

Fruit of the Spirit: Love

1 John 4:7-11; John 15:12-13; 1 Cor. 13:4-8

Today, we continue our sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. Let me read our core passage from Galatians 5:22-23, which Steve taught on last week. Paul writes:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Over the next nine weeks we are going to look at each of these aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. Today, we start with *love*. As you probably know, love is a huge theme in the Scriptures. Other than the book of Acts, love is a topic that is addressed in every single New Testament book. Love is a critical issue.

Your ability to love, or on the other hand your failure to love, will determine the nature of every relationship in your life. It will determine the quality and depth of your marriage. It will determine the nature of your relationship to your children or to your parents. It will determine your relationship with roommates and co-workers and bosses and neighbors. There is so much at stake.

Or if you think about us as a church, our ability to love one another and the world around us will determine how much kingdom good we are able to do. Jesus said that the world would know us by our love. Our ability to love will determine our outreach and it will determine how much this is a place of healing and restoration. There is a reason love is such a big topic in the Scriptures. It is vitally important.

And so today, we are going to try to understand the nature of the kind of love to which we are called. And then we are going to consider how we can cultivate the fruit of love in our lives.

I. Understanding Love

And so first, to better understand love, we are going to look at some insights from John and Jesus and Paul that will hopefully will give us a clearer understanding of what the Spirit wants to do in our lives.

A. Insights from John

And so, let's look first at what John has to say. In 1 John 4:7-11, he writes:

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

After commanding us to love one another, John says that *love is from God*. God alone is the source of the kind of love we are talking about today. And he says that love is the sign of truly being *born of God*. If the life of God is at work within us, then love will grow within us and be expressed through us. But, if we don't love he says that it is an indication that we don't know God.

He goes on then to describe the nature of God's love:

⁹By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

What is the nature of God's love? It is sacrificial. It's giving. God sent His *only begotten Son into the world* to be to be the propitiation for our sins. In other words, He sent His Son into the world to die for us. His love cost Him what was most dear to Him. That's what God's love is like. And that is the nature of the kind of love that Paul says the Spirit of God will produce in the one who is born of God. Biblical love is a sacrificial, giving kind of love that is rooted in life from God.

Do you love like this? Do you believe that this is the kind of love that the Spirit wants to produce in your life?

B. Insights from Jesus

We see the same idea in some of Jesus' final words to His disciples. In John 15:12-13, Jesus said:

¹² "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. ¹³ "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

We are commanded to love one another. But what does that mean to love one another? What does it look like? The love that we are to exhibit for each other is to be modeled after Jesus' love, because He says, *love one another JUST AS I have loved you.*" Jesus' love sets the standard for our love. His love was a self-sacrificing, giving kind of love. Greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life. Giving. Sacrificial. This is the kind of love that the Spirit produces in our lives.

Do you love like this? Do you believe that the Spirit wants to make you the kind of person who can love JUST AS Jesus has loved you? Obviously, Jesus had a lot more to say about love. We are to love our neighbor as ourselves and other such things, but let's take a look at Paul.

C. Insights from Paul

As most of you know, the most comprehensive picture of love in the Bible is found in Paul's great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. For many of us this is such a familiar passage that we can tend to tune it out. But try to hear this as if you've never heard it before.

⁴Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, ⁵does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, ⁶does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; ⁷bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never fails; . . .

Paul says *love is patient*. It has the ability to endure and put up with offenses without retaliating. It is the long-suffering that Steve talked about last week.

Love is kind. It has the quality of active goodness in how it treats others. Love desires to express kindness in helping others.

Love is not jealous. It doesn't envy or become jealous of what another has or experiences. Rather, it really longs for others to have the best.

Love does not brag. Bragging is boasting in oneself. Bragging says, "Look at me. Look at what I did." But, love would rather hear about the other person's attainments. Love puts its focus on the other person.

Love is not arrogant. This is the idea of being puffed up about oneself. If one is arrogant she sees herself as better and above another. But when we love we'd rather esteem another person highly than ourselves.

Love does not act unbecomingly. To act *unbecomingly* is to be ill mannered or rude towards others. Love does not do that. It cares about another person's feelings.

Love does not seek its own. Even when a person is entitled to something, love is willing to give it up for other people. Love thinks of others first. Love seeks to meet the other person's needs first. Jesus certainly didn't seek his own when he sacrificed himself for us.

Love is not provoked. It isn't touchy or easily angered or easily irritated. Love overlooks the offense of others.

Love does not take into account a wrong suffered. The idea of taking *into account* is that of making a mental record of offenses or hurts. It is a kind of "file in the mind" of wrongs suffered that can be accessed later. Love doesn't do that. It doesn't keep score of the wrongs suffered, because love forgives and moves on.

Love *does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth*. Love does not delight in evil, but is so quick to rejoice in something that is right or truthful.

When we come to verse 7, Paul sums up and says that love *bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*. *Bears all things* and *endures all things* are very similar. Love is able to endure and put up with things. The middle phrases – *believes all things, hopes all things* – are similar too. They point to a kind of hopeful, positive outlook even when a person has, once again, been disappointed by another person. Because of all of this, Paul can say, *love never fails*.

If we sum up what Paul says about love, he describes it as selfless; as others focused; as something that gives; it is a commitment to act for another's good even when it is undeserved. This is what this fruit of the Spirit looks like. This is what the life of God within a believer produces.

Do you love like this? As you think about the relationships in your life – your spouse, your kids, your parents, your co-worker or roommate, do you love like this? This is exactly what the Spirit wants to do in your life. Do you believe that this kind of love is possible; that this is exactly what the Spirit of God wants to produce in you?

D. Two Further Clarifiers

Now, before we look at how we can cultivate this kind of love in our lives, I want to look at a couple of other verses that further clarify the nature of biblical love.

Love and natural affections (Matthew 5:43-44) Donald Whitney makes a distinction between biblical love and what he calls “natural affection.” He makes the point that in normal circumstances parents love children, family members love each other and people love their friends. This is true for believers and unbelievers alike. We naturally love certain people. This is simply part of being human. Here's why this is important . . . we can tend to look at these natural affections and think, “I am a loving person.” And you are in those relationships, but natural affection is not the sum of Biblical love; it goes way beyond that. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 5:43-44:

⁴³ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.’* ⁴⁴ *“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

Whitney says that:

The test of Christlikeness is not the greatness of your love toward those who love you, but the bounty of your love toward those who do not (*Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health*, 46).

In other words, we can't think that just because I love the people who love me that I have this fruit of the Spirit called love. That kind of love can simply be only natural affection and believers and unbelievers alike love the people who love them. But the kind

of love that the Spirit wants to produce in your life is characterized by not just being able to love those who we are inclined to love, but by the ability to actually love even your enemies.

Decisions and desires (1 Peter 1:22) Now, here's the second qualifier. A lot of times when we think about what biblical love is we can stress that it is a matter of actions and not emotions. We just need to decide to do what is loving regardless of how we feel. And this is important because if we waited to do what is loving until we felt like it, we'd never get there in some cases.

But here's the clarifier, we are settling for too little if we only get to the point where we make decisions to act loving, but never get to where it is also our desire. Hear what Peter says in 1 Peter 1:22:

²²Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart,

Peter is talking here about more than just actions; he is also talking about desire. He is talking about our hearts. Love is not just a decision to act; it should be accompanied with the desire to do so. Look at the language that Peter uses here. Our love is to be *sincere*, which means a genuine, unfeigned love. He also says that we are to *fervently love one another from the heart*.

The Spirit of God wants to develop within us a kind of love that wells up from genuine care and compassion. God doesn't want us to just do loving things; He wants us to be loving people.

Jerry Bridges preached here a few weeks ago. Here's what he says about this:

We should do more than just *decide* to do acts of love: we should *desire* to do them. This is not to say we are to do acts of love only when we feel like doing them; it is to say we are not to content ourselves merely with acts of the will, good as those acts may be. We are to lay hold on God in prayer until he gives us that vigorous and loving spirit that delights to reach out and embrace our brother and to meet his need or forgive his sin, even if it is at great cost to ourselves (*The Practice of Godliness*, 256).

As you consider what Jesus and John and Paul and Peter say (really, what God's says about love) do you love like this? Do you believe that it is possible to love like this? Do you believe that this is the kind of love that the Spirit of God wants to grow in you? This is exactly what the Spirit of God wants to do in you.

Again, at stake is the quality of every relationship in your life. And for us as a church, our kingdom impact is at stake. And so the question is, how can we cultivate such love in our lives?

II. Cultivating Love

Such love is the fruit of the Spirit, but it is also something that we are to work at cultivating. Colossians 3:14 says:

¹⁴Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

We are commanded to *put on love*. And so the question is, what can we do to put on love? This morning I want to give you four suggestions.

And the first is that you need to **stay rightly connected to God**. As we think about growing in love, or in any of the fruit of the Spirit, we need to remember that this is the work of God. It is what He does in us. And so core to growing in our ability to love is staying connect to God who is the source of love. When we do this, His life grows within us and we will become more loving just by our connection to Him.

One of the things I loved about our three years in CA while I attended seminary were the fruit trees in our backyard. We had oranges and grapefruits and plums and peaches and a number of other fruit trees. You know what I noticed about those trees? Fruit was a natural response to being connected to the right things. As those trees roots sunk down into the soil and received water and as their leave soaked up the sunshine, they naturally bore fruit. They were rightly connected to the source.

Our growth in bearing fruit is similar. If we will stay well connected with God, the source, the fruit of love WILL grow in our lives. And so without a doubt, the most important thing you can do is to seek to grow in love is to stay relationally connected to God. And there are things that you can do to stay relationally connected and open to God's work in your life. For centuries Christians have pursued certain spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible reading, silence, solitude and many other things to open their lives up to God. These are things that you can do to stay rightly connected to God. Next week, Robynn Bliss and I will begin teaching a class called *Habit of Maturing*, which will be a class about the spiritual disciplines. We'd love to have you join us if you think it would be something that would help you stay connected to God. It will meet at 9:30 starting next Sunday.

A second thing you can do is to **be reminded often of God's great love for you**. Jesus said that the one who is forgiven much, loves much (Luke 7:36-50). As we reflect on and grow more deeply aware of God's great love for us and how He has forgiven us, our own love will grow. It is a natural response to the God's love expressed to us. There have been times in my life where I've had a cold heart and wasn't loving well and it was through meditation on God's love for me that He has softened and warmed my heart and caused me to be more loving towards others. Be reminded of God's great love for you.

Third, **you can simply ask** that God would make you a more loving person. What does the Bible say God will do when we pray anything according to His will? It says that He

will hear it and will do it (1 John 5:14-15). Is it God's will that you become more loving? Of course it is. And so ask in faith knowing that this is exactly what God wants to do in your life.

Finally, let me encourage you to make this real practical. **Identify one relationship in which you can grow your ability to love.** Maybe the person that comes to mind is someone who is a kind of enemy in your life. What would it look like to love that person? What could you do to take the initiative to show love in that relationship? Maybe it starts by simply praying for them. Maybe it starts by choosing to give a blessing in return for the unkind things they say to you.

Or maybe the person who comes to mind is a family member – a spouse or a child or a parent or a sibling. What might it look like to grow in your love for them? What actions and words can you offer that will express love for them. How can you choose to more and more love JUST AS Jesus has loved us in a sacrificial, giving kind of way, in a way that Paul talks about in 1 Cor. 13.

Identify that relationship that you are going to work on, pray about it, and then be intentional in choosing to express love and trust that as you do this God is going to grow your capacity to love that person as well as others.

Love is critical. It will determine the quality of every relationship in your life. And our ability to love each other in this church will determine the kind of kingdom impact that we will make.

I'll close with this story. In the summer of 1995, Cindy and I were part of a team in Hungary with the ministry of Campus Crusade that was running English camps as an outreach. During the summer we had the opportunity to get to know a Hungarian couple named Szabolcs and Katie who ran the facility we used. Sometime during our time there we learned that they were atheists, which wasn't surprising since they had grown up under communism. Over the course of the summer they were able to observe how our team of fifty staff and students ministered, how we acted, how we treated one another. On one of the last nights there, they invited about four of the staff couples over to their apartment for refreshments and conversation. During that conversation, Szabolcs said an amazing thing. I don't remember word for word what he said, but it was something like this, "If you would take 50 Hungarians and have them live together and work closely like you have this summer, they would not get along. There would be fights. But you have worked together so well." And then he said this amazing thing, he said, "Because of how you have loved each other, I believe there might be a God."

Love is critical. May we individually and may we as a church be putting on love.