

How to Be a Better Lover

1 Corinthians 12:31b–13:13

Dear Friends in Christ,

If we could measure the love we have for one another, what would be the mark, or the outcome be? Or better yet, maybe the question we need to ask is this: Is there any love in me? And if so, how good a lover am I?

We are to love one another as human beings, but more as Christians. Love is the identity of a Christian. Therefore, we can say with Paul that unless we have love anything else we do or say will amount to nothing.

But what is love anyways?

In the original Greek language, there are five words that are translated as Love in English. We have A) *στοργή storgē* - which describes a natural affection or love, like that felt by parents for their children. Then we have B) *ξενία xenía* - a word that describes a true bond of hospitality. C) *ἔρως érōs* - is passionate love, with sensual desire and longing. D) *φιλία philía* - a dispassionate virtuous love. It includes loyalty to friends, family, and community, and requires virtue, equality, and familiarity.

Now, all these types of love, are inherent in the human nature. But there is another one, the E) *ἀγάπη agápē*- type of love. It describes a "pure," and ideal type of love. It draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling. It is the basic element in Christ-likeness love.

And agape is the word used in this text of 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, the bases for our meditation. Especially chapter 13 verse 13, where Paul

says: “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (13:13)

Love he says is what we receive from God in Christ, and if we have Christ, we have love, we show love, we live in love.

So, how is your agape love? Paul says we are to love in this type of love. And what he says is nothing more than an echo of what Jesus already asked and commanded us to do: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” Matt 22:37-40

What Jesus and Paul want us to be lovers, and excellent lovers at that, after all it is the “excellent way,” 12:31b).

I. Jesus makes us excellent lovers.

So, Christians are in essence excellent lovers! But are we? It’s hard to love to begin with. Let’s face it, how many of us are not the “people’s person” type? I’m not! We can be afraid of relationships. We are even afraid of talking to those near and dear to us! We don’t like to be opposed. We don’t like to open our hearts fully to our neighbors... do we? Especially if we have been hurt before. We don’t like to get hurt some more, so we try to protect ourselves, but that can certainly hinder us from loving others. And will prevent us from becoming better and even excellent lovers.

C.S. Lewis says: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries;

avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin or 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 only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers...of love is Hell.” (C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1960, p.169.)

It is true, loving others it is a hard business. Even Paul found it difficult, and maybe that’s why other Christians stress more other aspects of faith more than love. That’s why Paul himself says: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Cor 13:1-3

In other words he was saying: “If only, like my mother tongue, I could speak all their languages, and speak like an angel. If only I could preach with prophetic power, grasping and giving away all the marvelous wonders of God’s Word. If only I could move the mountains, with faith jump the furthest sea. If only I were more willing to give all I’ve got. To give myself, burning out, shining. To give myself just like my loving Lord, like Jesus did!” If I could do that, perhaps just as Paul did his missionary work with all his heart... if only! If only I could do that! But really who am I deceiving, I don’t get even so close to the start of what he did. Even so, he sways if I “have not love,” I’m just making noise. I’m a bell clanging in an idol’s temple, absurd. Without love, “I am nothing” (13:2). Without love, “I gain nothing” (13:3).

But it is hard to love one another! Let alone becoming a better and excellent lover? Especially in this divided world. But the truth is that you and I can become better and excellent lovers. But how? We start not by focusing on ourselves. Because on our own we cannot love. We become better lovers by who we are made into and by what we have in us.

Remember, we are the ones who were loved first and made children of the Loving Father. We have been loved unconditionally, undeservedly, you and I are loved by God! And what is it that we have in us? God has poured out his heart on you. You are filled to brimming over with love from God. That's what's in you!

With God there is no if's, but a reality. What Paul holds as ifs, have come true in you already. His love for you is unconditional, even if you spoke languages of human or angels, or not. His love is for you even if you were a prophet or not, a mountain mover or not. Even if you don't give your life or even if you do, God still loves you the same.

God loved Paul also, God loved him even before he become what he become. In fact, God's love is what made Paul do what he did. Before that Paul hated Jesus. He was bent on wiping out Christ's people, there was no love in him, only hate, even when he was a jealous religious scholar of his time. Even when he thought he was defending his faith and religion, there was no love in him. It had to come from the cross where Jesus paid for Paul's sins.

The same with us. From the cross we have received love, and if we are in Christ we are loved, and we do have love! That's a fact! Ah, so we are better and excellent lovers then. Actually, we have been made into better lovers by Jesus love. Sometimes we pray this way: "God, if only you

would change me, then I would love more. If only you would make me more like Jesus, then I would love like Jesus.” Really? Haven’t we realized that that has already happened? We have been changed already? Yes, Jesus took your place at the cross of Calvary, you are baptized, so then you are changed!

And because we are changed, then now, we can pray differently, now we can say: “God, you have loved me. You have baptized me! Lord, help me to believe your love. You give me all your heart. Help me to live your love. Move me to live from your heart!” That’s how we become better lovers!

To become better lovers, or just to love one another, we don’t need anything more, only Jesus! Only God gave of Himself in the person of Jesus is that we know of True Love.

II. Jesus keeps feeding us Love!

How can you love? Remember Paul’s words as he describes love so beautifully. Listen again: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Wow, that’s love! Now, think about this, is it possible that Paul is actually describing you by any chance? Can you see yourself in those words? Here’s a scary exercise. Try to repeat Paul’s words but substitute your name for the word *love* in vv 4–7, like this: “*Name* is patient and kind; *name* does not envy or boast; *name* is not arrogant or rude. *Name* does not insist on its own way; *name* is not irritable or resentful; *name* does not

rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. *Name* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Now that sounds amazing, doesn't it? Equally they could sound hard! How is our love? It fails doesn't it? My heart goes dry. I am painfully aware that I need to be a better lover!

But the Good News today is that Jesus is patient. Has he ever said, “I would not forgive you any more”? Jesus is kind. He's always lifting us up, “Are you stuck? He asks, I'm here to help!” Jesus does not envy. He could say, “Only I am lovely. Why should you get any?” Jesus doesn't boast. A ridiculous picture! As if Jesus is at the throne, bragging, “Father, see me. I am perfect; I am love!” When the reality is that Jesus is at the throne pleading, “Father, see these wounds you gave me for them. Forgive them, guard them, guide them!”

Jesus is not arrogant or rude, does not insist on his own way. Gladly giving himself into the hands of his God, he begs, “Father, not what I want. Your will be done!”

Jesus is not irritable or resentful. He does not rejoice at wrongdoing done against him. Do sin and death do wrong against you? Does the devil wrong you? The devil is delighted to do you wrong! Everything that's wrong with you, and everything wrong done to you, or what you have done, all of that kills Jesus! Gentle as a lamb, he takes up the cross.

Jesus “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (v 7). All that his Father promises—Jesus pours out his pure and holy Spirit to make it all come true for you. Jesus “never ends” (v 8).

While other focus on prophecies, or speaking in tongues, or revelations and knowledge... hear this, they will pass away, they will cease, but

Love? But Jesus? He stands forever, and ever! And Jesus keeps feeding your love so you can be an excellent lover. There in each instance, at any place and time, you are an excellent lover, because you have Jesus, because Jesus has you in his hands.

God has given us each different abilities. You have your unique experiences and your own dreams. And so we each make our unique contribution. Isn't that why God has brought us together in this church family? He loves for us to love one another. We can love with such a love that it spills over to those in our lives who do not yet know Jesus. For we know where love comes from. Jesus loves us! You've got God's word on it. "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (v 13).

Faith holds on to Jesus, takes to heart his love. Hope looks forward to all Jesus so lovingly gives us. So why is love the greatest? Only love nails God's heart. John, in his First Letter, says flat out, "God is love." "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God" (1 Jn 4:8, 7).

"Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (v 12b). I am fully known by Jesus, the Jesus who fully loves me!