

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

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

**Rom 13:8-10**

This morning I'm beginning a sermon series for the summer on the Fruit of the Spirit, which will take us through the end of August. The list of the fruit of the Spirit is found in Galatians 5:22-23 (depicted on the bulletin cover). This list is given in the context of Paul encouraging them to let go of what isn't useful any more (strife, quarrels, divisions, and "things like these"). Then he says, "*By contrast, 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?? In our neighborhoods and communities? That you need or want? Here they are again: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This is our series for the summer.

As I work on these sermons I am thinking about, and praying about, and preparing them with a couple questions in mind: What does it mean to have love, joy, peace, patience and so forth in a diverse and pluralistic society? And, what does it mean to have these fruit of the Spirit in a fractured society that is in need of healing? Now, as much as ever, God needs his people to be healers who are people of positive influence, when and where we are able. Even in the smallest of

ways. I have a pastor colleague who, at the bottom of her email template, has a saying that I appreciate. Underneath her email signature it says: “Be calm; be part of the solution. Be like Jesus.” The fruit of the Spirit will lead us in that direction. To be calm, be part of the solution, and to be like Jesus.

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 God’s Spirit at work in our lives. These aren’t 9 better virtues to acquire if we all just try a little harder. They aren’t “9 habits of highly successful Christians,” and all that. Now, we *do* have a part to play, and need to be willing to partner with the Holy Spirit in order for these to grow in our lives (that’s why they are called fruit; they grow and mature in us). There *is* a measure of consent on our part, and practice as we work to live them out. However, lest this feel daunting to us, the good news is that God’s Spirit is pleased to grow these in us—it’s the *Spirit’s* work in us. We simply need to be willing people.

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, 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 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 (or perfect, by any means). He came to grow us as disciples, who are salt and light in the world. So we need the Spirit's help to develop these Christ-like character traits in us.

We begin, this morning, with love. You heard the poetic reading from 1Corinthians 13. Now let us turn our attention to the next reading, from Romans.

### **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'd like to begin by reminding us that in the world in which Jesus lived and moved and had his being, there were 4 words and in the Greek language that we translate into English as "love," and therefore 4 concepts or ideas of what love is and what love does. 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 we are reminded of the "greatest of these" fruit of the Spirit, which is love.

It's important for us to distinguish the different kinds of love, because we tend to toss that word around as a way of describing how we feel about almost anything, 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! There are different expressions of love, though, so let's look briefly at the 4 loves:

***Eros***, which is erotic love. This is being "in love," this is passion, hormones, sexual attraction. In Greek thinking, eros was considered mostly human physiology at work, and not a decision and a commitment that truly values another person, over time. It *can* lead to that, but doesn't *necessarily* lead to that. Eros *can* lead to commitment, and it's wonderful to experience, right? 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 an old pair of shoes or a pair of jeans that you have worn comfortably for years and you want to hold onto. It's the love that a child has for their blankie 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 (or something) through the fondness of familiarity.

There is the word **philia**, which is friendship love. This is the love between friends who share a commitment to one another that goes beyond affection. The friendship is the strong bond existing between people who share common values, common interests or activities, and a history together. And, you wouldn't have a problem saying "I love you" to that person.

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 close 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. But the word here means to seek the good of another, in spite of how we feel about them. It is loving no matter the circumstances. This is what the apostle John affirms in his epistle 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 my neighbor no matter what.

This is 1Cor.13—If I speak in the tongues of mortals and angels, but have not agape, I'm just fingernails on a chalkboard, a muffler dragging on the ground behind a car. Love is patient, love is kind, and so forth. That passage is read at so many weddings one would think that it's *eros* that's being talked about here.

Romance and all that. But it's *agape* love, expressed as covenant, as commitment. Love that says we belong to each other, whether that belonging is through wedding vows, or church membership, or simply because of 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 another."

In Romans 13, as we heard, Paul sums everything up by saying love, *agape*, 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 devout Jewish teacher, 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 won't do this perfectly, and that's the grace we receive from God as we walk in faith. We need the Holy Spirit's help. And... we need to keep at it and not give up. Because we *do* get it right much of the time. And we get better at it with practice.

And, it would be worth examining how we really, truly love ourselves. How we think about ourselves and value ourselves, like we talked about last week. 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 unconditional love. And that we will, then, in turn, love our neighbor in likewise fashion.

This is why we need to become beloved! For our sakes, and, so we can communicate belovedness to our neighbors.

And remember, our neighbors are not just fellow church members or our literal next-door neighbors, or just people we like or are who like us, but also the people we come across in our day to day lives, even if we don't know them personally. Because Jesus reminds us that anyone in need is our neighbor.

Remember that the parable of the good Samaritan started with a question [from someone who was trying to justify himself, after Jesus reiterated the command to love your neighbor as yourself]; he asked: "Who *is* my neighbor?" It's a boundary question: Who am I obligated to love? And, therefore, who do I *not* have 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 and asked him: “Who *acted as neighbor?*” So, it’s not just 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.

One last comment/reminder: love, agape—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 the 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, and Jesus did not command us to 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 was giving his final charge to his followers, did not say to his people, “As I have tolerated you, now go and tolerate others.” That sounds silly, but that seems to have become our default mode of existence, and it just isn’t working for us.

As we saw 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 out to serve. They were called to love, sacrificially, with understanding, with reconciliation, with generosity, and power.

Historically, tolerance has never been considered a Christian virtue, nor is it developed as a classic virtue by any of the historic philosophers, *unless* it is combined with another classic virtue, such as... love. Tolerance is like a holding place we might need to go to for a while until we can get to the place of proactively working for the best of another person. But it isn't a place to remain. That's why it hasn't been considered a historic virtue, or landing place.

Because think about it: who wants to be tolerated?!? Can you imagine someone talking with you, and they look you in the eye and say, "I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, I tolerate you."

We're called to love, to be led by the Spirit into words and actions that bless and build up and unify.

Randy Woodley, a Cherokee descendent and Christian theologian, in his book, *Shalom and the Community of Creation—An Indigenous Vision*, talks about

the Shalom principle in the Bible, as a golden thread that runs throughout it— which is God’s desire for peace and justice and wholeness and well-being for all, which is also consistent with every indigenous culture’s principle of what is called “The Harmony Way.” We’ll talk more about this when we get to the peace. In *Shalom and the Community of Creation* he says: “Christ’s witness on earth is impeded by American Christianity’s homogeneous cultural views, and by the failure of Christians to appreciate divergent cultural views. Working toward tolerance is a place to begin, but even tolerance is not the best solution to a lack of diversity. To tolerate difference is often the same as to ignore it. I believe that today God is calling Christians beyond tolerance and toward celebrating the uniqueness of the other.” This is agape, love that proactively seeks what is best.

Church in CA that asked, “What is our reputation in the community?” And, “What do we *want* to be our reputation in the community?” Their answer: become people who bless others, in words and actions. Long story short, they adopted a new mission statement: “We exist to bless God, and bless others.” It’s so simple! And it’s not so huge and ethereal that it’s unattainable. And so the people of this church bless others with deeds of mercy, acts of justice, and of generosity, and they also do it verbally as each person chooses to bless people within their sphere of influence and activity.

And, over time, they became known as “the blessing people.” If someone found out that a person attended that church, they’d say, “Oh, you’re one of those blessing people, aren’t you?”

We don’t have to become the blessing people, but it’s worth thinking about what kind of people we want to be. Because Christians and the Church don’t have a great reputation right now—no thanks to the 5% or so of Christians and churches that speak and act in unhelpful ways. We can’t control what they do and say, but we can work to strengthen our witness, to be people of agape, in whatever form that may take, in small ways or larger ways, as the Spirit leads us.

So, friends, go—be calm, be part of the solution, be like Jesus, with the Spirit’s help and guidance.

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