

Perfect Love

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We've been moving into a new house while doing some renovations. I've had plenty of opportunity to apply this chapter. As contractors made mistakes, salespeople overpromised, I've repeated this phrase: *Love is patient; love is kind; it is not rude*. Guess what? I totally nailed it! How do we get in on this unfailing love?

Love Competitors

Love never falls apart. That's the literal reading. It doesn't fall to pieces, collapse, under the weight of life. Love is dense; it *never* fails. It's a strong word, and the only time Paul uses it. Love *never* falls; it stays the course even when, "*burned out from exhaustion, buried in the hail. Poisoned in the bushes an' blown out on the trail... Try imagining a place that is always safe and warm. Come in she said I'll give you shelter from the storm.*" Dylan sings about the sheltering power of love *and* its failure, his marriage crashing down. 50ish years later, *everything* seems to be crashing down, our *society* burned out from exhaustion, poisoned by the virus. Cases are soaring and so is anxiety. Doctors writing 5x the amount of prescriptions for anxiety. Loneliness pervasive. Where can we shelter from the storm? During lockdown, I went to a several small social gatherings, and when people walked through the door I hadn't seen in months, who hadn't seen me, our eyes dazzled as we soaked in one another's presence. Some brought to tears. As they filed out, they thanked the host profusely. Why? *People can be a shelter from the storm*. It's people Paul tells to be patient and kind. And yet, many of us haven't turned up, reached out, called one another. We've been self-sheltering. Too self-absorbed to brave the cold and warm another heart. The COVID tempest leans in and whispers, Don't reach out. It's safer in here. *But is it?* How do we cultivate unfailing love? **Competitors** have to be put to flight. After declaring the never-failing quality of love, Paul identifies three competitors to love: prophesy, tongues, knowledge. Aren't these heavenly things, spiritual things? How could they possible compete with love? Well, in Corinth people were sheltering in their gifts instead of in Christ. *Prophecy*: cared more about speaking in front of others than edifying them. *Tongues*: they'd rather speak unintelligible words coherently build one another up. *Knowledge*: amass libraries of insight without a single volume of love for the church. Can gifts be used



in love? Certainly. But Hays: [Only when love presides over our common life in the church will spiritual gifts find their rightful place.](#) You see [Paul's point here isn't to expound on spiritual gifts; it's to expose them, their failure, inadequacy, partiality.](#) *What are your competitors to love?* We think of this as an unproductive time, but shopping for my office I've noticed just about every desk is on backorder. We've been busy turning bedrooms into work stations, homes into production lines. *Creating shelters within the shelter.* To cope with the chaos we retreat to a tiny desk in the corner of a room. Squirrel away from screaming kids and COVID numbers, to bang out our significance, mete out our views on social media breaks, to establish a defense. Meanwhile, the people on the other side of the wall, the church, *need to be loved.* Those on the other end of your post need shelter from your storm. *But we're too busy prophesying.* Author Otessa Moshfegh says, "[Without love, life is just doing time.](#)" [Have you resorted to just doing time?](#) Burning hours as if there's no shelter from the storm? **Productivity** can compete with love. Maybe that's not you. You've thrown yourself into love. You're affirming others. Celebrating what they stand for. If we're not cautious, we'll mistake **secular love** for agape love. Secular love is love stripped of God. Agape love comes from God. It speaks the truth. It challenges a friend. Doesn't dodge the hard conversation. But secular love dispenses with the truth: accepting every bend in gender, alteration to sexuality, every presidential tweet, every tweak on Scripture in CG. Why not stand up for what's true? We've fallen into secular love which makes pact, enters into self-affirming bargain: I'll accept you *if you accept me.* I won't challenge you *if you don't challenge me.* That's not love; it's flattery. Are you settling for circles of flattery instead of CGs of love? Not Paul. His love doesn't collapse under the weight of self-esteem. He challenges their *competitors to love.* If we're to love, we have to put its competitors to flight.

Partial Perception

But don't we see dimly? Paul says even our spiritual gifts of perception will pass away. The word means *to be rendered ineffective, inoperable.* One day prophecy, tongues, and words of knowledge won't be necessary. So don't get too attached to them. Why? Because they belong to a different age: *Now* I know in part, *Then* I will know fully. Now is like dial-up. Then fiber optic. Dial up gets you nowhere in a fiber optic age. Just a spinning wheel, partial access, a fraction of the site. Everything is partial *now.* We apprehend a fraction of reality:



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

Corinth was well known for the production of good quality bronze mirrors. And the thing about mirrors is we don't see through them; we see *into* them. Mirrors reflect but not accurately. We had a mirror in one of our houses that was slightly off, and when I looked into it, it widened my face making it hard to shave. A dim reflection of my chiseled reality let me tell you! When we look into a mirror we're a step removed, or ten, from the real thing. Similarly, our knowledge, wisdom, and even prophecy help us appropriate an image of God that still off. So we must labor to submit our thoughts to the perfect mirror of Scripture. We comprehend God **partially**. *Partial*. 4x. We brush up against our partiality, our limitedness, our finitude every day. We have to come to terms with our partial perception in order to love. Every part of me is partial. My writing is partial. Some articles are accepted and other rejected. Manuscripts returned with red ink. I am partially a good Dad and partially bad. My kids will tell me I'm greatest dad ever one day, and I blow up at them the next. I am partially wise and partially foolish. Some counsel is spot-on, some misses completely. I *feel* my partiality. Do you feel yours? The impulse to not love others but love yourself? To shelter at expense of neighbor? *We. Are. Partial*. If that's true how should it affect the way we view others? Give us pause before judging. Someone was telling me a story about a friend who'd gone haywire. Made bad decisions. Been a fool. And the person telling me said, You know we only see a person in a tiny slice of time and often leap to judgments. I did. But God sees the whole of their life, and guess what? He's *patient*. We are partial, incomplete—a thought that would crush us if it *weren't possible to see the perfect*: FOR we know in part, but when the perfect comes the partial will pass away. What a glorious thought. I will no longer pass wrong judgments, harbor impure thoughts, or selfishly look out for myself. The crutches of partiality will fly off *when* the perfect comes. But what is it? The word is *telios* means the highest possible standard, completion, the acme of goodness. The *summum bonum*. John uses the word when he says perfect love casts out fear (1 Jn 4:18). What does this tell us about the perfect? It's personal; it *casts* out fear. It *loves* perfectly. The perfect is *the* shelter from the storm, and the more we hide in him, the more fear goes running. The more we gaze at him, the more perfect and loving we become. The only way to avoid the competitors to love, and diminish our partial perception, is to move toward Perfect love. How?



Perfect Love

In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Walker Percy describes the arrival of super intelligent extraterrestrials. They hover over earth in their ship, so the humans fly up to meet them. They want to grasp alien intelligence, but in order for them to come aboard the alien ship *they have to ask for help*. They are unwilling. They say: "We help ourselves." They're obstinately self-affirming. Look for wholeness within. But it is not there. The book ends with a message from the aliens: "*Do you have a self? Do you know who you are? Do you know what you are doing? Do you love? Do you know how to love? Are you loved? Do you read me? Come back. Repeat. Come back. Come back. Come back.*" Do you know yourself? Do you know what you are doing? Are you just burning time? *Do you love? How do you to love?* You won't find it from within, from productivity or flattery. To find love we have to look out, ask for help. We must acknowledge our partiality to see the whole; the imperfections to take in the perfect, turn to *the one who casts out fear*. To love we must *come back*. Turn around to Christ. Only *perfect love* casts out fear. Only *Christ* is shelter from the storm. He has come, and as we'll see this Advent, he is coming back. We know *in part*, but when the perfect comes the partial will pass away. Church, the perfect is coming. Let's love like it's true.