

WHAT IS LOVE?

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[0:00] Lord, we pray we may hear you speaking to us through your word. Quiet in our hearts. Calm our minds that we may listen to your still small voice.

Bring us closer to you in the words we hear and how we hear them. And how we hear them and how we think them. In Jesus' name. Amen.

What is love? Popular culture tells us love is important. Love is a many-splendored thing. All you need is love. The famous song by the Beatles. Love makes the world go round. Love means never having to say you're sorry.

And so on. Ancient philosophers said that everything in the world is made of four elements. Earth, air, fire, and water.

[1:03] The movie called *The Fifth Element* imagined that there was a fifth element that tied these four together. And that element would save the world.

That fifth most important element was love. Psychologists once said that love is one of the five basic needs of a human being.

And that to be healthy and happy we need to love and to be loved. But do we know what love is? What it really means? We use the word love in connection with all sorts of things and anything, don't we? Anything for which we have even the slightest feeling.

We might say we love cheesecake. We love watching our favorite soap or sport on TV. We love our new mobile phone.

[2:06] We love our dog. We love our cat and so on. Do we really know what love is when we also say we love our children? We love our grandchildren, our great-grandchildren.

We love our husband, our wife. And we love God. For the Christian, the term love has a very definite, a very specific meaning.

But like the world at large, we too tend to forget what love really is. We can turn almost anywhere in Scripture and learn something about love.

Seemingly, the word love can be found 442 times in the King James Version. Of the Bible. But the more modern translations use the word even more often.

In the NIV, you will find the word love 697 times. And in the reader's version of the NIV, love can be found 832 times.

[3:15] So we seem to be using this word love more and more in our Bibles as well as in everyday life. The best-known text on love, of course, is the passage I read earlier, the 13th chapter of Corinthians, which was Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

In chapter 12, the preceding chapter to our reading, Paul's been discussing the gifts that God gives the church through his spirit. Paul speaks directly of many of those gifts and shows how they work together for the good of the whole church.

But then he shifts into a different approach and says, I now will show you the most excellent way. And that more excellent way is in fact the most excellent way of all. The way of love. Yes, popular culture and thought says that love is important.

But so does the Bible. Jesus said that the most important commandments were to love God and to love our neighbor. The Bible also tells us that God is love.

[4:35] It says that God loved the world and that is why he sent Jesus to die for the world. It says that God loved the world.

It says eternal. It says eternal. It says eternal love. It says eternal love that lasts longer. Much longer than this world because we carry this love with us into eternity. This love is God's greatest gift to us. You might say at this stage, now wait a minute. Aren't there other important things that just might be equal to, if not more important than love? What about preaching the gospel?

Is it not through preaching the gospel that people hear about Jesus and accept him as their Lord and Savior? Isn't telling people about Jesus the most important?

[5:58] And what about prophetic powers like the prophets in the Bible? They were able to tell God's people what to do in times of trouble, tell them what to do in times of despair.

Isn't that kind of divine guidance important? And what about faith? It's through faith that we're saved by grace.

And even the faith the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain. And preaching without love is just speaking. And not really saying anything relevant.

Faith without love is empty. Even great wisdom is meaningless without love. Friends, love is the essential element that gives meaning to all the others.

Without love, all those other things, as powerful and as important as they are, they all lose their meaning.

[7:08] Someone once wrote, love is that thing which of a church, church has it. It doesn't really need much else.

But if it doesn't have it, whatever else it has, doesn't really matter very much. Without love, wisdom, faith, even sacrifice, become unanchored in the sea of life and lose their place.

Love is the anchor. Love is the key. Love is the essential element to all things in life. So we all agree that love is essential and important.

And our question remains, what is love? Well, both the church and the world speak of love, but they often seem to be speaking of different things.

The world speaks of falling in love and of falling out of love. The world speaks of love as simply never having to say you're sorry. Well, surely there's more to love than that.

[8:23] Here in this chapter, Paul's talking about a unique kind of love. He's talking about unconditional love.

In Greek, the word agape is used to describe this self-sacrificial, this unconditional love. Paul says love is patient and kind.

Love is not jealous or boastful. It's not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

This is the kind of love that the Bible says that God has for us and that Jesus calls us to have for God and our fellow human beings.

Love is why God sent his only son into this world and why Jesus chose to die for our sins.

[9:30] It wasn't nails that held Jesus to the cross. It was his love for each one of us that kept him there.

What kind of love is this that gave itself for me? I am the guilty one, yet I go free. No eye has ever seen, no ear has ever heard, nor has the heart of man conceived.

What kind of love is this? So love is not just romance. It's not just friendship. It's not never having to say you're sorry.

Love in the biblical sense is so, so much more. Paul tells us how supreme love is and then goes on to show us how it is superior by saying something about its nature.

His definition, I suppose, is not much a definition as it is a description. A description of how love behaves.

[10:37] Every term in this section is a verb because Paul knew that love is not just a static thing, not merely a state of being, not just a nice feeling, not just empty talk.

And most of all, what Paul says is not so much what love does is what it doesn't do. One commentator puts it this way and I quote, he said, this love of which I speak is slow to lose patience.

It looks for a way of being constructive. It's not possessive. It is neither anxious to impress, nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

love has good manners, does not pursue selfish advantages, it's not touchy, it does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people.

On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails. friends, love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope.

[11:54] It can outlast anything. This picture of love is by no means complete, nor does it try to be. But it is enough of a description to convince us of three things, and the first is, Paul must have been thinking of Jesus himself as he sought to describe love.

Who more than Jesus demonstrated such incredible love? No other man could have lived a life worthy of such description.

In fact, Paul describes love as a perfect thing no mere human could ever achieve. The second thing, the kind of love described here, is far from being merely a feeling of fondness and goodwill. The real sentiment of love is the most difficult of all to accomplish. Who among us is always patient, always kind, never jealous or boastful, arrogant or rude?

Who among us pretends to bear all things? Pretends to endure all things? To hope all things?

[13:22] There's not one among us who has not failed time and time again to love as we should have loved. And every one of us will continue to fail.

love is the love that doesn't mean we cannot also succeed and succeed more and more. And the third thing we learn here in Paul's description of love behaves is that this kind of love must come to us as a gift from God and is in turn a gift we should try to pass on to others.

Love is the highest spiritual gift of all. Love has its origin in God not in us. The early Christians experienced this amazing love and the undeserved grace that had been given to them through Jesus.

And they knew they knew they could not return this love to God. They could only respond by loving each other in the same way.

As in 1 John chapter 4 we love because he first loved us. Friends, this is where the presence of God either becomes real for us or does not.

[14:42] It's easy to affirm the superiority of love over all spiritual gifts. It's easy to affirm that perfect love is a thing from God. However, it's not easy to practice that love in our relationships with each other.

There are times when we're too selfish to love. Times when we're too tired to love. Times when we honestly don't know how to love. Times when loving one person seems to be hurting another. Times when we simply don't have it in us to love. And the question that begs an answer in each of our lives is this. How do we become more loving?

We must learn more about the love God as for us and for others. And the love others have given us without our ever realizing it.

In addition to its superiority and its nature, Paul would also have us learn about the permanence of love. Another fact of the gifts of the Holy Spirit is that they, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, are all temporary except for love.

[16:08] We all look forward to the day when all things will be made complete, when the final triumph of the Lord will be known among all peoples, when sin and death are no more.

Paul characterized this day of the Lord in two ways. He said it like the change that happens when a child becomes an adult and enters into full maturity.

It's like seeing someone face to face instead of in a mirror. We eagerly await the time when we shall understand fully all the complexities and questions of life, don't we?

The time when we leave this earthly body and go home to be in full presence of our Creator. When that time comes, we'll have no need for prophecy, for we shall know the past, the future.

We shall enter into a realm where past and future are consumed by an eternal present. present.

When that time comes, we'll have no need for earthly knowledge because we'll have all knowledge at our fingertips.

[17:22] We'll have no need for different languages. We'll communicate. We'll relate in far, far greater ways. When that time comes, we'll no

longer need faith.

We'll no longer need faith as we know it here because our faith will have been fulfilled. When that time comes, we'll no longer need hope because our hope will be realized.

When that time comes, we shall be in the full glory, the full majesty and power of God. And God is love. Well, perhaps the world is partly right about a few things.

Love is a many splendored thing. Love is all you need. Love is truly what makes the world go round. Love is the fifth element of creation.

Love is a basic need for humanity. But the world is a few things wrong too. Love often means saying you're sorry.

[18:33] Love is more, much more than a mere physical act. love goes way beyond flowers and candlelight. As I already mentioned, love is eternal, effective.

Love is essential. You want to know what love is? Look at Jesus. Especially look at his broken body and his blood shed for us.

Why did he do this? Because he loved us. He's the eternal, unconditional, self-sacrificial love of God.

Another thought about love comes from a ten-year-old girl who said, you really shouldn't say I love you unless you mean it.

but if you mean it, you should say it a lot and show that you mean it. Friends, if we love someone, we should tell them today, tomorrow may be too late, seize the present moment to express affection.

[19:52] affection. Because life is so fragile, so unpredictable, we should express our affection immediately or as soon as we can.

All through the Bible, Jesus reminds us how much he loves us. He loves each one of us here today, even after all the times we've let him down.

He still loves us. His love endures forever. Let's look at verses 4 and 5 again. Love is patient. Love is kind.

It does not envy. It does not boast. It is not proud. It is not rude. It is not self-seeking. It's not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs.

And we're not really talking about Jesus here. Jesus is kind. Jesus does not envy.

[20:58] Jesus does not boast. Jesus is not proud. He's not rude. He's not self-seeking. He's not easily angered. Jesus keeps no record of wrongs.

Love makes us patient, understanding, and kind. And we judge with our heart, not with our mind.

For as soon as love enters the heart's open door, the faults we once saw are not there anymore.

All you need is love. Maybe the Beatles got it right after all. Maybe perhaps you never got a card on Valentine's Day or chocolates or a bunch of flowers.

God's love will be there for you. Not just on Valentine's Day, but every day. Every day until that day when he'll return or call us home.

Remember Jesus' words, love one another as I have loved you. Love one another as I have loved you may seem impossible to do, but if you will try to trust and believe great are the joys that you will receive and now these three remain, faith, hope, and love.

[22:27] The greatest of these is love. Let's pray. Loving God, we thank you for loving each one of us, undeserving as we are.

Give us the grace, Father, to love one another, to show our love to those who are near and dear to us, to our husbands, our wives, to our children, our grandchildren, to our friends, and to those whom we find it hard to love.

Help us to reach out and show your love to the unloved just as you have for each one of us. In Jesus' name, hear our prayers. Amen.