

Will True Love Please Stand Up

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part I

Introducing I Corinthians 13

Introduction

There once was a city – it was fast, loud, busy, sensual, and devoted to sports, culture, and commerce. I have never been there, but I have read a lot about it.

This city could easily have been called the Vanity Fair of the ancient world. It was:

- a sailor’s favorite port of call;
- a merchant’s gold mine;
- an actor’s dream spot;
- a prodigal’s paradise.

By the time Paul wrote to believers who lived in this city, it had gained the reputation of being the vice capital of ancient Greece.

Corinth was also the first city to begin the gladiatorial games where competitors died for the blood lust of spectators.

This was Las Vegas and San Francisco and the back alleys of major cities combined.

Corinth was so well known for being sinful that if someone wanted to tell a person to, “go to the devil,” they merely told them to “Corinthianize”. If someone wanted to refer to a woman as being loose, they called her a “Corinthian girl”.

In this city, even the religious worship to Aphrodite and other gods and goddesses had organized brothels with temple prostitution as part of their so-called religious service.

This culture was literally bloated with lust for blood, lust for money, and lust after the flesh.

In the middle of this culture was the unbelievable; the almost unimaginable. There was the revolutionary work of the liberating, redeeming gospel of Jesus Christ.

There was a church in this city! An assembly of redeemed, washed, forgiven, imperfect, growing, needy sinners now called saints. In fact, the longest letters from Paul are letters he wrote to the church in Corinth.

Its charter members, according to I Corinthians 6:9-10, were men and women who had past lives of immorality, infidelity, and homosexuality. There were former thieves (the Greek word actually refers to someone who robbed another with violence), alcoholics, and white collar criminals. Paul writes to them in I Corinthians 6:11a,

Such were some of you . . .

In other words, “This is what you used to be, but you were washed; you were sanctified; you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Former felons now served as deacons; former thieves were now in charge of counting the offering; drunkards were now reaching the down and out. They had come to find true satisfaction in Jesus Christ.

Wisdom for the Heart, our radio ministry, got an email this week from a man who was moving into town. He wanted to know if the church I pastored accepted same-sex couples.

I wrote this man back and told him that anyone and everyone is invited to attend our services – but to be accepted into our church as a member means to have accepted the authority of God’s word. Understand that we take the Bible literally – it clearly informs that any sexual activity outside of marriage is forbidden, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Beyond that, the Bible clearly informs that homosexual relations are sinful. I sent a copy of Romans chapter 1 for this man to read. I invited him to come, but informed him that the gospel of Christ is both forgiving and demanding.

We who believe have come under the authority of the word of God.

Paul did not say to the Corinthian believers, “Such are some of you still.” He did not write, “You can keep stealing; you can keep fornicating with others who are not married and commit adultery with those who are; you can keep on reviling or verbally abusing others; you can keep on swindling other people out of their money.” He wrote, “Such *were* some of you.”

These were Corinthians who were now rescued by the grace of God.

We are in the process of helping to start a church in Las Vegas, by supporting Matt Pettit, the church planter. What a great place to start a church!

We do not believe the commercial that says, “Whatever you do there stays there.” In fact, we believe whatever you do there or anywhere is recorded in a book of deeds. This book will be opened at the final judgment when the unbelieving world will be proven to have defiled the image of God in their own lives, rejected the purpose of God

for their own bodies, and refused the authority of God in their own minds.

This church in Las Vegas, in 16 months, has already grown to over 200 people, and they are seeing one rescue after another. Las Vegas is the leader per capita for rape, armed robbery, and divorce. One older man, who had spent several years in prison for armed robbery, and his family, was led by Matt to Christ. They were among the first to be baptized and received into the membership of the church. From what I have been told, the transformation of this family has been undeniable to everyone around them. They are now faithful members of the church.

However, just because we come to faith in Christ does not mean we know how to live for Christ. Repenting of our sins does not create an automatic awareness of how to live a holy life. Desiring to live a holy life for Christ is not the last step in the Christian walk – it is the first and ongoing step of genuine faith.

The writer of Hebrews put it this way,

. . . the mature [are those] who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

It is going to take practice. It is going to involve persistence.

If you have been through our new member’s class, you have heard this question that I will repeat now. How many of you have taken piano lessons at some point in your life? Look around! Look at all the hands. Look at all the skilled, concert pianists!

How many proficient, skilled pianists do we have? Not many. What made the difference? That word “practice”!

The truth is that those who learn how to play the piano need to be willing to practice and they need a piano teacher to tell them what to practice.

In the same way, we need to determine to practice the truth of the word of God and we need to listen to our teacher – the inspired record of scripture.

I shared with the new member GreenHouse class this past week, my own experience. I decided in

college to restart piano lessons so I could keep what I had learned in the lessons I took from 2nd grade to 11th grade. I thought it would be a good idea to improve on my ten years of lessons. I asked around to see who the best piano teacher was on the faculty at my college. Everyone I asked said the same name – Mrs. Hermann. In fact, the music building was named after her and, I believe, her husband. I went to her studio and knocked on the door. She came to the door and I said, “I’d like to take piano lessons from you.”

She replied, “I’m sorry, but my schedule is now full.”

She was, in fact, in the middle of a lesson.

I said, “Please, I’ve been told you’re the best. Would you let me play something for you first?”

She agreed, so I went in, sat down at the piano, and played for her for a few minutes.

She said, “I’ll make room for you.”

I said “Great!”

She then said, “We’ll begin next week. Now you need to understand that if you take lessons from me, you will be expected to practice four hours.”

I said, “No sweat – one hour for four days out of seven will be just fine.”

She said, “No, young man, I mean four hours a day.”

My life passed before my eyes. I could not imagine any torture greater than that. No one in their right mind will do anything but play golf four hours a day. I do not do that either.

We agreed to part ways and my mastery of the piano never happened.

Understand that what the apostle Paul was about to deliver to this congregation was not something they would ever really master, but something they would constantly practice – with persistence. They would not practice for an hour a day, or even four hours a day, but every moment for the rest of their lives.

What were they to practice? True, genuine, authentic lives marked by love.

Of all the cities in the ancient Greek world that would have had a twisted view of love, it would be Corinth. Of all the churches that would be in need of teaching on the subject of true love, it would be these former adulterers and thieves and homosexuals and fornicators and swindlers. They had lived for their own lusts and their own pleasures. They had extorted and stolen from neighbors and employers and strangers for their own materialistic advancement.

Now these believers are in the assembly where *giving* is better than receiving and serving is better than ruling. This is a life-changing perspective.

- They knew how to use people for their own advantage, but had to learn how to serve people.
- They knew how to have sexual relations with other people, but had to learn how to faithfully commit to their own spouse.
- They naturally followed the motivations of greed and self-advancement and could use people and manipulate relationships to get what they wanted, but knew nothing of the spiritual motivation of love.
- They knew how to get, but had to learn how to give.

In fact, by the time Paul sent his first letter to the Corinthian church, they had become enamored with the public, miraculous demonstrations of the Spirit and were embroiled over self-centered disputes and self-promoting disagreements.

These church members were mirroring their self-centered culture. They were in the process of moving Corinth into the church. They were bringing into the assembly their old way of life – their self-oriented pursuits where they were first and everyone else came last; where they mattered and no one else came close.

Paul delivers to this Corinth church one of the most remarkable, radically challenging pieces of prose that we will find in any of his letters. He says, in effect, in the first few verses of I Corinthians 13, “Listen everyone, I don’t care who you are or who you think you are, or who people think you are, if you do not operate with the principle and upon the

foundation and through the motivation of love, you are nothing.”

- You accomplished nothing – verse 1;
- You are nothing – verse 2;
- You profited nothing – verse 3.

Life without loving adds up to zero. It does not matter who you are – rich or poor; married or single; young or old; educated or illiterate – life apart from love is nothing.

The reason we have a hard time believing this is that we do not understand what true love is.

Words for Love

In this instruction, Paul introduces the Corinthians to a brand new word – a word that was ignored by their culture and, in fact, by the Greco-Roman world. It is the singular word embraced by the inspiring Holy Spirit as the primary word that would become the vehicle to explain the gospel, and the life of a disciple. It is the Greek word, “agape”.

We only have time today, to simply introduce this rich word translated “love” over and over again in the New Testament.

- 1. The Greek word “agape,” in short, describes the selfless, committed love of intellect and will which places value upon the beloved, even though they may be undeserving or unattractive or even unable to return the same.**

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only . . . Son . . . (John 3:16)

How attractive was the world to which God gave His Son? How able is the world to return this quality to God? How worthy was the world of sinners for whom Christ died?

This is “agape”; this is genuine, divinely inspired, self-sacrificing love which Paul will describe in chapter 13 of his first letter to the Corinthians.

The Corinthians did not understand true love. In fact, of all the words and expressions for love in the first century, “agape” never made the list.

“Agape” rarely even appears outside of the Greek New Testament. In fact, one Greek scholar said there is not even one clear example of the use of “agape” by a Greek author outside of scripture.ⁱ

It was the ignored word for love. “Agape” was considered too unemotional; too intellectual.

There were several other words in the Greek vocabulary that were highly prized words for love.

- 2. The Greek word “storge” was a preferred word to use for love and referred to natural love or family love.**

You love your Uncle Henry and Grandma Ethel and all your cousins with this kind of love. You stick up for your sister and brother because of “storge,” even though around the house you tell them to stay out of your room.

This love is like the law of gravitation or the force of blind nature. It is the natural movement of the soul.ⁱⁱ

This love causes a mother to naturally want to take care of her newborn child. It causes a man to naturally sacrifice time and effort to provide for his family.

It is interesting that Paul tells us in Romans chapter 1 that as society continues to become more and more depraved, more and more perverted and self-centered, one of the obvious results will be that people no longer demonstrate “storge”; that is, they no longer operate with natural affection or they literally have no “storge”. (Romans 1:31 and II Timothy 3:3)

Children will be cruel to parents and leave them without care, and parents will abandon their children. They will deliver newborns and put them in trash dumpsters without any thought. Child abuse will rise, as well as the abuse of the elderly. Husbands and wives will try to kill one another for an insurance policy. These are signs that “storge” is on the wane.

There is nothing wrong with this kind of love – a love that produces natural protection. However, “storge” works best when it is founded upon “agape”; when the foundation for natural love is built upon selfless, compassionate, willful, servant love.

It is interesting to me that the New Testament speaks of the Father's love for the Son,

. . . *"This is My beloved Son . . ."*
(*Matthew 3:17*)

The Father did not use a derivative of "storge," which we would fully expect, but of "agape".

3. Another Greek word for love is "philia".

This word gives us words like Philadelphia, "the City of Brotherly Love".

This is the kind of love that bound together people who liked the same things and preferred the same hobbies. This is the love of mutual attraction. This love is fondness, affection and liking.ⁱⁱⁱ

Leon Morris wrote that this love was built on common insight or interest or taste.^{iv}

"Philia" means, "I love that shirt. I love that recipe. I love baseball. I love that song. I love playing monopoly." (You want to avoid people like that!)

This is the common expression used today for love, "I love you because you are like me."

This is eHarmony love. You find someone who has 20 or 30 answers to questions on stuff that you would answer in the same way. You are both morning people who love coffee, laughter, family values and God.

As if some guy is going to fill out his survey and say, "I'm grouchy in the morning, I don't have a sense of humor, I hate kids, and I'd rather spend time alone on a fishing boat than chasing you around the mall."

No, he is going to say, "I love sunsets, babies, long walks in the rain, and newborn kittens."

He is lying.

A couple came up to me a few months ago and they were laughing. They said, "Stephen, we met through eHarmony." She then said, "Are we ever different from one another!"

"Philia" is the common love of the Corinthian culture and the American culture. Most often, it says, "I love you because you love everything I love."

It is a love drawn together by the strings of common affections.

However, it is not all bad. In fact, it is used 45 times in the New Testament to speak of community love; friendly love; affection for someone that is the outgoing of one's heart in delight to that which affords them happiness.^v

The trouble comes when the other person does not return happiness; when they do not make "philia" worthwhile; when they are unworthy of affection.

This is why the love of our culture, which is "storge" and "philia," at best, runs out of steam and lovers are replaced as quickly as automobiles.

The world can only wonder why they run out of steam. Love that is "philia" alone is the reason one actress said her relationships are really great for about three months. They wonder why the fireworks seem to fade; why the excitement and thrill of love disappears at the sight of an overflowing diaper pail. There is a romantic thought!

This type of love is why books can be written today, and actually bought, that tell us what we really ought to do is plan for three spouses over the course of our lives. One spouse is for the early, child-rearing years; another is for the middle years when there is the time and desire for the sailboat and golf course; the third is for the later years of life.

Why? Because love is all about you! It is all about someone meeting your needs and making you feel happy.

What someone with this love is really saying when they say "I love you," is "I love me and you make me feel good about me."

Just read the lyrics of the most popular songs on the subject of love – it has been reduced to a search for that never ending warm and fuzzy state. We hear lyrics such as, "I'm hooked on a feeling . . . and I can't stop loving you," and "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah."

Okay, so I am stuck in the 1970s.

Do you remember this one?

Why do birds suddenly appear

Every time you are near?

Just like me, they long to be

Close to you.

Anybody ever thought about that? Would you fall in love with a guy who had birds following him everywhere? Didn't Alfred Hitchcock do a movie on that?^{vi}

However, that was the 1960s and 1970s. The world has grown and matured.

Really?

Now we can look up the lyrics of just about anything, which I spent thirty minutes doing, and easily found that the world still defines love in terms of "philia" alone.

You have to be a great catch in order to make the one who loves you improve their status or their income or their reputation.

This is a song on an album called *Big Dog Daddy* – now one of my all time favorites. It is a song about a guy who is a custodian and the girl he loves who is a beautiful, self-centered woman. He sings his lament (this is good poetry),

*. . . She wouldn't look my way,
but buddy what'd you expect?*

*I'm just the fix-it-up boy
at the apartment complex.*

*. . . I'm just sitting around
waitin' on a telephone call
after a water pipe exploded
in the living room wall.*

*If your washer and dryer
need a repair,*

*You know your handyman's waitin',
and he'll be right there. . . .*

Then he sings the problem.

She's my baby doll,

She's my beauty queen,

She's my movie star,

Best I've ever seen.

I ain't asked her out yet,

Cause I don't know if I can.

It's just a high maintenance woman

Don't want no maintenance man.^{vii}

Poor guy.

This is so descriptive of the wrong side of "philia". It is a love that loves only the lovely; only the attractive; only someone who will advance the reputation and self-image; only the popular. In other words, we are attracted to a society that is far from classless – it is prejudiced and self-centered.

Friendship based on "philia" alone can, as the ancients used to say, become a school of virtue; but also a school of vice. Friendship can make good men better and bad men worse.^{viii}

This is why the Bible, especially Proverbs, says so much about who our friends are. Who have you allowed to influence your mind and heart? They can make you better and they can also make you worse.

The good side of "philia" is the natural affection between friends who bond with mutual likes and dislikes. However, it must challenge one another to grow in greater and deeper "agape" love for Christ and his church.

4. Let me give one final Greek word for love that is perhaps the most unlike "agape" and yet, the most loved by the world – it is the word "eros".

This word gives us the English word "erotic". "Eros" is sensual, sexual love.

Contained within marriage, this type of love becomes a wonderful thing of affection and pleasure.

It is interesting that this word was the most commonly used word for love in Paul's day, yet the Holy Spirit did not select this word for any passage on love – not even one. What the world and the flesh clamor for, the New Testament descriptions ignore. We have to find out what "eros" means by looking outside the New Testament.

This does not mean the word is inherently evil. Romantic love at its best is a wonderful, pure and lofty love. The Song of Solomon considers the virtues of passion.

The fact that the New Testament never selects this word should tell us that the world, and even the church, is focused on one aspect of love that is actually secondary and not foundational.

Without “agape,” “eros” is self-seeking, self-centered, abusive, possessive love. Without “agape,” “eros” only lusts to own, to have, to conquer – and then it will discard for a newer model.

However, combined with a will to serve and commit, “eros” will swim oceans and climb mountains and cross deserts to win that husband or wife.

Since “eros” has such strong emotion, the world of Paul and our world consider it tantamount to love. It is the measure of true love. The fireworks determine if it is the genuine item.

The Greeks viewed love as “eros” – they called it “intoxication where the senses are in a (delightful) frenzy.”^{ix}

Our world today, equates this intoxication with true love.

This is a best selling song from another artist who describes his love for his girl that he keeps coming back to.

I got lightning in my veins, and thunder in my chest;

All tangled up with you and trying to catch my breath.

I’ve been chasing that sensation halfway ‘round the world;

*. . . I’ve done it all, I’ve seen it all,
But I can’t find a feeling like that.^x*

This is selfish love that pursues this intoxicated feeling – this is considered the litmus test for true love. All you have to do is check your pulse.

You make me have lightning in my veins and thunder in my chest.

How does this work when she has been in labor for eighteen hours? That will redefine thunder and lightning.

How does it hold up when he is laid off from work and his car gets repossessed. Man, is he a heartthrob or what?

“Eros” knows nothing of emergency rooms, house payments, and braces; “eros” has no time for homework and late hours, broken down cars and used clothing; “eros” is bored with long hours and has no room for arthritis; “eros” colors gray hair and sells steroids, tummy tucks and Rolex watches; “eros” is fashion and beauty. “Eros” eventually makes everyone lose what they once had.

- “Storge” – I love you because you belong to my family.

“Agape” says – I love you and will treat you like family.

- “Philia” – I love you because you are like me.

“Agape” says – I love you even though you are unlike me.

- “Eros” – I love you because you meet my needs.

“Agape” says – I love you and commit to meeting your needs.

“Agape” is true love.

Conclusion

I found the lyrics to another song – this one written by a Christian artist who understood a little better what “agape” in a relationship looked like. The words are:

Tomorrow morning if you wake up

And the sun does not appear

I will be here

If in the dark, we lose sight of love

Hold my hand, and have no fear

‘Cause I will be here

I will be here

When you feel like being quiet

When you need to speak your mind

I will listen

*And I will be here
When the laughter turns to cryin'
Through the winning, losing and trying
We'll be together
I will be here*

*Tomorrow morning, if you wake up
And the future is unclear
I will be here
Just as sure as seasons were made for change
Our lifetimes were made for these years
So I will be here*

*I will be here
And you can cry on my shoulder
When the mirror tells us we're older
I will hold you
And I will be here*

*To watch you grow in beauty
And tell you all the things you are to me
I will be here*

*I will be true to the promise I have made
To you and to the One who gave you to me*

*Tomorrow morning, if you wake up
And the sun does not appear*

I will be here

Oh, I will be here.^{xi}

The world can only long to find love like that.

This is why, back in Corinth and here in Cary, the Christian who comes out of his culture and into the church must learn how to love like that.

This is why God will so clearly spell it out for us in this great chapter on “agape” where Paul will deliver a radical description – God’s description – of genuine, authentic, true love.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/9/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Kenneth Wuest, BYPATHS in the Greek New Testament (Eerdmans, 1954), p. 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 111.

^{iv} Leon Morris, Testaments of Love (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 118.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Dave Barry, Book of Bad Songs, quoted by Steve May in The Story File (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 199.

^{vii} Keith Toby, “High Maintenance Woman” (Big Dog Daddy).

^{viii} Morris, p. 118.

^{ix} Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 35.

^x Gary Allen, “I Can’t Find a Feelin’ Like That”.

^{xi} Steven Curtis Chapman, “I Will Be Here”.