

Compelled by Christian Love

Culture of Grace: Practices & Habits of GracePoint Church / 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

Introduction:

Today, we are continuing in our Culture of Grace Series, look at the practices and habits we want to prioritize pursuing at GracePoint Church. Our focus for this morning is on Christian love, which should be one of the primary marks of everyone who follows Christ. When asked what the greatest commandment in the law was, Jesus responded in Matthew 22:36-40, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” Did you catch the ending? He says all the Law and Prophets depend on these two commandments, Love God and Love your neighbor. In John 13:35, Jesus tells His disciples, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Paul often shows the primacy of love in his letters. In Romans 12:9, he places it at the beginning of a series of commands following his teaching on the gospel saying, “Let love be genuine.” In Galatians 5:14, he continues Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 22 saying, “For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” In Colossians 3:14, after calling us to pursue compassion, kindness, humility, patience, and forgiveness, Paul says, “And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” We are called to be a people committed to pursuing love. But, what does Christian love look like? To begin answering that question, we will consider Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 13:1-7, containing verses you have likely heard most often at weddings. Here is the thing, this chapter is not primarily about the love between a husband and wife, it is about the love that should exist in the church. 1 Corinthians 13 falls in the middle of a 3-chapter teaching by Paul on Spiritual gifts, showing it is the key point in the whole section. Beyond that, it connects all the way back to 1 Corinthians 8:1 which focuses on pursuing love to build up others. When we recognize chapters 8-14 all center around conflicts that have divided the Corinthians, we see that love not only guides our use of spiritual gifts but is the key for managing conflicts in the church. These verses, then, have a great deal to teach us, not simply about how we love our spouses, but how we love each person around us. Look at verse 1-3 with me to see the first thing we see about Christian love, how,

Christian Love Must Flow through Everything We Do

Again, Paul is primarily addressing the use of spiritual gifts, and particularly the more miraculous ones, for lack of a better description. But what I want to consider is how this teaching applies to everything we do. Look at verses 1-3 with me, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” Focus on what he is showing us about the primacy of love. Paul gives 5 if/then statements. In verse 1 he says, “If I speak,” in verse 2, “If I have prophetic powers,” and “all faith,” and 2 more in verse 3, “If I give away,” and “deliver up my body.” Each if statement includes exaggerated language of these things could even be the most extreme versions with a consistent refrain, “but have not love.” Then, Paul concludes with 3 negative then statement. If I have not love, then “I am a noisy gong...I am nothing...I gain nothing.” Another way to say these might be I am a useless distraction, invaluable participant, and recipient of no rewards. Paul’s main point is we will not be measured by how gifted we are or what gifts we display, but how we loved. Now, notice how Paul ends with things in verse 3 outside of spiritual gifts, and things often considered to be the epitome of love. He says if we sacrifice our money and even our lives without love, it’s pointless. Wait a minute, God encourages us to give and lay down our lives, right? Yes. Jesus says in John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Paul says in 2 Corinthians 9:7, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Yet, Paul is showing us how these acts can be done without love for others.

And if love isn't flowing through them, they are pointless and gain nothing. There are many other good things we could do, but if love for God and our neighbors is not flowing through them, they are missing something vital. In 1 John 4:7-8, God's Word says, "whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." Christian love must flow through everything we do. The rest of these verses focus on what Christian love is. In verses 4-6 we see how

Christian Love is Radically Others Centered

In these verses, as Paul lists these qualities of love, he personifies love with the use of verbs instead of adjectives, showing love is demonstrated, not just felt. These qualities aren't an exhaustive list on what love is, as Paul is particularly engaging with everything he has been teaching in 1 Corinthians. But, while it isn't an exhaustive list, it is a valuable foundation. Look at each quality with me, "Love is patient and kind." Pause there. Paul starts with a pair of qualities relayed positively. Patience here carries the idea of forbearing, meaning particularly patience in suffering. It is used as a characteristic of God when describing His forbearance of our sin. This kind of patience keeps us from complaining, becoming irritated, or responding harshly to those who cause difficulties for us. You can see how the word "kind" fits as a pair then. This word is only used here in the New Testament, and it involves reacting in goodness or kindness in service of others. So, not only are we forbearing with those who cause difficulties for us, we actually react with intent for their good, demonstrating love through extra compassion and mercy. Continue with the next set of qualities in verse 4, relayed negatively. You could probably put the next four together, but let's take them two at a time, "love does not envy or boast." Envy has two aspects to it. One is being jealous of the possessions or status of another person. The second goes further and resents that they have good things at all. There is a painting by the Renaissance artist Giotto hanging on the wall of a chapel in Italy. In it, Giotto portrays envy with long ears able hear any news of someone's success, and the tongue of a serpent to harm the reputation of that person being envied. That is the idea here, love isn't jealous and doesn't desire to harm in that jealousy. Boasting is seeking to set yourself above others. It's ultimate design is to make others feel inferior in some way. Where envy covets what God has given others, boasting parades what you have to cause envy in others. Christian love will never boast in intellect, position, or gifts because it understands that every good and perfect gift comes from God. Continue in verse 4, "it [love] is not arrogant or rude." Love is not arrogant or puffed up. It isn't inflated with it's own self importance. Years ago, I was struck but a story of William Cary that illustrates the opposite of this. If you don't know who William Carey is, he might be one of the greatest missionaries and linguists the world has ever seen. He translated at least parts of the Bible into no less than thirty-four Indian languages. Before he was a missionary, William Carey was a cobbler, and when he arrived in India, he was not held in high regard. At a dinner party, someone tried to humiliate him in front of everyone saying, "I suppose, Mr. Carey, you once worked as a shoemaker." Carey response was great. He said, "No, your lordship, not a shoemaker, only a cobbler." William Carey moved himself even lower. Love is not arrogant but lowers itself for the sake of others. Paul then says love "is not rude." The term means to "act unbecomingly" and carries the idea of a disregard for how one's words or actions affect those around them. This is one we need to consider more often because we often share our opinions and thoughts with no regard for others, and we justify that by saying we are just speaking the truth. Christian love, on the other hand, doesn't dishonor others. William Barclay comments on this term saying, "There is a graciousness in Christian love which never forgets that courtesy and tact and politeness are lovely things." Do you see how these four qualities are others centered? Love is consumed with considering the good of others, not oneself, so it doesn't envy or boast, and isn't arrogant or rude. If this isn't convicting you yet, keep going in verse 5, "It [love] does not insist on its own way." Or said differently, love is not self-seeking. This may be the hardest one of these qualities, yet the key to them all. Paul is saying Christian love will not seek its own rights at the expense of others. When presenting this in the negative, Paul is actually affirming an opposite positive quality. If Christian love is not insisting on its own way, it is conversely happy to lean into serving and blessing others.

Paul returns to a pairs of qualities again at the end of verse 5, “it is not irritable or resentful.” Irritable carries the idea of being easily annoyed or provoked to anger, especially when someone wounds you. How often do arguments turn into irritation and anger because someone says the wrong thing? Love is not provoked or exasperated with people, because it is always patient. Over the years, I have learned that if I am mindful of my love for others in any conversation, I can check my heart and continue that conversation without getting irritable. Paul then says love isn’t resentful. I never like challenging a faithful Bible translation, but I think the ESV doesn’t help us see the full meaning here by translating this into one word. There are three words in the original language, one is an accounting word, connected to keeping a ledger meaning “to reckon.” A second word means “an evil thing of moral wrong,” and the third is no. So, this is saying love keeps no record of the wrongs one has received in its memory bank. Love forgives and forgets. This is so hard for us to do because we like to recount everything that has happened in the past when we are harmed again, even when repentance clearly took place. Yet, this is one of the clearest ways we can mirror the love and forgiveness we have received in Christ. Romans 4:8 says, “blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.” Count is the same Greek word used for reckon in our passage. Church, God keeps no record of your sin when you place your trust in the work of Christ on the cross. And when we understand the depth of that truth, we will be able to start loving others in the same way. Finally, consider the qualities of love in verse 6, “it [Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth.” Wrongdoing is the word for unrighteousness. Paul is saying love doesn’t rejoice in sin being committed. It isn’t glad about sin in any way, even if the sin of others vindicates your concerns about them. Have you ever been glad about being right when someone’s sin is exposed? We should never be glad in any way about the presences of unrighteousness in someone’s life. It should always grieve our hearts. Paul then shows the reverse of this action that Love “rejoices with the truth.” He actually uses a different words for “rejoice” in this verse. The first just means being glad. This one means sharing in another persons joy. The idea here is that love rejoices together with another person when the truth of God shines through them. When taking these two together, we see how love grieves over wrongdoings and the presence of unrighteousness, but rejoices with things like repentance and righteousness in the lives of others. And these two truths provide a helpful qualifier for the rest. While love is patient, kind, and doesn’t keep a record of wrongs, it doesn’t overlook sin in someone’s life but seeks always to promote the truth in the lives of others. Are you seeing how Christian love is radically other centered? Every quality here is focused on the good of another, not ourselves. To live in this way, your heart has to truly desire the benefit of those around you. The only way you will be patient, kind, not envy or boast, not be arrogant or rude, not insist on your own way, not be irritable or keep no records of wrong, never rejoicing at wrongdoing but rejoicing with the truth, is if your ultimate desire becomes the good of others. When it focused on yourself, these things simply will not happen. And there is more that we need to see about the qualities of Christian love in verse 7, how,

Christian Love is All-Encompassing

At the end of several rapid fire descriptions of the qualities of love in verses 4-6, Paul concludes with a string of connected qualities in verse 7. Each verb has the same ending sound, along with the same adverb coming before it. Look at verse 7, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” Don’t miss how the adverb defines the scope of these qualities. These pertain to “all things,” or “always” in some translations. The first and the fourth are similar ideas, along with the middle two, showing they are all connected together. Bearing all things means to cover something. The idea is that love covers the faults of others. Rather than magnifying the things people have done to harm you, love endures the pain and does its best to keep others from knowing about it. This doesn’t mean it wont address things with that person, but it will conceal them from being found out by others. To “believe all things,” in the context of relationships, means love believes the best about a person until proven wrong. This doesn’t mean love is gullible or denies that hurts happen, but it fights to first think the best and doesn’t start by assuming the worst. “Hopes all things” continues this string of connected qualities.

When love can no longer believe the best because it has discovered iniquity to be true, it then moves to hope for repentance and a good outcome when confronting the sin. Have you moved past the ability to believe the best in a relationship because the truth has exposed sin? If so, do you still hope for that person to change and turn from evil? Then we come to the end of this string, “love endures all things.” The word for endures means to remain and can carry the idea of being fortified. Alistair Begg says this word, “is the picture of a soldier who, when the battle is at its toughest, he launches into it with renewed energy.” The idea isn’t that you just make it through continued difficulties with people around you but you press in to purposefully keep loving them.

Conclusion:

This is a lofty call, and I am sure there are many of these qualities you may need to work on, as I know I have things to work on from this list. To end our time together, I want to seal in the importance of us being compelled by Christian love. Why should we pursue this? The first reason is that,

1) Christian Love is a Means of God’s Grace

We have talked about prioritizing these practices and habits because they are means of grace, or channels in which God’s grace flows into our lives. How is our love for each other a channel of God’s grace? Astonishingly, God has chosen us to be instruments of His love. He uses our love for others to show His love. 1 John 4:19 says, “We love because he first loved us.” Our love should be an extension of God’s love. When we love others, they see the love of God flowing through us to them. And as they see God’s love flowing through us they receive grace from Him. So our love becomes a way of dispensing God’s grace to others. There is another way Christian love is a means of God’s grace. When we are truly loving others like this, our hearts are reminded of the great love God has shown to us and therefore flooded with His grace. Church, the only way we have the ability to love like this is because God first loved us. Prior to this, the apostle John describes love like this in 1 John 4:10, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” God’s love is poured out on us through Jesus Christ being the propitiation for our sins. What that means is Christ is the appeasing payment for our sin. His blood satisfying the wrath of God and makes us right with Him. And in this act God shows us what love really is. He shows His patience and kindness towards us. He removes the record of our sins and the debt we owed for it. This is what Christ Jesus accomplished on the cross for all who trust in Him. If you don’t know God’s love like this yet, turn to see Jesus’s death as the payment for your sin. Receive reconciliation with God and find His love and mercy extending to you every day. If you are in Christ, see how your love for others reminds you of the love shown to you, and have that flood your heart with God’s grace. The second reason we should pursue this is because,

2) Christian Love is Everlasting

Time won’t allow us to cover everything in the rest of 1 Corinthians 13, but I want to briefly consider the beginning of verse 8. Look there with me, “Love never ends.” This statement launches Paul into a contrast between the temporary nature of Spiritual Gifts with the permanence of love. For our purposes, I just want to focus on what it plainly says, “love never ends.” Love for God and our neighbor will extend into all of eternity. Other things in this world, like spiritual gifts, will cease because we will be in the presences of God for all of eternity, but our love will never end. We should be compelled by it now, because we will be perfected in our love and continuing to love each other for all of eternity. As the worship team is coming up to lead us in a time of response through reflection and song, think on how you personally need to grow in your love for others. Are some of these qualities of love weak or lacking in your life? Confess that to God and ask for His help to grow. Fight the temptation to think of how they may be lacking in others and respond to how the Lord is working on your heart. You can come down to kneel before him, or meet with Him where you are at. Sing for your own heart, and for the sake of those around you. As always, if you need prayer for anything, we have a team of people ready to pray with you and for you who will be worshipping with lanyards on in the front rows or the bottom of the stairs. Pray with me as we seek God’s grace?