

Biblical Love in Action

2 Corinthians 12:13–21

August 9, 2026

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Introduction

In the New Testament, Paul wrote thirteen letters, and in all of them there is one instruction he gives over and over again: the instruction to love.

| *“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” (Romans 12:9)*

| *“Let all that you do be done in love.” (1 Corinthians 16:14)*

| *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” (Galatians 5:13)*

| *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us...” (Ephesians 5:1–2)*

| *“And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” (Colossians 3:14)*

| *“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5)*

God’s Word instructs us to love. But what is love?

We are in the book of 2 Corinthians, a letter written by Paul to the church at Corinth — a letter in which Paul spends much of his time defending himself against false apostles who had infiltrated the congregation. One of the ways he mounts that defense is by telling the church how much he loves them. But he does not just tell them; he shows them through his actions toward them. And that is what our passage is about today: Paul’s love shown in action.

Setting the Stage

We are nearing the end of our study in 2 Corinthians, and for me personally it has been an encouraging and comforting journey. This letter was sent to the church at Corinth around AD 56. Paul had just left Ephesus and had traveled to Macedonia, waiting for word from Corinth. He wanted to go to them, but he was not sure he should. The last time he visited — probably about two years prior — it had not gone well. False apostles had come into the church and turned the congregation against Paul, and when he arrived, he was attacked and accused, not only by those false teachers, but by people in the church, people he loved.

Paul's authority was challenged. His physical appearance was mocked, his speech dismissed as unimpressive, and his refusal to accept financial support from Corinth was twisted into evidence that he did not truly love them. He left deeply hurt, shunned by the very church he had planted.

From Ephesus, Paul wrote a letter we no longer possess, but he describes it in 2 Corinthians 2:4:

“For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.”

That letter, written out of abundant love, softened their hearts toward him. The church sent word to Paul, now in Macedonia, that they loved him and wanted him to come. Paul was overjoyed and comforted by their message, and that joy prompted him to write the letter we call 2 Corinthians — a letter of comfort, joy, and reconciliation.

But there was still an issue that needed to be addressed: the false apostles and their ongoing attack on Paul. How would he respond? How would he defend himself? This is no small question.

How a person responds to adversity, tribulation, or personal attack reveals what kind of person they truly are. Tribulation strips away the façade of cultural politeness; personal attacks and hardship reveal whether the fruit of God's Spirit in a person is real, and how steadfast their trust in the Lord actually is. This is why a person's response to hardship is one of the greatest forms of testimony. Paul himself tells us as much: *“My weakness reveals His power. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”*

And so, in making his defense, Paul organizes it around the power of God. He states this plainly:

“For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.” (2 Corinthians 10:3–4)

From that point forward, Paul defends himself with heavenly weapons of divine power. He appeals to the power of pleasing God (10:7–18), the power of God’s Word and gospel truth (11:1–15), the power of God’s presence in weakness (11:16–33), and the power and sufficiency of God’s grace (12:1–12). And now, at the end of chapter 12, we encounter the divine power of love in action.

Paul does not label it that explicitly — he is still making his defense against the accusations of the false apostles. But he defends himself by describing the way he has acted toward the Corinthians. In other words, Paul is saying to them: *Here is my defense. I love you.* The false apostles boasted about themselves, promoted themselves, enriched themselves, and used the Corinthians for their own purposes. Paul answers them by showing that genuine spiritual authority is demonstrated through love.

In our passage today, 2 Corinthians 12:13–21, I want to draw out what godly, biblical love looks like when it is put into action.

1. Biblical Love Seeks the Good of One’s Neighbor

“For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you.” (2 Corinthians 12:13–14a)

When Paul says, *“I seek not what is yours but you,”* he is expressing what love does. In 1 Corinthians 10:24, he tells that same church: *“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.”* That is love. And Paul demonstrated it concretely by refusing to accept financial support from them.

The false apostles turned that refusal into an accusation. Perhaps they said something like, “If Paul were a real apostle, he would expect to be compensated like one. If he truly loved you, he would allow you to support him.” Paul answers this with irony: *“Forgive me this wrong!”* What was this great wrong he had committed against them? He had preached the gospel to them free of charge. He had served without placing a financial burden upon them. He wanted their good; he wanted their fellowship. As he puts it in 1 Corinthians 10:33, he was *“not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.”*

To be clear, Paul does teach that those who proclaim the gospel have a right to be supported by the gospel:

“*In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*” (1 Corinthians 9:14)

That is an instruction I am personally grateful for. But in Corinth, Paul voluntarily surrendered that right because he did not want money to become a stumbling block to the gospel, or to hand the false apostles yet another opportunity to accuse him. “*I seek not what is yours but you.*” That is love.

The false apostles, by contrast, sought not the good of the church but their own good. Paul describes their behavior in 2 Corinthians 11:20:

“*For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.*”

Without love, people view others according to what they possess and what they can provide — money, loyalty, admiration, influence. This is how the world loves. Worldly love says: *I love you because of what you bring into my life. I love the way you make me feel. I love the support, the attention, the security, the status you give me.* Worldly love seeks and values possessions and usefulness. Biblical love seeks and values the person. “*I seek not what is yours but you.*”

2. Biblical Love Sacrifices for One’s Neighbor

“*For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?*” (2 Corinthians 12:14b–15)

To describe what love gives, Paul reaches for the image of a parent and a child. He was their spiritual father — through his preaching they had heard the gospel and come to faith in Christ. And his love for them had never stopped flowing. It continued to the point of giving everything. Notice what Paul says: “*I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.*” He is describing a love that pours out everything it has — time, energy, resources, strength, health, opportunity — and then, when those things are gone, gives itself.

There is a meaningful difference between giving something and giving yourself. It is possible to give money without giving attention. It is possible to offer help without entering another person’s pain. It is possible to perform acts of service while keeping your heart at a safe

distance. Paul says: that is not me. *“I will spend — and I will be spent.”* I will give what I have, and then I will give myself.

This stands in sharp contrast to how the world loves. Worldly love is transactional — it gives in order to get. What is in this for me? Worldly love spends for praise, control, approval, image, comfort, leverage, security, attention. The list is long. Worldly people keep a scorecard.

Biblical love sacrifices. It is willing to be spent — even when that sacrifice goes unnoticed. And that is exactly what Paul is pressing on here: *“If I love you more, am I to be loved less?”* Everything he has done for them, every action of love, seems to have been forgotten or ignored. But that does not change his love. Even when he is not recognized, even when his love is not returned, he says: *“I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.”*

3. Biblical Love Is Genuine and Faithful

“But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?” (2 Corinthians 12:16–18)

Since Paul had refused to accept money personally, his critics twisted even that into a new accusation. It seems they said something like: *Paul did not take the money himself, but that was merely part of his scheme. He sent Titus and others to collect it for him. Paul was being crafty. He was using other people to take advantage of you.* If Paul had accepted financial support, they would have accused him of greed. When he refused it, they accused him of deception. He could not win — at least not by the world’s standards.

Paul simply answers by pointing to integrity — not only his own, but Titus’. *“Did Titus take advantage of you?”* The answer was no. *“Did we not act in the same spirit?”* Yes. *“Did we not take the same steps?”* Yes. Paul, Titus, and their unnamed companion had all conducted themselves in the same honest, transparent, and selfless manner.

What we are seeing here is love being genuine and faithful, set against what worldly love so often is: deceptive and full of hidden agendas. The false apostles were accusing Paul of doing precisely what they themselves were doing — using a facade of kindness and concern to extract what they wanted.

Perhaps you have experienced something like this. You walk into a furniture store or onto a car lot, and a salesperson begins treating you like a long-lost best friend. That is an obvious

example, but the pattern runs deep in human nature: people often put on the appearance of caring simply to extract something a little later.

In Romans 12:9, Paul's instruction about love is this: *"Let love be genuine."* The word translated "genuine" in the Greek is the word for hypocrisy placed in the negative. Let love not be a façade, a mask, an act. Let it be real and authentic. And authentic love — precisely because it is real — seeks the good of the other, sacrifices for the other, and continues doing good with integrity, without deceit, manipulation, or hidden agendas.

4. Biblical Love Speaks Truth to One's Neighbor

"Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish — that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced." (2 Corinthians 12:19–21)

Words have power to build up and words have power to tear down. I love Proverbs 12:18: *"There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."* Paul, in love, is now speaking truth in order to build the church up. He is confronting them in areas of their lives that have brought disorder — both to them personally and to the congregation as a whole. The sins he names are works of the flesh that tear apart the body of Christ.

People do not like to be told that their actions are wrong, sinful, hurtful, destructive, and selfish. And when people hear such things about themselves, they tend to lash out, pull away, or run. This is precisely why worldly love does not speak truth. It flatters. It tells people what they want to hear.

Flattery tells people what they want to hear because it wants something *from* them. Love tells people what they need to hear because it wants something *for* them.

The world has redefined love as unconditional approval. We are told that if we truly love someone, we will affirm every desire, celebrate every decision, and never say anything that might cause discomfort. But that is not love — not biblical love. Approval and love are not the same thing. If someone is walking toward destruction, silence is not love. If sin is damaging a

person's soul, affirmation is not kindness. If someone is harming others, refusing to confront that behavior is not compassion.

Love speaks truth — not to win an argument, not to embarrass, not to establish moral superiority. It speaks truth, as Paul says, “*all for your upbuilding.*” All for one's restoration.

And this is not easy. No one who loves enjoys confronting the person they love, and Paul clearly does not relish it: “*I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many...*” He is hoping there is repentance before he arrives, because he simply does not want to be put in that position. But as hard and painful as it may be, he will do it — because he loves them.

In Ephesians 4:15, Paul tells us that we are to speak truth in love. Our passage shows us what that actually looks like. Notice the qualifiers Paul places around what he has to say in verse 19: “*It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking.*” Paul knows he is accountable to God for every word. “*In Christ.*” He speaks under Christ's authority and in Christ's character — Christ being the source, the content, and the manner of truth. “*And all for your upbuilding, beloved.*” Restoration is the purpose, and love is the posture.

Notice also where speaking truth falls in the sequence of these actions of love. It comes *after* seeking their good, *after* sacrificing for them, and *after* demonstrating integrity without hidden agendas. There is great wisdom in this ordering. Before a person can hear truth spoken, they need to know that the one speaking it cares for them, gives to them, and is not trying to get something from them. They need to know they are loved. And it is from that foundation that words of truth may be received — and may bring restoration.

Application

In Luke 10, Jesus is asked to name the greatest commandment. He answers:

“*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.*”
(Luke 10:27)

A teacher of the law then pressed him: “*And who is my neighbor?*” In response, Jesus told the parable we know as the Good Samaritan — a story about a Samaritan, a non-Jew, who stopped to help a Jewish man who had been robbed and beaten, after several religious leaders had passed by without stopping. At the end of the parable, Jesus flipped the original question: “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*” The teacher answered, “*The one who showed him mercy.*” And Jesus said: “*Go and do likewise.*”

The point is this: your neighbor is the person God has placed in front of you, and whoever that person is, you are called to love them.

Who has God placed in your life for you to love? Perhaps it is a family member — a spouse, a child, a parent, a sibling. Maybe it is a coworker, a next-door neighbor, a long-time friend, or another member of this church. Perhaps it is someone who has disappointed you, exhausted you, or failed to return the love you have given. I believe everyone here today has a neighbor that God has called them to love — someone the Spirit is pressing on your heart even now. Picture that person. How are you to love them today?

Maybe it is simply to care about them regardless of what you get out of it or how they make you feel — to seek their good for their sake, not yours. Perhaps there is something you need to do for them, and you already know what it is.

Maybe that love requires sacrifice — a spending of yourself in the costly forms of time, attention, forgiveness, patience, and presence. It may mean setting aside your own comfort and entering someone else's burden.

Maybe that love means a continued faithfulness — going on caring, listening, and being present when everything you do goes unrecognized or unacknowledged.

And maybe that love will mean having a difficult conversation. There is a truth that needs to be spoken — not in anger, not to win, but for the other person's good. If that is you, then before you speak, pray for a heart that is willing to weep, listen, forgive, and help restore.

This is what it looks like to love our neighbor as Christ has loved us.

And if you have never trusted in Jesus Christ, hear this: this is precisely how He loves you.

Jesus did not seek what was ours — He sought us. He did not come to take from us, but to give Himself for us. He spent and was spent for our souls, going all the way to the cross, where He bore our sin and gave His life in our place. And He loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves — that we are sinners who need to repent — but He also speaks the greater truth of the gospel: that there is forgiveness, mercy, and new life for everyone who comes to Him.

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”
(Romans 5:8)

So perhaps the first response to this message today is not, *“I need to love better,”* but rather, *“I need to receive the love of Christ.”* If you have never trusted in Jesus Christ, then repent of your sin and place your faith in Him today. Come to the One who sought you, gave Himself for you, speaks truth to you, and loves you with a love that will never let you go.

Amen.