

The Fruit of the Spirit is Love

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“*But the fruit of the Spirit is love...*” (Galatians 5:22).

“*Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other*” (John 13:35 MSG)

INTRODUCTION

My Dearest Jimmy,

No words could express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking off our engagement. I have had a change of heart. Please take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart. I love you, I love you, I love you.

Forever, Marie.

PS. And congratulations on winning the state lottery.

Loving is easy when the person you are loving provides all you ever wanted or needed. Loving God is like that.

GOD IS LOVE

Did you know that in the New Testament, God is *described* with adjectives: God is holy; God is just; God is merciful. But in 1 John, God is *defined* when the text says God is Love (1 John 4:8). In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent His Son to die for us (1 John 4:10). Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God commends/shows/displays/proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:7-9). See what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon

us—that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are (1 Jn 3:1)! This is *why*... *This* is why... inspiration says that God IS love. It was Karl Barth who suggested that we insert the name “Jesus” every place you find the word “love” in your New Testament. I told you this morning that the theme of every sermon, and the heart of every story in the Bible is Jesus Christ. But it’s also true that the theme of every sermon, the heart of every story in the Bible is love.

1 Corinthians 13 says that love is patient and kind. When the people in the wilderness were as dumb as a post, God gave them all they needed, and they couldn’t see it. It didn’t register. Yet God continued to be patient and kind. Even in captivity, the people of God called upon their God who is patient and kind, and God brought them back out of the land of Egypt, out of the hands of the Assyrians, out of the hands of the Babylonians, and ultimately (as the Message puts it in the most beautiful rendering of that baptism section of Romans 6) out of the old country where sin was sovereign and into the new country of grace to experience new life in a new land (Rom 6:1-2 MSG). Titus 3 says we spent years---who knows how many years—in vanity and pride. But God was patient. And then he introduces the theme of grace with these words: “When the goodness and loving-kindness of God our savior appeared, he saved us” (Titus 3:4-5). Oh yes, our God is patient and kind. Just look at Jesus Christ.

After saying two things that love is, Paul recounts things that love is NOT: love is not easily angered. He hung there on the cross as we hurled our insults at him. We treated him worse than a criminal, as the angry mob called down generational blame in their thirst for blood. And what did Jesus do? He was moved to pity. And between agonizing breaths, with what few precious words he could muster in his dying moments, Jesus said to his father, “please, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Jesus was not easily angered. Love is not easily angered. And love keeps no record of wrongs. When it comes to grand concepts, don’t you like a simple picture that speaks a thousand words? Try this one on for size. The Bible says that God through Christ takes our sins and removes them as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. God is FOR us...who is it that condemns (Rom 8:31)? Oh, we condemn ourselves. We can’t forgive ourselves. We can’t get over it. But when we go to God for the umpteenth time asking for him to forgive us of that sin years ago, God says “I don’t know what you are talking about. I have the book of life right here, and there is no record of it.” He keeps no record of wrongs.

Do you want to know more about my God? He always protects. Our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days. Always trusts. Some trust in chariots, but we put our trust in the Lord our God (Psalm 20:7). For God has said “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” (Heb 13:5). He always protects.

Always hopes. It’s amazing enough that we hope in God. But did you know that my God believes in *you*? That he has confidence in you? Confident enough to put his Spirit in you. Have you ever invested enormous amounts of blood, sweat, and money in a boat or car or something of that nature that you wouldn’t dream of handing the keys over to your 14-year-old son?! God says this is the holiest thing I have, and I want you to have it, and go anywhere in the world with it. Oh, and by the way, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. Twice in the New Testament, he’s called the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7; Phil 1:19). That’s why John declares that if the Holy Spirit is with you, the Father and the Son are with you; in fact, God in three persons makes his home within you. “You trust in my Son,” declares the father; “I trust you with my own Spirit. And we will come to you and make our home within you.”

Love never fails. Let me tell you something, you better believe it does! I’ve seen love fail time and time again! Because every other kind of love does! Everyone and everything in this world have the potential of letting you down. But Jesus never fails. He always delivers. That is why He is and ought to be your one true love.

THE GREATEST COMMANDS

With the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of God, living within you, both securing you and empowering you, He begins to cultivate his fruit within you. The fruit the Spirit gives...is love.

The first and greatest commandment, says our God, is to love him with all you’ve got. Well...who wouldn’t?! The only perfect love in the world, who constantly gives when He doesn’t have to. Who *couldn’t* love someone like that?

But he’s not finished.

“I want you to love your neighbor.” (It’s in the OT—Lev 19:18—and in the NT). And we say back to God, “are you serious? My neighbor? That person is not always faithful to me! Sometimes they really get on my nerves and bring up the same old fights. Love my neighbor? In Leviticus he’s talking about your fellow ‘called-by-God’ Israelite. That alone was a tall order.

“I’m not finished yet,” says the Lord.

“I want you to love your enemies.” Our Lord tells the story of a Samaritan. Israelites told lots of stories about Samaritans. But they didn’t have any stories about a “good”

Samaritan. And they certainly didn't end those stories with a call to be like them. Jesus gets up on a mountain and gives the greatest sermon in the history of the world. And in that sermon, he says “pray for those who persecute you, and do good to those who hate you. If you only greet, serve, and love those who love you, what reward do you have? Love your enemies.” And we start saying to ourselves, “ok, this will take my whole lifetime.”

“I'm not finished yet,” God snaps back.

“I want you to love your enemies like you love yourselves; and I want you to put them before yourselves.” We say “that's impossible.”

He says, “I'm not finished yet.”

God says “and here is your rule of thumb. In fact, it's my standard. How you love your neighbor, the kind ones, the indifferent ones, the hurting ones, and even including your most bitter enemy, is how you love *me*.” In Matthew 25 we are introduced to a judgment scene. I know there are other judgment scenes for a more well-rounded picture of what to expect. But Matthew has a point to make so let's let him make it. In this judgment scene, there is only 1 criteria given on judgment day. “Where were you when I was sick, cold, naked, and hurting?” “Well, Jesus, I was coming home from worship and saw that guy on the side of the road and assumed you didn't want me to touch an unclean thing. I mean, what if that guy was a Samaritan?” “What you did or didn't do to the least of these,” says Jesus, “you did or didn't do to me.”

We listen to all of this, and eventually we throw up our hands and say “God, only *you* can love like that!” And God says, “*now* you're catching on! I want you to love with *my* love.”

AGAPE: SUPERNATURAL LOVE BASED IN THE OTHER

The Greeks had 4 words for love.

“Phileo” (where we get the word Philadelphia and Filet-O-Fish) is when you love because you have something in common. Jerry Seinfeld jokes about how easy it was to make friends in kindergarten. All it took was one thing in common. “You like cherry soda? I like cherry soda! We'll be friends forever!”

The second kind of love was “eros.” This is crazy love. Love without reason. The love of passion. Love between lovers. This the love that says “I can't help but fall for you.”

When your heart is thumping out of your chest, and you start to drool because you have nothing to say—that’s an eros kind of love.

“Storge” is the third kind of love. This referred to natural affection like a parent has for a child. It wasn’t solely reserved for people. In some Greek writers, it was used to describe love between an owner and her dog. This is the love that says “I have a *need* for you.”

And then we have “agape.” Even though this is a Greek word, the concept is very rare in the Old Testament. Even rare anywhere before Christ. There really isn’t a great magisterial definition for agape. The power of this word is not so much in what it means as how it is used. It’s the word used for the love you show to a wounded soldier coming back from the battlefield. When you feel a sense of duty to show honor to whom honor is due, you pay them a tribute. That’s agape. If you are looking for a definition, this one from Tim Keller is pretty helpful: it means to serve a person for their good and intrinsic value, not for what the person brings to you. You don’t find a lot of feeling necessarily attached to it. Agape love is seated in the will, not the emotions. It’s the love you are *supposed* to do for somebody. Jesus comes along and says “that’s the word I want to use; and I’ll start by talking about what I have done for you.” For God so loved (agape) the world that he gave His son. What does it mean that God loved the world? It’s not because we have a lot in common (do I like what he likes? Would you say that describes the cosmos?). So “phileo” isn’t the right word. It’s not an eros love or even a storge kind of love. In the Old Testament, God says “if I am looking for feelings toward my people, sometimes they are hard to find!” When he is leading them out of Egypt and in the wilderness for 4 decades, the nicest thing he says about them is “you are a stubborn and stiffnecked people!” God says “no. Only I deserve the kind of tribute I give you. And now I want you to give to others the love I give to you. There is no greater love than to die for your friends; and you are my friends.” Someone is quick to say “well, only if you do every thing he tells you.” When Judas turned his back on Jesus, and sold him out for 30 pieces of silver, betraying him with a kiss, do you remember what Jesus called him? “Friend.” “I’m dying for you, too.” When he was on the cross, and we were hurling insults at him, your rescuer cried out to his father, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” Why would he talk this way? Because we are supposed to treat each other as if the image of God was in them. Jesus is saying to the Father, “I will treat them with the same tribute I give to you.” To love when we don’t feel like it; to love when others don’t act like they deserve it.

There are not enough feelings in the world for us to do that kind of love. The motivation can’t come from within ourselves—we don’t have it. The motivation can’t come from the other person. If that was the case, we’d never love our enemies; they don’t invite us to love them. He chooses a word that is based on dessert other than the

tribute owed to God. Agape love is *entirely* other-centered. It is about giving to others without expecting anything—anything—in return.

Agape love is loving in a way that is about the *other*. Other-centered, rather than what I can get out of this relationship. There is no “what’s in it for me” involved in this. It’s a love that asks one question: “what will this mean for *you*?”

THE OPPOSITE OF AGAPE: FEAR AND SELF-PRESERVATION

You can look inward and tell if you are showing agape love. Just read your heart. Because the opposite of this kind of love is fear. “Perfect love drives out fear,” writes John, “because anyone who fears has not been made perfect in love.” Fear of what? Fear of getting hurt. When we fear getting hurt, we build a wall of self-protection. We don’t love people; we use people to get what we want. And if we aren’t careful, we don’t just use people; we abuse people to protect ourselves.

C. S. Lewis saw that to open up to real agape love is to open yourself to a great deal of possible hurt. There are no walls, no defense mechanisms. Love always protects the other, but love does not protect myself. Love means I die to myself to protect you.

Lewis writes this:

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.¹

Tim Keller offers something very insightful here. He says that agape love has a counterfeit. A fake version that can easily be mistook for the real thing. And that is “selfish affection.” This is where you serve others and show them affection not because of how it affects them, but because of the way they make you feel about yourself. Psychology books and therapy books about toxic and unhealthy relationships will talk about the “rescuer syndrome”, where you seek out someone with deep emotional

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*.

needs, maybe even with severe trauma; and others say “wow, that person is really selfless and giving” but in reality, you are really rescuing yourself. This is where a person is attracted not to a person, but to how that other person’s love makes you feel about yourself.²

But agape love isn’t like that at all. It is not self-regarding. 1 Corinthians tells us “it is not proud.” That means there is no pride in it at all. It’s not about you, what you get from it, or even how it makes you feel. It is entirely about the other.

And that is why Paul calls this the fruit of the Spirit. This is not a natural kind of love, that can be ginned up with will power. It’s a very specific kind of love. After all, as Keller reminds us, there are many ways to be kind, sweet, and loving without the Holy Spirit. When love involves our own interest, we can find the strength and power to do so on our own. My interests and my needs naturally lead to self-preservation. We need friends, so we act friendly. Business models show how honesty is the best policy because it pays off in the end, so we choose to be honest. It’s good for business.

But the cross stands in apposition to any kind of self-interest. Agape love, the love that the Spirit produces within people who have denied themselves, taken up the cross, and chosen to follow Christ comes out of what Keller describes as a supernatural “self-forgetfulness based in knowing how loved you are by God.” It flows from the inside-out.

TO LOVE GOD WITHOUT SELF-REGARD

And this is where the challenge becomes the strongest. We are accustomed to think of loving God because at the end of the road there is a heaven awaiting us. But would you love Him even if there wasn’t? I only ask because in the Old Testament, there isn’t much talk about an afterlife. And while there is much about it in the New Testament, most early Christians were lucky to have 1 gospel, or 1 letter, before Bibles were bound and collected, printed and distributed. And in the Gospel of Mark, there is just one chapter about it. Originally, the earliest preaching about Jesus and the call of the kingdom was not about what you get in return, but what God gets out of it. God is all in all. Will you love him because of who He is, not because of what you get? Oh, it takes complete self-denial, complete and total ‘other-centeredness’, to do that. That’s an out-of-this-world kind of love. And that’s how you know it’s of the Spirit.

² Tim Keller, “Love—Overcoming Fear.” A sermon preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, on Feb 4, 1990.

Listen to the prayer of Francis Xavier, written down in the 1400's:³

My God, I love thee;
not because I hope for heaven thereby,
nor yet because who love thee not are lost eternally.
Thou, O my Jesus,
thou didst me upon the cross embrace;
for me didst bear the nails and spear,
and manifold disgrace.
And griefs and torments numberless and sweat of agony;
even death itself,
and all for one Who was thine enemy.
Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ
should I not love thee well?
not for the hope of winning heaven,
or of escaping hell.
not with the hope of gaining aught,
nor seeking a reward,
but as thyself has lovèd me,
O ever-loving Lord!
Even so I love thee, and will love
and in thy praise will sing,
solely because thou art my God,
and my eternal king.

Love God like that, and loving your fellow Christian, or loving your neighbor, even loving your enemy, will be a piece of cake. Only God can produce a love like that. And a love like that can only bring glory to God.

³ *O Deus, ego amo te.*