

Marriage and 1 Corinthians 13

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Sometimes, one of the biggest problems that we have with interpreting the Bible is the inability to make applications unless those applications are spelled out right in front of us by God. There may be no area where this is more obvious than in the realm of teaching about marriage. Most of the sermons and presentations that I've ever heard about marriage fall into one of two main categories. Either they focus on Ephesians 5 or 1 Peter 3, or they use much more pop psychology than Scripture and claim to be an application of one of those two passages.

Now, admittedly, if we were to do a concordance search for "husbands" and "wives", we'd end up back in Ephesians 5 or 1 Peter 3, because those are the places where the Scripture lays out duties that are unique to the husband and unique to the wife. However, most of the attitudes and actions that build a good marriage are not unique to one gender or the other. Husbands have to be courteous, but so do wives. Wives have to be forgiving, but so do husbands. Nor, in fact, are these responsibilities that Christians have only in marriage. With a few exceptions, God's expectations for our conduct toward our spouses are the same as His expectations for our conduct toward anyone. This means, then, that instead of just a few passages here and there, He meant the entire Bible as a manual for our marriages.

With this in mind, let's consider the great description of love in action contained in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. As Paul makes clear here, love is more than just a feeling. Love is more than just words. Instead, true love manifests itself in action, and nowhere should these actions be more evident than in our interactions with our spouses. Even though these things are critically important to our marriages, typically they get a brief mention during our wedding ceremonies and not much discussion thereafter. Let's correct that this morning. Let's look at marriage and 1 Corinthians 13.

Longsuffering, Kindness, Lack of Envy.

The first thing this text tells us is that love **SUFFERS LONG**. Many translations here say that love is patient, and although that's pointed in the right direction, it doesn't really capture the nuance of the Greek here. Sometimes, when we're patient, it just means that we wait without kicking up much of a fuss, like a child who waits for Christmas without begging his parents to let him open some presents early. At other times, though, we are patient when we are actively suffering and endure it, and that's the kind of patience associated with love. To give us an idea of what this entails, we see the same Greek word translated "patience" in James 5:10-11. The patience of love is the patience of the prophets, who endured persecution while they were waiting for God's promised reward. The patience of love is the patience of Job, who lost everything but his life, yet refused to curse God and die as his wife urged him to do.

If we truly love our spouses, this same kind of enduring even misery will be evident in our marriages. Maybe the suffering isn't a big deal. Maybe it's that week after week, year after year, our husbands will not take out the trash, even if it is utterly overflowing, unless we directly ask him to do so. And yes, I would be one of the bad husbands who falls into that category. Maybe the issue is more serious. Maybe our spouse has the habit of launching into verbal tirades at the slightest provocation. Maybe they're total slugs who refuse to get a job or even help with the housework. Regardless, they are still our spouses. We committed ourselves to them for life, and it's our responsibility to patiently endure.

Just as love is longsuffering, love is also **KIND**. This means that it is mild-mannered, easy-going, and gracious, even when it is provoked. We see an excellent example of kindness in the person of God as He is described in Luke 6:35. When the righteous live according to God's will and thank Him for His goodness, He responds to them by blessing them according to their needs. On the other hand, when the unrighteous rebel against God and greedily consume His bounty without giving thanks, God still blesses them according to their needs. The evil of others does not erase His determination to do good. We must be kind in our marriages just as God is. As we all know, there are times in our marriages when we feel like we're not being treated the way that we deserve. When that happens, we're tempted to retaliate by returning evil for evil. I heard a story recently about a sister who got in a fight with her husband, stormed out of the bedroom, over to her sewing machine, and spent the next couple of hours sewing the flies of his boxer shorts shut! However satisfying that kind of counterattack may be, it is not kind. If we want to please God, we must respond to even the harshest provocation with gentleness and mildness. That doesn't make us weak. It makes us strong in the Lord.

In addition, love **DOES NOT ENVY**. We see a marvelous example of this forbidden behavior in Acts 7:9. Joseph had a high opinion of himself, he was clearly Daddy's favorite, and here he comes, strutting into camp to spy on his brothers. They can't stand it, so they dump him in a pit and sell him to slave traders. At first blush, it's hard to imagine this kind of envy arising in marriage. However, after a little thought, it's easy to see how it could become a problem. Anytime one person thinks another is better than he is, that's a breeding ground for envy. Perhaps the husband can't ever seem to get a good job, the wife is the primary breadwinner, and it really grates on him that she is more financially successful than she is. Maybe Dad is really easygoing and good with the kids, but they resent Mom for being

the disciplinarian, so they prefer to associate with him instead, and she seethes about it. If we ever find ourselves becoming envious about these or any other issues, we must remember that in marriage, there aren't two. There can only be one. Our spouses' successes are ours; their triumphs are our own too. Rather than envying them for their blessings, we need to be thankful for what they have received, and learn to be thankful for our own blessings too.

Arrogance and Rudeness.

Beyond these things, love **DOES NOT PARADE ITSELF**. This is a difficult idea to explain, and it's difficult because this is actually the only place in the Bible this particular Greek word is used. It's the adjectival form of a word that isn't even in the Bible, and this word describes a boastful man who marches up and down the street singing his own praises. None of the other words in Scripture for boasting or pride really capture this idea, so the best I could come up with for a definition was 2 Samuel 20:1-2. This rebel Sheba was a man who DID parade himself. He literally blew his own horn. In our marriages, this is something that we must not do. I'll admit, I can have trouble with this one. As I mentioned earlier, I am not the world's most diligent trash-remover, so on the rare occasions when I do notice the full trash can and change it, I'm guaranteed to let Lauren know all about it. I may even blow a fake trumpet fanfare or two on my way down the stairs. Of course, I'm not totally serious about that, but blowing our own horn can be a serious problem. If we demand that our spouses recognize every nice thing we do for them or every success we attain, whom are we really serving? Are we living for them, to make their lives better, or are we living for ourselves, and they make a convenient audience? Let's be careful to take the focus off of ourselves and put it on them where it belongs.

In similar fashion, love **IS NOT PUFFED UP**. This may seem like the same idea as the last one, but it's really not. The idea of parading ourselves was about our actions; this one is about our attitude toward ourselves. When we're puffed up, we've gotten impressed with our own wonderfulness, often in areas where we don't have cause to be impressed. Look at how Paul addresses this problem in the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 4:6-7. The Corinthians had the ungodly problem of calling themselves by the name of their favorite preachers, and they looked down on those who had a different favorite preacher than they did. It was a grown-up version of "My dad can beat up your dad". As Paul says, this was ridiculous. The Corinthians had accomplished absolutely nothing spiritually, yet they were putting on airs because they said, "I am of Paul" or "I am of Apollos", as though labeling themselves were some kind of spiritual triumph. Today, we don't have any trouble getting puffed up for equally ridiculous reasons, even in our marriages. It might be nothing more than looking over at our spouses and thinking, "Boy, they're lucky I married them." It might be using every opportunity we have to remind them that really, this is our world, and they're just living in it. No matter what impressive attributes we may think we have, we never have cause for this kind of posturing. As Paul asks, what do we have that we did not receive? Even if we are smart, charming, good-looking, and really awesome at Wii Bowling, it's all because God created us that way, and it glorifies Him, and not us. Let's remember that.

Love also **DOES NOT BEHAVE RUDELY**. This attribute seems pretty straightforward at first, but there's more here than is apparent on the surface. "Rude" here doesn't mean "discourteous". Instead, it refers to that which is shameful or embarrassing. A form of this word is translated as "shame" in Revelation 16:15. In other words, if you are walking down the street as naked as a jaybird, and everything you've got is exposed for all to see, you're behaving rudely in this sense. It might not be immediately obvious what this has to do with marriage, but there's actually an extremely important point for us here. It means that in our marriages, we should never expose the things that should be kept private. I see this one especially at potlucks and holiday parties. There I am, sitting down, eating too much, making conversation with the couple across the table, when all of a sudden, one of them really zings the other, not in good fun, but in a vicious, mean-spirited way. Moments like that are embarrassing. I don't know what to say. I don't know where to look. Thankfully, Lauren has never zapped me in public like that, but I'm sure it's even more embarrassing to be on the receiving end of such a barb. When I hear comments like that, it makes me concerned for the marriage, because if husband and wife will say such things to each other in public, what do they say to each other in private? Let's be careful never to expose our spouses to that kind of shame and humiliation. Let's keep rudeness out of our conduct.

Finally, at least for this first half of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, love **DOES NOT SEEK ITS OWN**. This is one of the most global attributes we've looked at so far, and it points to nothing less than the fundamental orientation of our lives. Are we here for others, or are we here for ourselves? Certainly, few people will admit to being basically self-seeking, but if we are, it will always be evident in our lives. James explains in James 3:14-16. Nowhere are these things going to be more apparent than in our marriages. Marriage, as God designed it, is an arrangement in which husband and wife live for each other and serve each other, and when that purpose is absent, the basic design of marriage is subverted. We can point fingers at our spouses all we want, but we are far better served to point them at ourselves. If we keep score of every little nice thing we do for our husbands or our wives, and then refuse to do any more nice things until they do something for us, we're being self-seeking. If we constantly focus on ourselves and on our needs, and pitch a shrieking fit if our needs aren't being met, we're being self-seeking. Let's erase that attitude from our lives and concentrate on our spouses instead.