

## **Introduction**

The home in which I grew up was situated on a heavily wooded lot. But in front of all those trees was a long and wide open swath of grass about 70 yards long. It became the neighborhood football field in the fall. But during the summer when the grass was growing, there was a lot to cut. And I did a lot of the cutting. I didn't mind riding on the lawn tractor. It was very loud, and as I rode along, I would sing my lungs out. It never entered my mind that my voice could be heard over the rumble and pop of the lawn mower. Years later I came to find out that the neighbors all thought it was quite entertaining.

The era was the mid 1970's. And I was into the music of the day. For a while my favorite musical group was the Captain and Tenille. The song those neighbors probably heard most was "Love Will Keep Us Together." Any of you remember that song? Every era is marked by its love songs. Think of the Beatles. They sang the hit, "All You Need Is Love." Dionne Warwick sang "What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of." The world sings about love as much as anything else. And well it should. But sadly the world greatly misunderstands what love really is. In fact whatever love there was between the Captain and Tenille, it did not, in fact, keep them together. I hope this morning to confront the world's misunderstanding and put our focus on where we need to look if we truly want to know what love really is.

[Read text and Pray]

These messages on the fruit of the Spirit will be more systematic than what I usually preach as we will be drawing on a host of texts to expand on important elements of the various aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. As you all know this is not my usual custom, but there are times when it is needful to draw together various texts of scripture for a holistic grasp of a subject. That certainly is true today as we consider the matter of love.

First, I want us to consider ...

### **I. The Importance of Love.**

It is difficult to overstate the significance of love. As we consider the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, it heads the list. Each of the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit flow from this one. Love is the fertile ground out of which proceed joy and peace and patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. But nowhere is the importance of love better-stated than in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. Paul sets forth the point that without love nothing else matters in my life. Whatever I may be or whatever I may do, no matter how impressive or compelling or awe-inspiring, if I have not love I am nothing and I gain nothing. I could speak in angelic tongues, but without love I am just being noisy. I could prophesy, possess insight into mysteries, and even move mountains by faith. But without love, I am NOTHING. If I go so far as to sacrifice my life for some cause, and even give my body to be burned at the stake, it is not worth anything if I do not have love.

The importance of love is definitely observed in the two great commands. The first is, "You shall LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul." The second is, "You shall LOVE your neighbor as yourself." To fulfill the will of God is impossible without love. It is at the core of godliness. John tells us plainly that "God is love."

At the conclusion of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul makes this assertion: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Peter exhorts his readers, "ABOVE ALL, keep loving one another earnestly" (1 Peter 4:8).

If love is this important and it heads the list of those characteristics which are produced like fruit in the lives of those who believe in and follow Jesus, then it is imperative that we give ourselves to diligently

pursue the production of love in our lives by walking in the Spirit. We should admire it. We should yearn for it. We should pray for it. So at the outset this morning, let me encourage you to be looking inward as we walk through what the scripture has to say in regards to love.

## **II. The Confusion About Love**

To use the word LOVE in our day and time is to invite a good deal of confusion. There are so many different ways in which our culture and society uses the word. We all do it. How can it not be confusing if we use the word LOVE to speak of how we relate to food, sports, hobbies, and warm weather, as well as how we relate to our spouse, our children and our pet, oh and even how we relate to Jesus. Clearly the way we throw around this word contributes to the confusion.

But then there is the impact of humanity's fallen nature on how we understand love. If we consider the works of the flesh back in Galatians 5:19-21, we see things the world considers love from a fleshly viewpoint. Sex is called "making love." People definitely associate sex with love despite that song that once asked, "What's love got to do with it?" Sexual promiscuity is actually the opposite of love. It is using another person to satisfy oneself. That's not love. Jealousy, envy, anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions—those are not love, unless we are talking about love of self. And yet I guess that's what some in this world believe—that the greatest love of all is loving yourself. A catchy tune can easily have you joining in with song of one of the greatest lies ever sung. Loving yourself is what you do naturally. It just comes out. But that is not LOVE as we see it revealed to us in the scripture.

Another worldly myth about love that contributes to the confusion is the idea that love is a feeling. I just mentioned the song, "What's love got to do with it?" The lyrics of that tune assert that love is just a second-hand emotion. There are no doubt numerous songs expressing the same sentiment. I would venture to say that most people out there agree that love is a feeling, a romantic sensation of delight in another person. However, that is more accurately called infatuation. It is not biblical love. Equating love with a feeling and inner longings is one of the biggest lies out there and one we have to put down because the popularity of this idea is so widespread.

So in order to help dispel the confusion I am talking about what love is not. It must be distinguished from my disposition toward fried chicken or sitting by a warm campfire on a chilly night. It is not sex. It is not about me. And it is not a feeling. And there is one more point I need to make. Biblical love—that which is produced by the Spirit of God as we walk by him—is not merely how I relate to persons that treat me kindly. It is not merely how I relate to persons whose actions toward me are ones I really like. Jesus made this point in the sermon on the mount and in the sermon on the plain. On the mount, he asked, "If you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matthew 5:46). On the plain he pointed out that "even sinners love those who love them" even sinners do good to those who do good to them, even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount" (Luke 6:32-34). There's nothing spectacular about that kind of love. So this point is all about what Spirit-produced love is NOT. We need to say it to cut back on confusion.

## **III. The Meaning of Love**

There are different kinds of love. In English we use one word for all of them, but the Greeks used three different words to distinguish one kind of love from another. There is the word eros which is the Greek word for romantic love. There is also the word phileo, mainly used to express the idea of brotherly friendship. The word, however, at the head of the fruit of the Spirit is another word altogether. It is the word agape. This is also the word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 13. Agape is the word John used when he said, "God so LOVED the world." Agape is the root of the word Jesus used when he said, "If you LOVE me, you will keep my commandments." And it is this same word that Peter used when he said, "Above all, keep LOVING one another." We are not commanded in regard to "eros." We ARE commanded in regard to "agape."

The lexical definition of agape is to be full of good-will or to exhibit good-will to others. It is to regard the welfare of a person. Christians are to regard the welfare of one another. God in sending Christ Jesus his Son to provide salvation has regarded the welfare of human beings. Human beings are to regard the welfare even of our enemies. With regard to God, human beings are to behave toward him with regard for the welfare of his glory and reputation. To love God is to possess affectionate reverence and exercise prompt obedience as in "if you love me you will keep my commandments."

So you see. Love is not a feeling. It is a frame of mind and a determination. It is action designed for the welfare of another. Love looks away from self. It is not concerned in the first instance with what I need or want. It is concerned with the need of another. To behave in love may not result in anything good returning to me, except maybe the sheer joy of loving. In fact, to love will probably cost me something. Hence it is selfless. Love is what leads a person to count others more significant than oneself. It looks beyond personal interests to the interest of others. It is willing to embrace personal pain for the benefit and welfare of someone else.

#### **IV. The Greatest Display of Love**

You want to know what love is? We need look no further than God himself. God is love. No greater love exists than the love with which human beings have been loved by God. Paul brought this fact to light in Romans 5. He made mention of the fact that scarcely no one would die for a righteous person but God demonstrates his love in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. John wrote in his first epistle, this is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us ... for US!! Who are we? We are not lovely people who deserve a break! We are sinners who deserve hell just like everyone who died in the flood when only Noah and his family were saved. This is who he died for! Jesus did not die for good people, and he didn't merely die for BAD people. He died for his enemies.

Then let's turn to Jesus's own words. Jesus declared what is the highest expression of agape. Recorded in John 15, Jesus was commanding the disciples to love one another in the same way he loved them. He said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." And then he showed them what he was talking about. He declared, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). We see the love of Jesus all through his life. We see it in his instruction and proclamation of the kingdom, in his patience with those who were of little faith. We see it in his compassion for the down-trodden and grieving. We see the love of Jesus in his kindness toward the sick and infirm. But the greatest display of his love is in his death. He yielded up his very life for the welfare of his sheep. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

God so loved the world he gave his Son. Jesus so loved the sheep, he laid down his life. While we were still SINNERS, Christ died for us. While we were still ENEMIES we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. In this is love, says John, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

The greatest love is so NOT loving yourself but loving, seeking the welfare of, those even who hate you and oppose you. If you truly want to know what love is, you look to the One who IS LOVE and you look to His Son who displayed love in the greatest way by laying down his life for his friends.

As we look to Jesus and his cross, I want you to see this morning four key aspects of his love. These are aspects of the love that the Holy Spirit produces as fruit in the lives of those who belong to Christ Jesus.

First, the love of Jesus was unhesitating and determined. Jesus did not drag his feet when it came to finishing his work on the cross. He never dragged his feet, but especially not even as the prospect of the cross drew near. Luke 9:51 says, "when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he SET HIS FACE to go to Jerusalem." It was for this hour that he came into the world. In fact as he was attempting to alert his disciples of his impending death, he said this: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say?"

'Father, save me from this hour?' But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Did Jesus relish the anguish of the cross? Not on your life! He sweat drops of blood in anticipation of that anguish. But he did not hold back. He did not drag his feet for the greatest display of love ever. He was eager for the Father to glorify his name and he was determined to lay down his life for the sheep. No one took Jesus' life from him. He laid it down of his own accord. He did it for the joy set before him. The love of Jesus was unhesitating and determined.

If we would follow in Jesus' footsteps, if we would walk in the Spirit, then we would grow to be unhesitating and determined in loving God and loving others.

Second, the love of Jesus was sacrificial. This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ LAID DOWN HIS LIFE for us. He did not merely sacrifice a little of his spare time for us. He did not merely pause to allow himself to be momentarily inconvenienced for us. He did not merely give up an afternoon of his favorite activity. He didn't give us a little; he gave everything. He stepped down out of heaven. And he lived every single minute of his life for others! And he died. He laid down his life. He endured hunger, fatigue, discomfort, hostility, meanness, and rejection. He was afflicted. He bore our griefs. He carried our sorrows. He was wounded and crushed. He bled. He thirsted. He was humiliated. And all this for the welfare of his sheep! Friends, THIS is sacrifice like no other. And this says "I love you" in the most profound and deep way. My grandson Titus expresses how great is his love. He says, "Granddad, I love you to the moon. I love you to the all the universe and stars." It is moving whenever he says these things. Who does not like to hear things like that? And when we consider Jesus, we hear him assert that he loves us but then he SHOWS his love. He sacrifices. In his sacrifice Jesus shows us what agape really is.

And this is where we need to measure whether we truly love or not. Jonathan Cruse rightly says, "Jesus wants us to get to the place where we see that living is not the most important part of life. Actually, as a Christian, the most important part of my life is OTHER people's living and welfare. Whatever I can do to enhance that, protect that, or help that is love, and that is what I am called to do—even if it means dying to do so" (23).

Third, not only is the love of Jesus unhesitating and determined as well as sacrificial, his love is also gracious. That is, his will to provide for welfare to others extends to those who deserve to receive his wrath. That is every one of us. As sinners, the wages we earn is death. Our sins cry out for God to act in his complete holiness and judge us—condemn us eternally to separation from God and to punishment. Our sins are reflective of a heart of enmity against God. We were his enemies, children of wrath. But Christ died in order that those who deserve condemnation and who made themselves his enemies might instead receive forgiveness, and eternal life, and reconciliation with God—that for us who turn to him in faith there might no condemnation. This, brothers and sisters, is grace. It is the marvel Paul speaks about when he says that God demonstrates his own love toward us in that while we were STILL SINNERS Christ died for us.

This is the love of Christ. It is gracious. Likewise, love as the fruit of the Spirit is gracious. We are privileged to love like God loves, to love like Christ loves. Hence it is that Jesus tells us: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. Paul reiterated this point in Romans 12. He said never avenge yourselves ... to the contrary, if your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. We do not fully love until we love those who make themselves our enemies, those who rub us the wrong way, those who offend us, and those we are tempted to despise. If it is the fruit of the Spirit, it will not only love those who love us but seek the welfare of those who put our contentment in danger. That is grace. That is how we were loved by Jesus.

Fourth, the love of Christ is merciful. He loved and he loves not the people who can help him get ahead, the ones who might make him look important but he loves the poor and downcast, the weak and unimpressive, the shabby and miserable, the grieving and the downcast. He raised the son of a widow. He healed a poor woman who had spent all her money trying to get well. Jesus fed people who were hungry and stilled storms that made his disciples fearful. He taught the ignorant and those considered riff-raff. He was not repulsed by the lepers who needed healing but cleansed them and separated them from their disease. All of those for whom Jesus felt compassion represent each one of us. Not only are we enemies. We are pitiful. Without his love we would be absolutely miserable.

We must love as those who have been loved when we were repulsive. Love that is fruit of the Spirit is compassionate, and sensitive. It identifies with the sorrow and misery of others.

Each of these ways in which we see the love of Jesus—intentional, sacrificial, gracious, and merciful—lead us back to 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul describes practical ways in which love, AGAPE love, is demonstrated in us personally. He says love is patient. It bears with the weaknesses of others and the slowness of others. Maybe they don't see what we see. Maybe it takes them longer than we would like. The inconvenience of loving them takes longer than we would like, but love is patient. Love is kind. It truly seeks welfare and benefit for others. Love does not envy or boast. Its concern is for others more than self, so it does not envy what others have. It realizes that what it possesses is by God's grace so it has nothing about which to boast. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love that flows from the Spirit has been humbled to know that the love of God itself is given to the undeserving. Therefore, it treats others with compassion. Rudeness is just meanness. Love does not insist on its own way. Yep. That is love. Love as sacrificial and selfless is not looking out for the preferences and comforts of itself but is ready to yield them to the preferences and comforts of another. As intentional and determined, love is not irritable or resentful. It rejoices to be like Jesus.

Love that is fueled by the Spirit of God is captivated with truth and holiness. It interprets what is good for another in terms of righteousness. Righteousness is our good. Therefore, agape does not rejoice when people sin. It does not celebrate the world's pursuit of fleshly satisfaction. It must sometimes refuse to join in worldly celebrations. It will not do anything to help enable another to sin. But love will rejoice in righteousness and truth.

Finally, love endures. If it is real it lasts. It perseveres.

## **V. The Fruit of Love**

Apart from Christ you can do nothing. Loving like this is not something that any one of us could accomplish on our own. Are we commanded to love? Yes, indeed. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. They will know we are Christ's disciples if we love one another. It can only happen as a result of the Spirit of God at work in us. But with the work of the Spirit, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. How do you love those who love you?

How do you love your enemy? Walk by the Spirit and you will carry out the works of the flesh. Walk by the Spirit and you will see his fruit on the branches of your life. Acknowledge that you can't. Pray for his power to be at work in you. Trust and do the right thing. And give God the glory.

And one more thing, you can and you must cultivate a humble heart. Those who are forgiven much love much. Those who realize and remain aware that in the love of God we have received the opposite of what we deserve are far more disposed to love readily, sacrificially, graciously and mercifully. The world thinks it deserves something good. People of faith in Christ realize we deserve nothing good.

A group of Jews approached Jesus one day when he was teaching in Capernaum. They came in behalf of a Roman centurion. The centurion had a servant who was very dear to him but who was sick and at the

point of death. The centurion demonstrated appreciation for the Jews and had built the local synagogue. On that basis the Jews earnestly pleaded with Jesus. They reasoned that this centurion was worthy to have Jesus come and heal his servant. Jesus went with them, but a different attitude was reflected by the centurion. When Jesus was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends, saying to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. Therefore, I did not presume to come to you. But just say the word and let my servant be healed." Jesus lauded the faith of this Gentile. He said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." And he healed the servant.

Some come to Jesus like the Jews with the idea that because of their works they are better than others and deserve something in return for how good they are. They miss the truth. Our righteousness is filthy rags. Others come to Jesus like the centurion. They come to Jesus because no one else can supply what they need. But they come with the full realization that they are not worthy of anything good. They simply trust in His goodness and love. And these show great faith. They receive in spite of what they deserve. And it makes all the difference. The love you have for others is affected by the recognition you have of your own sin and unworthiness. If you think highly of yourself and minimize your sin, you will value the gracious love of God considerably less than if you see yourself for the worm that you are. Then you are like the prostitute who came to Jesus while he was reclining at table in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Simon gave him no water for his feet, no kiss, and no oil to anoint his head. The woman, however, whose sins were many, wet Jesus' feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them profusely, and anointed them out of an alabaster flask filled with ointment.

### **Conclusion**

The better we know the love of the Father and the love of the Son, the better we will love him, the better we will love each other, and the better we will love our enemies as a fruit of the Spirit.