

## **Is Love Tough or Tender?**

I Corinthians 13:4-8; Exodus 20:5,6

Just think back on your childhood for a second. Do you think your mother got the mixture right between tough and tender? Did Mom major in discipline and rules? Or did your Mom major in kindness and going the extra mile to express her love to you? To have a functional home, a great childhood, you really need to have both tough and tender. To learn as a child what love really is, you need a good balance between tender and tough.

If parents are only tough, if there is no snuggling and cuddling, if there is no complimenting or expressing affection, they will probably raise a kid who is going to bust out and rebel against the rules the first chance that they can.

On the other hand, if you have only tender and there is no tough, if it is all bulldozer, helicopter parenting, if all a child ever hears is “you poor sweet baby, come here and let me get you a Band-Aid for that boo-boo” even though the child is 17 years old, then you are raising a baby who will not be prepared for actual relationships, a real boss, and the real world. Right? The best mixture of love is both tough and tender. To really love a person is to do what is best for that person. What is best for a person may not be easy and convenient for you. Love may be hard to do. And doing what is best for a person may not be what they like – it might upset them.

What every good mother knows every good Christian does too. If God is love and if Jesus was love walking on two legs, if you are going to understand a good relationship with a Father in heaven and if you and I are going to have good relationships filled with love on earth, then we have to recognize that same balance between tough and tender.

Some Christians are only tough. They love thumping their Bible, quoting the commandments, telling people that they better turn or they are going to burn. But if you are only tough, that is not really love.

On the other hand, if you are a Christian who is only tender, who expresses love and compassion, sympathy and empathy, who walks with people and says God loves you just as you are, but you never challenge them with God's truth; never hold them to biblical standards, that, too, is not what Jesus did, and therefore, that is not love.

Every Christian has to think very carefully about how they balance those tough moments in conversation and those more tender ones.

You do not like how your spouse is spending money. Are you tough? Are you tender? Your child comes out as bisexual. Are you tough? Are you tender? What's the right balance in those and in a hundred more situations like that? Don't you wish that you could open the Bible and God would have an answer to every question? Don't you wish God gave you a recipe book for how many cups of tough and how many cups of tender for every real-life situation?

Did you know in the bible's most famous paragraph on love in 1 Corinthians 13 God says things that are pretty tough and He says things that are pretty tender. The balance God uses are not equal parts tough and tender.

Today I want to ask you to vote 16 times. I am going to ask you 16 times do you think it is tough or is it tender? Tough or tender. Sixteen points. Are you ready for this?

All right, let us do it. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul **"Love is patient."** The Greek word for "patient" means it takes a long time to bubble up. Like a big pot of water on a hot stove it does not bubble up instantly. It takes a long time. Loving, patient people are willing to slow down, and do life at a pace that communicates love. When your spouse is about three minutes late doing hair and makeup before you want to get out the door; when you end up in the check-out line at the grocery store with the trainee who does not know how to look up the price of cilantro, love does not twitch or itch because love is patient. So, let's vote. **"Love is patient"** - Do you think that sounds pretty tough or pretty tender? (Yeah, for sure. That's 1 vote for tender.)

Number two, **"Love is kind."** Love is thoughtful. It is caring. A loving person is the one who comes during that stressful season at work and just gives that quiet compliment that means the world to someone. It is the person who puts the date in their phone six months after the funeral to follow up when a grieving widow is really in need. **"Love is kind."** So, tough or tender? (Two to zero.)

Number three, Paul says, **"Love does not envy."** Love does not pout when other people get the praise. You might have tried out for the team, and she got the spot. You might have interviewed for the job, but she got it instead of you. Christian love wants you to be happy as much as it wants me to. And so, if you get the praise, praise God. Let's vote. Tough? Tender? (I think so too. Three to zero.)

Let us do four and five together. **"Love does not boast,"** and number five, **"Love is not proud."** Love does not thump the chest. It does not brag. Instead, love says things like this, "Yeah, that was a pretty sweet goal, but what you did not see before the highlight clip was the assist, and the coach and the parents who drove me to practice." Love says: "Yeah, I have been pretty successful in life, but if it was not for 1,000 people, it never would have happened." Or, "Yeah, that is pretty impressive, but if it was not for God, I could not do a single thing." Love is not puffed up. It is not proud. What do you think? Vote now. (I give that two more votes for tender. It is a runaway so far.)

How about number six? **"Love does not dishonor others."** Love does not want to embarrass anyone. It cares not just about proving I am right and you are wrong. Love wants to make sure you feel right after this conversation is over. Love is cautious in the comment section because I honestly care about your reputation. Sound tough? (I think pretty tender.)

Seventh, **"Love is not self-seeking."** "Honey, it means a lot to you when we text during the day, when we say little sweet things, when we put away the screens and close the laptops and just connect when we come home and talk about our days. That is not my thing, but it is not about me. It is about you." You are not big on physical touch, but you know he likes it when you hold his hand or rub the back of his neck. It might not be the top on your list, but love

is not self-seeking. It thinks about the other. How do you vote? (I would say incredibly tender.)

Number eight, **"Love is not easily angered."** Love has a keyboard and the caps lock does not work. (Sound pretty tender to you?)

Number nine, **"Love keeps no records of wrongs."** Love is the opposite of a cancel culture. When people sin and they are sorry, love has wide-open arms, and does not bring it up again unless it absolutely has to. What do you think: tough or tender? (It sounds pretty tender.)

Ah, but then we read this, **"Love does not delight in evil,"** number ten, **"but it rejoices with the truth."** Now, I would give a couple votes for tender if that passage says love rejoices with your truth. Like, whatever you think I support you. Whatever you want to do I am behind you. But that is not what Paul wrote, is it? He says, **"Love does not delight in evil."** If you are doing something that God calls evil or sinful, I cannot delight in your actions. Love does what is best and if you are doing what God says is not best, I cannot click the little thumbs up. I can only celebrate, I can only affirm, and I can only applaud lifestyles that line up with God's definition of love and if you do not like that, it means you are living your truth instead of God's truth. (So, what do you think? Tender? Not a chance, right? That is pretty tough.)

But then Paul moves on. He says in number 12, **"Love always protects."** The original Greek implies protecting something from danger. If you are on the offensive line and a blind side sack is coming, protecting the quarterback is tough. If you are in middle school and all the other girls are picking on one of your friends, standing up to the popular kids is pretty tough. When someone protects you it feels very tender to you. But the actual job of protecting someone is tough, isn't it? (Another vote for tough.)

Home stretch, 13th and 14th, Paul writes: **"Love always trusts,"** and then he adds, **"Love always hopes."** Love says, "Shh! Shh! It is going to be okay. Be still. He is God. Believe He is going to get us through this. Have hope. There is a good future, so let us just take a deep breath, calm down, and put our trust in God." Tough or tender? (Two votes for tender.)

And then finally, Paul says this, "**Love always perseveres,**" description 16, "**and love never fails.**" The Greek word for "persevere" means to remain underneath a pressure or a weight. Think of when you are squatting. Your legs are burning. Last set. You do not want to do it. You want to throw the weight off. When you persevere, you stay under it until the job is done. You do not quit. It is like the last round of one of those high-intensity interval training workouts. You ever done one of those where you just hate life and you are angry and you are moody and you are sweating, and you could quit, but you don't? Love always perseveres and love never fails which sounds like two votes for tough. (All right?)

Are you still with me? Sixteen descriptions Paul crams into this essential paragraph and if you ask Paul is Christian love tough or tender? He would say, "Yes." And then if you pushed him and said, "Well, Paul, how tough and how tender," he would say... By my count it was 5 toughs to 11 descriptions of tender. For every one time love is tough, at least two to three times it is pretty tender.

What did we discover? I hope this has become clear that **According to the Scriptures love is tough AND tender.** Love is tough and so tender. Now, what does that mean for our daily lives? I want to give you just three takeaways as you think about your relationships and your families, your significant others, your next-door neighbors, your bosses, your kids, your whoever. There are three things that God would love for us to take out of church today.

Here is the first one. **According to God, tough does not equate to hate.** Do not equate tough with hate which is what everyone does these days. Right? When someone calls you out, when someone gives you tough love, when mom says, "I love you, but no," when a pastor or Christian friend says, "You cannot," that is not hate. When someone calmly rebukes you – not in anger to tear you down, but to help you by pointing out a problem – when that happens do not say, "You are a hater." Do not say, "I thought you were my friend. I thought you loved me."

God says that love has to be tough. If you walk out on every church, every relationship, every friendship where someone has to

have a tough conversation with you, please know this, you are walking away from love because according to God love is tough.

I know those moments are difficult. I know all of us would rather not experience them, but to be biblical love, it must be both tough and tender. So, I have some scary homework for you today. I want you to ask at least one person, ideally three, if they are scared to talk to you about tough things. If you are dating, if you have a boss or some employees, your brother, your sister, your whoever, parents, I would love for you to ask your children this, "What is it like to talk to me about tough things?" I think you would learn a lot about you.

Number two. Here is the second point we can take today: **Tend towards tender.** Yes, love is tough. Yes, Christians take the side of the truth. But according to this definition for every ONE time that happens, several more times we should tend towards tender.

There was a study back in the 1970's where researchers were trying to figure out which couples would stay married and which ones would eventually divorce? They observed each couple's conversations for 15 minutes. The couples had to talk about some issue that was a source of tension in their relationship. The researchers were actually tracking tough and tender comments. They recorded every tough moment like an interruption or an accusation or a raising of a voice or an "always" or a "never." And they counted every time there was a tender, "that is a good point," "I am sorry for interrupting you," "I see what you mean," "Yeah, I never thought of it that way." They found that the married couples who made it were not equally tough and tender. They were about one part tough to five parts tender.

Paul found out the same truth and recorded it in God's Word 2000 years earlier, in these words: ***"Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not easily angered. It is not proud. It does not dishonor others. It is not self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. Love trusts, love hopes, and love never fails."***

And a third teaching for us to take away this day: **God is tough, and God is so tender.** There is a beautiful Bible passage

that says **God is love** which means sometimes when you read God's Word, He will be tough with you. He will call you His child, but He will not let you run His kingdom. It is His will, His kingdom, His glory, His plans, His truth, and He isn't changing His mind about that, not for me and not for you. That is pretty tough. But oh my goodness, for every time in Scripture that God calls us out, He is so tender.

Some of you tragically grew up in churches where you did not hear much of that. You only heard God's Commandments. You heard only expectations, do this, a little bit of God's gift of heaven but a whole lot about hell. When you actually read the Bible, however, you meet a God who is so insanely tender.

Today is Mothers' Day, and they say there is no love like a mother's love. Mom's give up so much for their children. A mother starts by giving 9 months of free room and board. Follow that up by at least 18 years of feeding, and protecting, teaching, and nursing back to health, and counseling. A mother would take a bullet for her kids – is that right, Mom? (Yes.)

Friends, God loves us so much more – so much more than the world's best mother ever could! God is the kind of God who tends toward tender. He is so patient with us! Day after day, week after week we struggle to do the right thing, to change our ways. God *should* give up on us, and we know it. Yet, He never does give up on any of us. God is so patient and He is so kind.

He always protects us. When the devil would accuse us, or those negative thoughts pop into our head that we are unloved, unforgiven, unworthy, Jesus says, "Uh-uh. You want to get to my brother, my sister? You have got to come through Me." Jesus is the risen, almighty, powerful son of God and nothing gets through Him because He persevered. When it was painful, the son of God did not shrug off the cross. He hung there, and He will never fail you because God is love. He is so tender. He is so compassionate.

Friends, believe that. God will call you out like a good parent, and he will hold you and love you and treat you better than you ever

imagined. God is tough, but get to know Him more and you will find He is so tender, that you can't even put it into words! AMEN.

**PRAYER:**

Father, thank you for revealing yourself. There are so many philosophies and religions and ways to see the divine in our world, but no one says that there is a God who keeps no record of wrongs. No one preaches grace that is so amazing it separates sin from us as far as the east is from the west. The gods of human invention are just tough and a little bit tender, but you are the flip of that because you are our father.

Lord, we pray for faith for everyone who grew up in an oppressive church, people who were just threatened and controlled and commanded, but they were never led to the cross of Jesus to know that your true heart, God, is to love and accept and forgive and protect people forever and ever. Help them to believe that this is what you are really like in spite of what they have been told.

Father, there are people that we are going to see this week who are messy, and to be honest, they deserve some of our toughness, so fill us with your heart that we could at times be tough but infinitely more we could be tender. Restore, Father, reconcile. For couples who have been too tough on each other, may their families be different in the days to come as they understand what love really is. For parents and children who have been separated by time and distance and sin, God use this message as a seed that may not fix things today or tomorrow, but a year from now things could be different.

Heavenly Father, love can change the world, and you tell us exactly how to do it with a little tough and a lot of tender. We pray these things, Jesus, in your beautiful name, and all God's people said, Amen