

## “U Before I”

### I Corinthians 13

The Greek word “agape” was one of four nouns used in ancient Greek literature for “love”. The other three are “eros” describing sexual love, “philio” describing the love between friends or siblings and “storge” describing the love for a parent or child.

Paul defines “agape” love in 1 Corinthians 13 in 3 ways. First, in verses 1-3, Paul proclaims the superiority of agape. Second, in verses 4-8, he describes the qualities of agape, and in verses 8-13, Paul focuses on the everlasting quality of agape.

In verses 1-3, Paul begins by emphasizing that without agape, though he might speak in any language, known or unknown, it would be mere noise. Without love, prophecy and knowledge are also useless. Paul had just finished discussing the importance of using our spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and goes back to the theme of spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14. But in between, in 1 Corinthians 13, love is the greatest gift of all. Love is greater than prophetic powers, knowledge, faith, and all our possessions. If one does not have love, one gains nothing.

In verses 4-8, Paul describes the characteristics or qualities of love, where he pairs love with 16 verbs, showing love in action. In these verses, he shows us how to spell love.

Many of us remember chanting in grade school “I before E except after C.” For generations, it’s been one of the commonly used mnemonics to help children learn how to

spell certain words in the English language. It helped us spell ie words such as friend, thief, and yield, and ei words such as ceiling, receive, and deceit.

But you may also remember that you soon had to learn several exceptions to that rule; for example, neither and weird.

Verses 4-8 could be thought of as the answer to the question, “How do you spell love?” The Apostle Paul gives several rules for spelling it by pairing it with verbs.

Love is patient. I like Divinity member Dan Taddeo’s description of patience when he writes: Patience is the ability to calmly endure unpleasant situations. Exercising self-control under trying circumstances presents the greatest challenge of all. “. . . Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.” Being patience means looking beyond present circumstances. We are to dwell on the fact that God is in charge rather than on complaining.

Parents should do everything possible to cultivate patience in their children. The reason it’s so important is that impatience is the cause of most unhappiness. Patience should be encouraged when children’s wants, needs, and goals are not met immediately. They need to be reminded that each minute, hour, and day that passes brings them closer to the end result.

Children should be reminded that their problems during their lives on earth represent but a moment in time compared to eternity. “. . . Do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” “And

let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.”

Patient people make the most of their trying times. They maintain a positive outlook. They seek ways to improve the situation. They think of ways to use the waiting time profitably.

Patience promotes peace of mind, good health, and more importantly, glorifies God. Parents need to make every effort possible to instruct their children in the Godly trait of patience.

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”

Paul’s words describes an agape that is merciful, not filled with jealousy, and not heaping praise upon itself. Agape is not puffed up with conceit, does not seek its own interests, does not easily become irritated or provoked, does not keep an account of wrongs, does not rejoice in wrongdoings, but rejoices in the truth.

None of that comes easily and we all have to work at it. Our tendency to put I before U is deeply ingrained in us and doesn’t go away just because we want it to or because we started following Jesus.

Even so called unselfishness can be based in self-interest. More than one philosopher has pointed out that when we make a sacrifice for someone, it’s possible that

our motive isn't so much that we care about the person who benefits from our sacrifice as that we don't wish to be thought of as selfish, which is, of course, a self-interest viewpoint.

If such is who we are, what are we to make of Paul's "U before I" spelling of love?

Paul wrote that in our hearts we are all sinful and fall short of the glory of God. To me, that means that even if our inward response is "What's in it for me?" our outward response needs to be "What's best for you?" And we can ask that question and act on it's answer regardless of what our inward sin and self-interest is saying to us.

And yet that seems kind of grim. "Let's do what's best for you. I don't really want to, but at least I'll be loving my neighbor."

But instead of seeing loving others as acting against what we naturally want to do, it may be better to realize that acting lovingly toward others is a learning opportunity that will help us grow and mature.

To say it a different way, following Jesus brings instant forgiveness of sin which signs us up for a life-long character formation course. Paul gave his rules for how to spell love because people in the first century who were learning how to follow Jesus, needed some help spelling love in their daily actions and attitudes. So do we! We can all learn the joy of overriding our tendency to put I before U.

Then we learn that love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

Again from Dan Taddeo's book on the characteristics of hope:

Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst.

Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot.

Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of  
mankind.

Hope "lights a candle" instead of "cursing the darkness."

Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities.

Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism.

Hope sets big goals and is not frustrated by repeated difficulties and setbacks.

Hope pushes ahead when it would be easy to quit.

Hope puts up with modest gains, realizing that "the longest journey starts  
with one step."

Hope accepts misunderstandings as the price for serving the greater good of  
others.

Hope is a good loser because it has the divine assurance of final victory.

Love hopes all things.

In verse 1-3, the superiority of agape is proclaimed . In verses 4-8, the qualities and actions of agape are described. In the last section, verses 8-13, the ever-enduring,

everlasting quality of agape is extolled.

Paul picks up again a thread from the first section, explaining that while prophecy and tongues will have an end, as will knowledge, love will live on. Faith, hope, and love will endure forever and the greatest of these is love because agape encompasses both hoping and believing.

Perhaps there is no more powerful example of agape than a parent's love for their child. To illustrate that kind of love, I share one last quote from Dan's newest book: "The Controversy: Godliness vs. Worldliness." It is entitled, "I loved you enough . . . Some day when my children are old enough to understand the logic that motivates a mother, I will tell them:

I loved you enough to ask where you were going, with whom, and what time you would be home.

I loved you enough to insist that you save your money and buy a bike for yourself even though we could afford to buy one for you.

I loved you enough to make you take a Milky Way back to the drugstore (with a bite out of it) and tell the clerk, "I stole this yesterday and want to pay for it."

I loved you enough to stand over you for two hours while you cleaned your room, a job that would have taken me fifteen minutes.

I loved you enough to let you see anger, disappointment, and tears in my eyes. Children must learn that their parents are not perfect.

I loved you enough to let you assume that responsibility for your actions even when the penalties were so harsh they almost broke my heart.

But most of all, I loved you enough to say NO when I knew you would hate me for it. Those were the most difficult battles of all. I am glad I won them because in the end you won something, too.

We learn to spell love because Jesus dying on the cross taught us that putting “U before I” is what it means to be faithful to our Father in heaven. Putting “U before I” gives us the peace of God . . .

#836 - Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee<sup>8</sup>