

LOVE IS A NO-LIMIT CREDIT CARD!

Today's Text: 1 Cor. 13:1-13

Extracts:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails [1 Cor. 13: 4-8].

*In the seventh cinema adaptation (1985) of **Brewster's Millions**, Monty Brewster (played by Richard Pryor), a Minor League Baseball pitcher with the Hackensack Bulls, and his best friend and catcher for the same team, Spike Nolan, are arrested but cannot afford bail.¹ They are approached by a lawyer from a Manhattan law office who offers to help them. To Brewster's surprise, a great uncle, Rupert Horn, that he had never met, died recently and left his entire fortune worth \$300 million for Brewster. However, there are conditions attached. He can either walk away with \$1 million upfront or spend \$30 million within 30 days to inherit the \$300 million or be left with nothing. Should he choose the latter, he must not donate more than 5% to charity or lose 5% by gambling. Brewster chooses the second option and goes on a spending spree. However, on the 30th day, he finds that he is still left with some money out of the \$30 million!*

In his life, Brewster had never earned more than \$11,000 per annum. The \$30 million that he spent was not his and he was not required to pay back. A few seconds to the deadline, he was able to spend the whole amount and was given access to the \$300 million left him by his late uncle. Therefore, Brewster enjoyed a form of no-limit credit card. Love is like that. On our own, we cannot love enough or at all because we are self-centred. But love belongs to God and He has offered it to us to spend without limit on our heart's desires. However, there are conditions attached. If we are able to meet them, we get an ultimate prize! What are those conditions and how can we access this credit card that opens the door to eternal bliss?

In this week's Bible verses, Paul opens our understanding to the true meaning and practice of love; the kind of love that never fails. Let us find out how we can lay hands on such a no-limit credit card.

¹ Based on the following sources: "Brewster's Millions (1985 film)," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brewster%27s_Millions_\(1985_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brewster%27s_Millions_(1985_film)) ; and "Brewster's Millions: Full Synopsis," <http://www.movies.com/brewstersmillions/details/m61223>

1. Background: Superiority of love over spiritual and natural gifts

A Scribe once asked Jesus which was the first commandment of all. He answered that we should love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves [Mk 12: 28-31]. Do we even love ourselves, not to talk of loving our neighbours? Was the wickedness of man not evident right from the time of creation when God saw his great wickedness and “every intent of his heart was only evil continually” [Gen. 6: 5]? I wonder then how many believers can claim to understand the love that Jesus is referring to in His response to one of the Scribes.

It certainly is *not sexual love which is driven by lust*. For example, love-making is influenced to a large extent by lust. If it is not controlled (i.e., not directed only at one’s spouse), it can lead to such sins as fornication or adultery. Sexual immorality is hardly love of our neighbours or of God! Idolatry (worship of false gods, including materialism) is hardly love of God, either. Liking or affection, the type we have for a friend or family member, is a non-sexual form of love that is characterized by caring and helpfulness. In the words of Jesus, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” [Jn 15: 13-14]. But how many of us will actually lay down their lives for their friends? Most of us instead show *affectation*, a hypocritical show of affection, for motives that may have nothing to do with caring. Sometimes, our worst enemies may be our family members [Mic. 7: 6; Matt. 10: 36]. That is why we hear of betrayals, stabbing in the back, etc.

Finally, we also hear, especially in believers’ circles, of another form of love called *Agape* love, that is, *nonsexual love that is wholly selfless and spiritual*. But in practice, what does that mean? The word of God says, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” [1 Jn 4: 7-8]. What does such love mean and how can we access it?

Perhaps a good way to understand love is by the process of elimination, that is, by excluding what is not love until we can understand and appreciate what love means in the sight of God. *Paul’s famous treatise on the subject [1 Cor. 13: 1-13] is a most helpful point of reference*. Here is what Paul has shown us, among others:

a) *Love beats all gifts*

Paul writes, “Though I speak with the *tongues* of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of *prophecy*, and *understand all mysteries and all knowledge* ... but have not love, I am nothing” [vv. 1-2]. In other words, love is superior to spiritual gifts.

Interestingly, we are more impressed by those who can demonstrate spiritual gifts in their ministries than by those who show godly love. You may recall what James and John asked Jesus concerning a Samaritan village which had rejected Him because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem. They asked Him, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” Jesus rebuked them, saying, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them” [Lk 9: 51-56]. On an earlier occasion, Jesus told His listeners during the Sermon on the Mount, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness’” [Matt. 7: 21-23]. ***Therefore, love is a fruit of our righteousness in God and by our fruits, we shall be known.***

b) *Love trumps faith*

Paul writes, “Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” [1 Cor. 13: 2b]. Faith is so important that we walk by it [2 Cor. 5: 7] and, without it, no one can please God [Heb. 11: 6]. The just shall live by his faith [Hab. 2: 4], through which the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith [Rom. 1: 17]. Yet, ***love is greater than faith.***

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a good illustration of this point. The traveller injured by robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a Jew like the priest and Levite that refused to help him. All three were of the same faith. But the Samaritan that took the injured man for treatment came from the people that the Jews looked down upon. He turned out to be the wounded man’s neighbour, the one “who showed mercy” [Lk 10: 25-37]. Therefore, ***if you only love your friends or family members or those of your faith or denomination, you have not loved enough, or even at all, by God’s standards*** [Matt. 5: 46-47].

c) *Love is more than charitable deeds*

Paul writes, “And though I bestow all of my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing” [1 Cor. 13: 3]. Here, Paul is reminding us that ***love is not measured by charitable deeds but by the motives behind them.*** Why have you bestowed all your goods to feed the poor? Why have you given your body to be burnt? The Robin Hoods of this world steal from the rich to distribute to the poor. No matter their intentions, they are thieves. Some

people give for pecuniary gains. Some give as a form of investments. None of such would qualify for love before God.

Teaching on the subject of doing good, Jesus said [**Matt. 6: 1-4**]:

*Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But **when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.***

From the foregoing, we can begin to understand what love means from God's perspective. It is more than a feeling like lust or infatuation. It is more than caring or charity. It is **deeply spiritual and divine**. Remember that it was God that first loved us by sending His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins [**Jn 3: 16**]. Yet, we cannot love Him back by working for salvation through our own efforts. We have been saved by grace, not by works [**Eph. 2: 8-9**]. So, how can we love God back? In the book of Isaiah, God invites those who trust in Him to come to abundant life, saying, "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" [**Is. 55: 1**]. To buy without money is to buy on credit. To buy without price is not to worry about the credit limit or pay back. It follows that, **when God gives us something, we can hardly ever pay back because the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof** [**Ps. 24: 1**]. **Therefore, if we want to fully understand love from God's perspective, we need to see it as a no-limit credit card with strict conditions for keeping it valid.** Paul has also provided us those conditions in the Bible verses under consideration.

2. Implications for accessing true love

Brewster was given 30 days to spend US\$30 million or lose an inheritance of \$300 million. God has given us a life time here on earth to use His no-limit credit card to practise fervent love as He has commanded it or lose eternity in heaven for love covers a multitude of sins [**1 Pet. 4: 8**]. But to keep the card valid, here are certain conditions that we must understand and accept:

a) *God owns it!*

The word of God says, "Beloved, let us love one another, for **love is of God**, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God ... for **God is love**" [**1 Jn 4: 7-8**]. A credit card belongs to the merchant services company that issues it. In like manner, God is the issuing authority for true

love. He defines what it is and how it must be used. He says that love never fails [**1 Cor. 13: 8**], that is, it has no limit; and it is perfect, unlike spiritual gifts, faith and hope which are in part and transitory [vv. **9-13**]. Therefore, love is divine; it is heavenly.

If love is from above, you have to use the love credit card as if it is only valid in heaven. Since “no one has ascended to heaven but He who [first] came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” [**Jn 3: 13**], it follows that only Jesus can show you how to use the card here on earth. No one has seen God at any time but Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son has revealed Him [**Jn 1: 18**]. At various times and in various ways, God spoke to us through the prophets; but, in the last days, He has spoken by His Son, Jesus Christ [**Heb. 1: 1-2**]. Therefore, what He has told you about love is how His Father in heaven sees it. Jesus told His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” [**Jn 13: 34-35**].

How did Jesus show His love for His disciples? He lived among them [**Lk 9: 57-58; Jn 1: 38-39**] as their Servant, not the Master [**Lk 22: 24-27**]. He taught them what He knew from His Father [**Jn 5:16-23**], and prepared them for their future work- administratively and spiritually [**Matt. 10: 1-26; Acts 1: 4-8**]. He forgave Peter that had denied Him thrice during His trial [**Lk 22: 54-62**] and ultimately made him the head of His disciples [**Jn 21: 15-17**]. Everywhere Jesus went, He was doing good [**Acts 10: 38**].

b) *But you must pay the premiums to keep the “credit card” of love always valid!*

A credit card company sends you periodic statements, usually monthly, indicating your indebtedness and minimum payment due at an indicated deadline. In like manner, *God “sends” His love bills to you to “pay” by way of how you must continue to demonstrate that you love Him and your neighbours.* To know and practise divine love, here are the premiums that you must pay, according to Paul, to keep your no-limit credit card of love always valid:

- *You must always be patient.* To be patient means to suffer long and be kind. To love means to bear all things, believe all things and endure all things [**1 Cor. 13: 4, 7**]. The word of God says, “In returning and rest, you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength” [**Is. 30: 15**]. Therefore, *you love God if you can wait for Him while waiting on Him. You love your neighbours if you can bear with their inadequacies as you lead them on the path of truth and fear of God.*

- ***You must remain selfless and humble.*** You have chosen not to envy or behave rudely or seek your own [1 Cor. 13: 5]. Jesus once told His listeners, “If you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?” [Lk 16: 12]. ***When you are able to do to others what you want them to do unto you, you are showing that you love your neighbours. When you see God as the One who can carry you and not the one you can carry, you are demonstrating that you love Him.***
- ***You must practise righteousness.*** That means that you have determined not to think of any evil; nor to rejoice in iniquity but only in the truth [1 Cor. 13: 6]. ***Can you love your enemies or bless those who curse you? Can you do good to those who hate you? Can you pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you?*** In the words of our Lord, Jesus, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [Matt. 5: 10].

In sum, the love of God and of your neighbours should be the guiding principles of your sojourn here on it. You will not willfully hurt or disobey the person that you love. Jesus has said, “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love [and] this is My commandment, that you love one another as I have love you” [Jn 15: 9-12]. ***If you can do that, then your no-limit credit card of love is valid, alive and well. That is Paul’s message in this week’s study.***

3. Conclusion: Christ is God’s love for you!

While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us [Rom. 5:8]. That demonstrates God’s love for us. When we reciprocate by accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we are guaranteed eternal life in His Father’s kingdom. But, when we refuse and choose to live by sight, we have preferred darkness to light [Jn 3: 16-17].

The choice is yours. You can love God’s way and have an unlimited access to His love, mercy and grace “without money and without price” [Is. 55: 1]. Or you can be carnally minded and you know what that brings! ***Choose life and live by love.***

God’s love is a no-limit credit card!