

Uncommonly Rare . . . Undeniably Real

Will True Love Please Stand Up – Part V

I Corinthians 13:5a

Introduction

Since it was minted in 1933, one particular gold coin has been stolen, shipped to Egypt, hidden, and almost destroyed by fire twice. It is the Double Eagle twenty dollar gold coin. Containing an ounce of nearly pure gold, when it went up for auction a few years ago, this twenty dollar coin sold for over seven million dollars.

It all started during the days of the Great Depression. During the worst years of the depression people were hoarding their gold, which was undermining the nation's financial system. As soon as Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President, by executive order, he took the United States off the gold standard. Payment by gold was then prohibited. As a result, thousands of citizens exchanged their now worthless gold at the banks for cash.

Someone, however, forgot to send the memo to the United States Mint to stop making new gold coins. They produced hundreds of thousands of these twenty dollar gold coins, until the Mint got the memo and stopped. All the Double Eagle coins were melted down – except for ten of them.

Ten of these gold coins were stolen by the U.S. Mint's chief cashier. Eventually, the Secret Service found nine of them. The tenth and only remaining Double Eagle had landed in the collection of the King of Egypt – a man who had a strange penchant for collecting old aspirin bottles, used razor blades, stamps, and coins.

In 1952, this last remaining Double Eagle was to be returned to the United States after the Egyptian king died. It never made it, but instead, disappeared

again. Finally, 45 years later, in 1996, it showed up in the hands of a dealer who claimed to be the legitimate owner.

This dealer went to court and battled the United States government over ownership of the coin. During the court battle, the coin was placed in what seemed to be a secure location – a vault at the World Trade Center. However, just days before 9/11 it was moved to Fort Knox where the government agreed to release the coin for auction and split the proceeds with this dealer.

An anonymous telephone bidder won the bid and purchased the twenty dollar Double Eagle coin for 7.6 million dollars.¹

Can you imagine paying seven million dollars for a twenty dollar coin you would never spend?

Why is there such interest in this coin? Why is it of such incredible value?

The reason is that it is one of a kind. There is no other coin like it in the world.

Rare things are treated differently than common things.

I believe it was the great theologian Mark Twain who once said, "If stones were rare and diamonds commonplace, we'd be wearing rocks for jewelry and throwing diamonds at stray dogs."

Now, you may be like me and you would not spend more than twenty dollars for a twenty dollar coin, however, the truth remains – the more uncommonly rare something is, the more valuable it becomes.

In I Corinthians chapter 13, we have been exploring the rare sightings of genuine, authentic, uncommon, true love.

We have contrasted true love to the loves of the world and discovered the rare beauty of “agape”. We have noted the absolute necessity of this kind of love, for without it we might as well get a bunch of cymbals together and make a lot of noise.

We then began to explore how love acts. Remember that verses 4-7 are not filled with adjectives, but verbs – fifteen of them. This is not what love is – these are action verbs – this is what love does.

We have now arrived at I Corinthians 13:5a, where I was immediately struck by the simplicity of love’s activity. Paul writes in this verse,

[Love] does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked . . .

This is so simple; this description of the way love acts is so obvious. As one of my friends would say, “This is not rocket science.”

However, something that is obvious to all of us can still be rare among us. These three actions are like Double Eagle coins – not only are they rarely seen in public, they are becoming more and more uncommon in the church today. In fact, they are hardly surfacing at all.

These are the expressions of true, selfless, willful, committed love. We will call them “three uncommon expressions of love”.

Three Uncommon Expressions of Love

1. The first of these expressions of love is uncommon courtesy.

Paul says in the first part of I Corinthians 13:5,

[Love] does not act unbecomingly . . .

We could translate this, “‘Agape’ does not treat others rudely.”

One author translates it, “does not behave indecently.”ⁱⁱ

In the Corinthian church, the members were selfishly overindulging at the church feasts – some even to point of drunkenness (I Corinthians 11:20-22); they were suing one another for all sorts of things (I Corinthians 6:1-7); they were hogging the floor and taking over the assembly with their own personal agendas (I Corinthians 14:26).

Becoming more and more rare was the uncommon expression of courtesy. Instead these church members were uncouth and unlovely and were displaying an unattractive demeanor that cared little for the sensitivities of others.

This is the absence of tactfulness. Someone said, “Tact is making people feel at home when we really wish they were.”

One author wrote that this verb for “rude” or “unbecoming” conveys the idea of inappropriate dress, inconsiderate talk, disregard for other people’s time or moral conscience, taking advantage of people, running roughshod over other’s plans and interests, inappropriate behavior with the opposite sex, basic discourtesy and rudeness, and a general disregard for proper social conduct – all of which are evidence of a lack of love.ⁱⁱⁱ

This phrase can refer to those who are considerate of how their behavior affects others, even in little things.^{iv}

I can remember sitting in the balcony of Moody Church with Marsha and our children, listening to a popular Bible teacher preach. It was a tremendous sermon and the church was packed with several thousand in attendance. When he was halfway through his sermon, we heard a cell phone ring somewhere in the audience. I remember thinking, “Poor guy, how embarrassing this must be here in Moody church where everything echoes around the sanctuary – everyone heard the ringing.”

After a couple of rings, I heard – as hard as this is to imagine – a man say, “Hello?”

Those of us in the balcony especially, saw to our amazement, a man seated in the middle of the sanctuary, get up out of his seat, clamber over a couple of people, and talk out loud as he walked down the aisle to the back of the church.

It is one thing for a phone to ring in church; it is another thing to answer it; it is another thing altogether to carry on a conversation while walking out.

This is unbecoming.

Paul is speaking as practically as he possibly can. True love is politeness toward others; it is consideration, which is becoming all the more uncommon. It is proper, discreet conduct in dress, speech, and action.

This verb can refer to uncouth speech. In fact, one commentator believes the thought in Paul’s mind is the behavior of the man in I Corinthians 5 who is sexually immoral.

In other words, “acting unbecomingly” refers to purity of action and speech. To put it in common language, “true love is not off-color” – it is not telling dirty jokes. There is no such thing as, “Oops, forgive my French.”

A great missionary of over a hundred years ago by the name of Hudson Taylor speaks to the church like never before with this challenge. While he was referring to missionary work in China, where he was known for his sensitivity toward the Chinese culture and customs, his words were for us as we reach out to our own people. He wrote, “Rude people will seldom be out of hot water in China and though earnest and clever and pious, they will not accomplish much. In nothing do we fail more as a mission, than in a lack of tact and politeness.”^v

Tact is making someone feel at home when you really wish they were.

It is the winsome witness of a polite believer that will often make the most profound impression.

Uncommon courtesy is synonymous with true love.

2. Secondly, Paul refers to uncommon concern as an expression of true love.

Paul writes further in I Corinthians 13:5,

... [love] does not seek its own ...

True love does not pursue the blessing and comfort and advantage of self.

We could translate this, “*Love does not insist on its own way.*”

Paul brought this rare coin out in the public view of the Corinthians time and time again.

- He said,

I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many. (I Corinthians 10:33 paraphrased)

- Earlier he wrote,

For though I am free from all . . . , I have made myself a slave to all . . . (I Corinthians 9:19)

- Paul also challenged the Corinthians to,

Let no one seek his own advantage, but that of another. (I Corinthians 10:24 paraphrased)

There are two kinds of people in this regard: those who insist upon their own privileges and those who remember their own responsibilities; those who

are always thinking of what life owes them and those who never forget what they owe life.^{vi}

“Agape” is rare because “agape” is uncommon concern for others. It is the selfless pursuit of another’s blessing. And the reason it is so remarkable is because we rarely see it in public.

This is selfless, self-defacing, self-serving, self-demoting, self-sacrificing love.

“*Seeking your own*” is the law . . . it is your rights. The most natural and human thing is to stand up for one’s rights. Here then, is that rare, unnatural thing that goes against human feelings and reactions.^{vii}

This is the opposite of selfishness.

Lenski penned this provocative statement, however, when he wrote, “Cure selfishness and you (re)plant the Garden of Eden.”^{viii}

True love is always unselfish. How easy this is to say, but how hard to live out, right?

This is the reason selfishness is as common as rocks – and unselfish living is as rare as a Double Eagle twenty dollar coin.

In a devotional that I have been reading, the author referenced two tombstones in England that perfectly illustrate this verb in I Corinthians 13:5.

A tombstone in a small English cemetery reads:

Here lies a miser, who lived for himself,

And cared for nothing but gathering wealth;

Now where he is or how he fares,

Nobody knows and nobody cares.

This man evidently lived, “seeking his own advantage.”

In contrast, a tombstone in the courtyard of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London reads:

Sacred to the memory of General Charles Gordon,

Who at all times and everywhere gave his strength to the weak,

His substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering,

And his heart to God.^{ix}

I might add that it would be the last line on this second tombstone that enables its first lines. He gave his heart to God; he gave his affection, his longing, his weakness, his sin, his failure, his faults to God. That alone allowed him, as it allows anyone, the ability to give his substance and his sympathy and his strength to others.

As Paul wrote,

I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13)

Christ Himself said,

. . . apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:5b)

Without Christ, we cannot do the rare, uncommon expressions of love.

True love expresses uncommon courtesy and uncommon concern.

3. Thirdly, uncommon control is an expression of true love.

Paul writes,

. . . [love] is not provoked . . .

We could translate this, “*Love does not become cantankerous when disappointed.*”

The Greek word is transliterated to give us our word “paroxysms,” which means “a fit of anger”.

The word means to have an inward state of arousal. By the way, it can have the positive meaning of inspiring another. The negative side has to do with irritating another, or, in its passive form, to be irritated.^x

When we read this phrase, immediately every one of us might as well stamp “guilty” on our foreheads, right? Right?!

It does no good to argue with Paul and say, “Well, I lose my temper a lot, but it’s over in a few seconds.”

So is a nuclear bomb.

One author wrote of being on a flight in which two young children sitting near him were arguing and fussing and quarreling.

Some of the moms hearing this are thinking, “I wonder if they were my children?”

I am sure they were not.

The flight attendant knew exactly how to handle these children. She went over to their seats, smiling, and said, “What’s all this squawking up here?” The children grew quiet. Then she leaned over them and said in a serious, quiet voice, “I must remind you, this is a non-squawking flight.”^{xi}

Paul is effectively saying that true love views life as a non-squawking flight.

Since it takes two people to have a provocation, Paul says we are to refuse to become the second person.

When we read this phrase, “love is not provoked,” we think, “Yeah right! Paul doesn’t expect me to take this literally, does he? This verse is for people like the apostles. This is for dead people – they can live without being provoked! This is a verse for Paul.”

The secret to this uncommon control is not that we have some sort of amazing self-control – this is Christ-control. To be mastered by this love is the same as being mastered by Christ.^{xii}

Our inability to demonstrate this love is not so much a lack of self-control as Spirit-control. Again, I take us back to the fact that “agape” is not difficult – it is impossible, apart from surrender to Christ.

The Lord began to reveal this radical way of living as He preached His sermon on the mount.

He said, in Matthew 5:39,

Do not oppose [fight] an evil person – even if they slap you on your right cheek, turn the other to them also. (paraphrased)

Most people misunderstand what Christ is saying in this verse. They think that it is referring to letting someone punch them in the face – and not to punch back, but to turn the other cheek. Then, after being hit a second time, they can send the person to the hospital.

However, this is effectively the same demonstration of love that Paul is referring to in I Corinthians 13. The text gives us a clue about the culture of Christ’s day. The Lord specifically mentions being slapped on the right cheek.

Now most of His world, as ours, was right handed. They had to watch out for the right hook. However, Christ specifically mentions being struck on the right cheek. In other words, for this man to be struck on the right cheek by a right-handed person, that person would have to swing back-handed, slapping him with the back of their hand across his right cheek. This, in the culture of Christ, was the ultimate insult.

Christ is saying that if we are insulted by someone to the maximum degree, be willing to be insulted again.

- **Love that refuses to be provoked is willing to forfeit personal dignity.**

Look further in Matthew chapter 5, to verse 41,

Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

This is again, something that the generation of Paul would clearly understand as an incredibly insulting, aggravating, anger-provoking event.

During these days, the law of the land gave a Roman soldier the right to force anyone in the empire to carry his gear for one mile. The Jews especially hated this practice, not only because it interrupted their schedule, but because they had to help their enemy. A mile was considered a thousand steps. So the poor person who had just been drafted to carry the gear, would begin walking along, counting – sometimes aloud – the number of steps, “One, two, three . . . 998, 999, 1000.”

As soon as he got to a thousand, he could legally, legitimately say, “That’s far enough,” and there was nothing the soldier could do.

Christ says, “If you are compelled to walk one mile, go with him two miles.”

This is where we got our phrase, “going the extra mile”.

Imagine the surprise of the Roman soldier at a response of, “Hey listen, I know I’ve already walked a thousand steps in the opposite direction, but I’m willing, because of my love for Christ – and you – to walk another mile.”

This meant that he would have to walk another two miles to get back, or four miles in all. There go his plans for the afternoon.

- **Love that refuses to be provoked is willing to forfeit not only personal dignity, but personal convenience.**

This person had every right to let the Roman soldier know how unhappy he was to have been picked – to have been insulted. It was a long thousand step journey.

Paul writes that true, genuine, selfless, servant-like, Christ-honoring, God exalting love – the “agape,” which is rare and precious action – is the kind of love that instead of provocation, proceeds another thousand steps.

This is indeed, uncommonly rare love, but undeniably real.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, some guy is eventually going to die with a twenty dollar gold coin in his safe. What good did it do except to allow him to think he really had spent his money well and now owned something valuable only because it was rare?

The most valuable things in our lives are indeed rare, but they are not kept in the safe – they are evidenced in our lives.

This is especially true of this rare thing called true love; love that demonstrates these uncommon expressions:

- uncommon courtesy;
- uncommon concern;
- uncommon control.

Let me close with a story of something to put into practice.

A young father was in the grocery store pushing a shopping cart with his little son strapped in the front. The kid was a little terror – fussing, irritable, and crying. The other shoppers gave the pair a wide aisle because the child would pull cans off the shelf and throw other cans out of the cart. In spite of it all, this brave father continued to encourage his son with kind words, “It’s okay, Donnie...Don’t worry, Donnie...Listen, Donnie, we’ll be done in a few more minutes...It’s all right, Donnie.”

One mother who was passing by was so impressed by this young father’s attitude that she said, “You certainly know how to treat your son.”

Then, bending down to the little boy, she said, “Now what seems to be the problem, Donnie?”

“Oh no,” the father said, “he’s Henry, I’m Donnie.”^{xiii}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/7/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ American History Magazine, Feb. 2003, <http://www.cnn.com>, July 30, 2002.

ⁱⁱ David Garland, Baker Exegetical Commentary: 1 Corinthians (Baker Academic, 2003), p. 618.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alexander Strauch, Leading With Love (Lewis & Roth, 2006), p. 61.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 60.

^v Strauch, p. 61.

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- ^{vi} William Barclay, I Corinthians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 122.
- ^{vii} Roy L. Laurin, First Corinthians: Where Live Matures (Kregel, 1987), p. 233.
- ^{viii} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of First and Second Corinthians (Augsburg Publishing, 1937), p. 557.
- ^{ix} John MacArthur, Drawing Near (Crossway Books, 1993), Aug. 19th.
- ^x Garland, p. 618.
- ^{xi} Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 397.
- ^{xii} Laurin, p. 234.
- ^{xiii} John Huffman, "The Fruit of the Spirit is Patience," <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.