

# Love Suffers Much

By Todd Pruitt

I have been meditating in recent days on Paul's words about love written to the Corinthian believers. The church at Corinth was wracked with problems. They sinned sexually, they abused the Lord's Supper, they showed favoritism to the wealthy, they misunderstood the resurrection, they quarreled and were divided, they boasted in their spiritual gifts, they welcomed false teachers, and they were not generous. As we read the letter we find that at the heart of much of their sin was a conspicuous lack of love. It is no accident, therefore, that some of the most stirring words about Christian love are found in I Corinthians. What Scripture holds forth to us, particularly in I Corinthians 13:4-7 is a radical standard.

*Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

We read these words at weddings and see portions printed in greeting cards. But Paul's words are far from sentimental. They describe a kind of love that is particular to Christians for it is a love that cannot be had apart from the power of Christ. And yet how rare it is to find these qualities truly manifest in the fellowship of God's people.

I am particularly moved by the words, "love bears all things" (v. 7). To "bear" means to carry something. It implies an arduous task. The image of someone carrying a heavy pack comes to mind. Far from secular, blissful images of love the Bible teaches us that love involves bearing up under a heavy load. Experience confirms this. It is hard to love. This is why some have translated this verse: "Love *suffers* all things." There is a great deal to commend this translation. Love does suffer much. Loving a spouse, a child, a co-worker, a fellow student, a boss, or a neighbor is to invite suffering. Buddhist philosophy is largely correct: *He who has many loves has many woes. He who has one love has one woe. He who has no love has no woes.* The solution for the faithful Buddhist therefore is detachment – reduce your woe by reducing your loves. This is human wisdom 101. After all, who wants woes? Who wants to bear a burden?

This is why the call to love in Scripture is so outrageous. God calls His people to greater attachments, greater love, and greater burdens. There is an extraordinary completeness to the statement in verse seven. "Love bears ALL things." How much can love put up with? How often should love suffer pain?

How often do we forgive? Jesus was asked questions like these. As you may recall He said something about seven times seventy.

Does this mean that love insists on no accountability, no discipline, or that it never speaks the truth? Of course not. In fact, love necessarily involves accountability, discipline, and truth-telling. But reconciliation is always the goal. Making a point or seeking revenge are never the goals of a Christian. For instance, Scripture tells us not simply to speak the truth but to speak the truth *in love* (Eph 4:15). This is why gossip and fault-finding are such grievous sins. They are a denial of love. Rather than seeking the person's good, these divisive actions are completely self-serving. We excuse our grumbling and gossip by saying we are "venting." But these are all love killing responses to conflict. Scripture calls such actions sin. They are a denial of the second great commandment. God made His people wander in the desert for forty years until a generation died because of a spirit of grumbling and complaint. Jesus equated unloving words and attitudes with murder and warned that they would merit Divine judgment.

How is it then that the people of God so often excuse such evil? In my own heart I always find excuses for my criticisms of and complaints against others. "Some people are just not lovable, they have crossed the line too often, or loving them will cost me too much," I reason. Every time I adopt an attitude like that I am forgetting about Jesus Christ whose love for me cost him his life. Scripture makes a direct connection between my love for you and my love for God (Mt 22:37-40; I Jn 3:10). How can I call myself a "Christian" and refuse to suffer much, forgive much, and bear much for the sake of loving my brothers and sisters?

"Love bears all things." That is a high standard. It involves much more than talk. We Christians are very good at saying that we love everyone. But love is specific action directed toward specific people. It is forgiving the one who has offended. It is patience toward the one who has disappointed. It is saying, "You first" to the one behind you. It is insisting on the good of your brother before you seek your own good. It is humbly acknowledging your own sin and failure before you point out that of another. And love does this all the time.