

## Why We Fail at Love

*“Love is the hardest lesson in Christianity; but for that reason it should be most our care to learn it.”*

William Penn

In one way or another, all of us have failed at love...are failing at love...or will fail at love. Loving is the most complicated of all human skills. When we fail, we often make excuses:

“I didn’t have the time.”

“I didn’t want to get involved.”

“I was afraid.”

“I don’t know how.”

Isn’t it sad that developing one of the most difficult skills a human being can learn—to love—is given so little attention? Our public schools teach nothing about learning to love. Colleges skip over the subject. Seminaries offer no classes in loving—or helping others to love. No wonder we often fail at love...no one has ever taught us how, or given us a model to follow.

But, there is another reason many of us don’t love as well, or as often, as we should. It is because we have developed either attitudes or behaviors that interfere with our ability to love. Similar to the plaque that can accumulate in one’s arteries and inhibit the flow of blood through the body, there are obstacles to love which can easily accumulate in our lives and inhibit the flow of love through us to others. And, like the balloon catheter that bores out the plaque from our veins and allows blood to flow freely, these love obstacles can be identified, confronted, and flushed out of our system.

What are the obstacles that keep us from loving? We find many of them hidden in the Apostle Paul’s classic essay on love. Here he lists the qualities of love and, in the process, helps us to identify the obstacles...

### Love’s Ideals...and Love’s Obstacles

Love’s Ideal: “Love is patient”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Impatience***

Impatience describes a person whose own agenda is more important than anyone else’s. He/she has little time for others’ concerns. An impatient person must constantly be entertained, and quickly loses interest in people if they are not filling a need in his/her own life.

The word Paul uses for “patience” describes a person who has been wronged and has the power to avenge himself, but chooses not to.<sup>1</sup> Impatience seeks revenge. Patience does not.

Rate yourself on the scales following each of love’s obstacles.

“Most of the time, I am...”



Love’s Ideal: “Love is kind”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Unkindness***

Some people think kindness is synonymous with weakness. Therefore, these people reason, strength and power cannot be obtained through kindness. Those who constantly see themselves in competition with others tend to be unkind. A latent sense of inferiority is another cause for unkindness. Smedes suggests that kindness is “...the readiness to enhance the life of another person.”<sup>ii</sup>

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Unkind*

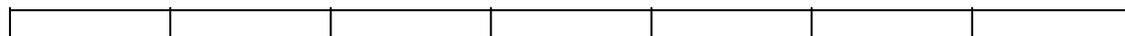
*Kind*

Love’s Ideal: “Love is trusting”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Jealousy***

Love naturally means concern. As love grows, concern for the person also grows. But often, without one realizing it, this concern can become possessive. Jealousy is normal concern that has grown out of control, just as a cancer cell is a normal cell grown out of control. Jealousy requires total possession—it must have exclusive rights to another person. “This emotion has the power to overwhelm and destroy the most seemingly sound and secure relationship and the most rational person.”<sup>iii</sup>

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Jealous*

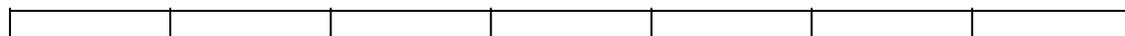
*Trusting*

Love’s Ideal: “Love is humble”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Arrogance***

Various Bible translations use different words: “boastfulness,” “rudeness,” “proud,” “anxious to impress,” “braggart,” “cherishes the idea of its own importance.” Arrogant people give their “love” away as though it were a tremendous favor. Their real purpose, however, is to put others down while trying to lift themselves up.

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Arrogant*

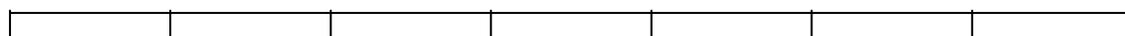
*Humble*

Love’s Ideal: “Love is generous”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Selfishness***

If there is any one quality that creates an insurmountable barrier to love, it is selfishness. “Love” and “selfishness” are, by their very definition, at opposite ends of the human experience. Actions motivated by selfishness are exactly the opposite to actions motivated by love. Every selfish act takes a person that much further away from love. Christ knew about the problem of selfishness when he said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”<sup>iv</sup> Selfishness seeks its own way and in the process loses it. Love seeks the way of others and in the process finds its own.

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Selfish*

*Generous*

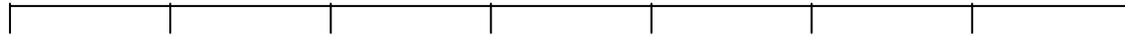
Love’s Ideal: “Love is slow to anger”

Love’s Obstacle: ***Irritability***

Christ had strong words for those who are quick to anger: “But now I tell you: whoever is angry with his brother will be brought before the judge; whoever calls his brother ‘you good-for-nothing’ will be brought before the Council; and whoever calls his brother a worthless fool will be in danger of going to the fire of

hell.”<sup>v</sup> “Therefore, my beloved brethren,” said James, “let everyone be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.”<sup>vi</sup>

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Irritable and touchy*

*Slow to Anger*

Love’s Ideal: “Love is forgiving”

Love’s Obstacle: **Resentfulness**

Resentfulness is the accumulation of irritations suffered in the past, recalled in the present. The word Paul used for resentment was an accountant’s word for entering an item in a ledger so it would not be forgotten.<sup>vii</sup> This is exactly what many people do...and it is a great obstacle to love. “I’ll forgive, but I’ll never forget” mocks the true meaning of forgiveness. Resentfulness looks to the past rather than the future. The opposite of resentment is forgiveness. Love releases memory’s grip on a wrong suffered or a hurt inflicted.

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Resentful*

*Forgiving*

Love’s Ideal: “Love hates evil”

Love’s Obstacle: **Loving evil**

What did Paul mean when he said, “Love hates evil”? Smedes says that loving evil is not so much finding pleasure in doing wrong, as it is the malicious satisfaction in hearing or saying something derogatory about another.<sup>viii</sup> Surprisingly, persons who work the hardest at their high moral standards often love evil the most! As they struggle to live a life of abstinence from worldly things, they silently condemn those who do not. They gloat at the hurt or stumbling of those who “compromise with the world,” and look forward to the day of judgment when these hypocrites will be cast into a lake of fire. To these people, the message of the Gospel begins with condemnation. It centers on judgment. It ends in fear. Love seems nowhere to be found.

“Most of the time, I ...”



*Love Evil*

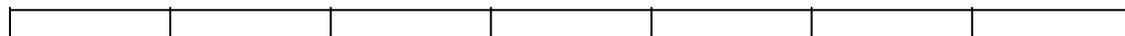
*Hate Evil*

Love’s Ideal: “Love is always there”

Love’s Obstacle: **Inconsistency**

False love has limits on its endurance. It doesn’t last when things get tough. False love is like the faulty bonding of a poorly made dam that begins to lose resistance at its weakest point. A few drops of water begin to seep through the dam. The inconsistency grows to a stream, and then a torrent, and soon the entire dam gives way. But real love never fails. It is like the strong dam standing against the tremendous pressure of the water behind it. Love will bear any insult, any injury, and disappointment...and still hold strong.

“Most of the time, I am...”



*Inconsistent*

*Consistent*

I enjoy Eugene Peterson's interpretation of the conclusion of this great chapter on love: "*We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!*"

*But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love. So, go after a life of love as if your life depended on it—because it does!*"<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 133.

<sup>ii</sup> Lewis Smedes. *Love Within Limits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 15

<sup>iii</sup> Leo Buscalia. *Loving Each Other* (Thorofare, NJ: Slack, Inc., 1984), p. 121.

<sup>iv</sup> John 12:24

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 5:22

<sup>vi</sup> James 1:19

<sup>vii</sup> Barclay. *ibid.*, p. 136

<sup>viii</sup> Smedes. *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>ix</sup> I Corinthians 13:12 – I Corinthians 14:1 *The Message*