreground and background switch positions, and we reach toward our image but our image reaches back from the opposite direction and with the opposite hand. Even so, a mirror gives us a likeness of what we are observing, albeit an imperfect and partial glimpse. When our vision is clouded by a lack of focus, such as from a dirty mirror, the image we see is an even less reliable likeness of reality. Of course, the creation story says we were created in the *image* of God. For

me, this adds another intriguing element to the concept of seeing “in a mirror, dimly.” Dimness can result from poor light, a dirty lens, or an image being out of focus – all of which may apply to our earthly lives. As we consider love, a limited or poorly focused view of love will result in a limited understanding of what love is and what love is not.

All of this helps to explain why our experiences of love on earth do not always live up to the expectations created by the Bible, not to mention movies, novels, and fairy tales. When we see and experience love “in a mirror, dimly,” we only gain an approximation of the enormity and inclusiveness of love at its core. We catch a glimpse of the reality, our brains compensate accordingly and convince us we have seen it all, when in fact we have only seen in part. When we rely only on our earthly senses to gage love, it will appear to wax and wane like the phases of the moon. We must also see through the eyes of faith with an optimistic hope in order to grasp the fullness of love.

The Greatest is Love

And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

1 Corinthians 13:13

To *abide* means to continue, to remain, or to stay. It elicits images of stability and permanence. Therefore, when Paul says “faith, hope, and love abide,” he separates these qualities as uniquely

enduring. While we know that much of what we work for on earth – homes, cars, clothing, food – will not endure, we confess these are the priorities that consume most of our waking hours. We seldom lay awake at night worrying about a lack of faith, hope, or love. Instead, we worry about a lack of money, or a meeting with an unpleasant co-worker, or an appointment with the doctor about an abnormal test result. Faith, hope, and love are not commodities we can purchase, steal, or trade, but they are characteristics we can develop. Some come more naturally to certain people than others, but all of us are capable of cultivating a more-than-sufficient degree of all three.

Because Paul says the greatest of these is love,

***Love is inclusive of
faith and hope***

I think it is fair to assume that love is inclusive of faith and hope. If we are to

love others in the ways described in 1 Corinthians 13, we must have faith in the innate goodness of others, or their worthiness of our love. Such goodness is not always obvious, but when we recognize that everyone is a child of God, we accept that everyone is loved and valued by God. We connect in love with their image-of-God essence, attempting to look beyond their all-to-human exterior.

A loving relationship also inspires hope. There is an optimism in loving relationships that springs from the knowledge that all things are possible and, in the end, all things work together for good. We always hope for the best for those we love.

As we look in depth at 1 Corinthians 13, we begin to picture the expansive and inclusive nature of

love. It permeates every created thing and connects us all. Love is the thread of our interdependence, connecting us together as one, regardless of whether we ever recognize or affirm that unity. Love expresses intensely in committed relationships, but goes well beyond romance. Love is the essence from which we spring and the destination to which we journey. Love is God, and God is love. Without love we cannot recognize God's presence in our lives, nor can we love ourselves or others as we should. We feel separate and out-of-step with life's rhythms. Ultimately, the most pervasive sin of our time is that of separation – the failure to recognize our unity with God and others. Separation, like all sin, is its own punishment. It makes us miserable, it makes us feel unworthy, and it makes us feel alone. Love is the antidote to sin and separation. Where faith and hope abide, love grows – and so do we!

Epilogue

Paul wrote the book of love. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul describes the width, breadth, and depth of love. He makes clear that love extends well beyond, but is inclusive of romance. The true, living Book of Love is dynamic, however, and is still being written. You, gentle reader, are the star character for the next section. Many authors, myself included, have written about the book that Paul wrote about love. Books, however, are not reality, but only someone writing *about* reality. The difference is significant.

The reality behind all expressions of love is God. By whatever name you chose, by whatever religion you practice, by whatever degree of spirituality you possess, God is the sole source of love. When we love another with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength, we allow God's love to flow through us to others. When we are present and participating in that flow, we experience true love in unity with another. For that to happen, however, requires complete vulnerability and trust of us. It requires us to enter loving relationships with all three centers of intelligence – mind, heart, and gut – fully engaged.

There is a Native American story about a finger pointing at the moon. I have seen the moon, and you want to see it, too. I point to the moon for you. My finger is not the moon. My words about the

moon are not the moon. My finger and my words only point you in a certain direction, but you must find your own way there. You can only experience the moon by your own volition. So it is with love. This book is a finger pointing to Paul's insights on love. Paul's book serves as a finger pointing to love. True love is yours to discover, and the next chapter is yours to write.

Appendix

A Sampling of Biblical Passages about Love

“Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.” 1 Peter 4:8

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another: for one who loves has fulfilled the law.” Romans 13:8

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” Romans 12:9-10

“He said to them, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”
Matthew 22:37-40

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
Leviticus 19:18

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

Deuteronomy 6:5

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” Galatians 5:22

“For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love.” 1 Peter 1:5-7

“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.” 1 John 3:14

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”
1 John 4:7

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” 1 John 4:12

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.”
1 John 4:18-19

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Luke 6:27-28

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." Luke 6:32

"But love your enemies; do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Luke 6:35-36

But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. Psalm 13:5

I love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Psalm 18:1-2

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. Psalm 25:10

For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens; for faithfulness extends to the clouds. Psalm 57:10

Those who love me, I will deliver; I will protect those who know my name. When they call to me, I will answer them; I will be with them in trouble. I will rescue them and honor them. With long life I will satisfy them, and show them my salvation. Psalm 91:14-16

The Lord watches over all who love him. Psalm 145:20a

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth, a lovely deer, a graceful doe. May her breasts satisfy you at all times; may you be intoxicated always by her love. Proverbs 5:18-19

To get wisdom is to love oneself; to keep understanding is to prosper. Proverbs 19:8

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine. Song of Solomon 1:2

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

Song of Solomon 8:6-7

And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. Hosea 2:19-20

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Colossians 3:12-14

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love... Philemon 1:8-9

To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance. Jude 1:1-2

Endnotes

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