

Series: "The Fruit of the Spirit: Love"

If you're a follower of Jesus, is there any way to gauge how mature you are in your faith? Is there any measuring tool to determine how spiritual you are, how filled you are with the Spirit of Christ? Are you a baby Christian, or a seasoned disciple? Well, there *is* a way of sizing up just how far advanced we are in the Lord: It's the "fruit test".

Jesus talked about this: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:15-20). Jesus here is talking about how to recognize false prophets. You look at people's actions, behaviors, what kind of "fruit" their life is producing.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the Galatian believers, talks about a kind of "fruit test". He refers to the *fruit of the Spirit*. How do we know how much the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is in control of our life? Well, check out how much the fruit of the Spirit is evident in the way we live. He lists the fruit of the Spirit: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Last week I talked about the command to be filled with the Spirit. Today I want to begin a series of messages where we look at the 9 fruits of the Spirit – 9 qualities that will be evident in our life if the Spirit is in control. *So let's get started!* The first fruit of the Spirit listed is *love*: "But the fruit of the Spirit is *love*..." (Galatians 5:22).

A good place to start if we're talking about love is 1 Corinthians, chapter 13 - the great love chapter. This Scripture talks about the *preeminence of love*. "If I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. 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" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Here's something often overlooked: 1 Corinthians 13 is right between 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 (bet you never knew that!). 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In the passage above Paul is referring to some of the gifts of the Spirit: He says if I speak in the tongues of humans and of angels, but don't have love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have great prophetic powers, understand all mysteries and knowledge, have mountain moving faith, but don't have love, I'm nothing! He mentions here speaking in tongues, the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge, mountain moving faith – these are all gifts of the Spirit. i.e. Spiritual gifts are important, but love is even more important! We can see from reading 1 Corinthians that some people in that church who were exercising their spiritual gifts were misusing these gifts for self gain – to boast, or bring attention to themselves.

Paul reminds them – and us – that if we don't have love, we don't have anything!

The New Testament is unified in telling us that love is the most important thing for followers of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul stresses this in many of his writings: In Galatians 5, verses 6 and 14 he writes: "The only thing that counts is faith *expressing itself through love* ...the *entire law is fulfilled* in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" He says, "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore *love is the fulfillment of the law.*" (Romans 13:10). He writes this to those in Corinth: "*Let all that you do be done in love*" (1 Corinthians 16:14).

Simon Peter wrote this to the early church: "Above all, *love each other deeply*, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

The Apostle John agreed: "We know that we have passed from death to life, because *we love each other*. Anyone who does not love remains in death...dear friends, *let us love one another*, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 3:14 4:7-8).

Jesus put the icing on the cake when He said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, *if you have love for one another*" (John 13:35).

But what does this love look like? In the English language we have one word for love, and it covers a lot of ground. We "love" chocolate...we "love" our doggies and kitties...we "love" to read or knit...we "love" our country. Couples "make love", and that same word that describes heated sexual passion is used to describe the tender love we feel towards our babies or elderly parents!

The Greek language (the language of the New Testament), however, has 4 words for love: one for friendship love, one for erotic love, one for family love – but the word most often used in the New Testament is none of those three: it's the word "agape". Agape is a love that has the interest of the other person at heart, and asks for nothing in return. It is self-giving, unselfish. Agape describes a steadfast devotion to the welfare of another person – even if that person doesn't deserve it. It's an action word. It is treating others – even our enemies – in a caring way; doing good to those who may abuse or misuse us.

Agape is the word used to speak of God's pure and holy love for us sinners. It's not a warm, fuzzy fondness for someone. Agape love does not come naturally.

This love is a fruit of the Spirit in us. It's a love that comes from God. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love...." (Galatians 5:22). We want some indication of how far along we are in the Christian life? Ask ourselves: How loving a person am I – especially towards people who may not deserve it!

1 Corinthians 13 gives us a picture of ways this kind of love is expressed. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way;

it is not irritable or resentful" (verses 4-5).

Love is patient and kind. Now here's an interesting thing: patience and kindness are also mentioned as 2 of the 9 fruit of the Spirit. So there's an overlap here. We'll put these aside today and talk about patience and kindness when we cover them as fruit of the Spirit.

*Love is not envious (vs. 4).* Ever envy someone? We're jealous of someone because they've got more money or a nicer house than we do, or they're better looking or more talented or have a better job? Love means that instead of envying someone we can be happy for that person's good fortune or blessings.

*Love is not boastful or arrogant (vs. 4).* Some translations have it love is not anxious to impress...it isn't inflated with its own importance. I worked with a pastor once who had a way of "name dropping". He had this conversation with the bishop recently, he was on stage once with Bob Hope. He knew this high ranking official in the local government, etc. Thank heavens I don't have a problem with being boastful or arrogant. I'm really pretty good that way. Never had a problem with it; don't understand people who do! (Ha!).

Loving people are humble; they're not full of themselves.

*Love is not rude (vs. 5).* We've all been in a situation where someone's been rude to us, right? One Annual Conference I was having a conversation with a pastor I knew –a former District Superintendent. Another pastor came up to us, a rather prominent pastor in the conference, pretty much acted like I was invisible, and immediately cut right in and started a different conversation with my friend. (*I thought, preachers!*) We've all at times probably come across as being rude and really didn't mean to be. It happens. But love...is not...rude.

*Love does not insist on its own way (vs. 5).* Ever do that? You want to get your own way. My way or the highway. It happens in marriages. Want a prescription for an unhappy marriage: one of the spouses is always insisting on his or her own way. Want a prescription for a really rocky marriage: *both* partners are always maneuvering to get their own way!

It happens with brothers and sisters, each vying for their own way. It happens at work. Think this happens in the halls of Congress – politicians insisting on their own way? Thank heavens it doesn't happen in the church! I've never been on a board or committee in any of the churches I've served where a member is trying to manipulate things to get their own way! Don't I wish!

Love does not insist on its own way.

*Love is not irritable (vs. 5).* Ever get irritable? Most of us get irritable when we're overworked or tired. Some of us are irritable when we're *not* overworked and we're getting plenty of sleep!

*Love is not resentful (vs. 5).* Loving people forgive others.

*Love does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth (vs. 6).* It's possible when something bad happens to someone we don't like to take delight in that. Or if somebody who has hurt us now is wronged themselves in some way, we can kind of gloat over that. Ha! Serves them right! Love doesn't do that. Love always rejoices in what's right and what's true – never is happy about any kind of wrong done to anyone.

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (vs. 7).* When we truly love someone, it can mean putting up with a lot of stuff that isn't easy, or pleasant. Bearing it, enduring it, rather than quickly opting out of the relationship.

When it says love believes all things and hopes all things, I don't think this means we act clueless – we believe anything the person tells us (especially if he or she is known to not always tell the truth). I think this means we believe the best about a person. We don't give up hope for that person. It could mean continuing to pray for a family member who isn't a committed Christian, not giving up hope that they'll come to Christ and be saved. It could mean not giving up hope that someone we love who has an addiction might not be able some day to overcome that habit.

Paul goes on in this beautiful love chapter, this love poem to say *love never ends*. Prophecies, speaking in tongues, the word of knowledge – these spiritual gifts, as wonderful as they are – they will end. God's eternal kingdom will be a place of perfect love and harmony. To love people now, is to live the way life is going to be in God's kingdom!

In the beautiful words of this text, Paul writes: "And now, faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). And then he says, "Make love your aim" (1 Corinthians 14:1). You want to know what to aim at in life, what to strive for? Here it is. Make *love* your aim!

"The fruit of the Spirit is love" (Galatians 5:22). Love is the first quality listed as one of the evidences that our life is under the control of the Holy Spirit. How can I determine how mature I am in my faith, how spiritual I am? The place to start is to ask the question: How loving a person am I – especially to people who are difficult to love.

How can we become a more loving person? Since "agape" – this kind of love that has the interest of the other person at heart – is not natural, we need God's help with this. 1 Thessalonians 3:12 says, "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you." We receive God's love (in Christ), then channel that love through us to others.

Love is a fruit of the Spirit. It's God's love taking control of us. We grow in love as we yield ourselves more and more to God and pray that He will fill us with His Spirit.

*Do you think the world needs more love? You and I can be part of the answer.*

