

Sermon 43: 1 Corinthians 13:4: The Give and Take of Love

OUTLINE

Patient
Kind

INTRODUCTION

What is love? This is the question we begin to answer today. We have come to 1 Corinthians 13 the famous love chapter and last week we focused on the why of love; the importance of love; and the superiority of love, today we come into the specifics of defining love. V4-8, is a list of what love is. In the Greek it is a list of 15 verbs pushing us into the idea that love is more than a feeling but is active. These verbs are in the present tense indicating that they are not one off grand gestures but a steady and consistent activity. Some have suggested that Paul pulled a previously existing poem and embedded it here; that is not the case. Paul is doing pastoral triage and reacting to the peculiar needs in the Corinthian church. This means that this is not an exhaustive list but rather a practical and personal one fitted for the Corinthian's needs. It has also been suggested that if we take the list as a list of negatives we will likely get a better sense of what was going wrong in the Corinthian church: the Corinthians were not patient; not kind; envious and boastful; arrogant and rude; insisting on their own way; irritable; resentful; defending sin not the truth; unwilling to bear anything, believe anything, hope anything, endure anything, and were only ever loving temporarily and conditionally. It does raise the question, what would our list look like; what would your personal list of fitted reminders of what love is look like? We all have differing personalities, situations and preferred sins. Maybe your list would have, 'love is gentle;' 'love keeps its promises;' 'love listens carefully to understand how another feels;' 'love is not lazy;' 'love does not use truth as a bludgeon;' 'love is not entitled,' etc.

Last week in v1-3 we looked at the problem of loveless religion, the dangers of lovelessness; today we begin looking at what true religion actually looks like and the manifestations love takes. We begin with the first two items on our list, v4, 'Love is patient and kind.' I have called this sermon, 'The Give and Take of Love' because patience generally speaking has to do with taking injury and difficulty; and kindness has to do with how we give to and treat others. This opening pair deal with the sins we put up with from others, and the good that we give in return. These will be our two points.

Patient

Why does Paul begin a long list of what love is with patience? If you were making a list you might have chosen a different practical application, maybe something more positive like love is giving or generous. Paul begins with a word that highlights that our loving often has to be exercised in the context of conflict and difficulty. Think about those situations when you have not been loving. After a long day at work where things have been going wrong and people have been making all sorts of demands of you and you feel overwhelmed. Then you get home and your family is the one that has to take the brunt of your frustration. Or think about the last time you said some hurtful things in anger, it was likely because someone had said something hurtful to you first. We use these situations as justification for our lovelessness. But here Paul pulls the rug

out from underneath our feet, for love is patient. Love is an unwavering dedication to do good for others no matter what sin others have committed against you, no matter what situations are piling up against you, love is patient. Long-tempered; long suffering; the positive act of waiting and not reacting; suffering injustice with goodwill; receiving injury without retaliation; enduring suffering both personal and situational, these are some of the suggested definitions of what Paul is describing and they all fit. We will all inevitably be hurt by others and be in situations where it is hard not to lash out, but love like that enduring desert plant continues to thrive and is not snuffed out. We will face harm from those who maliciously intend to harm us and all that is ours, like those who spitefully persecute Christians. And we will face the harm of those who go through life selfishly causing unintended damage, like the person who thoughtlessly texts on their phone while driving and rear ends you giving you permanent neck pain for the rest of your life. Patient love is the resilient Spirit grown fruit of the Spirit that endures all.

Harm to us comes in many forms. How many of us have been lied about, had others assume the worst of us, liberally and judgmentally reduced to some simple weakness, presenting our faults in an exaggerated light, poisoning the opinion of others against us, setting on fire the course of nature where for years in the minds of others a lying representation of our characters will now live, and we are now suspiciously viewed, we are not approached for relationship, any further injury we suffer is not met with compassion and sympathy but a judgmental indifference. Our bodies are harmed; our property; our jobs; our spiritual wellbeing. Love suffers long. It looks like Rom. 12:14; 17-20, 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them; ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.' It obeys 1 Pet. 2:19-23, 'For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.'

We are not patient, Christ was patient and is our example, Jonathan Edwards fills out exactly what Christ put up with in patience, 'He meekly bore innumerable and very great injuries from men. He was very much the object of bitter contempt and reproach, and slighted and despised as of but little account. Though he was the Lord of glory, yet he was set at nought, and rejected and disesteemed of men. He was the object of the spite and malice and bitter revilings of the very ones he came to save. He endured the contradiction of sinners against himself. He was called a glutton and a drunkard; and though holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners, yet he was charged with being a friend of publicans and sinners. He was called a deceiver of the people, and oftentimes (as in John 10:20 ; John 7:20) he was said to be mad, and possessed with the devil.... He was sometimes charged (John 10:33) with being a

wicked blasphemer, and one that deserved death on that account. Sometimes they charged him with working miracles by the power and aid of Beelzebub the prince of devils, and even called him (Mat. 10:25) a devil himself. And such was their spite against him, that they had agreed (John 9:22) to excommunicate or cast out of the synagogue anyone that should say that he was the Christ. They hated him with a mortal hatred, and wished he was dead, and from time to time endeavored to murder him, yea, were almost always endeavoring to imbrue their hands in his blood. His very life was an annoyance to them, and they hated him so (Psa. 41:5), that they could not bear that he should live. We very often read (as in John 5:16) of their seeking to kill him. And what pains did many of them take to watch him in his words, that they might have something of which to accuse him, and thus be able, with the show of reason, to put him to death! And many times they combined together to take his life in this manner. They often actually took up stones to stone him, and once led him to the brow of a hill, that they might cast him down, and thus dash him to pieces. And yet Christ meekly bore all these injuries without resentment or one word of reproach, and with a heavenly quietness of spirit passed through them all. And at last, when he was most ignominiously dealt with of all, when his professed friend betrayed, and his enemies seized him, and led him away to scourging and the death of the cross, he went as a lamb to the slaughter, opening not his mouth. Not one word of bitterness escaped him. There was no interruption of the calmness of his mind under his heavy distress and sufferings, nor was there the least desire for revenge. But, on the contrary, he prayed for his murderers, that they might be forgiven, even when they were about nailing him to the cross, and not only prayed for them, but pleaded in their behalf with his Father, that they knew not what they did. The sufferings of his life, and the agonies of his death, did not interrupt his long-suffering toward those that injured him.'

But there is more, this is not some empty tolerance, but a love determined not to respond to the evil but that continues to pursue for the good. Jesus endured His own murder and still went on to make his enemies His friends. We turn the other cheek not to glorify victimhood or hold up injustice but as the path of the peacemaker that seeks out its enemy that will not run from its enemy but pursue them in love. Now it is true that the path of wisdom dictates that we have to separate ourselves from certain enemies. There are those who are hard hearted who will not be reconciled, who will not be parted from their sins, who we forgive from the heart but still hand over to justice. Even then love is patient and is not in the grip of the fire of vengeance but sorrowful as it has exhausted all its options and gives them over to themselves and God's judgement. A hard-hearted child may have to be given tough love not as a vindictive repayment for wrong but as a protection for the home. An adulterous spouse will have to be divorced not as a measure of pain in the form of legal sanctions to try and extract a pound of flesh in payment. A toxic in-law may have to be put at a distance not as a weaponizing of silence but to protect the peace of the family. An abuser will have to be reported to the police not as a weapon of violence for the victim. Even in these acts where evil cannot be responsibly answered only with good but other measures of justice and self-protection, there is a patient, enduring, long-suffering love in the heart.

But how can we? As we have heard about Christ's enduring love, and as we have considered how bad we are at patiently loving those who hurt us, we all feel the seemingly infinite chasm between us and this sort of love. How do we do it? We have already spoken of the Holy Spirit who produces this fruit within our lives last week. We have just pointed to the incredible and inspiring example

of Christ as he lived out the perfect human example of patience. The Bible also points us to God's own patience with humanity, Matt. 5:44-45, 'But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.' When we consider God's disposition towards sinners as slow to anger and always ready to forgive we are brought again to the cross where we see God not giving sin what it deserves but paying the cost Himself to satisfy His love towards us. Take all the sin we as the human race have ever committed against God and lay it in a pile, and then see God not acting first in justice, but in mercy being patient with His enemies. Watch Him pursue the path of costly peacemaking paying the highest price to make His enemies His friends, measure how we rejected it when He Himself walked among us, measure the rejection of the gospel; see what is so costly yet offered freely, look at how we have spurned His offer, and yet He waits, 2 Pet. 3:9, 'The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.' When we thought that One so holy would act, would strike with unrelenting terror; when we volunteered to call down fire from heaven, as we filled our own hearts with fiery indignations and vehement renunciations of those who deserved punishments, still His patient love continues. As we learn of His holiness and His love and the infinite calm of His patience in the face of that which deserves nothing but judgement our own hearts are stilled, our own anger fizzles out, how can we justify our lashing out in anger when He who has every right to be angry is patient?

This patience is not only powerful to still our hearts but can work powerfully in the lives of those who are patient with. One commentator shares this story: 'One of Abraham Lincoln's earliest political enemies was Edwin M. Stanton. He called Lincoln a "low cunning clown" and "the original gorilla." "It was ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla," he would say, "when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois." Lincoln never responded to the slander, but when, as president, he needed a secretary of war, he chose Stanton. When his incredulous friends asked why, Lincoln replied, "Because he is the best man." Years later, as the slain president's body lay in state, Stanton looked into the coffin and said through his tears, "There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen." His animosity was finally broken by Lincoln's long-suffering, nonretaliatory spirit. Patient love won out.'¹

Kind

To stop here would be enough, to wonder at the patience of God and imitate Him seems like more than we could conceive of matching, but Paul goes on. Love is patient 'and kind.' If patience describes how we take injury, kindness describes how we give good. The Greek word for kindness is 'chresteuetai', 'The kindness of Christians in the second century so surprised their pagan counterparts that, according to Tertullian (*Apol.* 3.39), they called Christians *chrestiani*, "made up of mildness or kindness," rather than *christiani*.'² This word bears the meaning of goodness, generosity and benevolence. This is a word you would use to describe

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 339.

² David E. Garland, [1 Corinthians](#), Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 617.

a heart felt good not a mechanical good, an action tempered with a good will towards those it is loving giving shape and character to how it gives. It has been described as a tender-heartedness towards others as opposed to harsh or heartless.

Again we are pushed into defining love by the actions of God towards us in the gospel, Eph. 4:32, 'Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.' This will distinguish Christian kindness from other kindnesses. For example, think of a refugee situation, all of us have our hearts drawn out to a situation where a woman and her child are abandoned with no security and nowhere to call home, no prospect for the future. We all feel her vulnerability and powerlessness, we are all moved by the injustice of the situation and easily empathize and feel a desire to deal gently and generously with her. To not feel this sort of willingness to be kind is to be inhumane and unfeeling. Perhaps you might even be willing to be kind to one of the soldiers of the invading force who is injured and close to death, who is in pain and crying out for help. Your humanity might even be moved to be kind, to be generous, to go the second mile for such a person. But what about your enemy? This is the kindness of God towards us, Rom. 5:6-8, 'For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' Tit. 3:3-7, 'For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.' Jesus uses the example of the Good Samaritan a racial enemy and heretic to the Jew to show how he helped someone when no one else would, how he helped sacrificially, and even made provision for every need that the man who had been robbed and left for dead, a perfect stranger. A man who if he met on the street would avoid him and slur him.

Our kindness is like God's, He pours out gifts upon the just and the unjust. Even though rejected He gives willingly. God grants mercies every morning to the undeserving. Every good gift is from Him. The greatest possible gift is given by Him. The greatest gift at the highest personal cost. God did not shut up His heart or His kindness. It is an unrelenting flood that does not depend upon what we give Him. And so is our kindness shaped, a kindness of a different type, we are kind to all not only those situations which would move the heart of any; we are kind to all including those who do not deserve kindness like God does with us.

Let us move from these lofty heights to the dirty streets of the Corinthian situation. Those in Corinth were impatient and unkind. Maybe some had loaned money to a poor church member and would not wait for repayment patiently but took them to court to extract by law what they were owed. Maybe those of a Gentile background who had no scruples when it came to meat offered to idols were impatient with the weak consciences of those who were misled by guilt free eating and refused to accommodate the weak. Maybe the rich were too impatient for the poor and those who were slaves to arrive for the evening meal

and Lord's Table so they went on indulging themselves without any thought for them. Maybe there were unkind words, racial slurs, disrespectful and talking down to others. Maybe the groups that were divided against each other were now in a vicious cycle of returning lie for lie, character attack for character attack, social humiliation for social humiliation. Whatever the sins were, these are unworthy of those who are Christians. We are those who have been saved by God's patient and kind actions towards us in Christ, we are filled with His Spirit; and this is the very thing that the world needs to see and experience that they too would feel their brokenness and through a thirst for what is true be drawn to Christ through our love for one another.