

# “Keeping Short Accounts”

[Love] does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

1 Corinthians 13:5-6; 3 John 2-4 <sup>1</sup>

I don't know about you, but this journey through “The Love Chapter” is reminding me that “love is a many-splendored thing.”<sup>2</sup> Today's sermon is the mid-point of our study, and, just as a quick reminder, here is the path we're following:

1. *A Setup for Misinformation*
2. *Sine Qua Non*
3. *Five Points*
4. *Keeping Short Accounts*
5. *Love's Four Corners*
6. *Knowing & Being Known*
7. *These Three Things*

Last week, we looked at the first four of fifteen characteristics of love Paul mentions, and today we look at six more. And, since love is an interpersonal experience for the most part, most of these have to do with our relationships with other people.

**1. Love does not dishonor others.** As you may see in your own Bible, this characteristic can be translated in a number of ways. Rather than “dishonor others,” other translations have “behave unseemly,” “behave indecently,” “behave gracelessly,” “behave shamefully,” or “behave rudely.” I suppose all of us have known persons who used “just telling the truth” as an excuse for behaving tactlessly and rudely, and our current political process is unfortunately taking such behavior to new lows almost every day.

The political process is not alone, though. Much of our public and private discourse is becoming increasingly crude, disrespectful, and shameful. Public shaming on social media is becoming frequent and extremely destructive. We seem to be losing the ability to carry on thoughtful conversations in which we are able to disagree respectfully. Our “reality” shows teach that the one who manages to betray the most people “wins.”

The disrespectful behavior of children and youth in our schools has reached nearly mythical proportions, and public school teachers consequently have one of the most difficult jobs to be found anywhere. Many parents, when they teach their children anything, seem to be teaching them to compete, both on the field and off, and teaching competition is a very different thing from teaching civility and courtesy.<sup>3</sup> It was not always so. Arthur Simon, who founded *Bread for the World*, grew up on a farm in Wisconsin,<sup>4</sup> where his father taught him that “Even the cows should know you are a Christian by the way that you treat them.”<sup>5</sup>

While negative examples are many, there are positive examples as well. When Thomas Edison and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb, it took hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, he handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love\\_Is\\_a\\_Many-Splendored\\_Thing\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Is_a_Many-Splendored_Thing_(song))

<sup>3</sup> Judith Warner, “Kids Gone Wild,” *The New York Times*, 11.27.05.

<sup>4</sup> I think the argument could be sustained that the farther humans get from farming, the less “grounded” we become.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Simon, “Simon Says: Vote! Write! Lobby!,” *World Vision* (April/May 1988), 6.

stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps. Instead of rebuking the boy, Edison reassured him and then turned to his staff and told them to start working on another bulb.

When the new bulb was completed a week or so later, Edison demonstrated his forgiveness in the most powerful way possible. He walked over to the same boy, handed him the new bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room." Imagine how that boy must have felt. He knew that he didn't deserve to be trusted with this responsibility again. Yet, here it was, being offered to him again as though nothing had ever happened.

Nothing could have restored this boy to the team more clearly, more quickly, or more fully. Rather than dishonoring and shaming the boy, Edison restored him to a position of trust. Do you think that lad ever forgot that moment?<sup>6</sup> *Love does not dishonor others.*

**2. Love is not self-seeking.** The second characteristic in our list this morning is to some extent the mirror of the first. We tend to dishonor and disrespect others as the mirror effect of thinking too highly of ourselves.

Love is not "self-seeking." Both of these words are significant. To "seek" something means to go after it with will, purpose, and focused intent. And I'm sure you know that "self" has become one of the watchwords of our time.

The word, "selfie," was apparently coined in 2005,<sup>7</sup> and it has taken our narcissistic world by storm. We have "selfie sticks" to allow us to take better pictures of ourselves. We have "Go Pro" video cameras to record the "amazing" things we do. We have apps that modify our selfies so that what we post about ourselves online will represent airbrushed perfection. Plastic surgery is a growth industry these days, with people spending unbelievable amounts of money in order to modify their appearance.<sup>8</sup>

With respect to "self-seeking," do you remember the "Allegory of the Long Spoons"? In this fable, persons in the afterlife are only given three-foot wooden spoons by which to feed themselves. Since there is no way for one to feed oneself with such a spoon, heaven is characterized by happy people feeding each other, while hell is full of pouting, starving, self-absorbed people who refuse to feed each other.<sup>9</sup> Self-seeking is its own "reward."

Some of you will recognize Jason Brown, who played football for North Carolina, was drafted by the *Ravens*, moved to the St. Louis *Rams*, and became for a time the highest-paid center in the NFL.<sup>10</sup> Four years ago, Jason had a wife, two children and a mansion, but his marriage was headed for disaster.

A professed follower of Jesus, Jason realized that, in his case, at least, he had to get free of the grip that football and money had on his life, and he began the journey to freedom by pouring thousands of dollars of expensive liquor down the drain. As God's path for his life became more clear, Jason left football, sold his mansion, and bought a hundred-year-old farmhouse with 1,000 acres of land back in North Carolina. He began to grow cucumbers and sweet potatoes to feed the hungry, and he began to devote himself to his family and to charity work.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict* (Baker, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selfie>

<sup>8</sup> Craig Groeschel, *#Struggles* (Zondervan, 2015), pp. 57-59.

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory\\_of\\_the\\_long\\_spoons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_long_spoons)

<sup>10</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason\\_Brown\\_\(American\\_football\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason_Brown_(American_football))

Jason learned a little bit about farming on *YouTube*, and he and his wife named their farm the First Fruits Farm. After giving away 10,000 pounds of cucumbers and 100,000 pounds of sweet potatoes, Jason said earlier this year that “I still know virtually nothing about farming, but my business plan can be summarized in one word: Obedience.” *Love is not self-seeking.*

**3. Love is not easily angered.** Other translations of this third characteristic might include “is not irritable,” “is not touchy,” or “is not cantankerous,” and the sad truth is that America has become a cantankerous and angry nation. While this week’s mass killings at Umpqua Community College in Oregon are the latest and most tragic example of this reality, other examples are not at all difficult to find. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the news shows that we live in an angry world.

One customer service representative grew weary of being yelled at. He was tired of being sprayed with the spittle of angry customers who wanted five-star service at big-box prices. On one of these occasions, this rep became strangely detached as a woman yelled at him, and he felt as though he was watching her diatribe in a movie. From this perspective, he was struck by how the angry woman’s antics made her look rather like a monkey . . . and this gave him an idea.

The rep mounted a giant mirror behind his desk so customers could see themselves, and the angry tirades miraculously went away. When people saw how they looked to others while they were yelling, screaming, and swearing, they stopped.<sup>11</sup>

Now before you get too comfortable thinking about those sorry, cantankerous, angry people sitting around you, let me invite you to undertake what I call “The Spirituality Test.” The next time something doesn’t go to suit you, the next time your GPS gives you bad directions, the next time a web page refuses to load, the next time your hair won’t do what you want it to do on the way to church, the next time you are late for an important meeting, or the next time you slam your finger in a door or stick yourself with a pin, pay attention to what you think and to what you say in that moment. That’s a pretty fool-proof indicator of your own level of anger and frustration.

As a further test, you’ve probably noticed that people don’t generally display their fury toward their employers—at least not directly. We tend to dump our anger, not “upstream,” but “downstream.” So if you *really* want to know how you’re doing in this area, ask your friends and family. *Love is not easily angered.*

**4. Love keeps no record of wrongs.** Here Paul used an accounting term that focuses on debts to be repaid. In terms of relationships, another way to translate this characteristic might be “is not resentful.”

I submit to you that virtually every Christian, and most of the non-Christians in the world, know that Jesus told His followers to forgive others “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:22). And if we stop to think about it, we know that keeping tally until that number is reached so we can mete out punishment and retribution *is not* what Jesus had in mind.

Most of us also know what it means to “nurse a grudge,” and some congregations are so full of people “keeping their grudges warm” that they have grown cold in every other way . . . and the non-Christians of the world see this, too. The truth of the matter is that each of us really needs a pretty fair-sized cemetery in which to bury the faults of our friends.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gary Thomas, *The Beautiful Fight* (Zondervan, 2007), p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Evan May, *Love Gives Life: A Study of 1 Corinthians 13* (Lexington, KY: Golden Mouth Press, 2012), p. 39.

I've always liked this quote, attributed to the author, George Eliot: "A friend is one to whom one may pour out the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that gentle hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping, *and with a breath of kindness, blow the rest away.*"<sup>13</sup>

If you want to know whether or not you are "keeping a record of wrongs," the discernment is really fairly simple. When you see someone who has offended or hurt you in the past, what comes to your mind?<sup>14</sup> Do you remember some past offense, or are you eager to show love?

I sometimes hear people say, "I'll forgive, but I won't forget." That attitude is not forgiveness, and it won't lead to healing. The "forgetting" of forgiveness is choosing to act toward the forgiven one *as if the offense had never happened*. The "forgetting" of "keeping no record of wrongs" is choosing to never, ever bring up the offense again, because if it's brought up, it's not forgiven.

If we live in this way, the time will come when we really don't remember the offense at all anymore. When that day comes, we'll truly be children of God, "*who blots out [our] sins for [his] own sake and will never [ever] think of them again*" (Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:34). *Love keeps no record of wrongs*.

**5. Love does not delight in evil.** Paul wasn't referring to pleasure in actually doing evil deeds so much as to the pleasure we take when we hear something derogatory about someone else. And here, too, we as a culture are in pretty bad shape. Virtually every magazine offered for sale at grocery checkout counters invites us to "delight in evil" in this sense.

One of the most common forms of rejoicing in evil is gossip. "Rejoicing in evil" is the very heart and soul of gossip, which has been defined as "vice enjoyed vicariously." We Christians are sadly well-practiced in such "rejoicing," which is something else of which the world is quite well aware.

Under the guise of caring for someone's well-being, we talk about their sins; or we may show how "in the know" we are by being the first to spread the news around. We may take secret, sordid pleasure in gloating to ourselves that we have kept ourselves from a sin that someone else did not manage to avoid.

My friend, if you want to know whether or not you are a gossip, just pay careful attention to what you say on the telephone, over the back fence, in email, at the barbershop or beauty parlor, at the dinner table, in Sunday school, in deacons meeting, or at prayer service.<sup>15</sup> I expect that most of us have room to improve! *Love does not delight in evil*.

**6. Love rejoices with the truth.** The flip side of "not delighting in evil" is to "rejoice with the truth." There are many directions in which we might go with this thought, but I want to end with the story with which I implicitly began.

*Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree* has been ranked by *Billboard* magazine as the 37<sup>th</sup> greatest song of all time.<sup>16</sup> Whether we agree with such an appraisal or not, the song remains wildly popular because it touches us in the deep places of our hearts.

<sup>13</sup> [www.goodreads.com/quotes/127-a-friend-is-one-to-whom-one-may-pour-out](http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/127-a-friend-is-one-to-whom-one-may-pour-out)

<sup>14</sup> May, pp. 39-40.

<sup>15</sup> James Renihan, *True Love: 1 Corinthians 13 - Understanding the Real Meaning of Christian Love* (Carlisle, PA: EP Books, 2010), pp. 102-103.

<sup>16</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tie\\_a\\_Yellow\\_Ribbon\\_Round\\_the\\_Ole\\_Oak\\_Tree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tie_a_Yellow_Ribbon_Round_the_Ole_Oak_Tree)

As I'm sure you know, the song tells about a man who has been released from prison after completing his sentence of many years. Prior to his release, he wrote a letter to his wife: "Honey, I'll be coming back on the bus on such and such a day, and as you know, the bus passes our house on the way into town. After all I've done and all the pain I've caused, there is no reason for you to want me back, and I'll not blame you if you don't. If you're willing for me to come home, just tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree at the end of the drive. If there's no ribbon, I'll just stay on the bus and keep going."

Later, as the bus approached the house, the man couldn't bear to look and asked the person next to him on the bus to look for him. What the man saw was a yellow ribbon tied to *every single limb* of the tree!

My friends, that's what God has done for us. *It doesn't matter* where you've been or what you've done. You have a Father who loves you, who forgives you, and whose arms are wide open to welcome you home.<sup>17</sup>

It is only as we know ourselves to be so wonderfully forgiven and so wonderfully loved that we are able to give to each other the kind of love about which Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13. And it is to celebrate such love that we now come to the Lord's Table . . . .

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<sup>17</sup> Read Luke 15:11-32.