

GOING DEEPER
DISCUSSION GUIDE
November 2, 2014



Life was not meant to be lived alone-

Discussion Guide

We Love

I Corinthians 13.1-7

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- Do you find it difficult to love people who are different from you? Would you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Use the notes to explain the background and context of 1 Corinthians 13.
- Read 1 Corinthians 13.1-7 aloud. Pause. Read 1 Corinthians 13.1-7 aloud once more. Seek to imagine listening to them as a divided congregation, hearing them for the first time.
- As you hear these words within the context of a divided congregation, what, if anything, stands out to you? Would you elaborate?
- According to Paul, what does love do? Seek to find as many examples from the text as possible.

- Considering what Paul says about love, how might you define love?
- In what ways, if any, might loving in this manner help people in the Corinthian Church connect?
- What keeps people the Church today from connecting? Why might these be an issue?
- How might loving in the way Paul describes address these issues?
- Do you find it easy or difficult to love others as Paul describes? Would you explain?
- What might make it easier for you to love in this manner? What steps might you be willing to take to love in this way? What steps might this group be willing to take?
- Conclude with prayer, praying in love for one another and for the grace to love one another.

Context and Background

Love

Love is often culturally defined as the feelings of affection which one person has for another person. This definition is rooted in the human experience of relationships and is therefore somewhat fluid, depending upon the nature of relationships as defined by culture. However, within Scripture, love is defined as an essential aspect of God's character. God, at his essence, is love (1 John 4.8, 16). Therefore, love finds its meaning rooted in the unchanging nature of God.

To state that God is love implies more than God possesses the capacity to love, but rather, it implies that God possesses the attribute of love which infuses his activity with love. All that God does is loving and all that God experiences is within the bounds of love. This reality is demonstrated within the experience of the Godhead as the members of the Trinity live in a love relationship with one another (John 14.31). Within the context of the Godhead, love appears to take the form of deference and a willingness to seek the will of the other through obedience (John 14.15, 21, 23; Luke 22.42) as well as a level of intimacy (Matthew 11.27; Luke 10.22; John 7.29).

While the nature of love can be observed within the Divine relationships between the members of the Trinity, it is within the context of God's redemptive actions on behalf of mankind that love's

full nature might be seen. It is love which motivates God to redeem a sinful and fallen humanity (John 3.16; Ephesians 2.4-6; 1 John 4.9-10). In this love-driven act of redemption we discover that love involves more than deference and obedience but also includes a willingness to sacrificially seek the well-being of another with little thought of what one might receive in return. It is this sacrificial giving for the well-being of another which forms the context of how love is to be understood and practiced, as God's example of love is to form the basis for how people are to love one another (1 John 4.11, 19-21). One might also state that God's example of love implies how people are to love God, though the emphasis of loving God seems to fall more on the aspects of deference and a willingness to seek the will of the other through obedience rather than the aspect of sacrificial giving (1 John 1.5; John 14.15). With this in mind, one might simply state that to love is to behave like God—that is, to seek the highest good of another who may be undeserving with little or no thought of what one might receive in return.

The Text

1 Corinthians 13.1-7: *The loving Church*

The present passage, a favorite for wedding ceremonies, is Paul's explanation of how God's people are to live in a connected manner (1 Corinthians 12.31). The Corinthian Church struggled to remain unified (1 Corinthians 1.10-17), in part because of factions who favored different leaders, but also in part because the believers struggled to see how the presence of differing spiritual gifts did not divide them rather than unify them (1 Corinthians 12). To this divided Church, Paul wrote an epistle stressing unity, reminding the Corinthians that in Christ, though different, they experienced essential unity (1 Corinthians 12.12-14). Therefore, no one was to say that they did not belong; that is, there was not to be a spirit of disconnection among the people of God (1 Corinthians 12.16). However, the practical reality was that the differences among the believers in Corinth made for a sense of disconnection. Opposites don't always attract. Sometimes they just annoy us! Therefore, Paul

sought to demonstrate a way in which people who were so different (by God's own choosing, 1 Corinthians 12.11) could live out their essential unity in Christ (1 Corinthians 12.31). Paul presented love as the way in which believers could experience the unity they possessed in Christ. Paul noted that love was actually essential for life to have any meaning. Apart from love, the people of God were unintelligible to one another (1 Corinthians 13.1), their lives were worthless (1 Corinthians 13.2), and they possessed nothing of value in the world (1 Corinthians 13.3). With such bold statements, one is left wondering just what Paul meant when he referenced love.

Paul provided a definition of love by stacking a series of 15 verbs describing love. In this way, Paul not only demonstrated what love looked like in practical terms, but he provided an understanding that love itself is rooted in action. While one might tease out the meaning of each of these 15 verbs, more than likely, Paul had in mind three primary movements with respect to love. First, love makes room for another person to grow. Love suffers with another person (patience) and provides that which is beneficial and needed (kindness). The idea is that to be loving is to allow a person to be imperfect but to provide them with what they need to grow. Second, love brings another up rather than puts them down. To love is not to desire what another has (envy) nor is it to boast that one has what another does not (boast). To love is not to behave in a way that provides the idea that one is better than another (pride) and it is not to behave in a way that brings shame to another (dishonor). Simply put, to love is not to behave in a way that is self-centered (self-seeking). To love is to move about in a way that one is not easily offended (angered), and if offended one does not keep a record of wrongs for later rehearsal. To love is to take no delight in the suffering or poor choices of another (delighting in evil) but rather to love is to seek what is best for another (truth). In each of these descriptions, to behave lovingly is to treat another person as an equal rather than to seek to elevate oneself over another person. Finally, love seeks and thinks what is best. In relationships there are always gaps between what is expected and what is experienced. Love fills these gaps with good things rather than bad things. To love is to stay with another person (protect), to trust and hope in all situations, and once more to desire to endure.

Real life with Blake:

For me, the idea of being connected with other people is a whole lot easier to accept than the practice of being connected. The experience of getting close to another person is like the experience of two porcupines trying to dance. Someone is going to get poked. What pokes at me most often are the vast differences between me and others. The saying goes that opposites attract, but most of the time they just annoy me. I just can't figure out how to draw near to a person who thinks and acts so differently from me. I want to retreat and find someone just like me. The problem is that no one is just like me. I am stuck with people who are different from me. So how do I connect with people who are not like me? Paul's answer is love.

To love seems easy enough, except I don't feel very loving to people not like me. Good thing love is not solely about how I feel. Love is more about how I behave. To love another person is to seek the highest good for that person without thinking of what I might get in return. When I love, I make space for the other person to be imperfect (after all, they are not like me!) and I give them what they need to grow. When I love, I don't look down upon that other person (I could because they are not like me!) but I realize that in Christ we are on the same level and I treat them that way. When I love, I don't walk away when what I experience in relationship is not what I expect (you are not going to act like me!) but I fill in the relational gaps with good thoughts. You are not late because you don't care. You are late because you got held up. When I behave in this way, all that separates you and me is pushed aside. When you treat me in this way, all that annoys me fades away and I am endeared to you because you love me, even though I am not like you.

Real life with you:

Connecting is hard because people don't act like we expect them to act. They don't act like us. They don't think like us, dream like us, eat like us, recreate like us. If they did, life would be better. They just don't. How do we connect with someone who is so different? The answer is love. When we love we push aside the barriers (differences) which keep us apart by focusing not on what divides us but on how to seek the highest good of the other person. This does not come naturally to us, but it can come with a healthy dose of God's grace and a willingness to practice. One of the easiest ways to practice this is with the decision to practice stability. Stability is the practice of staying in one place no matter what. Staying in one place and with one people forces us to lean into what divides us in such a way that we are forced to work things out. In other words, we are forced to learn how to love one another. We can practice stability with a large group of people such as a church or a small group of people such as a small group or intimate group of friends. To practice this informally, you might simply commit to staying in your small group for the long-haul, choosing to meet with them weekly. It can mean choosing to have dinner with a certain group of believers a couple times of a month with intentional regularity. It can take formal forms such as choosing to begin the membership journey at Union Center. (Contact Pastor Bill for more details at bsprouse@unioncenter.org.)

Want to know how this looks in real life? Check out Blake's blog at BlakeShipp.blogspot.com



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