

Russell Kelfer

Love Never Fails

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**Series: Why Do You Run When I'm Crying
(The Caring Church in a Hurting World)**

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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We live in a world plagued with “limited” warranties: guarantees that are only good under certain conditions, and for prescribed periods of time. And ever so often, the “limited” becomes more pronounced than the “warranty” when an item breaks or doesn’t live up to its expectations.

You buy a new car, and it breaks down. You go back to the dealer to have it fixed “under warranty”. But the thing-a-ma-jig that broke isn’t covered. It was warranted for the first three days, provided it was used only in temperatures above 80 degrees, and was maintained within the continental limits of the shores of Iceland. So you complain, only to find that you just didn’t read the fine print. They told you it was a limited guarantee. You just didn’t listen.

You watch television and you see these commercials with a guy standing in front of his burning home, weeping, and saying, “Oh, if I’d only been insured with Ajax Insurance Company.” And something inside of you says, “That could happen to me!” So you call Ajax and have your home insured. A storm comes along, and sure enough your roof takes a trip to the yard behind you and your south wall heads for Michigan. But you’re not worried. You’re no longer the harried looking guy in the commercial. Now you’re the other guy who had the foresight to call Ajax first. You call Ajax. Your answer? “Sorry, Mr. Misfit, but your policy, in paragraph 432, line 873¼ says that strong winds are only covered in March, July, and December. You didn’t ask for year-round roof coverage. That would have been \$6.00 extra.” You found, once again, you had a limited policy. It was limited to what you didn’t need.

Life just seems to be like that. There are so many things in life that almost turned out right. There are so many things that almost worked the way they were supposed to. There are so many things that almost got paid for. It’s the almossts that seem to kill us. Wouldn’t it be nice if there were something we could count on that would never fail? Yes, it would. It would be nice to have some kind of written warranty that we could really understand that clearly said there are no limitations, no restrictions, and no exclusions to this guarantee. No matter what happens, you’re covered.

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There is such a guarantee. It is that iron-clad, unlimited promise that we are going to discuss in this lesson. It is found in the only place that unlimited promises are found: the Word of God. It was written there by the Holy Spirit using the hand of the Apostle Paul.

We find it in I Corinthians 13:7, 8. Listen to what it says:

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.

(I Corinthians 13:7,8 J. B. Phillips Bible)

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That, Beloved, is a no-frills, lifetime guarantee. And interestingly enough, the God who wrote it has the authority to enforce it. So we know it's good. The next verse in that passage describes some things that do indeed have limited guarantees. Prophecies will be fulfilled, tongues will disappear, knowledge will be swallowed up in truth. The time will come when they will no longer be of any value. But not so with this apparently fool-proof commodity called "love". It has no limits to its ability to endure, no end to the time when it will be trustworthy, and no time, ever, when your confidence in it has just reason to erode. It can and will outlast anything ever created by God or man. It will never fail. Never.

That, it would appear, would make it the one thing in life worth appropriating. That, it would appear, would make it the one thing in this world worth giving yourself for. With that kind of guarantee, you would think that the church of Jesus Christ in this 20th Century would have traded in all of its options for this one. You would think that our lives and our churches would be so characterized by this one, unlimited, perfect thing, that it would, indeed, be the quality by which we are all known.

Apparently God intended it that way. In fact, John clearly wrote in his first epistle these penetrating words:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death.

(I John 3:14 NKJV)

This quality called love, then, this unfailing, fully-guaranteed part of the nature of God, was not only to be our calling card as Christians, it was to be the very symbol of proof that we are, indeed, God's children. It is the way others can know for sure that we belong to the King. No wonder God made it so clear that it was

so important. And so we continue our journey into a look at the Caring Church in a Hurting World. Our tour has taken us, you recall, right into the midst of a look at the only thing in life that is guaranteed to be successful...love.

I- LOVE: A REVIEW

In our last study, we took a look at what love is and at what love isn't. We looked at how the Scriptures define love and how the world defines love. We found that if we are going to apply the principles of love to the Christian life, then we simply must stop confusing the two definitions. We found several things are true about love that must be understood if we as Christians are to follow Scriptural guidelines.

1- Love is a command.

We found that love is not an extension of liking someone. In fact, many of the people we are commanded to love the most are those we like the least, including our enemies. Our ability to love someone, then, is not dependent on how we feel about them, but on a specific commandment from God. Husbands are commanded to love their wives, even and especially when they are unlikable. Wives are commanded to love their husbands, even and especially when they are unlikable. God demonstrated His love for us while we were yet in utter absolute rebellion to all He stood for. That's what Romans 5:8 says.

In John 13 Jesus said,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another;
(John 13:34a NKJV)

It's an order. Do it.

2- Love is divine.

We learned that love is divine. It is a part of the nature of God, and therefore can only be exercised if the Spirit of God lives inside of you. So you do not have the capacity to love, scripturally, if you are not a Christian. Conversely, if you are a Christian, there is nobody you cannot love.

3- Love is an imperative.

We learned that love is an imperative. It is not an option to be placed alongside other additives to the Christian life. Paul clearly said you could preach with the eloquence of an angel, be able to

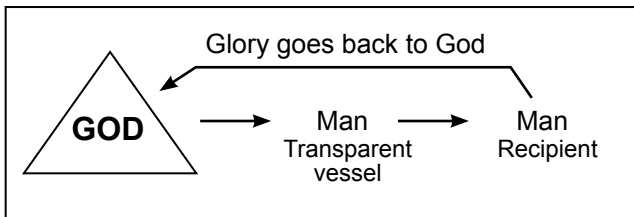
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see into the future, give away all that you have, and still amount to nothing unless you learn to love. In fact, he went so far as to state that you could even understand all of the deep spiritual truths and be able to astound the world with your insights into the things of God; but if you never learn to translate those insights into love, all that you do amounts to nothing. So love is an imperative. If you never learn to do anything else in the Christian life, you must learn to love.

Which brings us, of course, to the definition of love. We are defining love, not by the dictionary, but by the Bible. Simply put, though it is not simple, our definition is this:

Love is that active expression of the nature of God that demonstrates itself by giving itself away. If it is genuine, it will always accrue glory only to the source of that love: God Himself.

God loved! God so loved, He gave. Gave what? Gave everything. He gave himself away. He counted His own reputation as nothing to be clutched at and He released it without limits for the benefit of a people who had nothing to offer to make them worthy, and nothing to guarantee they would even be grateful. He gave Himself away for the likes of us. That's love. God giving Himself away. And true love, God's love, will always be transparent. It will never call attention to itself, and it will never call attention to the vessel that holds it. It will only call attention to its source, God Himself. So the end result of God giving Himself away through us will always be men and women being attracted to the person of Jesus Christ. It will be the salvation of the lost, and the encouragement of the redeemed. That is what God's love does: it draws people to His Son. That's a good test of your love and mine. If our love draws people to us, it's not God's love. If it draws them to a creed or a church, it's not God's love. God's love draws men and women to God, period. Its origin is God and its objective is God.



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So if the love you demonstrate does anything less than lead people to Christ, you are imitating the real thing. The real thing is the Spirit drawing men to Christ using your availability to do so. That's what love is: man giving himself away in such a way that glory accrues to God.

II - LOVE: A REVELATION

That's the issue we are dealing with. The issue of demonstrating the nature of God in a world that has created its own definition of love that is, in effect, the antithesis of love. In fact, so different is the world's love, that if we behave as Christians as God intended us to, people will know we are Christians, just because of the way we give ourselves away for one another.

The revelation of that love and the demonstration of that love are so clear in Scripture that the only way we have been able to ignore its commands is by pretending internally that surely He did not mean what He said. So we draft a compromise concoction that is a mixture of God's love and man's love and use it as our new standard. Jesus will have none of that. Listen to how clearly God revealed what love is and what it isn't.

For this is the message that you heard from the beginning,
that we should love one another,

not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his
brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were
evil and his brother's righteous.

Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we
love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in
death.

Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that
no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us.
And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in
need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of
God abide in him?

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in
deed and in truth.

(I John 3:11-18 NKJV)

We can't study it in detail, but we need to pause long enough to examine the key points in John's revelation of love. Let's look at them:

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1- The message isn't new as we see in verse 11. It's the same basic truth that God engraved on the tablets of His Word since the beginning. We should love one another. The problem was that man, until Jesus came, had no clear portrait to look at. But the Word of God has consistently taught the same truth. It always does.

2- Jealousy and greed are often the reasons we don't love as we read in verse 12. Cain is given here as our example. He couldn't stand his brother because he couldn't measure up to his brother. So instead of loving his brother, he killed his brother. Bad choice of alternatives.

3- Don't necessarily measure the depth of your love by the response of the world to your love as we read in verse 13. The world (Satan's domain and those under his control) is going to hate you. You are their mortal and immortal enemies. The more you love, the more they will hate you. So contrary to a pseudo-theological syndrome that is popular in many Christian circles today, the proof of your love is not whether or not you become popular in the community. The proof of your love is whether or not people are drawn to saving faith in the source of your love: the person of Jesus Christ.

4- Look now at the key thought in the passage in verse 16. It says that this is how you come to understand God's view of love. You look at the Cross. God defined love, according to verse 16, by giving Himself away. "Hereby perceive we the love of God because He laid down His life for us." That's God's definition of the most crucial ingredient known to the Christian life.

5- If that's how God demonstrated love when He was on this earth, then His plan to demonstrate love in us and through us will be no different, as we also see in verse 16,

He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (I John 3:16b NKJV)

In other words, here's how we love as He did. We do what He did. We give ourselves away.

6- John knew the tendency would be to talk about it, not do it. So he penned verse 18,

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. (NKJV)

7- He also knew that we might not understand what loving in deed and truth meant, so he gave us an example in verse 17,

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But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?
(I John 3:17 NKJV)

How can you say that you're a Christian, if you see someone who is struggling, and you have what it takes to help them, and you look the other way and stifle God's ability to express His love through you? To love in deed and in truth means to stop when you see a brother or sister in need, and meet that need at your own expense, in such a way that no one but God will be glorified. That's the love of God in action.

III- LOVE: A REFLECTION

So the personalization and practicality of God's love lies in the fact that it will always exhibit itself in very real acts of kindness and goodness within the Body of Christ. When one hurts, all hurt. When one weeps, all weep. When one rejoices, all rejoice. When one family's child takes ill, the bigger family assumes responsibility as though it were part of the smaller family. When one person loses a loved one, it represents a loss to the whole of the Body, even to those who perhaps did not personally know them. That's the love of God in action. The very definition of that love means that if it is not demonstrated, it is not real. You don't give yourself away in word.

Talking about love is not love. Giving yourself away is love. That costs something. It is more than conversation. It involves action.

But how do we know whether or not our love is real? If we are going to meet the needs of a hurting world, if we are going to stop running while they're crying, then we are going to have to have some kind of blueprint to work from so we will know whether or not it is God loving through us, or our imitating His love instead. You and I often can't tell the difference. The world almost always can.

So turn in your Bible to I Corinthians 13 again, and let's see, in closing, just how God's love reflects itself in a life. Use it as a barometer in the weeks to come to see if, in fact, you are letting God be God in you. If you are, as people around you have needs, here's how you will respond.

1- Paul says:

This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience.

(I Corinthians 13:4a J. B. Phillips Bible)

Let's imagine that God has placed someone in your life who is hurting, really hurting. But they drive you crazy. One minute they

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have a certain need. You go to meet that need and they aren't sure anymore. Or they ask the same question five times. Or they make the same mistake six times. Here's how you can tell if it's you or God loving them. God in you will be patient. The word here means "people-patience". I mean really patient. The way He is with you. God will be interested in whether or not that person's needs get met, not whether or not it irritates you in the process. If it irritates you, it simply means you have a need for God to meet, and you aren't letting Him be Himself in you.

2- It looks for a way of being constructive.

The love of God doesn't major on minors. In fact, it "overlooks faults". It sees the light at the end of the tunnel. It overcomes the temptation to talk about the gloom and the doom that appears on the horizon whenever Satan has his way. The people we minister to need honest exhortation. That means no "pie in the sky" clichés, but it also means we don't get down in the mud of defeat with them to commiserate. We listen. Then we lovingly try to lift them out of the well of self-pity and depression and place them on the Solid Rock, helping them count the blessings they may not see.

3- It is not possessive.

The love of God in man has no need to put a hammerlock on its recipients or brand them "personal possession". The church in our age is good at that. Those we minister to are "ours", and we don't want anyone else touching them. And if we help them, we surely ought to be able to run their lives. Not so with Jesus. The God who gave Himself away for us still gives us total freedom to choose in every situation. Love that possesses and smothers is not love. It is protecting the one who loves rather than the one who is in need. Love is not possessive because God is not possessive.

4- It is neither anxious to impress, nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

Love doesn't raise a banner and list its recipients. Love doesn't publish a list in the church bulletin of what it has done. Love doesn't have to be sure someone else knows you're helping that family in need. In fact, love prefers to remain anonymous. It knows that the real reward for love can only come in heaven, and can only come in heaven if it hasn't been taken on earth. Love doesn't allow the fact that it is charitable to add to its opinion of itself. What God does doesn't give man reason to boast. Love your wife and love your husband, even if and especially if they aren't lovable.

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But don't wander around and talk about it and expect accolades. If you can love them, it only means God did it, so what have you to boast about?

5- Love has good manners.

Some day I'm going to teach a whole unpopular lesson on this one phrase. The literal meaning is, "love does not behave gracelessly". Love exercises tact and courtesy and shows respect. The people you minister to ought to know that God is doing the ministering simply because of the grace and manners you exhibit as you meet their needs. You say, "But that's just not me. I'm crude and sharp and insensitive by nature. I like to use a little off-color humor and bulldoze my way into people's lives." That's all the more reason for you to get out of the way, then, and let God do it. When God loves through you, your love will be characterized by gentle, respectful, courtesy and grace. Your God isn't crude. Period.

6- Love is not touchy.

It isn't in God for Him to be easily offended. Otherwise He would have given up on us a long time ago. When God in us is doing the ministering, we are not going to run and hide if and when the person we are loving turns on us, or fails to give us gratitude or recognition. So what? God's doing it, not us. If we get offended, all we have to do is say, "Lord, did you see that? Here, You handle it. I can't." And He will. He'll cast it behind His back, and He won't remember it. Then He'll say to us, "Now go thou and do likewise."

7- Love doesn't keep account of evil, or gloat over the wickedness of other people.

This is a syndrome of much of modern Christianity that is not Christian. It isn't up to us to keep a record book of others' sins. God is a good bookkeeper, and He says, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." So let Him. Love doesn't have a party to celebrate the evil in the world, nor does it build its gospel on how bad the world is. The world has always been bad since the fall, and it will only get worse. Build your gospel on how wonderful God is, then you'll have a ministry.

8- On the contrary, love shares the joy of those who live by the Truth.

Love doesn't chop up the Body of Christ into denominational pieces, and then gloat over the evidence of blessings in its little part of the Body. Love rejoices when any part of God's family is

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blessed. Any part. Even those whose doctrines don't "measure up" to ours. Don't you see why Paul ended his symphony of love with that incredible finale? He said:

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything... [Love never fails.]
(I Corinthians 13:7,8 J. B. Phillips Bible)

"Love" means the nature of God giving Himself away. "Never" means never. "Never fails" means never stops giving. Love never runs out of energy to give, or resources to give, or hope that its giving will accrue glory to God. It never stops believing, never stops rejoicing, and never starts questioning the power of God to use the nature of God to change the world or that person your are mentoring. It will outlast anything Satan can throw in the road to slow it down. Anything.

Because love never fails. So we do have at least one perfect, foolproof written warranty in this life. One thing that God will make good no matter what. And all we have to do is use it.

LOVE NEVER FAILS, BELOVED

Love never fails, Beloved,
It never ceases to be
The power unleashed through a man
For a hurting world to see.

Love never fails, Beloved,
Through all of life's hurt and life's pain,
Everything else in life may fail
But love will remain.

So set God free to be Himself,
Let the power of love have it's way,
And watch the world behold your God
As you give yourself away.

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Assignment: Meditate on and Memorize I Corinthians 13:

If I speak with the eloquence of men and of angels, but have no love, I become no more than blaring brass or crashing cymbal. If I have the gift of foretelling the future and hold in my mind not only all human knowledge but the very secrets of God, and if I also have that absolute faith which can move mountains, but have no love, I amount to nothing at all. If I dispose of all that I possess, yes, even if I give my own body to be burned, but have no love, I achieve precisely nothing.

This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience—it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance.

Love has good manners and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it is glad with all good men when truth prevails.

Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. [Love never fails.] It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.

For if there are prophecies they will be fulfilled and done with, if there are “tongues” the need for them will disappear, if there is knowledge it will be swallowed up in truth. For our knowledge is always incomplete and our prophecy is always incomplete, and when the complete comes, that is the end of the incomplete.

When I was a child I talked and felt and thought like a little child. Now that I am a man my childish speech and feeling and thought have no further significance for me.

At present we are men looking at puzzling reflections in a mirror. The time will come when we shall see reality whole and face to face! At present all I know is a little fraction of the truth, but the time will come when I shall know it as fully as God has known me!

In this life we have three lasting qualities—faith, hope and love. But the greatest of them is love.

(I Corinthians 13:1-13 J. B. Phillips Bible)

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