

God's grace, our focus in this pre-Lent season, is what causes Him to give us His good gifts, especially forgiveness, life, and salvation. And God's grace always goes hand-in-hand with another of His perfect characteristics: love. God reveals Himself many times in Scripture as the God who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He shows His grace to those He loves.

Better understanding love lets us then better understand grace. It also lets us better know our God – who is love – and who we are as God's people, who are to reflect His love to others. Hence our Epistle reading this morning, from 1 Corinthians 13.

In this chapter, God the Holy Spirit teaches us much about love. Yet before we dig into those specific words about love, we must first ask ourselves who it is whom God loves. Does He love only some people? No. Scripture is clear: "God so loved... the world!" God's love extends to every human being.

Also, God's love isn't something given to those who have earned it. Scripture says, "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That greatest act of love, Christ laying down His life upon the cross, was something He did for those who opposed Him, who were His enemies.

We who are joined to Christ and have God's love poured into our hearts are to love in the same way that God loves. Jesus tells His disciples, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Therefore, when we read 1 Corinthians 13, we must have in mind not just a new couple on their wedding day, or a spouse we've been with for decades, or a good friend who's been with us through thick and thin. We must also read these words of God and apply them to those we'd consider our enemies – those on the other side of the political aisle, those who have hurt us deeply, those whom we'd prefer to never run into again if we could help it. Those are all people we are to love as the Epistle tells us.

Starting at verse 4, the first description of love is that love is patient. It waits on others, even when it could see a faster or better way, or it doesn't understand what's taking so long. Another way this could be translated is "long-suffering," such as the King James renders it. That word reminds us that love waits patiently even when the wait is unpleasant, when it entails suffering.

Verse 4 also tells us that love is kind. It treats others with compassion and care – and not just those who are kind in return. Remember: love your enemies. Be kind to those who are unkind to you.

Going on, we hear what love is not. Love does not envy or boast. It doesn't look at others – again, especially one's enemies – and think that it's not fair that others have things that it doesn't. Those who love don't think about how much better things would be if only they had the possessions or authority or place in life that someone else has.

And should they be blessed with good things in life, whatever they might be, in love they don't brag or boast about it. Instead, those who love receive the gifts God gives with humility, realizing that all is given from the hand of our loving God. Love is content with what it is given, however much or little that may be.

Love is also neither arrogant nor rude. Both these vices come from the great sin of pride, and pride, which puts self above others, is the opposite of love, which puts others before oneself. As Scripture says, those who love don't think too highly of themselves, but act in humility toward others. And this is true even when you are right and the other is wrong.

From this humility, love then doesn't insist on its own way. Those who love don't put their own desires and opinions above others; they don't seek to please themselves at the expense of others. Instead, they with patience – long-suffering – let others have their way. The only way they insist on is the way of God, as we'll see in a couple verses.

Connected to humility and patience, love is not irritable or resentful. Love isn't easily provoked, or irritated by little things. One who loves bears with the faults and flaws of others, while in humility remembering that he has faults and flaws himself (excepting Jesus Christ, of course). Love doesn't hold grudges against others, keeping track of how many times it has been wronged, wondering if it's getting close to the "seventy times seven" Jesus spoke to Peter.

Verse six sets forth principles that are difficult for us to hold when applied to both friends and enemies. "[Love] does not rejoice at wrongdoing." It doesn't rejoice when someone is wronged, even when the person is our enemy and we think they deserve to have injustice happen to him. It also doesn't rejoice when our friend does something wrong, excusing it by saying that everyone's doing that, or at least he's doing less wrong than others.

Wrongdoing, injustice, unrighteousness – you could translate the word any of those ways – is always wrong. God's word, not our thoughts or opinions, is what sets forth right and wrong.

On the other side of this coin, "[love] rejoices with the truth." That means the truth, whether it comes out of the mouths of our friends or our enemies. And it also means that in love, we speak the truth to both enemies and friends. We don't, we can't, excuse falsehood in people just because we care for them. Love rejoices in the truth, even when speaking or hearing the truth doesn't cause a person to rejoice.

The last listing of love's characteristics – verse 7 – shows that love doesn't change, despite what goes on around it. Love bears all things, remaining constant despite the load placed upon it. Love believes all things; not that love is gullible or allows for anything – again, love rejoices in the truth, not falsehood. Rather, this means that love believes in the midst of all things; it keeps faith throughout the changes and surprises of life.

Love hopes all things. Like belief, the idea is that love clings to the anchor of hope, the promises of God's word, no matter what storms rage around it. Finally, love endures all things. This

directs us back to that first virtue of love: patience. Love remains, patiently enduring all the challenges, temptations, and frustrations that life sends its way.

As you've hopefully realized by now, this passage on love is not just something sappy that they Apostle Paul put in so that Hallmark would have material for wedding cards. The call to love as God has established love is one of the greatest and most challenging callings we have as Christians.

It all goes back to the idea that God created man to be with Him and to bear His divine image. As God is love, man is to bear that love of God and reflect it to the world.

This is very similar to the idea that God gave us the Law to show His holiness and that by walking in His Law we would show forth His holiness to the world. As the Scriptures say, "love is the fulfilling of the Law."

Just as we are not excused for breaking the Law, neither are we excused for loving less than how God commands in His word. Note that, in the Epistle, it doesn't say that love is usually patient, or that love isn't resentful unless the wrong done was really bad. No, the word is command, written in absolute terms.

How can we love in such a way? It seems impossible! And, if it were just up to us, it would be. But with God, all things are possible. Another part of Holy Scripture that deals a lot with love, First John, tells us this: "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." And shortly after that, St. John writes, "We love, because He first loved us."

Our hearts, dead because of sin, were incapable of rightly loving God or our neighbor. And so, in love for the whole world, the Father sent the Son to pay the price to renew our hearts. As the word says, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

In Jesus, especially His cross, the love of God is shown forth perfectly. Consider again the Epistle verses we looked at, but with Jesus as love. Jesus is patient and kind, enduring all sorts of frustrations and suffering as He leads sinners into the kingdom of God, showing kindness to those who were very cruel to Him.

Jesus never envies, nor does He boast, despite all things rightfully being under Him as the Lord of Lords. He is never arrogant nor rude, even when dealing with the supremely arrogant and rude Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and lawyers.

Our Lord never insists on His own way in matters of personal taste or comfort, but only insists on the one way to the Father, and this because He loves all people and doesn't want them walking the path to damnation. Christ is neither irritable nor resentful, but forgives those who wrong Him, even as they crucify Him.

He never rejoices in nor justifies wrongdoing, even when it would have seemed to make things easier for Him. He always rejoices in the truth, for He rejoices in His Father's will, even when the Father's will must be done and not His own earthly will.

In love, He bore all our sins, believing perfectly in our place, hoping even when His Father forsook Him, enduring the cross and despising its shame so that He might bring salvation to the world. In Christ, everything He said, everything He did, the love of God is perfectly seen.

And as love, it was not for His own glory, but for the sake of those He loves. Though we were weak and dead in our sins, though we made ourselves God's enemies, though we sin against Him in thought, word, and deed, still He loves us and gave Himself up for us.

Because of love, Jesus graciously gives us all those gifts He won for us on the cross. We receive His grace, not because we deserve it, but because He loves us and wants us to be with Him in paradise forever.

Again, this isn't true for just some people. God loves all and desires all to be saved eternally. Thus, He pours His love into our hearts by His Spirit. We can't love Him or our neighbor as we ought, and so He gives us His love to do that. He is love, and He desires to show forth that love into the world, in us and through us.

Like grace, though, love can be rejected. He shows us love, and puts His love in our hearts, but we can put it out. Love is freely given, but it cannot be forced. That's why, though God loves all people, not all people will be saved.

As the end draws nearer, Jesus has told us that the love of many will grow cold. We can't help but see that in our own day, where patience and kindness are rare, where envy and arrogance and resentfulness are commonplace, where people rejoice, not in the truth, but in whatever makes them feel good.

Now, as in every age, the love of God is needed in the world. People need God's love, a love that is always there for them, from before they even existed and continuing into eternity. They need that divine love that tells them they were created for a purpose, that their lives have meaning. They need that love that rejoices in truth, that seeks their eternal good rather than just telling them whatever will make them feel good in the short term. In a world where everyone is out of himself, people need to hear of the God who loves them so much that He died for them, long before they were born.

This love of God has been poured into our hearts, so that by our words of love – sharing the Gospel – and our deeds of love – caring for our neighbor, God might draw even more people into His love. That love, as Scripture tells us, will outlast prophecies, tongues, even knowledge. By that love, our God will bring us into His glorious kingdom, where we shall see Him face to face. There, we will experience the fullness of what St. Paul writes in our Epistle: love never ends.

May the love of Christ be with you always. Amen.