



HOW WE ARE GOLFERS, LOVE AND IDENTITY KNOWN

Golfers come in every identity.

Some are the bombers, with their big builds and significant clubhead speed sending the ball far, far down the fairway—if in their wild slashing they can find it. No mind to their errancy, though. They are convinced that their strength will enable them to extricate themselves

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from any form of trouble. Often they've convinced me, too.

Others are the ballstrikers, precision players who carve 3-irons to three feet. Some take dead aim with their wedges, spinning it close from all the various distances and lies that confront us within a hundred yards or so. And there are the putters, those who can rescue any bad hole with a snake from across the green. A "seagoer," my father called these. The suggestion from golf's histories is that this term harkens back to the links game, when long putts looked like they were headed to the sea. Ignore the fact there

was no sea within 200 miles of where I grew up.

We know as well that many golfers mask their abilities by securing other identities—as storytellers or club collectors or dressers. Some spend more time at the nineteenth hole than they do on the other eighteen. And I once met a man who chatted up others for so long in the locker room that I wondered if he was scared to death of the first tee.

Yes, we probably all have asked ourselves in the quiet of our evenings, "How am I known to my golfing friends?" If we can settle happily upon our identity, we're more likely to enjoy the game.

Personal identity is important in any environment, of course. Always it is a blend of what we want to be and what we are expected to be. If we insist on always being seen a certain way, we will open and close doors for ourselves. Even golf clubs set standards by which they want their members to present

themselves, and if we have no intention of following those standards, we'll look for somewhere else to connect.

I wonder, however, if certain identities work in any setting. It's often said of a friendly person that they are "likeable." That seems to be a trait everyone can live with. But like so many things, what people like is subjective, so a likeable person to one observer may not be so likeable to another. Still, the truly friendly person stands a good chance of acceptance most everywhere.

A more important question for those who say they follow Jesus, however, is how Jesus says we should be known. What should our identity be if we are his? Is there one master trait, and how do we cultivate that characteristic in our lives?

Let's start by making a tap-in out of this. There is such a trait: love. Jesus told his followers, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

You probably already know all this. God is love. God demonstrated his love by sending Jesus to die on the cross to cover our sins. And now God calls us to love. This is no wispy thing, like the love of a romcom or the love you express for your favorite restaurant. It's not here tonight and gone by morning. John wrote in his first letter to Jesus-followers: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). We might go so far as to call these fighting words, because in truth they make a liar of all of us. We have all been guilty of not loving as we should.

This is where we make a turn in this article from how we should be known to how we get it done. If we should be known by our love and we should be more loving than we are, what does this love look like? For that exploration, we can do no better than to turn to 1 Corinthians 13.

We are nearly all familiar with 1 Corinthians 13. Its core passage is read at many weddings, and it has picked up an apropos moniker over the years: the love chapter. Although this is true, you may realize that you haven't heard this passage preached or read its explication too often. I find this concerning personally, because not so long ago I read this passage and found myself thinking, *If I lost the whole rest of the Bible and was left with only this—well, I could spend the rest of my life working on only this.*

By way of brief introduction, let's latch onto a sense of Corinth and its people. The city was a crossroads in the south of Greece, a cosmopolitan place where people would pass through and get their you-name-its on in the few days they were there. It was not unlike Las Vegas. Now consider this: Let's say, dedicated conservative Christian husband, that one evening you came home and announced to your devoted conservative Christian wife, "Honey, I've figured it out. The best thing we can do for our marriage right now and for our kids in their coming formative years is to move to Las Vegas. Trust me on this.

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It'll be great!" She'd think you were nuts. Everything about Las Vegas says *not Christian*. But there are Christians there. Quite a few of them. I know some, as a matter of fact. And Paul did, too. In Corinth. Trying to live the way God would have them live despite the crashing waves of a pagan culture.

This was a hard place to be a Christian, and Paul's letter to them reveals that. These people were having trouble breaking free of some of their old in-

fluences and frankly they were failing at loving each other well. They were arguing over whose preaching was best, they were allowing proud sex sin among them, they were taking each other to court, they were showing off their respective knowledge, they were pigging out on the communion elements, and they had apparently elevated some spiritual gifts above others to create a sort of hierarchy in the church. It was bad news. They needed to learn to love each other. That lesson was about to land on them with great force.

Love is the ultimate check and balance. It should be the measuring rod we turn to first in our ministry to one another.

The excellence of love

At the end of chapter 12, Paul wrote, “I will show you a more excellent way.” So we begin with the recognition that love is excellent. It is, we are about to find out, more excellent than many other excellent things. Look at the first few verses of chapter 13.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (13:1). Maybe we should call this the preacher’s comedown. I can’t speak for every preacher, but most preachers I know are committed to preparing well and speaking well. They’re going to get things wrong, but they certainly aren’t trying to. And yet Paul was saying here that they can get every last detail right, but if their words aren’t backed by love, they are only making noise. But it’s not just preachers...

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing (13:2). Here are three more gifts about which Paul had just written in chapter 12: prophecy,

supernatural knowledge, and faith. But just like preaching, if we render these without love, we are no better for them. In fact, we are nothing at all. Some of you may be thinking, *Well, that’s a good lesson for the preachers and prophets I know. So many of them are too proud as it is. Give me the humble people any day.* But look...

If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing (13:3). Even the humblest, even the giving-est, even the martyr, must have love.

The end, friends, does not justify the means. We can’t rationalize that we’re doing the right thing if we’re doing it in the wrong way. Jesus said, “There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). But just laying down our life isn’t enough. Love is the ultimate check and balance. It should be the measuring rod we turn to first in our ministry to one another. It keeps those on the podium and those in the crowd properly aligned. If we were writing it today, it might sound like this:

If I take the best notes, adding to them as I listen to the sermon for the third time this week, but I don’t have love, my efforts amount to a pile of blank paper. If I raise my children so they marry believers and enter the ministry and nurture their children, but I have no love, all my beautiful scrapbooks add up to zero. If I march in the pro-life rally and feed the needy every Saturday at the Rescue Mission, but love isn’t behind my good deeds, I might as well be rubbing my tummy and patting my head.

When we don’t have it, love can be to our shame. John knew this. He went on to say tersely in his letter: “Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1

John 4:21). Love, when we don't have it, puts us to shame because it is more excellent. More excellent than anything else we try to do. But because it is more excellent, it is also our calling—and a calling that shouts of who we are in Christ himself. When we endeavor to love as we have first been loved—when we truly reach out with mercy and care—people will notice. Consider this summary of the work of the men and women of Christ in the early church:

During the Plague [of Cyprian, AD 249-262] in Alexandria when nearly everyone else fled, the early Christians risked their lives for one another by simple deeds of washing the sick, offering water and food, and consoling the dying. Their care was so extensive that Julian eventually tried to copy the church's welfare system. It failed, however, because for the Christians it was love, not duty, that motivated them. (Charles E. Moore, "Pandemic Love," plough.com)

The writer of these words, Charles E. Moore, then draws a connection to our own time:

In an age of impersonal medicine, fear of death, social isolation, and mounting catastrophe, today's church has the opportunity to go beyond the precautions of quarantine and vaccine and trust in the ultimate protection: Love. Instead of retreating from the onslaught of pain and death, the church has the chance to demonstrate that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

The call to love is a great one. But if we really want to draw others to Christ, this is the calling we must follow. It is the one that brings glory to him. No wonder it is so excellent!

The nature of love

But while it is excellent, it is also so very challenging. In moving to the next section of this chapter, we come face to face with a list of characteristics that simultaneously remind us of who God is and of how we are called to be like him. In other words, like so many other places in Scripture, they set an "impossible" standard. Of course, we always wrap quotes around impossible, because we know what Jesus said when asked how a camel might pass through the eye of a needle: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). We cannot in our own sin-sapped strength reach the standard we are about to explore. But we can try. That is, we can put ourselves in God's way and pray, "Lord, by your Spirit, empower me to do what looks so very unlikely."

Now let's walk our way through these characteristics that comprise the nature of love.

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Love is patient and kind (13: 4). Immediately we find in this short phrase an echo of the common refrain of the Old Testament: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

Patience and kindness, of course, can be viewed separately, although we would certainly recognize how they feed one another. The Greek does not surprise us. For patient means much the same as it does for us: to persevere in the face of ill circumstances, to not lose heart. It means that whether our love is demonstrated with strong, protective boundaries or emotive compassion, it does not tire. It endures. It

prays for our children when they are 7 and 27 and 47. Kindness, too, is familiar. It means that we do nice things for others. Subtly, the Greek also suggests that to be kind is to be useful—which is to say that we do things for others that actually help them. But here's another word we must note: *and*. Love is patient *and* kind. We don't get to choose which of these characteristics we will show. We cannot say, "I'll be kind, but it's too hard to be patient." Love is both these things, and the others we are about to explore as well. We can't leave some out because they don't fit our personality or because, well, you don't know how hard so-and-so is to love. We endeavor, submitted to the Spirit in obedience but also for his power, to do it all.

We don't get to choose which of love's characteristics we will show. We can't leave some out because they don't fit our personality or because, well, you don't know how hard so-and-so is to love.

Love does not envy or boast (13:4). Here are two negative expressions that cannot be a part of love. In fact, we encounter now a string of such "reverse definitions"—things that love *is* not and *does* not. It does not envy, wanting what others have. We do not covet their skills or their looks or their friendships or their possessions or their calm personality or their trustworthy character. In many cases, it is OK to *want* what others have. In fact, when we see excellent character in another, this is something we should want. If we see a couple whose marriage honors Christ and one another, this is something we should want. If we see a business owner who treats his workers benevolently and gives away a large portion of his profits, too, this is something we should want. But in love, we cannot want these things for ourselves to the exclusion of those

who have them. We cannot say, "I want what she has, and I do not want her to have it."

Love also does not boast. As with patience and kindness, there is a relationship between envying and boasting. For if I am on the side of possessing and not of wanting, where I have admirable skills or traits or character, I cannot in love make much of these over and above others. I cannot say I love a brother and then get busy telling him how excellent the things are that I have compared to the things that he has.

It is not arrogant or rude (13:4-5). Arrogance was a negative distinctive of the Corinthian church that Paul had already dealt with in several places in this long letter. He juxtaposed arrogance and love in chapter 8, when addressing the argument of whether it was acceptable to eat food that had been offered to idols: "Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge.' This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up" (1 Corinthians 8:1). You might recognize a social media attitude here. It's one where I am sure that my arguments, based on my knowledge, are superior to the arguments and knowledge of others—and I am going to let you know it. This is not love; it is posturing. And when it is expressed without love it can come off in two ways: arrogant or rude (and maybe both!). Our words just get ugly.

It does not insist on its own way (13:5). We don't need a lot of explanation with this one, just a lot of practice. John Piper once preached on this passage and likened every characteristic here to dying to oneself. It sure shows up in this phrase. I defer. I get out of the way rather than insisting on what is "mine." In Piper's words, "Not seeking our own way means dying to the dominance of our own preferences."

It is not irritable or resentful (13:5). We might say this follows from the first pair: “Love is patient and kind.” What happens when your patience wears thin, when a day at the office or a day with the kids has been more like a day of disaster? We come to the evening tired and irritable or tired and resentful. The patience we were meant to have is replaced by shortness, bitterness, even meanness. Quite obviously, this is not love. Love is not short in spirit, but long.

We might add that love recognizes irritability in oneself and makes apology for it even before others notice. I may be willing and even quick to forgive grumpiness in my wife, but she is often quicker to seek my forgiveness, even before I notice. And this is good, for it allows no opportunity for resentment to grow. Other translations have rendered resentment as a record-keeping of the wrongs of others. But I have no chance to record a wrong on any naughty list I might keep if the wrong is covered by a confession before I ever get out my pen.

It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth (13:6). Now we are given a dichotomy, and it takes up the question of righteousness. Love does not admire what is wrong. Christopher W. Morgan helps us clarify this in our time:

Having nice feelings for someone is fine, but love goes beyond sentimentality to desiring his or her good and actively giving ourselves to help bring about that good. Love as open acceptance misunderstands that love seeks the good of others and therefore must oppose everything that hurts the person, whether they are aware of it or not.

Unrighteousness always hurts a person. We may adult-to-adult and citizen-to-citizen have to allow another to exercise unrighteousness, even unrighteousness

that masquerades as love, but we cannot rejoice in it. We must instead rejoice in the truth. This is what love does. Love upholds for all of us—family and friends and brothers and sisters in the Lord—“whatever is,” as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, [whatever] is of excellence and...worthy of praise.” These are the things love dwells on and rejoices in.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (13:7). This final phrase is so universal we might call it a summary or a declaration. Love will wait things out; indeed, it will wait everything out. Love will not be derailed by contrary evidence; indeed, not by any shred of counter evidence. Love will withstand our doubts; indeed, all our deepest doubts. And love will hold fast against the pounding of the world’s surf; indeed, no wave can tear it from its mooring, for as we have said, that mooring is God himself, and with him all things are possible.

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And wherein love expressed by us here on earth is tainted by our sin, love in eternity will be pure.**

The future of love

“Love,” verse 8 begins, “never ends.” You may know this phrase as “love never fails.” The Greek is not absolute. As close to literally as we can get, it means that love will not be knocked off its course. So it most closely aligns with the idea that it doesn’t (or will not) end. It cannot mean, at least as long as we are the ones dispensing it, that it won’t err or waver. We will make mistakes. We will fail in loving others. But love itself will not fail; it will not end; it is upheld eternally by the eternal one.

Then we read this:

As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. (13:8-12)

In eternity, a lot of other things get put away for good. What is necessary is what we express toward one another. Perhaps you have heard it said before that only three things last forever: God, God's Word, and people. That may be true of concrete things, but it is also true of love. Love has the same future we do. And wherein love expressed by us here on earth is tainted by our sin, love in eternity will be pure. It will not envy or boast or be arrogant or rude. It will not insist on its own way or be irritable or resentful. It will not rejoice at wrongdoing. Instead it will be patient and kind and rejoice at the truth. And remarkably, it may not even need to be patient, for if in eternity love is pure, there will be no one there to try your patience!

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (13:13). We've come to the final verse, and it's not an easy one to grasp. Since our faith shall be made sight and our hope of everlasting life will be realized in eternity, there may be no need at all for these two in the eternal presence of the Lord.

The old commentator Matthew Henry agrees. He says that faith and hope are means to the end, which is love. In eternity, he wrote, "there will love be made perfect; there we shall perfectly love God, because he will appear amiable forever, and our hearts will kindle at the sight, and glow with perpetual devotion. And there shall we perfectly love one another, when all the saints meet there."

The clothes we wear

What you wear to play golf is meaningful. Your shoes have spikes, or at least added traction, in the soles. Modern design has given us flexible shirts, so our twisting, turning torsos can swing the club freely. There are those who wear short pants to play, almost no matter the weather. For them, this is an essential part of the uniform of golf. All of this shows us to be golfers.

But in Scripture we are told to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13:14). Everything we have considered about love today was modeled perfectly in Jesus, right through to the giving of his life in the ultimate sacrifice for those he called his friends. When we take up the call of 1 Corinthians 13, we are identifying with Jesus not only in name but in deed.

Maybe you see now how we could spend the rest of our days working out these few verses in our lives. They tell us so much about who God is and how he loves us, while at the same time they tell us what we are to do and how we are to do it. So pursue faith. Fan the flame, as Paul wrote to Timothy. Pursue hope, encouraging one another with words about the day of Christ's return, as Paul wrote the Thessalonians. But beyond both of these, pursue love. Kindle it, cultivate it, develop it, grow it, practice it—whatever verb suits you. 🏌️