

## **Fruit of the Spirit: Loving our Neighbors**

**1Cor. 13:1-7**

**Rom 13:8-10**

New sermon series, in this Pentecost season: the Fruit of the Spirit, which will take us through the summer. Found in Galatians 5:22-23: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Any of those sound like something we need in our country right now?? That you need or want? That our cities and communities need and want? Here they are again: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This is our new series for the summer.

I say this is a new series, which it is, for the most part. I preached a series on the fruit of the Spirit exactly three years ago during the summer of 2017. But the world is not the same place now as it was three years ago, is it? And so, I thought a renewed series on the fruit of the Spirit is needed at this time.

And as I work on these sermons I am thinking about, and praying about, and preparing them with these questions in mind: What does it mean to have love, joy, peace, patience and so forth in a covid-19 world? And, what does it mean to have these fruit of the Spirit in a racially and politically divided and deeply wounded country? It sounds daunting to me to consider those questions,

but consider them we must. As you will hear me say later, as we talk about Biblical love, God's love: love is not passive; love does not remain willingly uninvolved when it comes to people in need.

As we begin this series, I want to point out the obvious: that these are fruit *of the Spirit*. That is, the character qualities listed here are formed in us by the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. These aren't 9 better virtues for us to acquire with greater effort on our part. These aren't "9 habits of highly successful Christians," and all that. Now, we do need to work at letting the Holy Spirit grow these in our lives (that's why they are called fruit; they grow in us). There is a measure of consent on our part, and practice. However, lest this feel daunting to us, the good news is that *God's Holy Spirit* is pleased to grow and develop these in us—it's the *Spirit's* work in us. We simply need to be willing people, for starters. And, we need to act when action is called for.

And we *need* the Spirit's help, because all of these traits, or fruit, don't come to us all, naturally. For example, let's skip right down to patience. How many of us are naturally patient, and overflowing with the ability to be patient in most circumstances? One traffic backup, or a long line at the grocery store, or a stay at home order during a pandemic, will reveal how *impatient* we can be. Or

how about self-control? It happens to be last on the list, but is by no means least.

One obnoxious person that we want to say a few choice words to, or a pan of double fudge brownies on the counter will reveal that we often lack self-control.

So during this series we will emphasize the work of *the Holy Spirit* in our lives, and not just willful attempts at virtue, or trying to be nicer people. Jesus did not come to make us nicer. He came to make us transformed people, renewed people. So we need the Spirit's help to develop these Christ-like character traits in us, as we do our part in consenting to the Holy Spirit.

We begin, this morning, with love.

## **1 Corinthians 13:1-13**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then

we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

## **Romans 13:8-10**

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup>The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>10</sup>Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I begin by reminding us that in the world in which Jesus lived and moved and had his being, and for a few centuries before and after, there were 4 words in the Greek language and understanding that we translate as "love" into English, and therefore 4 concepts or ideas of what love is. Jesus and all of the New Testament writers use one of these words, almost exclusively, and it's the last one of the 4 that I will describe along the way as I remind us of the "greatest of these" fruit of the Spirit, love. Which is why it's first on the list and spoken of more than anything else in the New Testament. Even more than faith.

It's important for us modern Americans to distinguish the different kinds of love, because we tend to toss that word around as a way of describing how we

feel about everything, from a person we know, to the chocolate that we consume. Or, as I like to say, from puppies to people. I just love 'em! It's not all the same love, though, because we have come to understand love, mainly, as a feeling. But the Bible understands it quite differently.

**Eros**, which is erotic love. This is being "in love," this is passion, hormones, sexual attraction. In Greek philosophy and thinking eros was considered the lowest form of love, because it's mostly physiology at work, and not a decision and a commitment that truly values another, over time. Today, in our culture, we tend to value eros as the highest form of love. It's there, from music to movies. The word eros actually never appears in the Bible. Eros *can* lead to commitment, and it's wonderful to experience. But it is just one form of love.

There is **storge**—this is commonly defined or understood as affection. It's the kind of love you have for your dog or cat, or for a good old pair of shoes or a pair of jeans that you are attached to and don't want to give away. Or the love that a child has for their blanky or a stuffed animal. But it's more than that. In classical Greek storge was also used to describe family affections—the bond between parents and children, or between siblings. Storge is liking someone

through the fondness of familiarity, or people who relate in familiar ways where they have found themselves bonded by chance. Met a guy on the golf course...

As with eros, the exact Greek term *storge* does not appear in the Bible. However, a *form* of it is used twice in the New Testament: the word a-storgos (when you put an “a” in front of a word it changes the meaning to its opposite: in English, “atypical” means not typical, “amoral” meaning without morals, and so forth).

*Astorgos* means "without love, devoid of affection, heartless, unfeeling," and that word *is* found in a couple places in the Bible. In Romans 1:31, unrighteous people are described as "foolish, faithless, *heartless*." The Greek word translated "heartless" is *astorgos*. And in 2 Timothy 3:3, certain people are described as "heartless, slanderous, without self-control, not loving good." Again, "heartless" is translated *astorgos*.

There is the word ***philia***, which is friendship love. This is the love between friends who may be considered as close as siblings in strength and duration. The friendship is the strong bond existing between people who share common values, common interests or activities and history together. These are usually long-time, committed friendships. These *philia* relationships are with people you genuinely

like, deeply; and you wouldn't have a problem saying "I love you" to that person, without the messiness of eros. Or the expectations of having to love that person because you're *supposed to* (like that family member at Thanksgiving dinner...). You just love them.

The word *philia* occurs frequently in the New Testament, and is even used by Jesus to describe his relationship to his followers from time to time. Think about it: Jesus doesn't just love you because he is God and he is obligated to. He likes you. He is your friend. He is your long-time companion.

Then there is ***agape***. That's the word that is used everywhere in the New Testament. *Agape* is unconditional love, no matter what the circumstances, whether or not someone likes another person (or maybe especially when they don't like another person!). When Jesus said, "Love your enemies" he uses this word *agape*. He doesn't say "*philia*" your enemies, or "*storge*" your enemies, although if you can make friends out of enemies or develop some sense of affection for them, that's great; it's a good start. But the word here means to seek the good of another, in spite of how we feel about them. It is love in spite of circumstances.

This is what the apostle John affirms when he says “God is love.” God is *agape*.

So, for the Christian church throughout history, *agape* is thought of as the highest form of love. This is love that is willing to sacrifice for another. This is band-of-brothers love, leave-no-one-behind kind of love. It's also the in-spite-of kind of love... in spite of faults and mistakes, in spite of feelings... I choose to seek what's best for my neighbor. I will make sacrifices for you and for my neighbor no matter what.

This is 1Cor.13—If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not *agape*, I'm just fingernails on a chalkboard. Love is patient, love is kind, and so forth. This passage is read at so many weddings one would think that it's *eros* that's being talked about here. Romance and hormones. But it's *agape* love, expressed as covenant, commitment. Love that says we belong to each other, whether that belonging is through wedding vows, or church membership, or simply understanding our common humanity.

This is Jesus, who in John 15:13 said, “Greater love has no one that this, than they lay down their life for a neighbor.”

In Romans 13, Paul sums everything up by saying love is the fulfilling of the law. The entire Jewish law, with not just 10 commandments but 613 commandments (a faithful Jew will tell you), is fulfilled with this one word: love your neighbor as yourself. One would think Paul, as a good Jew, would say that better behavior is the fulfilling of the law. Or, obeying all the rules is the fulfilling of the law. No, love, agape, is the fulfilling of the law.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Now, this isn't easy to do, and it doesn't always go well in our attempts to love our neighbor. We're never going to do this perfectly, and that's the grace we have from God we receive as we walk in faith. We need the Holy Spirit's help, as I said. And, we need to keep at it.

And, it would be worth examining how we really, truly love ourselves. How we think about ourselves. Because somehow, tucked into this command to love our neighbors as ourselves is the assumption that we will be gracious and compassionate with ourselves, and see ourselves as God sees us, with God's eyes of love. And that we will, then, in turn, love our neighbor in the same way. With graciousness and generosity; agape.

We need to become beloved! Then, we communicate belovedness to our neighbors. And remember, our neighbors are not just fellow church members or

our literal next door neighbors, but also the people we come across in our day to day lives.

But it's even more than about who we love; it's about who *we are* in our loving. Remember that the parable of the good Samaritan started with a question: Who is my neighbor? It's a boundary question: who am I obligated to love? And then Jesus tells the story of a person who loved another person in deep need along the road of life; and after telling the story Jesus turned the question around: who *acted as* neighbor? So it's not only about who is or isn't my neighbor, as much as it is about how the fruit of the Spirit is manifesting itself in my attitudes and actions toward others, in love.

So, how will you and I act as neighbor, especially at this time when our black American neighbors are suffering? I'll issue a charge to us along those lines in a moment.

One last comment, and then a charge: love—as a fruit of the Spirit, and as something that mirrors Jesus Christ and his life and love—is proactive. It's proactive. So, in that sense, love is not the same as tolerance. Tolerance is talked about a lot, and I appreciate and support the idea and the goals behind it. And realistically, sometimes all we can do is tolerate someone; it's all that our ability

will allow us to do in a moment. However, when we talk about agape, Christian love, and the fruit of the Spirit, we're not talking about tolerance here. God's people are not called to tolerate one another, or tolerate our neighbor. We're called to go beyond that. We're called to love, as Jesus loved. Jesus, after he was raised from the dead and about to pour out the Spirit, did not say, "As I have tolerated you, so you now tolerate others."

As talked about last week, on Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on a very diverse group of people—ethnically, socio-economically, generationally. They were not called to tolerate each other and tolerate the people God was sending them to serve. They were called to love, sacrificially, with forgiveness, reconciliation, generosity, and power—as Jesus did.

Tolerance is not a Christian virtue, it's not in the Bible, nor is it developed as a classic virtue by any of the great historic philosophers. Think about it: who wants to be tolerated?!? Can you imagine talking to someone you know and have a relationship with, and say to them, "I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, I tolerate you." Who wants to be tolerated?

We're called to love, which is proactive. If all we're doing is coexisting, or tolerating each other, then we will likely end up just ignoring each other most of

the time, and we'll retreat to our comfortable corners to hang out with people who are mostly like us (or who are at least less intolerable than others!). That is not a work of the Spirit or a fruit of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is to bring unity where there are a lot of very different kinds of people! And that takes willingness, it takes some work, and some sacrifice.

Therefore love, as a fruit of the Spirit, will sometimes be uncomfortable for us, because love isn't just a feeling; it's an action that we take, as we take steps toward people, to love people we don't naturally feel like loving or wouldn't naturally hang out with. But if we're in-Spirited (inspired) then God helps us to get over ourselves and learn to love.

And to that end, I'd like to offer this charge to each of us, myself included. While racial tension and conflict has surfaced big time in our country right now, we have an opportunity to help heal the racial divide. This is not just a time of tension and unrest; it is a monumental time of learning and healing. Because there is a reason why this tinder box became so inflamed, and with such intensity.

And as a way of showing love and being proactive in expressing love to our black sisters and brothers, we can each of us take steps toward *listening and*

*understanding*. Listening and understanding. And you don't have to leave your house as a first step in listening and understanding.

This is an enormous opportunity for us to listen and learn. Please take the opportunity. Don't be passive; be proactive. It's the loving thing to do right now as Jesus' followers. Go out of your way to look up and listen to African American journalists and activists, or neighbors and friends. Listen to their stories, listen to their explanations of what is happening right now and why, listen to their pain and suffering. And listen, not to formulate a defense or an argument, but to understand. To hear their voice and try to put ourselves in their shoes, their circumstances.

My college roommate... We had a lot of late night conversations, and I learned a lot from him about what it was like for him to grow up as a black American in our society. One of those conversations was the first time I learned what having "the talk" meant for black American parents with their children... What kind of a society is it for black parents and children when they have to have *that* conversation?

What kind of a society is it when black men and women suffer from hypertension and diabetes, not because they are inherently unhealthy but

because of the stress they carry every day just because of being a person of color living in our society? That's partly why people of color die from covid 19 at twice the rate of white people. And they are *infected* at a higher rate, for a number of reasons that all reveal the inequity that exists that causes underlying pre-existing health problems.

So, please take the opportunity to listen and understand. I am going to give you a couple of recommendations for people to listen to. This is just a start. There are dozens of others, but here are a couple of excellent voices of black Americans we can listen to right now.

Ijeoma Oluo, author and journalist who wrote a book titled, *So You Want to Talk About Race*. She's local! Lives in Seattle and speaks and holds workshops for business to have the conversation about race.

Bryan Stephenson. Civil rights attorney based in Montgomery, Alabama. He serves wrongly/unjustly convicted and incarcerated individuals, mostly those on death row. His book titled, *Just Mercy* (it's a movie too). In the midst of stories about unjustly incarcerated black men, he weaves in the history of racism and prejudice in our country. It's super informative. And be warned, it's also disturbing. But we need to be disturbed.

Here is his TED talk:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan\\_stevenson\\_we\\_need\\_to\\_talk\\_about\\_an\\_injustice?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice?language=en)

And this great article, interview from this week. If you are going to choose just one thing to read right now, read this because it is timely and relevant to

what is happening today: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/bryan-stevenson-on-the-frustration-behind-the-george-floyd-protests>

Joyce Taylor and Mark Wright conversation, our local King 5 reporters. It's an on-air conversation that is informative, and moving, and gives us a good example of two people listening and learning:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SumtBrrz8xM>