

Marriage and 1 Corinthians 13, Part 2

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Certainly, it is extremely important for all of us to study the word as much as we can, but even in that study, there are pitfalls that we must avoid. One of those pitfalls is been-there, done-that syndrome. This is most common in our dealings with the most familiar passages of Scripture. These are the passages that even non-Christians know, that football players put on their eyeblack, that we've been singing about in our hymns for as long as we've been Christians. We've seen the passage so much, and we've been through it so much, that we assume we've found all that we can find there. As a result, we fail to read it attentively with an ear for nuance, and we fail to make application.

In this category of too-familiar passages, we must include 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Everybody who knows anything about the Bible knows that 1 Corinthians 13 is the love chapter. We don't have to attend very many church services before we come across this one in some form, and many of us may well have it memorized. However, despite the well-known nature of this text, there are still things about it that we don't necessarily understand. What, for instance, is the difference between love bearing all things and enduring all things, and how does either one of those things differ from the patience that love exhibits that we looked at last week? Paul and the Holy Spirit chose those different words for a reason, and if we don't understand the nuances of the inspired language here, we're missing what God wants us to know.

Even more than that, though, our biggest problems with this text are not with our interpretation, but with our practice. We know that we aren't supposed to be provoked or remember evil of another, but in our lives, we struggle to avoid that evil conduct. Perhaps, we struggle most with this where it is most important, in our dealings with our families and particularly in our marriages. Let's work on these things as we look once more at marriage and 1 Corinthians 13.

Love and Reactions.

This unexplored section begins with the statement that love **IS NOT PROVOKED**. This is another word that doesn't show up in the New Testament a whole lot. In fact, the only other place it occurs is in Acts 17:16. Thankfully, this passage and 1 Corinthians 13 seem to be talking about basically the same thing. Paul came into Athens, saw all of the idols and their temples, and he felt like he had to say something. Those idols baited him into talking about God. This is what love does not allow to happen. Love knows how to shrug off even extreme provocation.

The application of this to our marriages is obvious. More than anyone else, our spouses know how to get on our nerves. They know which buttons to push to get a rise out of us. Too much of the time, we predictably take the bait and get hooked on an argument. Paul's point is that in our marriages we ought not do that. Even if our husband or our wife is spoiling for a fight, we must not oblige them. After all, of all the times in our marriages when we've said things in response to provocation, how many of those things were good? How much of the time do we look back on what we said and say, "Boy, I'm glad I let her goad me into saying that?" Brethren, I can't think of a single thing I said in the heat of anger, whether to Lauren or to anyone else, that I'm glad I said. What's best for our marriages is that we learn to ignore provocation. That mild-mannered response will do the best job of preserving peace in our households.

Paul continues on to say that love **THINKS NO EVIL**. To be quite honest, this is not a place where I like the New King James translation. The Greek word here doesn't simply mean "to think". It means "to impute, to reckon, to take account of." The mental picture here is of someone who keeps score of a loved one's actions. Every time that loved one says or does something they don't like, they put a little black mark next to the loved one's name, and when the loved one accumulates enough black marks, he gets blasted. We see God behaving in exactly the opposite way in 2 Corinthians 5:18-19. God could keep score on all of us. He could accumulate enough black marks to condemn us all forever, but He doesn't. Through His grace, He doesn't hold our trespasses against us, and reconciles us to Him instead.

Once again, this is a skill that is key to our marriages. All of us do things to our spouses that are dumb and downright sinful. I have certainly sinned against Lauren many times. Usually, I'll come to my senses a little later, and I'll go to her and tell her I was wrong and that I'm sorry for what I did. The only way that our marriage can continue is if she accepts my repentance and moves on, instead of nurturing her sense of being wronged. Thankfully, I have a forgiving wife who does just that. All of us must learn to be forgiving ourselves, instead of holding on to evil done to us.

Love also **DOES NOT REJOICE IN INQUITY**. This simply means that love does not delight in seeing unrighteous behavior, or in being unrighteous itself. This same word appears in Romans 6:13. Just like the Christian must not present his members as instruments of unrighteousness, so the one who loves must not be an instrument of unrighteousness either. This can become important in our marriages in two main ways. First of all, when our spouses engage in evil, we have to call them on it. It's not loving to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that they're not doing anything wrong when they are. Of course, the Biblical admonition about pearls and swine may apply here, but as a general rule, love is willing to speak out, lovingly but firmly, against sin in a loved one. Also, this means that love does not

sin against its object. No matter how angry we are, no matter how justified we may feel, we never have the right to treat our spouses in a way that goes against the laws of God. It may be extremely satisfying to return evil for what we believe is evil, but it is never righteous. Regardless of the situation, we cannot rejoice in iniquity in our marriages.

The flip side to that idea is that love **REJOICES IN THE TRUTH**. Once again, this is a fairly simple and Biblically common concept. We see Jesus describing some who did not rejoice in the truth in John 8:44. Notice that this doesn't have to do with any particular factoid. It has to do with an entire perspective on existence. The devil does not simply lie. Instead, he does not stand in the truth. Everything about him is warped by his love of falsehood.

It's all too easy for us to fall into the same trap. Ever met somebody who always thought they were right? Who never had a problem that they thought was their fault? Who was super-good at picking out sin in others, but was blind to it in themselves? That's someone who does not rejoice in the truth. We can get like that in our marriages. We can zero in on our spouses' faults. We can blame them for every argument or confrontation we have. We can act like we're angels and they're the scum of the earth. To an extent, all of us struggle with this, because it's hard to believe evil about ourselves or recognize our own flaws. That kind of self-examination is not pleasant. However, it's necessary, because it's the only tool we have to reveal the truth about ourselves. Let's rejoice in it in our marriages, even when it's painful.

"All Things"

In the finishing stretch of his definition of love, Paul uses four parallel descriptions that end with "all things." The first of these is that love **BEARS ALL THINGS**. This one is more difficult to unravel. As the saying goes, languages have lots of words for things the speakers encounter a lot. Supposedly, Eskimos have thirty different words for snow. If that's so, the ancient Greeks must have had a pretty hard life, because the Bible has at least 14 different words for bearing up under suffering, and each one of those words has its own distinct nuance of meaning. In this case, the word translated "bear" is *stego*, which is the same word as in "Stegosaurus," the dinosaur with the row of armored plates down its back. The idea here is of dealing with suffering by armoring or covering oneself against it. We see Paul himself *stego-ing* in 1 Corinthians 9:11-12. He was willing to steel himself to hunger for the sake of the Corinthians.

In our marriages, this puts a whole new spin on the idea of "tough love". We don't show tough love by booting the obnoxious spouse out the door. Instead, we show tough love by toughening ourselves. If they say or do something that really gets on our nerves, provided that it isn't out-and-out sinful, it's our responsibility to learn to deal with it. We can't go through marriage with tender egos that are easily offended. We need to learn to bear all things.

Likewise, love **BELIEVES ALL THINGS**. This is the same word that occurs hundreds of times elsewhere in the Bible. However, this doesn't mean that love is gullible or allows itself to be easily fooled. Look at the reason the people give for their belief in Jesus in John 7:31. It's not that Jesus just popped up, said, "I'm the Messiah," and all these people foolishly fell into line without seeing proof. However, even though these people were skeptical of His claims, they didn't take that skepticism to an extreme like the Pharisees did. They needed a reason for their faith, but they could ultimately be persuaded to believe. When they saw the works that Jesus did, those led them to accept Him as the Messiah.

This should also be true of our interactions with our spouses. Love doesn't mean that we have to be dumb. If the husband comes home at 1 in the morning, staggering drunk, reeking of perfume, with lipstick all over his collar, we aren't required by God to believe his lame excuses. However, that's not usually the problem. The problem arises when people don't trust their spouses when they should. If the wife is home from work two hours late, and she tells us that she had to work on a special project, we shouldn't jump to the conclusion that she was cheating on us with a co-worker either. We should accept any and all reasonable explanations. That's what it means for our love to believe all things.

Third, our love should **HOPE ALL THINGS**. Here, we run into another familiar Bible word. It's the same word as in 1 Corinthians 13:13-14. As is true of our hope of heaven, the hope of 1 Corinthians 13 is not the kind of hope that people have when they play the lottery. It's not the optimistic speculation that things just might work out. Instead, this hope is a trust, a confidence, an expectation founded on evidence. This is the kind of hope that we should have in our marriages. We shouldn't conclude that our union is headed for disaster. We shouldn't expect that our spouse is going to get worse and worse. Of course, those things may be true, and we shouldn't be blind to the possibility. Instead, what we should do is consult the evidence of today to learn what tomorrow may hold. If the evidence is encouraging, we should be willing to trust. In marriages where trust has been breached, this may prove difficult, and God doesn't require our hope to run ahead of our experience. However, where there is grounds for hope, that's where we should hope.

Finally, love **ENDURES ALL THINGS**. This is yet another one of those millions of Greek words for endurance, and this one means "to bear up under". It's the same word as in Matthew 10:22. The application is simple. Just like Atlas had to support the weight of the world on his shoulders, we have to patiently support the burdens of our marriage on ours. Some parts of marriage are wonderful, but some are just plain work. I don't enjoy doing the dishes in our household, but it's something that I endure doing because I believe it helps produce a good marriage. If we truly love our spouses, those are the burdens that we will be willing to bear, for as long as our lives last.