



## *The Fruit of the Spirit - Love*

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Love is one of the most often used, misapplied, and misunderstood words in the English language. Its usage is nearly limitless. People say they love everything from peanut butter to pork rinds, fireworks to Ferraris, lilies to literature. The semantic range is so broad and flexible as to render the word almost meaningless; for when a word is used to mean almost anything, it means almost nothing.

How then do we go about discussing the meaning of love from the New Testament perspective as a fruit of the Spirit? Despite the colloquial misunderstanding and misuse of the term, love is one of the most important and fundamental concepts in the New Testament. The word used in Galatians 5:22 is agape.<sup>1</sup>

To begin, let us say love is a divine attribute (1 John 4:8--"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love")<sup>2</sup> that is best understood as the motivation behind redemption (John 3:16--"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life"), best revealed in the person and work of Christ (1 John 3:16--"We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us"), and best expressed by Christian love within the body of Christ (John 13:35--"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another").

Essentially, it is a relational term that, within the context of redemption, defines our relationship to ourselves (1 John 3:2), to God (Matthew 22:37), to our neighbor (Matthew 22:39), and to the members of Christ's body (John 13:35).

The last aspect of God's love mentioned above is the most relevant and important one to the Christian experience. The apostle John writes, "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7,8). This dimension of love is what I choose to call "covenant love." It is the love of God that stands behind, in, and through His redemption in Jesus Christ. It is a love born in the heart of God for lost humanity, revealed in His redemptive acts throughout history, culminating in the sending of Jesus into the world as an offering for sin. It is a love incarnated in His Son Jesus, the Christ (John 14:8), but also a love that continues to be incarnated in the lives of His disciples.

Christians are called to "walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6) and so model and manifest Christ's love. But what is Christ's love like? In the life and ministry of Jesus we possess the clearest revelation of God's love (John 1:18). An examination of the life of Christ as portrayed in the New Testament yields at least five characteristics of God's love expressed in Jesus.

1. God's love is a self-giving love.

Love motivates the very heart of God to give. "For God so loved the world, that He gave . . ." (John 3:16). This love was manifested in Christ who, Paul tells us, "also loved you, and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). While we readily see that God's love is witnessed in the act of giving His Son for a sin offering, we seldom realize the nature of that love as self-giving. The mystery of the Incarnation affirms that the God who gave His Son is the God who gave himself. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Jesus, while on earth, perfectly modeled this self-giving love in His death on the cross. Thus, Paul confesses that he lives “by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20, NIV). Jesus’ love was sacrificial, not only in the Old Testament sense of an atonement, but also in the sense of spending of self in the interest of others:

“Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16).

## 2. God’s love is an intimate love.

The concept of intimacy suffers from the same societal abuse as the term love. All too often it is restricted to matters of sex. What is missing is the relational dimension. Intimacy involves close personal interaction resulting in commitment, emotional bonding, and mutual care and concern. Such interaction requires a significant investment of time to really know a person. Jesus spent nearly 3 years with His disciples. They ate, drank, slept, worked, and ministered together. Their lives were interwoven and inextricably linked. Herein lies a true picture of Christian fellowship.<sup>3</sup>

Intimacy speaks also of personal involvement. It speaks of interaction on the feeling level. While persons may discuss the weather, their jobs, hobbies, etc., it is only when they share feelings that intimacy is generated. This is when values are communicated, and we begin to know a person as a person. Jesus knew His disciples. He called them individually. He took time with each one so as to know their strengths, weaknesses, and temperaments. “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of” (Luke 9:55, KJV), he said to James and John, the “Sons of Thunder.” Our Lord’s intimacy with Peter enabled Him to look beyond the impetuous and vacillating disciple and declare His confidence that after his restoration Peter would strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:32).

Intimacy involves personal care. It includes concern for one another’s physical needs. Acts 2:45 portrays a church that cared enough to share: “and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.” Intimacy moves to concern for each other’s emotional needs. Paul enjoins us to “comfort those who are in any affliction” with the comfort we have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:4). However, intimate love finds its highest expression in the care for one another’s spiritual well-being. Such concern can be defined as caring enough to confront.

Nowhere is intimate love more practically expressed than in the confrontation of sin. Such confrontation is not an intrusion into the life of a brother or sister; rather it is a responsibility that comes with being a member of the same body of Christ. Furthermore, it is a divine mandate: “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

Love confronts sin. It does not wait until the sin becomes a cancer and the only hope for survival is radical surgery-- i.e., to excise that member from the body of Christ. Love takes action. It does what is best for the one loved, not what is convenient. Love confronts sin, not to criticize or condemn, but to restore.<sup>4</sup> The word in Galatians 6:1 means “to make whole by mending.” Such confrontation is to be done in a gentle spirit of humility, not one of arrogant self-righteousness. Nevertheless, confrontation of this kind demands the rapport of intimacy. How can it be seen as anything but an invasion of one’s privacy until a bridge of intimate love is built that can bear the weight of loving confrontation?

## 3. It is an unconditional love.

This aspect of God’s love is perhaps the most difficult to grasp. It is so because it is contrary to the very core of man’s selfish nature. So often we love because it serves us to do so. There is a “profit motive” behind much of what we call love. Couples marry because they feel they can’t live apart. They profess that they need one another, that each fills and fulfills the other’s needs. What is often overlooked is that, despite the romantic rhetoric, the love shared is essentially selfish and self-serving. It is founded not on commitment, but on performance.

God's love stands in stark contrast. God took the initiative to love us first (1 John 4:19) before there was anything in us worth loving. "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). In fact, as sinners we are described as "alienated [from God] and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds (Colossians 1:21).

Such a love involves a total acceptance patterned after Christ: "Wherefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us" (Romans 15:7). Furthermore, it involves a total or unlimited forgiveness such as we have experienced from Christ, "forgiving each other . . . just as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13). Jesus helped Peter learn that true forgiveness sets no numerical limits (Matthew 18: 22). The unconditional status of such forgiveness is epitomized by the words uttered from the cross: "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

#### 4. It is a vulnerable love.

There is a "risk factor" in loving like God loves. To love unselfishly, intimately, and unconditionally will expose you repeatedly to the risk of being misunderstood, exploited, and abused. To embark on such a course of love, a person must be willing to expose himself continually to hurt and rejection. Inwardly we recoil from the thought of such a prospect. Our psychical defense mechanism programs us to "pull up the walls" when rejected. How often do counselors hear words like, "I'll never let him (or her) hurt me again!" But we must recognize that Jesus' life was full of rejections.

Jesus was rejected by King Herod at His birth (Matthew 2) and by the religious leaders during His ministry. "He came to those who were His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). He was misunderstood by friend, foe, and even family (Mark 3:21). He experienced the betrayal of the Passover crowds, calling for His crucifixion while their Palm Sunday praises still rang in His memory. He experienced the subsequent betrayal of one of His own, then the abandonment of the rest in the hour of His trial. In the end, He would sense the abandonment of His own Heavenly Father when he cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).

#### 5. It is an enduring love.

Finally, we maintain that God's love endures. In the Old Testament the word for God's covenant love is *hesed*, and numerous times it is declared to be "everlasting."<sup>5</sup> *Hesed* is Jehovah's steadfast and enduring love for His covenant people. This love pursued Israel throughout her endless cycles of rebellion. As Isaiah wrote, "I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people" (Isaiah 65:2).

This same love was expressed in Jesus who "for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Hebrews 12:2). What should be noted is that the cross merely climaxes Jesus' entire life of obedience to the will of God. Paul tells us this obedience began with His incarnation--"being made in the likeness of men . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7,8). The author of Hebrews tells us "He learned obedience from the things which He suffered" (5:8). Later the same writer would encourage his readers with the example of Jesus, "For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart" (12:3).

While we acknowledge that love sent Jesus to the cross for us, let us remember the nature of that love--an enduring love. Let those of us who aspire to evince God's love in our lives take inventory. What is the staying power of our love? How far are we willing to go in loving, in forbearing, and restoring one another? To what extent will we go to reach the lost for Christ?

The above portrayal of love seems overwhelming to most people. As with all goals that appear far beyond our reach, there is the tendency to become disheartened and not even try. But we must remember two things about this love: It is a fruit; and it is of the Spirit. If the analogy holds true, fruit is cultivated and grown, not produced in the sense of making or manufacturing it. It is the natural result of a healthy fruit-bearing vine, tree, or plant. Second, it is fruit that the Spirit produces.<sup>6</sup> Here is where the analogy of fruit-bearing breaks down, or at least needs to be refined. It is the believer's part to cultivate the work of the Spirit in his life more than it is to grow fruit.

When it comes to God's sacrificial, self-giving love, who can comprehend, let alone practice it? It would be impossible were it not for the fact that God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Who but God can work such love in us? Only through the Spirit's life and power can we possess and express a truly intimate, unconditional, vulnerable, and enduring love. It is, after all, God who is at work in us "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

Endnotes

1. Agape and the verb agapan are the most common terms used for love or the action of loving in the New Testament. While other terms are used (e.g., philia/philein and storge/stergein) they appear comparatively few times. Agape is used overwhelmingly in the contexts of Christian love in its various relationships, involving God, Jesus, and the believer.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations in this article are from the New American Standard Bible.
3. The Greek word for fellowship (koinonia) speaks of a mutual participation or sharing in something. Among Christians it refers to sharing in some aspect of the redemptive life in Jesus Christ.
4. The word karteridzo can be translated to mend, restore, or put in order. It is used of Jesus' disciples mending their nets in Matthew 4:21 (Cf. Mark 1:19).
5. See 2 Chronicles 5:13; Ezra 3:11; Psalm 106:1; 107:1; 118:1,2,3,4,29; 136 (entire Psalm).
6. Here, there is little material difference between the subjective genitive and the genitive of source in the phrase "fruit of the Spirit." The Spirit can be viewed as both the source and prime mover in fruit-bearing without denying man's active involvement in the process. This is because the Christian who has received the Spirit (Galatians 3:2) has entered into a living relationship as well as a new dimension of spiritual dynamic.

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