

What Love Does

A Study of Thirteen Passages from the Letters of Paul

By: Matthew Allen

© 2026 Spiritbuilding Publishers.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced without the publisher's written permission.

Published by

Spiritbuilding Publishers

9700 Ferry Road, Waynesville, OH 45068

What Love Does: A Study of Thirteen Passages from the Letters of Paul

by Matthew Allen

ISBN

Table of Contents

WHAT LOVE DOES 1

INTRODUCTION..... 4

LOVE AND WHAT GOD SUPPLIES7

LOVE IN THE BODY 8

LOVE AND GIFTS 17

Introduction

One Subject, Thirteen Lessons

Ask a room of Christians to name the mark of a disciple, and love comes up in the first ten seconds. Ask that same room what love required of them last week, and the answers slow down.

That gap is the reason for this quarter.

Paul wrote these letters into congregations where love had gone missing in specific, nameable ways. Corinth was arguing over teachers and hauling brethren into court. Philippi had two women who could no longer work together. Rome had strong and weak members despising and judging each other over what was on the dinner table. Colossae had to be told, *in writing*, to forgive. In every instance Paul writes to a named problem, and every time he writes about love.

Thirteen lessons, one subject, every text from a letter of Paul. Each one ends with something to do.

Where We're Going

Two phrases in Paul's letters set the frame for this study.

From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love, Ephesians 4:16.

I want their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, Colossians 2:2.

Those two English phrases translate the same Greek word, *syμβιβάζω*, which carries the idea of separate pieces brought together and made to hold. Paul uses it of joints and ligaments in Ephesians and of hearts in Colossians. Both times the binding agent is love.

Notice where the knitting comes from. From him the whole body. The body does the growing, and the supply that makes it possible comes from Christ. That order runs through the New Testament.

One more verse governs everything we'll cover this quarter:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness, 2 Corinthians 12:9.

Paul learned that in the middle of his own struggle with something he had begged God three times to remove. The man who wrote most of what we will study about love wrote from a weakness God declined to take away.

The Three Parts

The thirteen lessons fall into three parts.

Part One — Love and What God Supplies

Lessons 1–4 · Ephesians, Romans, 2 Corinthians · The question: Where does love get what it needs?

Kind speech and a forgiving heart in the body. Gifts measured out by God and distributed as He pleases. Grace that proves sufficient at exactly the point where we are weakest. A welcome that does not wait for

agreement. God gives each of those four to us before it is ever asked of us. *Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift*, Ephesians 4:7.

Part Two — Love When the Body Is Strained

Lessons 5–9 · 2 Timothy, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians, Titus · The question: What does love do when people are hard to love?

Every congregation reaches the place where love costs something. Somebody falls. The wrong thing gets said in the wrong room. Somebody wants the credit. Part Two covers strengthening the next man in line, restoring the one who has fallen, speaking with grace when the conversation is difficult, answering rivalry with the mind of Christ, and letting grace do the training.

Part Three — Love That Lasts

Lessons 10–13 · Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 2 Corinthians · The question: What does love look like over the long haul?

The household and the ordinary week. Endurance when the times are unsettling. Generosity out of poverty, which is where Paul found it. The quarter closes where Paul closed his appeal to Corinth, with a harvest and a word of thanks.

Four Threads to Watch For

Paul comes back to the same handful of ideas across these thirteen texts. Watch for them.

Love is given before it is commanded. *God's love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*, Romans 5:5. When a lesson feels heavy, look for what God has already put in place.

The measure is not the same for everyone. Paul tells the Romans to think sensibly, *as God has distributed a measure of faith to each one*, Romans 12:3. Comparison is the fastest way to ruin a body, and Paul cuts it off early. A Christian owes faithful use of what he was handed.

Love is a set of verbs. Paul almost never stops to define the word. He lists what it does. Bear with. Forgive. Welcome. Restore. Encourage. Build up. Share. When these lessons ask what love is, the answer will usually arrive as something to do this week.

Weakness is where love does its work. The strong get instructions about the weak. The gifted get warned about pride. The apostle himself boasts about a thorn. A congregation that has no weakness in it has no need of the kind of love Paul describes, and no such congregation exists.

A Word About the Word

Two misunderstandings can wreck a study like this one.

The first treats love as a feeling that arrives on its own. If it arrives, we act on it. If it does not, we wait. But Paul commands love, and no one can be commanded to feel. He commands a settled decision about how another person will be treated, held in place whether the feeling cooperates or not.

The second misunderstanding runs the other way. It turns love into a technique, a list of behaviors to be managed, and drains the warmth out of it entirely. Paul will not allow that either. He weeps over churches. Whole congregations are his joy and crown. He asks God to make their love *keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment*, Philippians 1:9, and growth is not a word we use for machinery.

So, which is it, a feeling or a decision? Paul answers both. *Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity*, Colossians 3:14. Something a person puts on has been chosen. Something that binds a body together is alive.

How to Get the Most Out of This Quarter

Read the passage before class. Each lesson works from a short text, most of them under a dozen verses. Reading the surrounding chapter once, without commentary, will do more for the hour than anything else on this page.

Answer the questions on paper. There are ten at the end of every lesson, and writing the answers out is the point. Several of them cannot be answered honestly in a group setting, which is exactly why they are printed rather than asked aloud.

Bring the congregation with you. This material is about a body. The applications will keep pointing at real people who sit in the same rows every week, and the study only pays off where those names come to mind.

Expect to be uncomfortable somewhere. Thirteen weeks on love will eventually touch a relationship that has gone cold, a word that should not have been said, or a brother nobody has gone after. When it does, do not turn the page.

Finish the quarter. The lessons build. Part Three assumes Part One, and the last two lessons ask for something the first eleven have been preparing us to give.

Paul prayed a sentence over the Thessalonians that will serve as well as any for a class beginning this study:

And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you, 1 Thessalonians 3:12.

That is a prayer about growth, and growth takes a season. This one takes thirteen weeks.

PART ONE

Love and What God Supplies

Where does love get what it needs?

For who makes you so superior? What do you have that you didn't receive? If, in fact, you did receive it, why do you boast as if you hadn't received it? — 1 Corinthians 4:7

Four passages: Ephesians 4:29-32, Romans 12:3-8, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, and Romans 14:1-12.
Nothing in Part One asks a congregation for something it has not already been handed.

LESSON 1

Love in the Body

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ.

— Ephesians 4:29-32

A congregation builds itself up in love by what it says and what it forgives, and both are spent out of grace God has already handed it in Christ.

Introduction

EVERY CONGREGATION HAS A SOUND. Part of that sound comes when we worship together, and that part is easy enough to evaluate. The rest happens in the parking lot, in the hallway between classes, over lunch on the way home, or in a group text that half the membership never sees. That second sound is harder to measure, but it tells the truth. A church can sing well on Sunday morning and take a brother apart right after lunch.

Paul knew it. Ephesians spends three chapters on what God has done, then turns at chapter 4 to how a body of God's people ought to walk. Within a page of that turn, he is talking about words. Lying. Anger that will not go to bed. Rotten language. Shouting. Slander. The instructions get specific in a hurry, and they get specific about speech, because speech is where a congregation's love is most often put to work.

So where does a quarter on love begin? Here, in four verses at the end of Ephesians 4. Most Christians can quote pieces of them. Few have ever worked through them.

This lesson works through those verses in four steps. We start with the verses that come before them, because Paul lays a foundation before he gives a single command about the tongue. Verse 29 puts two questions to a sentence before it leaves the mouth. Verse 30 names a listener we usually forget. Verses 31 and 32 take six things off and put three on.

The anchor for this lesson sits thirteen verses earlier: *promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love*, Ephesians 4:16. Keep it in view. The body builds itself up, and one of the tools it builds with is talk.

Ephesians 4:17-24 – Before Paul Says a Word About Speech

Paul waits.

Eleven verses separate the turn at 4:17 from the command about rotten language at 4:29, and the delay is deliberate. He begins with a contrast: *You should no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thoughts*, Ephesians 4:17. What follows describes a darkened mind. *They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts*, Ephesians 4:18. Callousness comes next, then promiscuity, then an appetite that cannot be fed: *with a desire for more and more*, Ephesians 4:19.

Then Paul draws the line. *But that is not how you came to know Christ*, Ephesians 4:20.

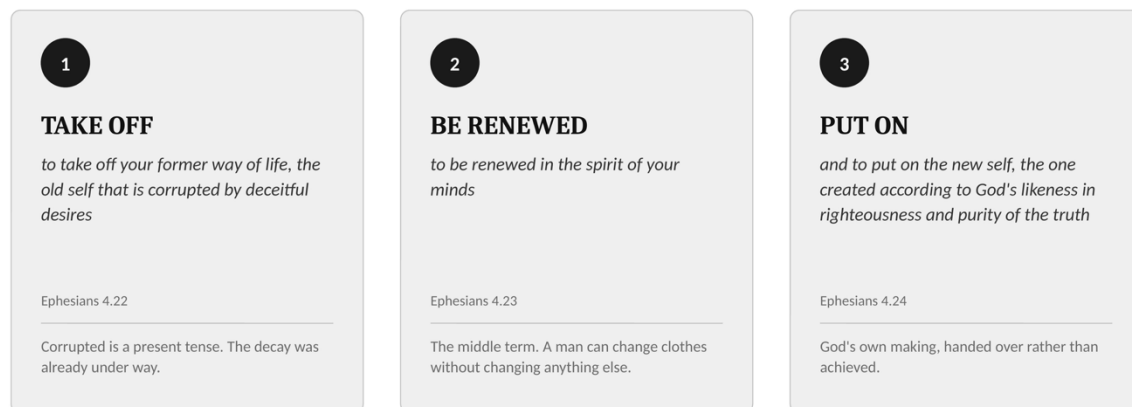
What they came to know instead arrives in three phases in verses 22-24:

- *to **take off** your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires,*
- *to **be renewed** in the spirit of your minds,*
- *and to **put on** the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth.*

Take off. Be renewed. Put on. The images come from clothing, and the middle term carries the weight. A man can change clothes without changing anything else, so Paul places renewal of the mind between removal and replacement. And the new self is God's own making, *created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth*.

The Old Self and the New Self

Ephesians 4.22-24 · three actions, and the middle one carries the weight



God supplies the garment. The congregation does the wearing.

Everything after verse 24 is verse 24 worked out. Kind speech, controlled anger, honest work, a forgiving heart: that is what the new self looks like once it is on. So, the commands ahead describe clothing the Ephesians had already been handed.

God supplies the garment. The congregation does the wearing.

Ephesians 4:29 – Rotten Words and Building Words

No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear, Ephesians 4:29.

The word behind *foul* is *sapros*. Jesus uses this word for the tree that produces bad fruit, Matthew 7:17-18. He uses it again for the fish thrown away when the net is sorted on the shore, Matthew 13:48. The remaining occurrences describe a bad tree and the fruit it produces, Matthew 12:33 and Luke 6:43¹. Rotten fruit. Bad fish. That is the category Paul assigns to certain sentences.

Notice the form of the command. Paul gives a test, and the test asks nothing about the speaker. Is the word *good for building up someone in need*? Does it *give grace to those who hear*? A sentence can be accurate, deserved, and satisfying to say, and still fail both questions.

Building up translates *oikodomē*, and Paul has already used that word twice in this chapter. Gifted men were given *to build up the body of Christ*, Ephesians 4:12. The body grows *for building itself up in love*, Ephesians 4:16. Now the same word is applied to our conversations.²

Then the last clause, easy to read past: *so that it gives grace to those who hear*. Grace. Paul asks for speech that hands a person something he has not earned, which is exactly what grace has always meant in this letter. And who is *someone in need*? In a congregation, more often than not, it is the person who has just been difficult. A word is measured by what it leaves behind in the person who heard it.

Ephesians 4:30 – Someone Else Is Listening

And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption, Ephesians 4:30.

This sentence sits in the middle of a paragraph about speech, between the command about rotten words and the list of what must be removed. Whatever else the verse means, it means the Spirit is in the room when brethren talk about one another.

Grieve is a relational word. Paul could have written that the Spirit is displeased, or offended, or provoked. He wrote *grieved*, which is what happens to someone who loves the person doing the wounding. Isaiah had said the same of Israel: *But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit*, Isaiah 63:10.³

Then the reason: *You were sealed by him for the day of redemption*. Paul had already said it. *In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed*, Ephesians 1:13. A seal marks ownership and guarantees delivery.

Why raise the sealing in a paragraph about speech? Because it settles the identity of the person being talked about. Your brother or sister carries the same seal and will be delivered on the same day.

Ephesians 4:31-32 – Six Things Off, Three Things On

Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice, Ephesians 4:31.

Six items. Read them in order and watch the progression. Bitterness is interior, a settled sourness nobody else can see yet. Anger and wrath are the temperature rising. Shouting is the point where the trouble becomes audible. Slander is what gets said about a man when he is not there to answer. Malice comes last, and it names the whole disposition that made room for the other five.

The command covers all six at once: *be removed from you*. A congregation is not permitted to surrender the loud items and keep the quiet ones.

And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ, Ephesians 4:32.

Six Things Off, Three Things On

Ephesians 4.31-32 · one removal, covering all six

REMOVED · 4.31		PUT ON · 4.32	
Bitterness	interior, a settled sourness nobody can see yet	Kind	<i>chrēstos</i> useful, easy to be around
Anger	the temperature rising	Compassionate	<i>eusplachnos</i> pity felt below the neck
Wrath	the same heat, further along	Forgiving	<i>charizomenoi</i> grace, handed over
Shouting	the point where the trouble becomes audible		
Slander	what gets said when he is not there to answer		
Malice	the disposition that made room for the other five		

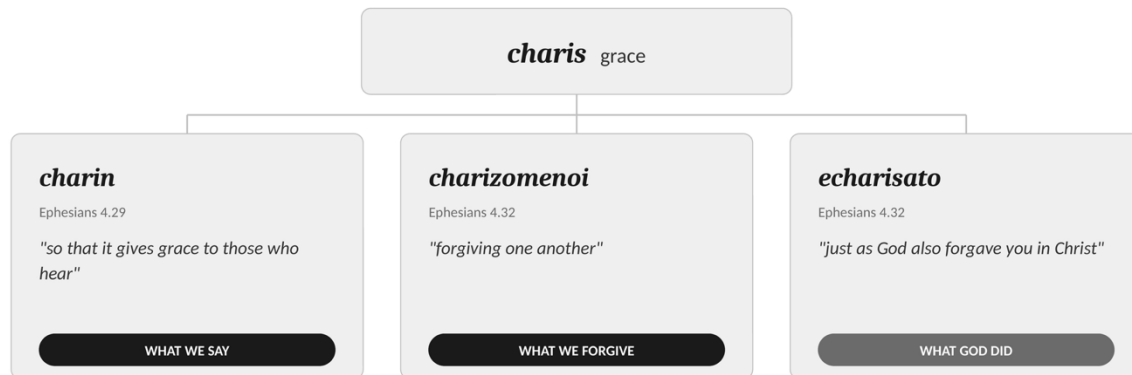
"just as God also forgave you in Christ," Ephesians 4.32

Three replacements, and each word needs to be noticed. *Kind* is *chrēstos*, a word used for what is useful and easy to be around. *Compassionate* is *eusplachnos*, built on the word for the inward parts, the ancient way of saying that pity is felt somewhere below the neck. *Forgiving* is *charizomenoi*, and that one deserves its own paragraph.

Charizomai is formed on *charis*, grace. Verse 29 asks for words that give *charin*, grace, to those who hear. Verse 32 asks the body to grace one another, *charizomenoi*. And the verse closes with what God did in Christ, *echarisato*, the same verb again.⁴ Three times in four verses, Paul builds the instruction from the same root, and the last use reports something already finished.

The Grace Thread

Ephesians 4.29-32 · one root, three times in four verses



The third one is not a command. It is a report of something already finished.

Just as God also forgave you in Christ. There is the measure. The cross set the standard, and it was set before anyone in Ephesus was asked to meet it.

Looking to Christ

Chapter divisions came along later than the letter. Paul did not stop at 4:32. He continues by saying: *Therefore, be imitators of God, as dearly loved children, and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, a sacrificial and fragrant offering to God,* Ephesians 5:1-2.

Imitators translates *mimētai*, the word standing behind the English *mimic*.⁵ It describes what children do. They copy long before they understand any of it, and Paul says as much in the same breath: *as dearly loved children*. A child imitates the father he already belongs to. The belonging came first.

Then watch the verb. Paul has used it twice already in this stretch of the letter. *Walk worthy of the calling you have received*, Ephesians 4:1. *You should no longer walk as the Gentiles do*, Ephesians 4:17. Now, *walk in love*, Ephesians 5:2. Three uses, one verb, and the third tells us how. *As Christ also loved us and gave himself for us*. Paul spends a paragraph commanding love, and here he defines it by what Christ did. The offering language comes from the altar, where something died, and the smoke went up as *a pleasing aroma to the Lord*, Leviticus 1:9.⁶

One Verb, Three Times: Walk

Ephesians 4.1 · 4.17 · 5.2

Ephesians 4.1	<i>"walk worthy of the calling you have received"</i>	THE CALLING
Ephesians 4.17	<i>"You should no longer walk as the Gentiles do"</i>	THE ROAD LEFT BEHIND
Ephesians 5.2	<i>"and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us"</i>	THE ROAD NAMED

Same verb, three times. The third one names the road.

So, look back over the ground. Rotten words are ruled out because Christ gave Himself. Bitterness must come off because Christ gave Himself. Forgiveness runs no shorter than the cross, because that is where the measure was set. A congregation learns how to talk by looking at the One who gave Himself for it.

Conclusion and Application

Our study on love begins in an ordinary place: the way we talk to and about one another during the week.

Paul's paragraph sends us home with five things. God supplies the new self before He asks for new speech. A word is judged by what it builds in the hearer. The Spirit who sealed us is listening to how His people talk. The pattern for forgiveness was finished before anyone was asked to follow it. And the whole of it is measured by a Christ who gave Himself.

What did your words build last week, and in whom? Is there a name that came to mind during verse 31 and would not leave? Is there a conversation you have been rehearsing that would fail both tests in verse 29? And is there someone in your congregation who is waiting on a forgiveness that God already extended to you?

So that it gives grace to those who hear, Ephesians 4:29.

For Discussion

1. What has the Gentile way of thinking done to the understanding and to the heart, according to Ephesians 4:17-18?

2. Name the three actions of Ephesians 4:22-24. Where does the new self come from, and why would Paul establish that before giving a single command about the tongue?
3. What two questions does Paul use in Ephesians 4:29 to test a word? Why is it significant that he gives a test rather than a list of forbidden terms?
4. Where else does *building up* appear in Ephesians 4? What does the repetition suggest about how the body gets built?
5. What does it mean for a word to *give grace to those who hear*? Describe one sentence that would and one that would not.
6. Why would Paul bring up grieving the Holy Spirit in the middle of a paragraph about speech?
7. Read the six items of Ephesians 4:31 in order. Which of them can other people see, and which can be carried for years without anyone knowing?

8. Ephesians 4:32 names the standard for forgiveness among brethren. What is it, and what reasons for withholding forgiveness does it rule out?

9. Ephesians 5:1-2 calls us to be *imitators of God, as dearly loved children*. What does the phrase *dearly loved children* settle before any imitating begins? What does Christ's own love cost Him?

10. Think back over the last seven days. What did your words build, and in whom? Is there a conversation this passage says you need to go have this week?

Looking Ahead

Lesson 2 – Love and Gifts, Romans 12:3-8

Lesson 1 asked what a congregation does with its words. Lesson 2 asks what it does with its gifts.

Seven of them appear in three verses of Romans 12, each handed out rather than earned, and each useless until somebody uses it. Read Romans 12 before the next class. Notice how few verses it takes Paul to get from *a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God*, Romans 12:1, to a plain list of ordinary jobs.

¹ *Sapros* carries the sense of "rotten, decayed," and by extension "of poor quality, unfit for use." BDAG, s.v. σαπρός. The word occurs eight times in the New Testament: Matthew 7:17; 7:18; 12:33 (twice); 13:48; Luke 6:43 (twice); Ephesians 4:29. Every occurrence outside Ephesians 4:29 is on the lips of Jesus and describes bad fruit or bad fish.

² *Oikodomē* appears at Ephesians 4:12, 4:16, and 4:29, rendered by the CSB as "to build up," "building itself up," and "building up" respectively. The same noun runs through Paul's argument at 1 Corinthians 14, where it governs everything said aloud in the assembly.

³ The wording of Ephesians 4:30 echoes Isaiah 63:10, where the grieving of the Holy Spirit is set against the Lord's faithful love recounted in Isaiah 63:7-9.

⁴ *Charizomai* is formed on *charis*. The sequence in this paragraph runs *charin* (4:29), *charizomenoi* (4:32), *echarisato* (4:32). Paul makes the same move at Colossians 3:13, taken up in Lesson 10.

⁵ *Mimētai*, from the same root family that gives English *mimic*. Paul uses the noun of Christians imitating him and the Lord at 1 Corinthians 11:1 and 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Ephesians 5:1 is the only place he applies it directly to imitating God.

⁶ The pairing of *sacrificial* and *fragrant offering* draws on the burnt offering of the Levitical system, described at Leviticus 1:9 as "a food offering, a pleasing aroma to the Lord."