

Surprised by the Appearances of Love

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part III

I Corinthians 13:4a

Introduction

I happen to love to surprise my wife, Marsha – whether it is with a birthday party or a trip or a new appliance. However, she is hard to surprise. I usually have to tell at least twenty-five lies and commit thirty misdemeanors in order to pull off one surprise.

Marsha turned the tables on me when I turned forty. That was a few months ago, now. She planned for almost a year and pulled off one of those, “This Is Your Life” parties. There were people from all over who traveled to Cary to surprise me. One attendee was a close friend from Dallas who paid the moving expenses from Dallas to Cary twenty-one years ago so we could start Colonial Baptist Church. A close friend from college days also came. However, I nearly fell over with shock when around the corner came a boyhood friend that I had not seen in years. He was another missionary kid whose father worked with mine. It was such a shock – he was married, had children, and looked so grown up. He and I, two missionary kids, were inseparable growing up, and got into all sorts of mischief. We used to play tag with a BB gun – but that is another story that I do not have time for today. I said that to encourage all the moms who are wondering if little Junior will survive. He will, and he will probably grow up to become a preacher, so be patient with him.

Marsha loves surprises a lot more than I do, but I will never forget that birthday.

I received another surprise recently in the mail. It was not nearly as much fun. It took me some time to figure out why I was being sent pictures of my Ford

F150 pick-up truck, until I realized it was a notice of violation from the town of Cary.

My beloved town had taken pictures of me going through a red light. I had been caught on film. Three pictures: one from a distance of me in the left turn lane, turning left; a second with the light clearly showing red and my truck in the middle of the intersection, turning left; a third was a close-up picture of my license plate, “POIMENAS”.

“Poimenas” is the Greek word for “shepherds,” which is the same word that gives us our word “pastor,” in the plural form. When I got that special license plate, my wife told me she was glad it was in Greek because of the way I drive. I did not think that was funny either.

The uniqueness of the license plate did not help – there was no denying that “POIMENAS” on a black Ford F150 was me.

The town of Cary even has a video of the violation. It is an open and shut case. The only positive thing about the pictures is that the truck really looks good. Thank you again for it.

At the bottom of the notice it said to mail in my \$50.00 if I wanted to avoid further civil action.

There was no way to argue – and no need to bother.

I read recently about a guy who thought he would be a wise guy. He received one of these notices in the mail, with pictures of his car running a red light, and was told to mail in \$40.00. He thought he would respond in kind, so he mailed in a photograph of \$40.00. He took a picture of two twenty dollar bills and mailed it in. A week later, he received another

letter from the town with a picture enclosed – a photograph of a pair of handcuffs. He promptly mailed in his money.

I have to say that it was odd seeing these pictures of me going through that intersection with undeniable proof of a violation of the law. I was embarrassed by it.

It has made me think, “What if someone was taking pictures of us throughout the day? What if we were surprised by snapshots taken for an entire day, with our facial expressions clearly exposed and our words captioned underneath? What if our actions were all recorded on camera?”

How many of these pictures would bring us embarrassment at the end of the day? How many would bring us joy?

Would we be surprised by the appearances of loving actions in those photographs, or would they simply catalogue selfish words and self-centered living?

It is as if the apostle Paul has been roaming through our neighborhood and church with a divine camera. He has been cataloguing for some time, what true love is up to. He has delivered the photographs to us in an envelope marked, “I Corinthians chapter 13”.

Now, if you have been under the impression that I Corinthians 13 is some kind of Hallmark romantic card about what love is, you are in for another surprise. Even though our translation includes adjectives for love – in the Greek language these are not adjectives, but verbs; present tense verbs – all fifteen of them.

This chapter does not tell us what true love is; it tells us what true love does – “agape” is active.

“Agape” is not something we feel; it is not some inner sensation or emotion. In fact, this kind of true love is not conveyed by words alone, but has to be shown.

One author said, “Agape” can be defined only by what it does and does not do.ⁱ

This is true love – caught on tape. This is undeniable evidence of what true love looks like in action.

Notice I Corinthians 13:4a.

Love is patient, love is kind . . .

These are the first of fifteen verbs. They are two positive statements followed by eight negative statements.

Paul spends as much time telling us the way love does not act as he does the way love acts. We will reserve comments on the negative side of true love for our next session.

The first two descriptions are nothing less than two surprising snapshots of love. They are surprising in that they describe love in places where we would not expect to see love show up. They head the list.

We could translate these first two positive verbs, “*love exercises patience, love demonstrates kindness.*”

Love Exercises Patience

First let us look at love that exercises patience.

This verb “patient”, by the way, comes from “makrothumew (μακροθυμew),” which means, “long suffering”. The word “macro” is used in our English language as a prefix meaning “broad or long,” as opposed to “micro” which is used for something tiny like a microchip.

“Thumew” refers to “passion”. It is used of something breaking into flames.ⁱⁱ

In other words, “makrothumew” takes a long time to burst into flame.

In our modern world we would call this, long-fused patience. There is a long fuse to “agape”.

This word, by the way, chosen by the Spirit of God, has to do with having patience with people, not things.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is one thing to exercise patience over a broken lawnmower, or a computer that crashes, or a photocopier that keeps jamming, or the vending machine that after you put in your 75 cents, the candy bar slides to the end of the arm but will not fall down. When that happens, most of us stand there and say, “I can’t believe it!” We push on the machine and smack the glass and threaten it.

This is certainly one kind of patience, but it is not the word in this verse. This has to do with exercising patience with people.

These are people who are evidently difficult – otherwise we would not need to exercise patience. These are people we would like to shake or push or threaten.

At this moment, there is a divine snapshot taken. Look at the photograph – perhaps you are in the middle of this scene now – what do the pictures reveal?

Our church is blessed with so many teachers from so many different venues of teaching. Perhaps you can especially identify with this incident submitted by John Beukema, from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.

An elementary teacher was helping one of her kindergarten students get his cowboy boots on before leaving for home. He had asked her for help and she could see why. Even with her pulling and pushing, the boots just did not want to fit all the way – they seemed too small. She persisted and by the time she got the second boot on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost cried when the little boy said, “These are on the wrong feet.”

You know how boots can sometimes be hard to tell – so she looked closely and sure enough, they were. She tugged and pulled and finally pulled the boots off. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on the right feet. Finally, just as she was finished, he said, “You know, these aren’t my boots.”

She bit her tongue rather than scream. Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off his little feet. No sooner had they gotten the boots off, he said, “See, they’re my brother’s boots, but my mom said I could wear ‘em.”

She did not know if she should laugh or cry, but she mustered up what patience she had left to wrestle the boots back on his feet one more time. Finally, she finished. Helping him into his coat, she asked, “Now, where are your mittens?”

He said, “I stuffed ‘em in the toes of my boots.”

(In two years, she will be eligible for parole.)^{iv}

I do not blame her.

It is interesting, is it not, that the first evidence of true love is patience? This is the way love acts toward the unloving.

I found it interesting that the Pharisees, in the days of Paul, held to the “theory of compensation”. That is, you return to others what they give to you.^v

This is the reason the teaching of Christ was so radical. It was no longer an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – which was certainly the basis for justice and remuneration. (Matthew 5:38)

Now, it was self-defacing, self-defrauding, self-emptying love toward others.

How unlike the world this is, which lives by the opposite mottos:

- “Don’t get mad, get even.”
- “Do unto others before they do it unto you.”

This is the law of the jungle.

Jesus Christ gives a new motto, “Endure suffering without seeking retaliation.”

Paul writes to the Romans,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . (Romans 12:17).

Chrysostom, the church leader, said that this word for patience describes a man who has been wronged and has the power to avenge himself, but will not do it.

The Greeks of Paul’s day would have considered this a sign of weakness.

We know this is a sign of supernatural strength. In fact, the only way we can demonstrate it is not to drum it up; not to try to come up with it on our own, but to surrender to the Spirit of God who develops it in our lives as one of His fruits – for the fruit of the Spirit is patience. (Galatians 5:22)

This is true strength.

If you have read the biography of Abraham Lincoln, you have come across the bitter resentment shown toward him by Edwin Stanton. Stanton, who was a political rival of Lincoln’s, called him a clown and nicknamed him, “the original gorilla”. He said that one particular explorer was a fool to wander about Africa trying to capture a gorilla when he could have found one so easily at Springfield, Illinois, where Lincoln lived.

Lincoln said nothing. In fact, after Abraham Lincoln became president of the United States, he eventually chose Edwin Stanton to be his Secretary of War. When friends and colleagues asked him why, he simply responded, “Because he is the best man for the job.”

The years wore on. The night came when the assassin’s bullet murdered Lincoln in the theatre. It was not long before Edwin Stanton stood looking down on Lincoln’s silent face, and said through tears, “There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.”

The patience of love had conquered in the end.^{vi}

This is to love those who are the neediest and the most irritating among you.

Paul writes to the Thessalonians, using the same word for patience,

We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly [disorderly], encourage the fainthearted [those prone to worry and discouragement], help the weak [the morally unstable who seem to constantly need encouragement to do the right thing], and be patient with everyone. (I Thessalonians 5:14)

Paul closes this verse by adding, “Be long-fused with all of them.”

Anyone can love the lovable. Anyone can exercise patience with the considerate. Anyone can put up with the neat and orderly and the strong and the refined and the polite. This is not the patience of “agape”.

The photograph of this kind of “agape” catches us when we exercise patience toward those who cannot seem to get their boots on without a lot of help.

One author said that “makrothumew” is having patience to bear with those who resist change; who are weak in their faith; who are quick to complain; who are forgetful of their responsibilities; who are emotionally unstable, fearful, or even wayward.

Be patient with them all, Paul writes!

The ancient Greeks used this word, “patience,” for the physician who continued to treat chronic illnesses when there was little hope for a cure.^{vii}

Why treat this person? Why go through the sweat of it all? Why bother? Because they have inherent worth and value, therefore the choice is made to serve them even though the outlook is bleak and there are no guarantees.

This is the “agape” of God,

. . . in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

This is true love; genuine, God-like, Christ-imitating, sacrificial, surprising love that is patient toward the irritable, the unexpressive, the disappointing, the unlovely.

This is the surprising snapshot of “agape”. Have you been caught in a photograph with this kind of love?

Love expresses patience.

Love Demonstrates Kindness

“Agape” does not stop with being patient with the unloving. Paul writes next in I Corinthians 13:4, that this love is also kind.

Being kind is the counterpart to being patient. In other words, while patience will put up with anything, kindness will give away anything to another.^{viii}

It is possible to be patient without being kind.

I might be able to put up with you by staying away from you, right? In other words, if we avoid that person, we avoid a conflict.

However, Paul does not stop with “exercising patience”. He has the audacity to tell us that true love “demonstrates kindness”.

We are going to have to come into contact with that person to do this, are we not?!

Kindness is more than a sweet smile and a handshake.

This word means that we not only take the injury from someone with patience, but we return the injury with kindness.^{ix}

“Agape” is not for the weak at heart.

This is Jesus Christ telling His disciples to “love their enemies.” He did not simply mean they were to feel kindly about them, but to literally be kind to them.^x

Jesus is the model we follow, for “agape” is of God.

The same word is used in,

. . . the kindness of God [has led us] to repentance (Romans 2:4)

We are to demonstrate to others what Christ demonstrates to us.

Peter writes, also using the same word,

. . . [we] have tasted the kindness of the Lord. (I Peter 2:3)

We are being called to demonstrate the kindness toward the world that God has demonstrated toward us.

You may remember Paul’s injunction,

. . . if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. (Romans 12:20)

You might say, “I like that part about burning coals on his head. I can do that!”

Paul is describing a very kind deed of his culture that would have been easily understood. We can miss the point.

No one in Paul’s day had matches in the pantry. If they did not keep their fire going, they could not

cook or keep warm in the cold night. In fact, without a fire, they were desperate. The only thing they could do was ask their neighbor for some live coals.

To carry the coals, they had to carry along a basin that they would balance on their head, in the custom of that day, as they carried supplies. Neighbors would live quite some distance away from each other. If the neighbor was stingy and gave only a coal or two, the coals might lose their heat and smolder out by the time the borrower arrived home. If the neighbor was kind, he would heap coals of fire on their head. In other words, the neighbor would give enough coals to ensure that by the time they arrived home, they had enough live coals to start a fire and even to begin cooking immediately.

This would be nothing for a friend to do for a friend.

However, what about a stranger; what about an enemy? It would require much more from the neighbor if their enemy showed up at their door. They would not be tempted to give him coal; they would be tempted to throw it at him; to put a hot one down his robe.

It is *this* person of whom Christ is speaking.

If we want to demonstrate the love of God – the “agape” love of kindness – we must demonstrate self-sacrifice, self-denial, selfless supportive love for someone we either do not know or do not feel kindly toward.

Demonstrate kindness to this person. Have you ever had your picture taken doing something like this?

This is the type of photograph that continues to surprise the world.

One magazine to which I subscribe, *World Magazine*, carried in the spring edition of 2006, an article written by an atheist. This atheist, Hattersley, was absolutely devastated by the obvious fact that the only people who really want to help other people in need are Christians.

As the atheist watched the Salvation Army and other faith-based ministries respond to Hurricane Katrina, he lamented in a newspaper column,

Notable by their absence are teams from rationalist societies, free thinkers’ clubs, and atheists’ associations – the sort of people who scoff at religion’s intellectual absurdity . . .

According to Hattersley, it was an obvious conclusion that Christians are the most likely to take the risks and make the sacrifices involved in helping others.

He went on to say that drug addiction offends Christians, but they are the most willing ones to change bandages and clean the addicts up.

Hattersley concluded by saying,

The only possible conclusion is that [Christians have] moral imperatives that . . . make them morally superior to atheists like me.^{xi}

This goes all the way back to the early church.

In the second century, the pagans were so struck by the kindness of the Christians toward people who rejected them; were so surprised by their kind deeds that, according to Tertullian, they were nicknamed by the changing of one Greek letter, from Christiani (followers of Christ) to Chrestiani – made up of kindness.^{xii}

Do we surprise anyone today by our demonstration of kindness?

Conclusion

Are there any living pictures of us involved in the actions of patience and kindness?

There are two reasons why there are not more of us in more pictures that reveal patience and kindness. There are two demands that make these verbs of love difficult.

- First, neither patience nor kindness can be developed apart from the Spirit.

These verbs are the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience and kindness – there they are, side by side again. (Galatians 5:22)

Ladies and gentlemen, you cannot decide to muster up the fruit of the Spirit. This is not some resolution you can develop on your own.

These fruits are the results of surrender to the Spirit of God. So pursue Him – and patience and kindness will eventually find you in their photo-album.

Neither patience nor kindness can be developed apart from the Spirit.

- Secondly, neither patience nor kindness can be demonstrated apart from suffering.

These two actions invite difficulty.

Patience demands, what? Irritating people to exercise love with. So if you ask God for more patience, He will probably send more irritating people to you.

God may send true suffering to you. Patience demands irritating conditions to be proven.

Kindness demands unloving conditions to be practiced.

We do not exercise patience and demonstrate kindness in private. We have to go public – and not to just any kind of public.

Lenski wrote, “These two actions are not revealed in surroundings of friendship and affection where each individual embraces and kisses the other – this is action in a bad, self-centered world.”^{xiii}

Perhaps this is the reason these photographs are so rare – and far too rare in our lives to be excused.

I read several years ago about a group of people who demonstrated kindness in a rare way. They did so in such a way that the world took note.

In 1975 a child name Raymond Dunn, Jr., was born in New York State. The Associated Press reported that at his birth, a skull fracture and oxygen deprivation caused severe retardation. As Raymond grew, the family discovered further impairments. His twisted body suffered up to twenty seizures per day. He was also found to be blind, mute, and virtually immobile. He had severe allergies that limited him to only one food – found after numerous attempts to find something he could digest – a meat-based formula made by Gerber Foods.

However, in 1985, Gerber stopped making the formula that Raymond thrived on. Carol Dunn scoured the country to buy what stores had in stock, accumulating cases and cases of it. But in 1990, her

supply ran out. In desperation, she appealed to Gerber for help. Would they help her and her son, Raymond?

The employees of the company were given the news. They not only listened, but they responded. In an unprecedented action, volunteers donated hundreds of hours to bring out old equipment, set up a production line, obtain special approval from the USDA, and produce the formula – all for one special boy.

In January 1995, Raymond Dunn, Jr., known as the Gerber Boy, passed away. But during his brief lifetime, he had called forth a surprising thing called kindness and compassion.^{xiv}

What a surprising picture; what a rare photograph of kindness.

Can we as the people of God be any less? Would the world be surprised by the appearances of love in our lives?

Paul says, “Let me show you a more excellent way to live.” He is not giving the Corinthians or North Carolinians a different way to feel; he is giving us a radically different way to live.

Surrender to the Spirit and invite suffering so that we can demonstrate to our watching world – which has cameras ready – the patience of “agape” and the kindness of “agape,” which become amazing, irrefutable pictures of God-like, Christ-honoring, genuine true love.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/23/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ David Garland, Baker Exegetical Commentary: 1 Corinthians (Baker Academic, 2003), p. 616.

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

ⁱⁱⁱ Leon Morris, Testaments of Love (Eerdmans, 1981), p. 244.

^{iv} John Beukema, “Child’s Boots Leave Teacher Frustrated,” <http://www.preachingtoday.com>, 2007, Chambersburg, PA.

^v Gerhard Kittle, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Volume IV (Eerdmans, 1967), p. 380.

^{vi} William Barclay, 1 Corinthians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 120.

^{vii} TDNT, p. 375.

^{viii} John MacArthur, 1 Corinthians (Moody Press, 1984), p. 339.

^{ix} Alan Redpath, The Royal Route to Heaven: 1 Corinthians (Revell, 1960), p. 164.

^x Ibid., p. 339.

^{xi} World Magazine, (Spring 2006), p. 67.

^{xii} Garland, p. 617.

^{xiii} R. C. C. Lenski, 1 Corinthians (Augsburg Publishing House, 1937), p. 555.

^{xiv} Leadership Magazine, Volume 16, #3.