

Beyond Puppy Love

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part VIII

I Corinthians 13:7-8a

Introduction

In 1961, Walt Disney came out with the animated film entitled *101 Dalmatians*. It was based on the 1956 novel by Dodie Smith. Millions of people watched the movie with their children. About thirty-five years later, Disney came out with another version – this one with real people and dogs. It too was an instant success, earning more than 350 million dollars at the box office. Everybody loved seeing the puppy-hating, fur-coat-making Cruella de Vil being outsmarted by these lovable and witty Dalmatians.

As a result of this most recent movie especially, thousands of people wanted to have their own Dalmatian puppy as a pet. Sales skyrocketed. When these new owners brought their adorable little black and white spotted puppies home, however, they found that living with a Dalmatian was a lot different than watching them on the big screen.

Dalmatians are a challenging breed to own for a number of reasons. They are rough around children – especially little children. They do not mix very well and are rambunctious and energetic.

Dalmatians were originally bred to run alongside horse drawn carriages as sentries. They were also trained and bred to run in front of the horses pulling fire wagons to sort of clear the path as an early warning system. To this day, Dalmatians are the firehouse mascot in many locations.

The bottom line is that without a lot of activity, Dalmatians become restless and even destructive. However, they are not true outdoor dogs. They also shed year round. As a result, they cannot be kept in the house or in the back yard.

Add to all of this the unique challenge with this breed of hearing impairment. Ten percent of Dalmatians are born deaf, which then requires the need for extra training and care.

A spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Humane Society said, “Dalmatians are beautiful puppies – you just need to know what you’re getting into.”

I found it interesting and somewhat sad that not long after the release of Disney’s *101 Dalmatians*, according to the Associated Press, dog shelters across the United States saw a dramatic increase in the number of Dalmatian dogs begin abandoned by their owners.

In fact, one Florida organization had been brought into existence merely to rescue this one breed of dog. According to them, nine months after the release of the Disney movie, they were taking in abandoned Dalmatians at the rate of one every week.¹

This redefines “puppy love,” does it not? Or better yet, it illustrates perfectly that which we call, “puppy love”. They are beautiful, unique, soft and cuddly. But they grow up; they create challenges; they have needs; they demand time.

“Puppy love” can be defined as a temporary infatuation which lacks a willingness to commit when the challenges become apparent.

“Agape,” on the other hand, is the kind of love that moves way beyond puppy love. It brings the Dalmatian home, adjusts life, and makes arrangements for long walks and chewed up furniture. It discovers deafness and compensates visually and physically.

“Agape” refuses the temptation to abandon. It refuses to give up. It refuses to trade in.

It is one thing to make this type of commitment to a puppy. How much more it is to make this to a person.

“Agape” chooses to serve and adjust and learn and adapt and give without any guarantee of a return. This is the love of God and the reflection of the love of Christ who,

Taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

. . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

(Philippians 2:8).

We immediately think, “Isn’t God great. Isn’t Christ the epitome of humility? Isn’t it wonderful that He loves us with ‘agape’ love?!”

We conveniently overlook the fact that the first part of Philippians chapter 2 tells us to be,

. . . maintaining the same love, united in spirit... (Philippians 2:2)

This passage is not just describing the great theological truths of the “kenosis” – the incarnation of Christ. It is a direct command for us to love like He did; to serve one another with humility like He did; to sacrifice our rights and privileges like He did.

“Agape” is not just for God. It is for the children of God.

Jesus said,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you . . . (John 13:34)

What an assignment. Jesus says, “You’ve seen Me love – now you love in the same way.”

This is a little like having Tiger Woods say to me, “Stephen, you’ve seen me swing the golf club – now you do the same thing.”

This is going to require an entirely new nature – and thinking and balance and coordination and age – in order to swing the club like that. Then I will need a lot more lessons – and I still will probably not get it.

Jesus Christ says, “Okay, you’ve seen the way I love – now you do the same thing.”

This is going to require an entirely new nature – and thinking – all the way down to our DNA. In fact, we are going to have to be born all over again into

someone new, and then be intimately related and daily surrendered to the Spirit of God.

We will then need a lot of lessons in order to love like Christ. And we have the primary manual on love in I Corinthians 13.

Let me read my paraphrase, based on our previous studies, of I Corinthians 13:4-6.

Love exercises patience toward irritating people; love demonstrates kindness in difficult situations; love doesn’t clutch what it has and want what others have; love doesn’t talk about itself and treat others with arrogance; love doesn’t forget its manners and only look out for number 1; love does not become cantankerous when disappointed; love doesn’t keep a list of wrongs, but daily erases the offenses from the ledger of its heart; love isn’t interested in sinful things, but is very excited about the truth.

Now, Paul comes to an end with five distinct positive phrases that summarize true love – “agape” love. Notice I Corinthians 13:7-8a.

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails . . .

In this summary, Paul reveals five enduring qualities of love. The:

1. support of “agape”;
2. simplicity of “agape”;
3. sweetness of “agape”;
4. steadfastness of “agape”;
5. supremacy of “agape”.

The Support of Love

Paul writes, in I Corinthians 13:7a,

[Love] bears all things . . .

This is the support of love.

Some take this verb “stego (στεγῶ)” to mean “to cover,” as a roof covers a house; so that Paul has in mind the idea that true love will cover over anything.ⁱⁱ

More than likely, this verb actually refers in this verse to the bearing of a load; the strength of the beams which support the roof.

In other words, true love will bear up under a great load – great pressure – great insult and great disappointment.ⁱⁱⁱ

One author said it this way, “True love gets underneath the load of life and bears it to the limit.”^{iv}

How true!

James Dobson in his book entitled, *Love for a Lifetime*, tells of the time he heard Francis Schaeffer speak to this issue of love. He described the bridges that were built in Europe by the Romans in the first and second centuries A.D. They are still standing today, despite the unreinforced brick and mortar with which they were made. Why have they not collapsed in this modern era? Simply for this reason: they remain intact because they are used for nothing but foot traffic. If a large truck were driven across these historic structures, they would crumble in a great cloud of dust and debris. He went on to make the application that marriages which lack determination to hang together at all costs are like these fragile Roman bridges. They appear to be secure and may indeed remain upright, until they are put under heavy pressure. Like unreinforced mud they will not withstand the weighty trials lying ahead or the pressing weight of the daily wear and tear which builds up over time. In fact, it is the daily load that accumulates over time which may be more threatening to a marriage than the catastrophic events of life.^v

In marriage and relationships in general, true love helps carry the load of life.

The apostle Paul is saying in this phrase that true love bears up under the heavy load of life’s problems and sufferings – despite deprivation, hard work, and even opposition.

“Agape” lends a hand. It shares the burden. It joins another person underneath the pressure of life and lends a shoulder to lift the load.

I had lunch today with four prospective seminary students who traveled here this weekend – three from South Carolina and one from Ohio. One was married and already a college graduate, having served now for fifteen years as a youth pastor, but sensing the need for training. I asked him about his family and he told me that he has two children, ages thirteen and ten. He went on to tell me that his thirteen-year-old son was born with severe brain defects – unable to swallow and mentally retarded. His son is unable to move, needs to be fed through a tube, and is under twenty-four hour care in their home. The boy is very aware of life around him, although mentally and emotionally he seems to be around the age of three. This man’s depth of character had already been apparent to me, but now I knew why. He and his wife had chosen to love and care for a child with

great challenges – and he said to me over lunch that God had been so faithful to them. He had such a sweet and kind spirit – there was no bitterness, no complaining. In fact, he said to me, “I know that there are a lot of people who suffer more greatly than we do . . . and our son is such a joy to us.”

This is the strength of “agape”.

The Simplicity of Love

Paul then goes on to tell us of the simplicity of love, as he writes in I Corinthians 13:7,

. . . [love] believes all things . . .

This is the simplicity of love – it is completely trusting.

When we love God like this, it means that we take His word for what it means. We trust Him. We do not complicate His word, twist it or redefine it.

As it relates to other people, this means that we give them the benefit of the doubt. We believe simply the most favorable possibility. We refuse the urge to be suspicious and create complicated conspiracies. We resist the urge to engage in drama and assign the worst possible motive to what someone says or does.

“Agape” believes all things. By this, Paul means that “agape” takes the kindest view. It takes God at His word and people at face value.

The scribes and Pharisees saw the worst in others, including Christ. When Jesus told the paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven, the Pharisees immediately concluded He was blaspheming God (Luke 5:21). Then the Lord further evidenced His divine claim to forgive sins by healing the paralyzed man of his paralysis, and told the paralyzed man, “Pick up your stretcher and walk home.” (Luke 5:24) Even though the paralyzed man did this, the scribes and Pharisees remained convinced that the Lord was not of God, but was an imposter at best and a deceiving blasphemer at worst.

There Christ was in broad daylight – He just healed a paralyzed man! However, these religious leaders could not believe the best about Christ. Why? Because they hated Him.

Hate believes the worst. Love believes the best.^{vi}

Leon Morris wrote,

This is not like the White Queen in Alice in Wonderland who believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast. This phrase does not mean that love is gullible; easily duped by pretenders. Love is clear

sighted, able to recognize wrong. This love is unlike the world, which always believes the worst about people. “Agape” is simply (as Moffat translated it) “eager to believe the best”.^{vii}

This is the simplicity of “agape”.

It is love that is uncomplicated, without intrigue, taking people at their word.

There is not only the strength of “agape” and the simplicity of “agape,” but Paul continues.

The Sweetness of Love

Paul goes on to add a third enduring quality of love, which is the sweetness of “agape” or love.

We could even call the next phrase Paul writes the smile of “agape”. After studying it, I am convinced that a person who demonstrates love has a sweetness of spirit toward others.

Notice that Paul writes, in the next phrase of I Corinthians 13:7,

... [love] hopes all things ...

This is the sweet optimism of “agape”. It never stops hoping.

“Agape” never takes anyone’s failure as final. The world frowns at you, but this person smiles at you.

I thought this story was funny; in fact, Pepper Rogers intended it to be. Several years ago, when Pepper Rogers was the head football coach at UCLA, he was going through a terrible losing season. He could not win a game. The media was hounding him; the alumni of the school were calling for his job; football fans were upset with him. His friends were becoming more and more scarce. Pepper Rogers said on one occasion that he was not even sure where his wife was in all this – she had become really quiet. So he complained to her one day, and said, “I guess my best friend now is my dog ... but a man needs at least two friends.” She said, “Well then, you’d better get another dog.”^{viii}

The chips are down. The Corinthian church cannot seem to do anything right. But Paul writes to the Corinthian church these words,

Great is my confidence in you; great is my boasting on your behalf. . . .
(II Corinthians 7:4)

You have got to be kidding. Paul – boasting about this wayward, weak, immature body of believers?

Yes.

How?

Paul loved them – and love always hopes for the best.

Paul writes to this church,

I rejoice that in everything I have confidence in you. (II Corinthians 7:16)

This is a coach telling his players; a teacher telling her students, “I know you can do it – you can make it.”

There is something incredibly infusing about this kind of person.

The truth is that we all know very few people like this, right? There are very few people who just see the best in everything and everyone; who are full of the sweetness of “agape” that engenders even more hope.

Why are there so few of these people? Because our nature gets hung up on the past.

We hear a new believer talking about how great God is and how interesting His word is, and instead of encouraging them, we are thinking, “He’ll eventually learn ... he’ll grow out of that excitement ... just give him time.”

When we talk to a newly married couple and the young bride gushes, “Oh, he’s so sweet,” we are thinking, “Just wait.”

We run around pouring cold water on everyone’s fire! We live in the negative and accusative case.

How many Green Bay Packer fans are hearing this?

Thirty-four days ago, Brett Favre broke Dan Marino’s record for throwing the most touchdown passes in football – 421 touchdown passes.

Fifteen days later, Favre broke another record – he is now the most intercepted quarterback in NFL history. Does Green Bay care about this record? No. If you get around one of these fans, they are not dwelling on the failures – they are focused on the victories. Why? Because they love their team and their quarterback. They know he has thrown 278 picks, but they choose to think about the 421 touchdown passes.^{ix}

This is the sweet optimism of love.

“I am so proud of my children,” you might say.

“What, haven’t they ever disappointed you?”

“Of course, but I’m focusing on the hope of ‘agape’.”

This is like Paul with the Corinthians, who chose to focus on what they could be and the good they had done.

One author wrote,

This “agape” is demonstrated in the hearts of the parents of a backslidden child; the spouse of an unbelieving marriage partner; the church that has disciplined members who do not repent – they all hope in love that the child, the spouse, or the erring brother or sister will be saved or restored. Love refuses to take failure as final. God would not take Israel’s failure as final. Jesus would not take Peter’s failure as final. Paul would not take the Corinthians’ failure as final.^x

This is a great challenge for parents – for dads especially. Your child just might have the record number of failures along with a record number of successes in life. Which record will you frame and put on the mantle of your memory?

True love chooses to focus on hopeful things.

The Steadfastness of Love

Paul reveals a fourth quality of “agape,” as he writes in the last phrase of I Corinthians 13:7,

... [love] endures all things.

This is the steadfastness of love.

What a fitting way to end this paragraph – and why not? What good are all the above qualities if we stop; if we quit; if we find some loophole or escape clause.

“Agape” does not have a back door.

We are told that God,

... will never leave [us] nor forsake [us] (Hebrews 13:5b NKJV)

... [nothing] will separate us from the love [“agape”] of Christ ... (Romans 8:35)

If we are to love one another as Christ loves us, then we will endure.

I found it interesting to read some of the data from the 2007 United States Census Bureau regarding the permanency of marriage in America today. The findings seem to reinforce the so-called “seven-year itch”. They found that on average, couples that separated did so after seven years and divorced after eight. Perhaps, one author concluded, it is this information that has led Gabriele Pauli, one of Germany’s politicians, to propose legislation that would make legal marriages dissolved after seven years. Her legislation would allow couples either to

extend their marriages or allow them to terminate automatically after seven years without undue legal burden or tiresome litigation.^{xi}

This kind of legislation is in our own future – and why not? Already one author has suggested that we plan on three spouses over the course of a lifetime.

The love of the world is self-focused, self-protecting, self-enamored, self-serving – so, a seven year marriage makes a lot of sense. This is puppy love – love when it is soft and cuddly and there are no apparent challenges or pressures.

The love of Christ is not a seven year affair. It is what? Everlasting! As we demonstrate the love of Christ – the “agape” of God – our love for spouses and children and the assembly will not be fickle fancy – it will endure.

Not that this makes it easy. In fact, the word Paul used for “endure,” “*hupomenei* (υπομενει),” is a word that referred to a soldier in the battle, fighting for his life and refusing to desert the front lines.

This is love for when life gets tough.

In his tremendous book, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*, Kent Hughes writes of his friendship with Robertson McQuilkin, the former president of Columbia International University. Robertson’s wife Muriel was in the late stages of Alzheimer’s when Dr. McQuilkin resigned to take care of her. In his resignation letter he wrote,

My dear wife, Muriel, has been in failing mental health for about eight years. So far I have been able to care for both her ever-growing needs and my leadership responsibilities at Columbia. Recently it has become apparent that Muriel is contented most of the time she is with me and almost none of the time I am away from her. It is not just “discontent”. She is filled with fear – even terror – that she has lost me and always goes in search of me when I leave home. It is clear that she needs me now, full-time. This decision was made, in a way, forty-two years ago when I promised to care for her “in sickness and in health . . . till death do us part.” So, as I have already told the students and faculty, as a man of my word, I will do it. She has cared for me fully all these years; if I cared for her for the next forty years I would not be out of debt. Duty, however, can be grim and stoic. But there is more; I love Muriel. She is a delight to me . . . I do not have to care for her . . . I get to.^{xiii}

“I do not *have* to care for her . . . I *get* to.”

This is much more than temporary infatuation when everything is sunshine and roses. This is the love that issues forth during the pressures and challenges of life.^{xiii}

This is the endurance of true love.

The Supremacy of Love

There is one more enduring quality of “agape”. Paul will speak from I Corinthians 13:8 to the end of the chapter on the supremacy of love.

Let us look for a moment just at I Corinthians 13:8, as we bring this series to a close. Paul writes this about “agape” – and I have translated it in this way:

Love never falls to the ground; if there are gifts of prophecy, they will taper off; if there are tongues, they will stop; if there is knowledge, it will taper off as well.

Now you might remember from I Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul told us that all tongues and all knowledge and all prophecy and all faith was worthless without love – we just make a lot of noise, like the crashing of cymbals.

Now Paul informs us that these wonderful gifts are temporary, but love is eternal.

This is the exclamation point of “agape”! Nothing outlasts true love.

This is the supremacy of love.

The word in this verse for “fails (πιπτω),” or “falls” is a word the Greeks used to speak of the petal of a flower or a leaf falling to the ground, withering and dying.^{xiv}

Paul says that true love – like the love of Christ for us – never falls down; will not wither away.

This is the constancy, the loyalty, the persistence, the devotion, the faithfulness, the dedication, and the dependability of true love.

One day, Charles Spurgeon, the well known London pastor of the 1800s, was walking through the

English countryside with a friend. As they strolled along, the pastor noticed a barn with a weather vane on its roof. At the top of the vane were these words: “God is Love”. Spurgeon remarked to his companion that he thought this was a rather inappropriate place for such a message, “Weather vanes are changeable,” he said, “but God’s love is constant.” His friend responded, “No Charles, I think you misunderstand the meaning. That weather vane is indicating a truth: regardless of which way the wind blows, God is love.”^{xv}

Conclusion

“Agape” is simply the description of the character of God. And these are the enduring qualities of true love which not only mirror the nature of God, but demonstrate His love through us. There is:

- the support of love – it bears up under the pressure of all things;
- the simplicity of love – it believes the best of all things;
- the sweetness of love – it chooses to infuse itself and others with hope;
- the steadfastness of love – it refuses to run from the challenges of life;
- the supremacy of love – it outlasts any gift and any act of piety and every demonstration of ministry or philanthropy; it is greater than all faith and all hope.

Who do we know that loves like this? Christ Himself. And as we are conformed into His image and confess our dependence upon Him, we can demonstrate a little “agape” as well. However, it is going to take a lifetime of practice – and we will never fully master it. But we strive for the goal – ultimately of pleasing Him – and then, as we pursue Him, we bear the fruit of His Spirit which is “agape” love. Then we, like Him, demonstrate to those around us, lives marked by true love.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/4/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ <http://www.wikipedia.org>; <http://k9web.com>; Craig Larson, *Choice Contemporary Stories* (Baker, 1998), p. 161.

ⁱⁱ Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 432.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, *1 Corinthians* (Westminster, 1975), p. 123.

^{iv} Alan Redpath, *The Royal Route to Heaven* (Revell, 1960), p. 166.

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- ^v James Dobson, Love for a Lifetime (Multnomah Press, 1987), p. 56.
- ^{vi} John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians (Moody Press, 1984), p. 354.
- ^{vii} Leon Morris, Testaments of Love (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 250.
- ^{viii} Steven Lawson, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Job (Holman, 2004), p. 143.
- ^{ix} <http://www.preachingtoday.com>; ABC News, Sept. 30, 2007; The Sports Network, Oct. 14, 2007.
- ^x MacArthur, p. 354.
- ^{xi} <http://www.preachingtoday.com>; Houston Chronicle, Sept. 19, 2007.
- ^{xii} R. Kent Hughes, Disciplines of a Godly Man (Crossway, 1991), p. 35.
- ^{xiii} Redpath, p. 155.
- ^{xiv} MacArthur, p. 358.
- ^{xv} Robert Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 357.