



I Want to Know What Love Is

Part 11 – Love Always Protects, Trusts, Hopes, and Perseveres

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're finishing up with the sticking power of love. We're in 1 Corinthians 13: 7 as we finish this. If you are brand new to our church, we say welcome and we're glad you're here. We've been going through 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 as an outline for 10 weeks. Today is the last one, Part 11, and we're looking at Verse 7 about love protecting, trusting, hoping, and persevering. The sticking power of love, commitment. It's a perfect way for us to end this series as we've been talking about love – defining it, understanding what it is and what it is not.

I can't catch you up from all the parts, but going back a couple of weeks, we looked at how we don't keep score. Love does not keep score; it keeps no record of wrongs. We know that in relationships, we always like to walk around with a score card, keeping track of what I've done and what you've done. We've all been in relationships where you're always down in the count with somebody. We talked about how if you keep a score card, that is not a relationship that is going to flourish.

Last week, we looked at that definition of forgiveness that we've heard before. **Forgiveness is giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me**, but we said it's not just that; love does not rejoice when other people hurt, even if you're not the one causing the hurt. We don't want those who hurt us to hurt. We don't need that. We know who our true and only source of life and love is. We go to Him for unlimited free refills and then pour into those around us.

Today, we're looking at standing with those who are hurting. Our verse is 1 Corinthians 13: 7. Again, love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase, *The Message*, says it this way: *"If you love someone, you'll be loyal to him, no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him."* That is love.

Young people, we're going to be talking to your parents in just a bit as we close out this message, but, this week, you think about it how it applies to you when a friend has been abandoned or rejected or kicked out of the friend group. Be the one that sticks around and the one who stands up. Be that person. Be the one that doesn't want someone to hurt, that's not keeping record of wrongs. This is what love does.

1 Corinthians 13: 7 is what we call the true love test. When times are hard, you find out who your real friends are. When you go through painful seasons or phases in life, you find out who those are that really love you versus those who were just sticking around for something to gain.

This is the true love test: Someone really loves you when they stick around even though you have nothing to offer. They are the ones who show up.

A good friend of mine called me this week. My favorite phone calls are the people who call me not to say, "Hey I need you to talk to and would you help so and so." It's those people that say, "I'm getting ready to so help someone, I'm getting ready to go walk through this difficult season, would you just give me something to say, walk me through it, coach me through it."

I love that because that's us being the body of Christ. Every member is a minister. My friend is a very busy guy. He's a successful business man. He said, "I have a friend whose wife left him, and he is at rock bottom. I cleared my schedule today so I could go be with him." That's a true friend, that's love showing up and sticking around when we hit rock bottom. We've been looking at what love is and what it is not. Love does not walk out during hard times.

Think about it today. I asked the first service and I had about half the room raise their hand on this, but I want to ask you. Do you have in mind the person who was there for you during a very difficult season? Like that name comes to you immediately. The reason I ask that is because many of you have experienced what it's like to be alone through difficult times, like no one is here for you, no one is talking to you, no one is checking on you.

The question I also want you to think about today is who have you been there for? Who have you walked with when times were tough, and everybody was using the exit door? You used the entrance and you said, "I'm here for you. I'm sticking with you, getting through this difficult time no matter what."

That's what I love about Ecclesiastes 4: 9-10. It says, **9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!** You don't need 50 people in your corner. We're going to see today that you need that one person who loves you no matter what.

We talked about it last week. What my mom would tell my brother and I as we were growing up. She'd say, "Even if you go all the way to death row, I will be there for you." It was kind of a weird little encouragement thing she would give us, but it stuck. We got it. Andy and I understand Mom is there no matter what and you don't mess with one of her cubs because the Momma bear comes out.

We get that from Mom, but who in here has known someone that you cared about who was having a difficult time and you weren't there. You felt it was putting too much at risk. Young people, I just challenge you to be that person that sticks around when someone is being abandoned or rejected at school. Don't worry about how it threatens you. Be someone of integrity, someone of love. Stand by that person. Be the one that helps someone else up.

The true love test. Another way of saying it is when you have nothing to offer the relationship, emotionally, relationally, or financially, the person that picks you up is the one who really loves you. The person who is there.

Another way of saying it is – boiling down Verse 7 – love is steadfast in the face of unpleasant circumstances. I just want you to think about the person... It may be you. You may be the one that's thinking about walking out of the marriage, walking out on your family, walking out on this church. You right there on the line. You're like, "I have a bias right now towards leaving, thinking I'm done, I'm out of here, it's too rough for me, I'm just not feeling it anymore." You're ready to go.

I just ask right now for you to take 10 seconds in this service to pray and ask the Lord to open your heart to this. Give him an open heart. Confess it right now. "I have a bias toward leaving. Today, I need to learn something about staying. Today I need to learn something about commitment." Pray that before the Lord right now. If that's not you; you're not in a relationship or a marriage where you're like "I'm out of here," but you know someone who's there. Pray for that person right now. Take 10 seconds. Call the person by name. Not out loud, but right there. Make this time a time of ministry for you to go "Who am I going to go be with who has fallen?"

When my dear friend in ministry fell, I would say he had tens of thousands of admirers, people that wanted to come hear him preach and teach. They flocked, and it was getting to him. When he fell and had an affair, guess how many there were. There weren't thousands of people there to pick him up. He was looking around for them. There were only a few.

Who is the person that's been there for you during unpleasant circumstances or difficult times? Take it a step further today and ask yourself the question: "Who am I going to be there for?" This is important as we get deeper into the scripture. We need to understand that God is with us when others abandon us. We have the opportunity to show people... When we show up, when we're there for them, they begin to get the understanding "God is with me."

Here's how it works. I love Psalms 46: 1-3. ***1 God is our refuge and strength...*** You find this throughout the Psalms. This is speaking directly of a fortress, of a refuge where they build high walls. Impenetrable defense is how you can look at this. But with ordinary weapons and ordinary war, it's still not 100%. The psalmist is using that to say God is an ever-present help in trouble. He is 100%, completely an impenetrable defense. He is there for you at all times.

I get the expression... Travis Brawner and I were talking about it this week. I get the expression sometimes... I hear worship leaders say it all the time. "Don't you just love it when God shows up?" Every time I hear that I get frustrated. That's because I don't want people thinking God was here for you then, but he's not here for you now, you've got to do something. You've got to say something for God to be your ever-present help in trouble.

We're not a Christmas yet, but what do we celebrate at Christmas? We celebrate Emanuel – God with us. I get the sentiment of God showing up. We talked to our worship team about not putting that theology out there. We want to be very careful how we speak that. God is with us. Some of you think, *The worship leader just said God showed up. Was it because both my hands were up? Is it only 50% when only one hand is up?* Some of you may think I'm getting mocky. I'm trying not to, but it's flowing out of me and I'll confess this after this service before the 11:30. What we say is very important. And what we want people to hear is very important.

What does it say? ...**an ever-present...** We speak of the immutability of God – he’s never-changing. We speak of the omnipresence of God – he’s everywhere always. And he is your ever-present **help in trouble**. And when you step into someone’s life, they are reminded of that. They’re like, “Man, this person is here for me.” **2 Therefore we will not fear...** I love this in the Psalm. The psalmist begins to basically say, “Use your imagination. Let’s go beyond ordinary war or ordinary weapons of war and let’s get cosmic with this thing.” ...**though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging**. In other words, even when everything is falling apart on a cosmic level, you can count on God. He will not abandon you.

Some of you need to hear that message today. I talked to somebody after the last service. Everybody has left this person... everybody. It’s a tragic story from their childhood with parents leaving and aunts and uncles leaving, and grandparents wanting nothing to do with them. Then as they got older and started acting out more, everybody just left them. No one has been there to tell them, “God will not do that to you. He will not abandon you like the people in your life have abandoned you. He will not bail on you like the father who bailed on you or the mother who bailed on you or the siblings who won’t talk to you.”

You're treating God as though this is how it works: I have to do this or do that, or do something in worship... That’s when God shows up. No, you become a Christians by placing faith in Christ alone. Faith alone in Christ alone. And when that happens, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life. Please hear me, follower of Jesus, the Holy Spirit doesn’t come and go in your life based on your behavior, based on the quality of your worship. Some of you came in today and you’re usually more expressive, but today, something may be heavy on your heart and you were more contemplative in your worship. That’s why at this church, if you're raising your hands, you're worshipping; if you're bowing your head, you're worshipping. We don’t sit around thinking, *I wonder what the quality of their worship is right now*. The quality of your worship does not determine God’s ever-present help in times of trouble.

Have you ever had anybody bail on you when you could no longer give them money? You’re like, *I thought that was family*. It’s interesting as you pick up this theme through the scripture, but some of you had a ton of friends until you lost your business. When you lost your business, you never heard from them.

In Hebrews, we read this. I’ve always been fascinated by the connection of these two thoughts in Hebrews 13: 5. **5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said...** And then we get this quote that Joshua gets after Moses has been told “You’re not crossing over. Joshua is going to lead the people in. Be strong and courageous.” Why can I be there? Because you’re standing there with me? No... **“Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”** God is with you.

Some of you right now have very little or nothing at all. The message for you today is, after people abandoned you because you have nothing left: He will never leave you nor forsake you.

But then... This one you could spend the rest of the time on. Some of you sinned and now you're dealing with the consequences of that. You sinned against family. You sinned against a spouse. You

betrayed a trust and you're going, "Everybody left me," like my friend who had the affair. Five years later, he is doing fantastic. He confessed his sins before his church, before his spouse, before his Lord. He's been in treatment and God is doing amazing things in his life because he opened himself up to it. But, some of you are in that moment right now. You've been abandoned because of your sin. You're dealing with the consequences of that. So today, you, as you repent before the Lord, be encouraged with Lamentations 3: 22-23. ***22 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; we are not cut off his mercies never come to an end; 23 they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*** You have forgiven me.

Bottom line: When we stand with those who are hurting, when we step in when they are hurting, we show them God's steadfast, ever-present help in times of trouble, his steadfast love for us, reminding them I need this just like you need this. I'm not in the season you're in or the circumstance you're in, but I need this and you need this and I'm just wanting you to see that. We're here. God is here.

I want to spend the rest of the time talking specifically to parents on how we teach this to our kids. And grandparents as well to the grandchildren. We're a family church and we always want to give Mom and Dad practical ways to do this. We hope to give you a very practical way to bring this home.

We want to start with this idea of application from 1 Corinthians 13: 7. **Never underestimate the value of your marriage as a parent.** Don't overlook your marriage as a parenting tool. **It's teaching your children a lot about love, commitment, and trust.** They are watching. They see you go through difficult seasons. They see how you handle job loss together. They see how you handle health together. They see how you handle finding a parking spot together. How you choose which restaurant to eat at. They're watching all that. And kids see everything, hear everything, remember everything, and repeat. By you sticking with that marriage during unpleasant circumstances, by you having perseverance and a commitment to your marriage, you're teaching your kids how to do the same thing.

I've been following this couple and I've been keeping you up to date on this couple. I haven't done it since last January, so it's been about 15 months. Many of you, if you've been here for a while, you know I introduced to this couple you four years ago, Lloyd and Jean, from Iowa City, Iowa. I was at a marriage conference, which is where I met them. He came walking up to me after the conference and he said, "I gotta say something to you, young man." He put his finger in my chest and he started giving me a blessing.

I had to take this picture because this was a moment in time. This is them. This is the perfect picture of their marriage. He is a World War II veteran. He would write to her during the war. They picked out a star before he left. He said, "As I'm writing to you, Baby, I'll be looking at that star, and when you get the letter, I want you to find our star and then read the letter. Very Nicholas Sparks type stuff going on here. He's a very mushy guy. Jean just sat there on his arm the whole time.

I've followed up with them every year since the conference. This last week, I emailed my pastor friend and said, "How are Lloyd and Jean doing?" They just celebrated 74 years of marriage. They still attend church together. They say he still carries on a great conversation. Jean had a mini stroke and she's suffering from dementia. What a great example for us.

Making it to 74 years is not the point of this. When they left me... I still have the image in my head. She reached into her purse and she grabbed two collapsible, identical canes and she handed one to Lloyd, and both of them, like Indiana Jones, whipped them out. They turned around and started walking. I watched them walk all the way out to the parking lot.

Now, you can look at this couple and go, "They found true love." They didn't find true love; they made it. They didn't stumble into it; they chose it. "Well, they had a good life." They were born right before the great depression. They went through the great depression. I love how John Crist says it, "Hey, before you whine on Facebook this week that you can't adult today, please keep in mind your grandfather served in World War II. Before you post online, "Rosé all day," get up, do your hair and go to work." It's not because they had life easy. They didn't have farmersonly.com in the 40s. They did it the old fashion way. I'm like right in the middle of our old generation and our younger generation so I'm going to lean toward the younger generation right now. We, you and I, we have a lot to learn from this generation's duty, loyalty, sacrifice, commitment, and honor. They chose it. They made the decision and now they have modeled it for children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

Dr. Scott Stanley, from the University of Denver, talks about commitment, and all of us in marriage and family ministry kind of flock to him for anything related to commitment because it's all he's dedicated his life to – the formation of relationships, the formation of marriage, and then commitment. What keeps a couple like Lloyd and Jean going? How do they get to that point? He has boiled it down to two types of commitment, two types of sticking power in a relationship.

The first one is what he calls **constraint commitment**. Constraint commitment is that which holds you in a relationship when you'd really rather not be in it. Dating for example. If you're dating someone right now, you may have constraint commitment because you went online, found somebody, went through that whole process, and you've been dating for six months. You don't think he's the guy, but here's what you say – this is happening in your mind – *I don't want to go do another profile on match.com*. That's a constraint. It's what keeps you in a relationship that you don't want to be in. The getting back out there in the single world just seems too much work. You'd rather put up with this one... Now, that's in dating. I'm not going to talk a lot about that.

Constraint commitment is also in cohabitation. Do you know what the constraint commitment is with cohabitation? It's "Well, we've got six months left on the lease." I have a family member that lives in downtown Chicago so they could be close to Wrigley's Field. This was years and years ago. When I asked him how it was going with his girlfriend, he goes, "Oh, it's good, we're breaking up at the end of next month." I was like, "What?" It didn't even process. How many of you have broken up like that? "Let's break up on June 30." It typically doesn't go down like that. He could see my confusion. He said, "Yeah, that's when the lease is up." That's a constraint.

A puppy keeps couples in cohabitating relationships. Animals become constraints because, "Well, we went to Walmart one day and they were giving puppies out in the parking lot and we took one. Now we just feel like we should raise the puppy together." Okay, so...

Let's talk about commitment and marriage. There are a lot of constraints in marriage. It's fear of looking like a failure to your family. It's breaking up the extended family. If you've been through a divorce, you know that's painful. "Will we ever see these cousins again?" Kids ask the real, honest questions. A mortgage, bills, 401k... You start to process it. As I'm talking about it right now, you may even be thinking, *well that's a terrible commitment.*

Scott Stanley says if you just look at it from a positive for a second, primarily in marriage, a constraint commitment is good in that it keeps you in the relationship (speaking now of marriage) and slows down the decision-making process. It slows down the decision-making process before you make a decision that you will regret.

That's not the commitment though that brings about a thriving, flourishing marriage. Here's the commitment that brings a thriving marriage and that's **dedicated commitment**. This is a commitment of self-sacrifice. He gives four main parts. He says it the desire for a future together. You're constantly talking about what life is going to be like down the road. Parents, you need to do this. You need to have regular conversations of what it's going to be like when the kids are gone. Some of you are like, "We do, and it's awesome."

We tell our kids often, "Hey, we love you, you are a welcome addition to this home. You won't be with us forever, and we have big plans after you leave. And we're kicking it off with a tour of Disney World. We're doing all four parks at Disney after the kids leave.

It's also a since of being part of a team. Scott Stanley uses the term *weness*. I'm not a big fan of the term *weness*. Senior adults, you need to think through the terminology that you use. I prefer usness. Usness doesn't rhyme with anything; let's go with usness. Or just team. Be part of a team. Give high priority to the relationship. In other words, I'm going to give up the singleness traits: hobbies, recreational activities, career goals, even as simple as how we watch television and what restaurant we go to. I'm going to give up my singleness status that I get to do what I want whenever I want. You don't have that when you have the priority of the relationship and the willingness to sacrifice for the other.

Never underestimate the value of serving your church because that's also teaching your kids a lot about commitment and trust. Do you know people that leave a church at the first sign of trouble? Some of you are here because of the trouble that your church is experiencing. I hope you labor over that decision and don't do it flippantly because your kids are watching, listening, remembering, and repeating. I want to say thank you to many of you in here that have been here 15, 16, 17 years. You've stuck with this church through many difficult seasons. Think about what you're teaching your kids. Love Jesus and his bride.

This one got a lot of amens in the 8:30. Never underestimate the value of caring for your aging parent. Some of you have done this and it's been such a fantastic model. You put yourself aside, you moved a parent in or moved a parent maybe to Branson. I got to watch this. My mom and dad taught my brother and me this very well. I got to watch this with Denny and Linda. They just did this with Linda's dad, and I mean they ministered to him. I kept telling my kids, "Watch this. We're learning how to do this. Do this for me one day."

When you care for an aging parent... When they start to get into dementia and anything else with mental health and they maybe become belligerent, to watch you care for an aging parent, the message it is giving the children and your grandchildren.

Then the part I'll leave you with today is this idea of the blessing for your child. **Don't underestimate the value of blessing your children**, being committed to them. I want to talk to you a little bit about the difference between false praise, which I'm not a big fan of... We over indulge and over praise our children and it doesn't set them up well. When they get out of the house and they deal with difficult times and hard times... If you over praise your child, it's going to be a tough road for them. They don't need that. What they need from their parents is commitment. Give them the blessing, not false praise.

The late Gary Smalley and John Trent wrote a great book on this. I want to give you the five parts of it because it flows straight from 1 Corinthians 13: 7. How to tell your kids. "I'm here for you, I'm with you, I bless you." It's not what we're talking about... Listen, I get sad when I watch the auditions for American Idol. It's filled with young people that got false praise. Those auditions – false praise, false praise, false praise. A loving parent would have said, "Yeah, you probably should do something else."

When I decided to become a professional athlete, I had loving parents who told me, "You don't have skill, balance, strength, all the stuff necessary to do athletics. You're going to get hurt." You may think my parents should have let me follow my dreams. No, they should have blessed me, which they did. I had a dad that told me, "You can't do anything in engineering, you can't do anything in accounting." He knew I couldn't do math. He'd say, "God didn't give you a math brain." But I got the blessing.

Here are the five parts of the blessing from Dr. Smalley and John Trent:

- 1. Meaningful touch** – Appropriate physical warmth and affection. Be hugging your kids. You know who really wants a hug from you? Your teenagers. Do it. Don't stop. My son Carson is sitting there going, "Oh, boy." But how many hugs do I give him where he just kind of reluctantly comes over to me?
- 2. Spoken words** – Verbalizing a positive and love message (spoken or written). This is attached to the third element.
- 3. Expressing high value** – Communicating that one is valued and accepted. And loved, no matter what your grades. "Now I'm going to want your grades up. I want you to learn integrity, but I'm here for you and I'm in this with you." They need to hear that from you regularly, not false praise.
- 4. Picturing a special future** – Helping your children see and believe they can live a fruitful life. Reminding your children, for you were created in Christ Jesus to do good works which he prepared in advance for you to do, and as your parent, I get to help find out what that is with you.
- 5. An active commitment** – I have a willingness and desire to do everything within my power to help you be successful. Mom and dad, never underestimate when you do this. **We stand with our children through every phase and difficult season because God stands with us.** They need to know that.

Here's why the false thing kind of wears me out and it's not healthy for kids. John Trent puts it this way: *"Every child in every home deserves to have at least one person in their life who is crazy about them. The blessing communicates unconditional love and an unshakeable foundation for health and wholeness."* It trusts, it pictures a special future, it perseveres, it never gives up. *"It does this without spoiling or giving false praise to a child that crumbles as they face the challenges and hurts in real life."*

False praise is not going to prepare your child for the real world, but the blessing will. And we want to give you a practical way to do that. As you leave here today... Greg and Erin Smalley challenged me earlier this year with connection points. There are these connection points all throughout the day. We've listed the four main connection points that you have with your spouse, that you have with your children, that you have with your grandchildren... If your grandchildren are coming over for a visit this summer, get this out and think it through.

These connection points are good night, good morning, goodbye, and hello. When you get up in the morning, you say good morning. In this column, write what do you do right now, and in the next column, write what do we plan... Let's mix it up a little bit. Let's give our children this unconditional love and unshakable foundation and let's do it at these four connection points. From the time we get up in the morning to the time we go to sleep at night, as we sit at home, and as we walk along the way. How do you say good morning? Then when you leave for the day, how do you say goodbye? When you reconnect at the end of the day, how do you say hello? And before you go to bed, how do you say good night?

I've been sharing this with couples around the country. I found out from a lot of couples they say, "When you were saying that, we realized we don't even say good morning to each other. Some of you do shift work, but you can connect with a text or phone call. How do you say good night? Our family prays together at night before we go to bed. I hug my kids before they go to bed. But I need to mix it up. For some of you, with the *what are we going to do now*, if you don't pray together when you say good night, you can start that. That's low hanging fruit to say we're going to pray together before we say good night.

For your spouse, maybe you don't pray together, you can pray together. You don't kiss each other before you go to bed. Kiss each other before you go to bed. How do we say hello? Every senior adult in my life has always challenged me with this. When you get home, you walk straight past the dog and the children, and you find your wife. And I do. I walk in and I get after it. And then the kids and then the dog. But who greets you at the door? The dog.

How do you say goodbye? I know life is crazy. Everybody's life is crazy. We've got millions things going on around us. We just rush out the door. Slow your roll and find a new way to say goodbye. Disconnecting for the day and give your kids those words of high value. Give your spouse words of high value. Give your grandchildren... Just speak that over them as you bless them.

Father, in the name of Jesus, we thank you for what you continue to do at this church for our parents, for our spouse, for our grandparents. For the singles right now who maybe are wondering and thinking about, maybe even fearing the commitment side, that, as we unpack it a little bit, they wouldn't form

relationships around constraints, but as they pursue healthy relationship and biblical relationship formation principles, they would pursue this commitment that is full of self-sacrifice, a special future, and team.

May this church be known for this that the way we have sticking power through difficult times and difficult seasons. Thank you for this series. Thank for teaching us what love is through your word.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, and everyone agreed and said... Amen.