

What Paul Forgot

1 Corinthians 13

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There are endless things I could say about this iconic passage, many of which you are likely to have already heard, as these words are probably, for many of you, quite familiar. Frequently read at baptisms, weddings, and memorial services, First Corinthians 13 is one of the passages of scripture most often recognized by both those within and outside the faith. And for good reason, as its eternal message spans the range of human experience and focuses on the single most important element of our existence: Love.

It has been said that love is the most important thing in the world. It is the spark behind our creation and culmination of our destiny. To love and be loved is why we are here. And unlike so many of the ways we find to pass the time—working, eating, sleeping, shopping, trips to the post office, standing in line at the bank, filing our taxes—no one, at the end of life ever looks back and says, I wish I had loved less. There could be many other ways we might regret how we spent our precious time here, but loving is never one of them. No, if we have regrets with love, it will always be because we would wish we had done it more.

This is not to say that we necessarily lack in love now, because we don't. Culturally we are simply inundated with it. Love is the main subject of practically every song ever written. Turn on the radio at any given moment, and we will be hard-pressed to find any song that does not focus on love—wanting love, finding love, losing love, missing love, searching for love, finding love again.

All great literature devotes at least a few pages to a love story; the primary purpose of poetry is to put language around the stirrings of the heart; and practically every play, TV show, and movie casts love as the main character. A decision so lucrative, that advertisers have caught on and frequently feature love as a key component of marketing campaigns.

Take, for example, the Apple Watch, the latest technological innovation seeking to captivate our minds and empty our wallets. In the video introducing the watch to consumers, the voice of John Ive, Senior Vice President of Design at Apple, repeats words like *intimacy* and *embrace*, and we see two watches on either side of the screen, both of their displays relaying messages of love. First comes a picture of flowers, followed by the letter I, an image of a heart, and then the letter U. The watches slowly turn to face each other and then move closer and closer together, the way two people might slowly lean in for a kiss, as the voiceover says that with the Apple Watch, we “can even share something as personal as [our] own heartbeat.”

In addition to our culture's interest in love, we too are quite invested in the word. My guess is that if we counted the number of times on a given day that the word *love* passes through our lips, we might be surprised. Often we say the word without even thinking about it, and if we did try to catch ourselves, what we might notice is that in a language consisting of over one million words, we use the same one to describe everything from our affection for the first cup of coffee in the morning to the feeling

of falling asleep in the arms of a cherished other.

We love to love it would seem, which is why we see, hear, and say the word almost every single day. What's more, we love to believe in love, to the point where each of us can probably think of a time, or times, in our lives when, against all the odds, and some might say even against all common sense, we chose to have faith in love. We chose to trust love. We chose to have confidence that this powerful, emotional, and primal force would not lead us astray and that things would work out in the end if we could just hold on to the promise of love. What is that? Why is that? How is it that love causes us to practically abandon all that might seem rational for the hope of what might be possible?

Last Sunday in *The New York Times*, the Op-Ed columnist David Brooks wrote an article titled "The Moral Bucket List." In it he writes about the type of people that most of us aspire to be, people who are deeply good. He says these are people who listen well, make others feel valued, and rarely seem to think about themselves. In his admiration of people who embody these qualities, Brooks says that it occurred to him that there are two sets of virtues—the resume virtues and the eulogy virtues.¹

The resume virtues are the skills we bring to the marketplace like our intellect, ambition, and accolades. The eulogy virtues are, as their name suggests, the way we are described at our memorial service. Were we kind? Were we brave? Were we honest and faithful? Were we capable of deep love? Brooks goes on to say, "We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones. But our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate an inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character."²

Fortunately, life still offers us many opportunities to cultivate our integrity. For example, failure aids in humility; suffering develops compassion; rejection fosters resilience. These experiences make up the moral bucket list, and most of us at one time or another have faced one or more of these challenges. But, as it is true that wonderful people are made, not born, in order for these challenges to truly shape us and make us into the people we wish to become, we must have, at our core, what Brooks calls "Energizing Love." This is the love of self, neighbor, and God that is essential to any kind of personal transformation. Character is not created by sheer will power and grit, but rather by the continual choice to let love be our primary motivation and desired outcome.

Consider this: if when we fail, we do not love ourselves, we will have greater difficulty finding the courage to try again. If when we suffer, we do not accept the love of others to help us see it through, we will extend the duration of our pain. If when we are rejected, we do not recognize that our lives are the design of a loving God who is at work in ways we could never comprehend, then we may lose perspective and become inflexible and bitter. In many ways this is antithetical to the way we think it should work. We should be able to change ourselves simply by gritting our teeth and doing so. If we want our lives to be different than they currently are, we should be able to make that change happen on our own, and to some degree, we can. But ultimately, any true and lasting change comes about more subtly than that. The change of a life, the change of a situation, the change of a relationship, is more like the slow unfolding of the petals of a rose. You barely notice it is happening until it is in full bloom. But it is the gentle presence of love, as the Sufi poet Hafiz says, that

acts as the sun's rays gently coaxing the blossom to unfurl.

Take, for instance, the story of Dorothy Day, a young woman whose life was marked by depression, excessive drinking, and the unrestrained pursuit of any and all desire. Committed to social activism, it wasn't until the birth of her daughter, and the love she felt as a result, that Day truly found her calling. She wrote, "No human creature could receive or contain so vast a flood of love and joy as I often felt after the birth of my child. With this came the need to worship, to adore." It was this love for her daughter that changed Day's life. She became devout in her faith and clear in her call to serve the poor by opening settlement houses and embracing a shared poverty. Her intent became not only to do good, but to be good, in response to the goodness she had received, the sheer and utter gift of grace she had been blessed with in the love she was given in the birth of her daughter.³

The theological term for this process by which our lives change to more fully reflect holiness in recognition and response to the grace of God is *sanctification*. But the common term is *love*. And it is the transfiguring process of love that Paul describes when he recounts the movement from being a child to becoming an adult; from exchanging a limited perspective for a broader one; from wishing to know, to being known. With love, Paul says, ignorance becomes insight, confusion turns into clarity, and what was partial becomes whole.

This is why, I think, we love to believe in love. Because each of us, in some way, has been marked by its transformative effects. And I think we all have faith that love will continue to shape us and our world until we more accurately reflect all it is we hope to be. This is the promise of love, true love, which is not necessarily the love of pop-songs, romance fiction, or TV drama. It is also not the love usually spoken about in common conversation, because when it comes to describing the unshakable, unconditional, unrelenting force that has the power to turn our lives completely upside down and in the process turn us into the people we wish to be, words, more often than not, fail us. This is why, when Paul describes love, he spends less time on words and more time on deeds. *Patient. Kind. Generous. Selfless. Gracious. Humble. Accepting. Forgiving. Bearing all. Believing all. Hoping all. Enduring all. Never-ending.*

Love, according to Paul, is not something we say, but something we do. It is something we become. Given this, I was surprised to notice, at least in this particular passage, in this beautiful and timeless selection of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, that we so often quote as the authoritative expression of all the things love is, that Paul seems to have forgotten the one thing that, to my mind, is an essential component of love and clear mark of a person's character. To me, this one action is the immediate response to love and the foundational behavior of any loving relationship. Just this one deed is the key, actually, to really knowing whether true love is really present or not and whether a person is really loving or not. And this one thing is gratitude. Gratitude. Love is grateful. Love recognizes the gift, and love realizes just how little we did to earn it and just how blessed we are by it. Because the truth of the matter is this: when it comes to love, none of us really deserve it. Not because we are unworthy, but because by its very nature love is a gift—and there is nothing you can do to deserve a gift; you can only receive it when it comes and be grateful for what it brings.

If we think back to the difficult periods in our lives, the challenging times we faced, the moments when our character was formed and tested, I believe most of us

would admit that it was not our own strength alone that saw us through, but the unseen hand of love that reached out to us: each time a friend picked up the phone to take our call, each time a loved one sat with us as we cried, each time we were extended kindness by someone we did not know and who was otherwise unaware of the power of their action.

And each one of us, in looking at our lives now, knows that we have far more love to be grateful for than we can even manage to name. In fact, to try to list it all might rip our hearts wide open at the sheer revelation of love so great and so deep and so wide that somehow we have managed to make it this far in life. And that somehow we are lucky enough to have people who have been there with us every step of the way. And that somehow there is a God in heaven who loves us enough to try every single day to show us just how much we matter.

Each of us has been blessed so much more than we could ever hope to grasp, and so the lasting mark of our character will first and foremost be reflected in the amount of gratitude we put forth into the world. Who we are, who we will be come, hinges on our ability to respond to the gifts we are given. And what is there to do but give thanks?

Notes

1 David Brooks, "The Moral Bucket List," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2015 (Accessed April 13, 2015).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.