

Title: *The Fruit of the Spirit is Love*

Text: Galatians 5:22

For some time, I've been wanting to preach a sermon series entitled *Portrait of a Christian*. What does a Christian look like?

This is Mother's Day as well and it is possible that for some of us, our understanding of love comes from the love and the nurture we received from our mothers. It is sad that for some folks here this morning that might not be the case. Maybe your mother was cold, distant, and unloving – nothing that fills the Hallmark card picture of motherhood. Maybe you would like nothing more than to become a mother but God has not yet given you children. We want to be sensitive to you today because after all, we are talking about love and bring a challenge that is applicable to all of us, whether we're a mother or not.

So, for the next 9 weeks we will be looking at what a Christian ought to look like. What are those traits that ought to show forth in our life as the Holy Spirit begins to fill us up more and more have his work in our life? Paul lists 9 characteristics – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

To give some historical context to why Paul wrote these words, he is writing his most angry letter. In the letter to the Galatians, he does not include any expression of thanksgiving. Instead he launches in to his defense of the gospel. At issue is an influence known as "Judaizing". That meant that they didn't trust the simple grace of Jesus Christ. They were falling prey to people telling them that they had to subject themselves to the Jewish law.

Paul says that's the greatest mistake you can make. I won't recap the whole book of Galatians, I'll just pick up at the beginning of chapter 5 where Paul says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."

In 5:13, he says, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

He sets some more context for any discussion of the fruit of the Spirit in 5:15-21, "¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What a terrible way to live. Sin has pleasures for a season and Satan masquerades as an angel of light but to live a life not just

of idolatry, witchcraft and debauchery but one of selfish ambition, factions, and envy, is a way that leads to death and destruction.

There's a better way. It's the way of the Spirit. It's the way of surrendering your life to God's Spirit so that his creative and empowering work can be done in your life. They are fruit. Fruit is not something that is the product of straining and stressing. It's produced as a part of a natural process.

The question first and foremost as we think about fruit, is what is it and how do I get it? Let me also point out that there is one other tendency some people have that kind of drives me crazy. It is to mention the fruits of the Spirit. The biblical term is fruit, singular. They come in a cluster. Think of them as a bunch of grapes. You get all of them. Some of them may be bigger or more apparent than others, but all of these characteristics – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – ought to be evident.

On a recent visit to two California vineyards, author Margaret Feinberg discovered that vintners must adopt a long-term approach to their work. According to Feinberg:

The first year a vintner plants shoots of vines rather than seeds because these yield the strongest vines. At the end of the first growing season, he cuts them back. A second year passes. He cuts them back again. Only after the third year does he see his first viable clusters of grapes. Serious vintners leave those clusters on the vines. For most vintners, it's not until year four that they bring in their first harvest.

For those growing grapes for winemaking, they'll bottle their harvest, but won't taste the fruit of their labors until year seven or eight. Most vineyards in Napa Valley won't reach a breakeven point for their investment until year fifteen, eighteen or beyond. Applying these insights to her spiritual life, Feinberg writes,

Sometimes I look at my own life and wonder, *Why am I not more fruitful? And why does pruning have to hurt so much? Why does cultivating a healthy crop take so long?* Yet those questions circle around the here and now. God's perspective is much different. Like a good vineyard owner, he knows how to bring about fruitfulness better than I ever will. And he is patient with me, more patient than I am with myself ... [Also], as we fulfill our callings ... we must recognize that like the vintner's, our fruitfulness will not come overnight. The first harvest of our labors may not come for three or five years.

So, this is a long-term process that doesn't come overnight. It doesn't excuse any lack of fruitfulness on our part, it should give us some comfort though to know that it takes time for all of this fruit to develop.

Someone said, "Love, joy, and all that other good stuff are the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of our efforts. We can't produce them on our own. Period. The fruit comes only as we submit our lives and let the Spirit control us."

The first of these fruits is love. We love love. We like to use the word love and to throw it around. We know that love is the

most important and most cardinal of Christian virtues. I could give you a textbook, dictionary definition of love: love is a commitment of the will to act, even at cost to myself, in the best interests of another person.

Maybe that touches you. If you're the kind of person who prefers a picture, let me give you a description of what love is. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

To understand what love truly is, the place we have to start is with God. He gives us the first picture of love and if we are to grow a God-kind of love into our own life, it will be as we allow Him, by the person of His Holy Spirit to indwell us and to live his life fully through us. God's love is seen in His nature which is to be completely and totally self-giving.

I John helps us understand God's love when it says, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.¹¹ Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Notice that God loves because his nature is love. Love is not an emotion. There are some emotional aspects to it. There are ups and downs and times of unspeakable joy and of great disappointment and sorrow when it comes genuinely to loving someone. We are commanded to love but love is not merely a feeling. Sometimes when you've been hurt or disappointed by someone, it's not easy to conjure warm, gooey feelings of love. John says, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Paul states it, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In spite of whatever sorrow or wrath God may have felt over our sin and rebellion, he gave. He acted sacrificially on our behalf. He gave His Son knowing that some would welcome him and receive him but that most would not. I heard someone say one time that God is a gambler. That really struck me the wrong way for a lot of reasons. A gamble is risk that is left totally up to chance. A risk is in a little bit of a different category. God took risks for us. It's always interesting to think about the parable of the vineyard. The vineyard owner has a vineyard and hires it out and sends his servants to check out the work and to collect his income and the workers turn on the servants and beat them and kill them. Luke says, then the vineyard owner says, "I will send my son, whom I love; perhaps they will respect him."¹⁴ "But when the tenants saw him, they talked the matter over. 'This is the heir,' they said. 'Let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.'¹⁵ So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them?"

If I were a business owner and was in a tough labor situation and the labor had beaten up my two top associates, I would

not be sending my son. That would be crazy, but God does some things that seem crazy and irrational.

Beth Moore tells a story about crazy, irrational love. She says:

I will never forget watching an evening talk show featuring the story of the parents and killer of a young college student. The killer was his best friend. The weapon was high alcohol content inside a speeding automobile. ...

What made this particular feature prime-time viewing? The parents had forgiven the young driver... And if that was not enough, they had taken him in as their own. This young man sat at the table in the chair which was once occupied by their only son. He slept in the son's bed. He worked with the victim's father, teaching seminars on safety. He shared their fortune and supported their causes. He spoke about the one he had slain in ways only someone who knew him intimately could have. ...

Why did these parents do such a thing? Because it gave them peace. The interviewer was amazed; I was amazed. I kept trying to put myself in the parents' position—but I could not. Then, as the tears streamed down my cheeks, I heard the Spirit of God whisper to my heart and say: "No wonder you cannot relate. You have put yourself in the wrong position. You, my child, are the driver." God was the parent who not only forgave, but also invited me to sit at His table in the space my Savior left for me. As a result, I have peace.

If God has demonstrated this kind of love for me, shouldn't I then develop these attributes into my character so that I can share this love with others? That's what we're talking about. It's not just some display of emotion or some warm and gooey feeling. Love is a commitment of the will to act in the best interest of someone else even at personal cost to ourselves. It is a willingness to sacrifice for someone else. When Jesus says, "Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself," he is not commanding self-love as much as he is assuming self-love. Even the most unhealthy, self-loathing person there is will want good things for themselves. It could be that their self-loathing stems from a deep disappointment that they want some good things that they haven't gotten and they've decided that they are unworthy of receiving any good things. The key to love is to want those good things for others that you want for yourself.

When I was single, I had a hard time getting excited about weddings because I would wonder why them and not me? If you're in that boat can you truly wish for someone else what you want for yourself more than anything? If you're unemployed and you find out that someone at church has just gotten a promotion, can you rejoice with them instead of grinding your teeth and saying, "Why them and not me?" When you're driving an old clunker and it's all you can do to keep it on the road, can you be happy for someone who has just gotten a nice, new car?

On another level, what is it you want for yourself? People to understand you, to be patient with you, to give you the benefit of

the doubt. Isn't that really what Paul describes in I Corinthians 13?

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

What is striking is to look at how many of those attributes coincide with the fruit of the Spirit.

For many of us, a godly, Christian mother is the earliest example we ever saw of love. Mothers believe in us when no one else does. Mothers will give themselves in a heartbeat for their children. I heard the story of a woman who learned an invaluable lesson from her 8-year old daughter.

Tracy is one of the worship leaders at her church. One Sunday, as she sat at the piano, she talked about the difficult week she'd just been through. It was chaotic, she said—a mess of petty crises on top of a rash of minor accidents, all mixed up in a soup can of crazy busyness. It had left her weary and cranky. She got up that Sunday to lead worship and felt spent, with nothing more to give.

However, Tracy's 8-year-old daughter, Brenna, helped her gain new perspective earlier that morning. When Tracy had walked into the living room, the window was covered with scrawl. Using a crayon, Brenna had scribbled something across the picture window, top to bottom and side to side.

At first, it seemed like one more mess for Tracy to clean up. Then she saw what Brenna had written: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindnece, goodnece, faithfulnece, gentnece and selfcantrol* (in Brenna's delightful spelling).

Mark writes: "Tracy stopped, drank it in. Her heart flooded with light. It was exactly what she needed to be reminded about: the gift of the fruit of the Spirit that arises, not by our circumstances, but by Christ within us.

And then Tracy noticed one more thing Brenna had written at the edge of the window: *Love one another*. Only Brenna, in her creative spelling, had written: *Love won another*."

As Mark concludes: "It's what Jesus has been trying to tell us all along. You were won that way. Now go and do likewise." Since you can't do that in your own strength, I'll give you my Spirit to empower to live the life you've always wanted.

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