

Scripture Readings for January 24th 2021

1 Corinthians 13:4-13 (NIV)

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

1 John 4:7-16

⁷ Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

¹³ This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. ¹⁶ And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

Sermon: God is Love - and Love Trusts¹

We heard in our readings some of the most profound statements on love *ever* written. The writer of 1 John makes the bold claim that God does not merely love, but “God *is* love.”² I, like many, hold that love is God’s *central* attribute. What this means is that God’s nature and character can *never* be disassociated from love itself. Any other divine attribute, such as his power, wisdom, and mercy, is motivated, directed, amplified or curtailed by love. Love is the *genesis* of those qualities. But what *is* love? It is difficult to define and we must obviously *not* confuse love with sentimentality. Here are a few basic elements of Love. It is *dynamic*; love affects others in how we feel, think, and act.³ Love involves *reciprocity* and is therefore experienced in relationship with others. Love also requires *mutual freedom* and because love can be rejected, it entails *vulnerability*. Moreover, if we are to love God with *all* of our being, with all our heart, strength, and mind,⁴ then love has a *multidimensionality* about it. Paul writes about love in 1 Corinthians 13, which we also heard this morning. Many are familiar with his words because they are a favorite text for a wedding. Listen again: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered or resentful. Love does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never ends.”⁵ This list contains both what love *is* and what love is *not*. Important though such qualities and actions are in *all* loving relationships, this description is also an outline of *God’s love for us*. Love is our theme for today. I therefore want to explore some aspects of love, including God’s love, by considering three prominent Greek terms: *eros*, *agape*, and *philia*. These are different shades of the *same* love; all three are important. Let’s consider all three in turn.

Eros-love is *desirous* love, that of a passionate lover and it is righteously jealous. It longs to give love freely but also to have that love freely returned.⁶ This is therefore a love that is *risky* and prone to heart-break because it is founded on *faith*. That’s because the partner of such love must *trust* the other to be faithful.⁷ We see this in marriage relationships, in that partners can fail to trust each other; yes, they may still love each other, but the relationship can be damaged or broken unless trust is restored. And if that relationship is to be healed, then *each* spouse must take the risk and commit to trusting the other. Afterall, healthy and genuinely loving relationships can never be one-sidedly trusting - anymore and they can be one-sidedly faithful.

¹ I acknowledge extensive use of material from Wm. Curtis Holtzen, *The God Who Trusts* (IVP, 2019) for this sermon.

² 1 John 4:8,16.

³ Love is practical as well as intellectual, that means we feel, think, and act in affectionate and beneficial ways for the beloved, and for ourselves.

⁴ See Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27; Deut 6:5.

⁵ 1 Cor 13:4-8a (NIV, NRSV, NIV). See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/True-Love.pdf> .

⁶ Eros-love is therefore risky, but hopeful, because there is no promise that the love given will be accepted and returned.

⁷ Such faithfulness can be minimalist or *passive*, merely *not* doing things that damage the relationship. But for the relationship to be the best that it can be, there is (and must be) an active trust in the beloved.

God's love for us has a similar passion;⁸ he is deeply interested in us. While God is free to do many things, he *cannot* coerce love. God can only have our love if we decide to give it. While God cherishes and desires – even longs for and hopes for our love - it cannot be guaranteed that we will love God in return. This makes God both vulnerable and long-suffering, for his love can be rejected or abused. That means that God's love for us *trusts* that we will respond to the love that he initiates. Many people are surprised to hear this kind of thing. They assume God is impervious and unaffected by creation, including human beings.⁹ But this mention of trust, suffering, and vulnerability are *inherent* to love, and so if God *is* love, then these aspects of love must also apply to God.¹⁰ We see this graphically portrayed in the so-called Parable of the Prodigal Son, with the longing, waiting, hoping father.¹¹

That passion of *eros* needs to be coupled with *agape*-love.¹² God's *eros*-love can be described as love "*because of*" - it's because of God's cherishing and desiring for communion. God's *agape*-love can be expressed as love "*in spite of*" – God's love *still* does what is in our best interest *in spite of* our rebellion and selfishness.¹³ Put more positively, *agape* is the love that comes from within towards another because of their inherent preciousness. It denotes, care, regard, and respect for the other and actively desires only their well-being. *Agape* is also spontaneous, unmotivated, creative, free, and sacrificial. *Agape* is *active, loving kindness*. God sending his son into the world is the ultimate expression of loving kindness that wants the best for creation.¹⁴ God does what is loving *in spite of* humanity's failings.

Parental love - at its best - is an example of *agape*-love. In addition to modelling those fine qualities of *agape*-love I just mentioned, in wise, parental love there are also boundaries. This sometimes means refraining from acting, allowing the other the freedom and room to develop and mature. We don't want to overwhelm or smother a child's growth and independence by not allowing them to succeed on their own or by removing the possibility of failure. This is coupled with the recognition of their need for solitude and privacy, and therefore knowing when to engage and when to withdraw.¹⁵ In that sense there's a subtle difference between active and passive love. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13:7, love always *protects* but it also always *trusts*. God also gives us that freedom and space because he desires that we grow and develop and mature in our relationship with him. It's a gift, nevertheless, it requires that God *trusts us*.

⁸ God's *eros*-love is, however, not selfish or egotistical.

⁹ In technical language, we are considering "divine impassibility." I suggest this has Greek origins, rather than Hebrew. See *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, eds Robert J Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, (IVP, 2019) and Terence E. Fretheim, *The God of Suffering: An Old Testament Perspective*, (Fortress, 1984).

¹⁰ What this also means is that God not only acts out of our best interest, but he has entrusted us with his own well-being! That's because God is dependent upon others returning love for love, and trust for trust. The consequence of this is that such risks and such faith can produce real joy as well as real sorrow. Note, I am *not* trying to "humanize" God by such rhetoric. This is a purely logical argument based on the nature of love.

¹¹ Luke 15:11-32; see also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf>. Love changes the beloved.

¹² *Agape* is the Greek word used in 1 John 4 and 1 Cor 13.

¹³ *Agape* is an active love that translates the passion of *eros* love into the friendship of *philia* love.

¹⁴ 1 John 4:9-10.

¹⁵ This also necessitates trust that the beloved will reengage in the relationship at a later time!

Agape-love is, then, a selfless, gift-love that acts for the betterment of the beloved. It is a love that works to produce trustworthiness, which is the fruit of trust. And we learn this love by example. If we parents want our children to be honest, we had better model honesty. If we want our children to be kind, we must model kindness too. If we parents want our children to be trustworthy, we must model trustworthiness. Moreover, if we parents want our children to trust, especially to trust in us as parents, we need to model that trust and not merely model trustworthiness. Clearly, agape-love is no romantic picnic! Living agape-love is not easy, not least because the people we trust can make bad choices. Marriages can grow cold and fail, children can rebel, friends can let us down. But hear this, *out of love, despite our past sin, God trusts us*. The question is will we return that trust? Despite disappointment in God's silence and hiddenness in the midst of pain and evil, *out of love, will we* continue to trust and hope in him? Throughout history God has *modelled* this love *by example*, most vividly in Jesus Christ. Remember too that God *forgives* in order to be in relationship. In order to *build trust* in relationships, it is necessary that we *forgive* the past, *trust* in the present, and *hope* for the future.

Let's now consider *philia*-love. If *eros seeks* and *agape gives*, then *philia shares*. This kind of love is inherently mutual; it's *friendship* love.¹⁶ The goal of love is not simply to be with the beloved, as wonderful as that might be, but being *in partnership* and communion *with* the beloved. Philia love is all about *interdependence* and *shared trust*. The *fruits* of love are seen in the *fullness* of philia. Consider this in the context of an orchestra or a band performing a musical piece. Each musician may play well, but they need to play well *together*, not only for their own good and the good of their fellow musicians, but for the good of the performance. And that brings with it *joy*. Divine philia invites us to pick up an instrument and play along!

Put in a different way, God also forgives so that there can be reconciliation. And reconciliation is for the purpose of restoring mutuality – friendship with God and with each other.¹⁷ The fullness of love depends, then, on our *free* response to God's invitation and our willingness to share in God's purposes. That respect for human freedom is critical here.¹⁸ If God sought to control us, coercing us into doing what he wants, then God would lose us. God could perhaps gain something by controlling and coercing humans, but as a result he would lose *friends* – philia love. To gain what God desires, namely, *mutual fellowship* of love, God must trust. Friendship is being in a relationship of faith with someone you love. You may recall that the scriptures tell us God called Abraham *his friend*.¹⁹ This reminds us that friendship is based on mutuality, *not* equality. It's not necessary that the friends be equals, only that friends care about one another, share their lives with one another, and are trusting and loyal. Recall too what Jesus

¹⁶ Philia-love is the word used in, for example, Rom 12:10; 1 Thess 4:9; Heb 13:1; 1 Pet 1:22, 3:8; 2 Pet 1:7.

¹⁷ Friendship is also marked by sharing we give our belongings, our time and ourselves. That friendship with God is also marked by giving. We give to God when we devote ourselves and our resources to building the kingdom of God.

¹⁸ Our friendships depend on trust because friends are free. As the saying goes, "You can pick your friends but you're stuck with your family!" That is true to a large degree. Family members are forced together for holidays and celebrations, but friends *choose* to be together.

¹⁹ 2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23; see also Exodus 33:11.

said to his disciples: “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you *friends*, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”²⁰ In short, our mutual friendship with God extends into *cooperation*, not just mutual love, but to be missional partners with God, *sent* to share with God in his mission to the world.²¹

OK, let me try and summarize: In examining what it means to be loving, as the desirous partner, as a parent, or as a friend, we see that *trust* is an essential element in each of these. The romantic lover cherishes the beloved and longs for her love in return, but because the beloved is free, it cannot be forced. God as a lover not only desires that we would return his love because he *enjoys* that love, but also because it is in our *best interest* to be lovers of God. Parental love is self-giving and acts for what is in the best interest of the child. This love both *adores* and *trains* in the hope that the child will grow into a mature, responsible, and trustworthy adult. Genuine friendship with others inevitably depends on trust. Whatever metaphors we have for God, let us hold on firmly to God *as friend*, for God is loyal, authentic, caring, sharing, and trustworthy. Because God is love and loving, God seeks mutuality, partnership, love returned, and love increased. Because God is love and loving, God acts to restore fellowship through Jesus Christ, through the cross, the resurrection, and the forgiveness that ensues. Because God is love and loving, God seeks to lead us all into mature and honest communion with himself,²² raising us up to be trustworthy both in character and competence. Love is what motivates God to trust *that* together we will achieve *his* ultimate purposes.

What else might we take away from all this? Here are two brief thoughts.

First, let us use this time as an opportunity to reflect on the level of trust we have in our relationships with those we love, including with God. The *strength* of a relationship is dependent upon the degree of trust. It is through trust we move into a deeper love. I encourage us to think about how we can improve the level of trust, and therefore strengthen our relationships, including our trust in God.

Finally, love can cause a person to do many foolish things, most notably trusting those who are simply not trustworthy. Remember, God is no fool. God knows better than anyone *who* to trust, *when* to trust, and *with what* to entrust them. God will be rightly distressed at times, perhaps be even suspicious, but *God will continually love without end*. To “love without end”²³ means that God *our friend* will never cease to hope in our faithfulness and never cease to work for our trustworthiness. May we respond accordingly. Amen.

²⁰ John 15:15. (There are some subtleties here; the servant/slave is assumed to have free choice. On a different - though perhaps related - note, the lyrics of the hymn *What a Friend we have in Jesus* seem to be too one-sided!

²¹ It is God’s mission, *missio Dei*, yet we are partners. The Church is “*apostolic*,” sent to the world, empowered by the Spirit.

²² Alternatively, with the Trinity and to join in with the divine dance.

²³ This is also implied in 1 Cor 13:7b,13. (In the eschaton, faith and hope will be unnecessary, but love remains.)