

Introduction

I'm continuing a series of sermons from 1 Corinthians 13 titled *Be a Star*. In verses 4-7, Paul reveals 15 practical ways that agape love manifests itself in our everyday lives. Today, I'm going to preach about the sixth, seventh, and eighth of those ways, which are found in verse 5. Turn there in your Bibles please.

Does Not Act Unbecomingly

The sixth way agape love manifests itself is this. It **"does not act unbecomingly."** The KJV translates it differently but the meaning is the same, **"doth not behave itself unseemly."** The Greek word translated "unbecomingly" or "unseemly" connotes "not according to due form."

What Paul's talking about, in other words, is what we call "propriety." Propriety is about how we behave in the presence of others. At root, the word refers to the true nature of things, their *properties*. So, to have propriety means to act in ways that are appropriate to the nature of the circumstance or setting we're in.

I can't think of a more timely subject than this one. I say that because the popular culture we live in rejects the whole notion of propriety. One of its central tenets is that the self is supreme. And since it is, each person should be able to behave in whatever manner he or she wants to. To do so is to be authentic, which is one of the things that popular culture treasures most, being authentic. Remember what propriety is about – acting in ways that are appropriate. But what popular culture is about is acting in ways that are authentic.

You realize what that does. It makes how we behave in the presence of others a subjective matter. The self defines all significance and thus acts however it wants to. So, if I feel like using filthy language in your presence, or ignoring you, or being blunt with you, and do, I'm being authentic, true to myself, and thus good and right.

Several years ago, I went to calling hours at a funeral home. While

I was there, a friend of the family and her son came in to pay their respects. Almost immediately, I heard several people around me comment on how the son was dressed. He was wearing those jeans that are made with holes in the knees and pockets, a t-shirt, and sandals. It's clear. He dressed how he wanted to dress. He was being authentic, in other words, and popular culture would applaud him. But he was also being inappropriate and Paul would condemn him.

But why would he? I mean, come on, this isn't a moral issue. Right? Wrong! Verse 4 says that love does not act unbecomingly. That clearly implies that acting unbecomingly is unloving, which is the case. Think about it. Authenticity says that I'm going to be true to myself. I'm going to act however I want to - even if I dishonor or disrespect others in the process. That's an egotistical and thoroughly unloving thing to do. And because it's unloving, it's wrong as well.

So, let's not act unbecomingly. Let's act becomingly instead, appropriately, as the nature of circumstance or setting dictates we should. What that means as a practical matter is this. We give attention to manners. We're courteous, tactful, and polite. Those are loving things because of what they do. They demonstrate honor and respect to others. Remember what I said several weeks ago. Everyone we know and meet everyday is an immortal with an eternal destiny. Each deserves honor and respect, which courtesy, tactfulness, and politeness give.

Rituals of relationship illustrate what I mean. Every culture, including our own, has rituals of relationship. Several weeks ago, a check out clerk asked me if I had a coupon. Suppose I just mumbled "Nah" under my breath. That's unbecoming. It's an inappropriate response to an immortal with an eternal destiny. So I didn't do that. I replied, "Thank you for asking ma'am, but I don't." The "thank you" and the "ma'am" are rituals of relationship that honor and respect people.

Or consider the question, "How are you?" So many people complain about that. "Sure, so and so asked how I was but didn't really want to know." They think the question, therefore, is hypocritical and

meaningless. But it isn't. It's becoming to acknowledge people's a person's presence and "How are you?" is one of the American rituals of relationship by which we do that. Sure so and so doesn't want a running and detailed commentary on our latest cold. But he or she does want to acknowledge our presence, which honors and respects us.

That illustrates our larger call. Love people by acting becomingly. Honor and respect them by behaving appropriately in their presence.

Does Not Seek Its Own

Verse 5 reveals a seventh way that agape love manifests itself. It **"does not seek its own."**

Notice the words "seek its own." We all know what it means to do that. I value and pursue getting my way more than others getting their way. I want A. You want B. I strive to get A. I'm a self-seeker.

Self-seekers aren't made. They're born. Socialization can reinforce and even deepen self-seeking but it doesn't create it. It's there from the very beginning, from the moment we're born. All of us are born with "original sin." That original sin is actually a disposition, what Oswald Chambers called "the disposition to self-realization." That disposition is nothing more than the overriding inclination to think, feel, and act in practice as if we're God. We think and feel that our interests, desires, and concerns are more important than anyone else's and act in practice as if it's so. Simply put, we seek our own.

You can see that seeking our own is one of the most intuitive, instinctive, of all human responses. It's something we do without any conscious thought at all. It's as natural to us as breathing is.

A person I knew worked in an office, the owner of which gave her co-workers and her a choice – coffee or soda. He'd provide one or the other but not both. Well, four voted for coffee and four soda. So the owner flipped a coin and it was coffee, which made one of her co-workers and her mad. They fussed and fretted about it for weeks. **"They shouldn't get coffee if we don't get soda,"** they said. I want soda.

You want coffee instead. I strive to get soda. I'm seeking my own.

But agape love doesn't do that. It doesn't seek its own. I want A. You want B instead. I strive for you to get B. Specifically, I want soda. You want coffee instead. But I want you to have coffee more than I want me to have soda. That's agape love. I value and pursue others getting their way more than getting my way.

Now, this aspect of agape love is an unnatural thing. It's foreign, alien, to our very nature. It isn't a natural thing. It's a supernatural thing, what Paul calls a "fruit" of the Holy Spirit. It's a quality of character, a state of being, that He Himself produces in us.

But as always, we have a part to play in that. That part is to engage God and His kingdom at hand. We do that by practicing certain central activities like solitude, silence, study, and prayer. We also practice certain spiritual disciplines like fasting, sacrifice, service, and submission. As we do those things, the Holy Spirit gradually but persistently transforms us until finally we no longer seek our own. We think and feel that the interests, desires, and concerns of others are more important than ours and act in practice as if it's so.

Coming to that point is obviously beneficial to the people around us. But it's just as beneficial to us. That's because the need to get our own way is one of the most crushing burdens we can carry through life. It's a terrible bondage that keeps us in a perpetual stew. We're always fussing or fuming about this or that, which emotionally fatigues us.

But love delivers us from that bondage. We lay down the need to get our own way and become free. We find peace psychologically, inside us, and relationally, outside us. Richard Foster explains what happens when we value and pursue others getting their way: **"Do you know the liberation that comes from giving up your own rights? It means that you are free from the seething anger and bitterness you feel when someone doesn't act toward you the way you think they should. It means that at last you are able to break that vicious law of commerce that says, 'You scratch my back, I'll scratch your**

back; you bloody my nose, I'll blood your nose.' It means you are free." He's absolutely right. So be free. Don't seek your own.

Is Not Provoked

Agape love manifests itself in an eighth way. It **"is not provoked."** The Greek word translated "not provoked" connotes "not irritated" or "not offended." It doesn't refer to spontaneous, short lived feelings of provocation. Please remember that. It does refer to those feelings received, indulged, and thus sustained.

The reason Paul mentions this is because so many people, including Christians, are. They're provoked. Pastors know that probably better than anyone. I say that because they're always putting out relational fires that provocation causes. They're always having to smooth things over because something has made someone irritated or offended.

I was with a group of pastors one time who were sharing a whole host of reasons why people were "put out" enough to leave their churches. Here's a sampling of those. One left because her name was left off a list of Bible school workers. Another because one of the elders, he thought at least, spoke rudely to him. Another because she didn't get enough cards from people when she was sick. Another because the Administrative Council turned down an idea she had. And finally, another because the pastor didn't recognize him enough for donating the church's sound system. Those people were provoked you see.

And Paul explains why they were. It's because they didn't have agape love. Listen to the what Adam Clark writes about that in his commentary on this verse: **"The apostle's own words are a sufficient proof that the love of which he speaks can never be provoked. When the man who possesses this love gives way to provocation . . . In that instant he does not love his neighbor as himself."** Those are hard words but they're true. The moment we're irritated or offended by someone, we aren't loving him or her.

Provocation, in other words, is contrary to agape love. That's

because it's egotistical. People get provoked because they blow two things out of proportion: their own importance and the meaning of what the person did. How dare my neighbor not invite **me** to his super bowl party and it's utterly humiliating that he didn't. Not only is provocation egotistical, it almost always involves a degree of malice. It almost always involves a will to harm the provoker. He didn't invite me to his Super Bowl party. I'll give him the cold shoulder and show him. You get the point. Being provoked is contrary to agape love.

So, don't be provoked. As always, it's the Holy Spirit who gives us the capacity not to be. But we need to assist Him in His work. One of the things we can do in that regard is get to keep things in perspective. First, get the self in perspective. Remember Philippians 2:3. Regard others as being more important than we are. Second, get the meaning of what the person did in perspective. Be objective about what its implications really are. Yes, my neighbor didn't invite me to his Super Bowl party. But he's an immortal and besides, objectively, it isn't really humiliating at all that he didn't invite me.

Not being provoked is a loving thing. It means that the ones around us aren't always having to worry about what we're thinking and feeling. Don't make the ones around you walk on eggshells. Don't be provoked.

Conclusion

I'd like to share some chilling statistics in closing. According to the FBI, there is one violent crime in America every 24 seconds, one aggravated assault every 48 seconds, and one murder every 23 minutes. Those things are bad but collectively, there's something worse. That something is the number of times every minute that someone acts unbecomingly, seeks his own, or is provoked. The harm that causes to others is staggering. Well, don't be part of that. Don't be part of the hurting. Be part of the healing and helping instead. Act becomingly, seek the interests of others over your own, and don't be provoked. Love!