

The Fruit of the Spirit Is – Love

A writer by the name of Kathleen Kroll Driscoll wrote a column in the *Rockland (Massachusetts) South Shore News*, giving advice to women on how to discern the character of the man they are dating. She wrote:

A [movie] theater is an interesting place to analyze someone new in your life. Does he have a phobia about sitting on the aisle? When everyone else is sniffing and crying, is he busy unwrapping licorice and covering up emotions? Does he hog the communal armrest? Does he put his feet on the seat in front? Is he reluctant to ask people to move over one seat so the two of you can sit together? Everything you want to know about your potential mate can be discerned during a movie.¹

If asked, I think every person, not just every Christian but every person, believes that the nine expressions of the fruit of the Spirit that we are studying this summer are good values. And most would also say that they, at least to some degree, possess all nine. Especially on dating websites, what do we read? “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... yep, that’s me!” And if asked which of the nine is most dominant in their life, I think most say, “Well, that would have to be love. I’m a very loving person.” But what would the movie theater test reveal?

Now, we don’t have time today to all go to a movie and rate each other. But I think we’ve got an even better test—the Word of God. King David prayed this prayer:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts! (Ps. 139:23)

Are you willing to say that to God right now? Let’s pray...

[I will pray and ask God to search us and tell us the truth.]

As has been said, the fruit of the Spirit is singular. So, think of it this way; it’s one fruit with multiple flavors. Today’s flavor is love. Let’s take a bite. We begin with a...

I. Definition of Biblical Love

I say “biblical love” because in Greek there are at least four different words for love, while in English there’s one word with multiple meanings. And this, you see, is part of our problem. The English word “love” can be stretched so thin that it means both “I love chocolate” AND “I love my wife.” But those are two very different kinds of loves. (At least, I hope for you those are two very different kinds of loves!)

Not so in Greek. In Greek, there are four different words for “love.” First is the word *Storge*. *Storge* refers to family love, the natural love between a parent and a child. Second, is the word *Philia*. *Philia* is a friendship love. It is warm, tender, and affectionate. It is from this word that Philadelphia got its name. Thirdly, is the word *eros*. *Eros* refers to sexual love. Over time, this Greek word took on a permanent connotation of lust. The Greek word *eros* does not appear in the Bible.

Finally, there is the word *agape*. *Agape* indicates unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill. Listen to William Barclay’s description of *agape* in action:

...it means that no matter what that person does to us, no matter how he treats us, no matter if he insults us or injures us or grieves us, we will never allow any bitterness

against him to invade our hearts, but will regard him with that unconquerable benevolence and goodwill which will seek nothing but his highest good.²

Now his highest good might be arrested. The word isn't a weak word. It's a tough word. Jesus, speaking to His disciples the night He was arrested, used this word. Listen:

“This is my commandment, that you love (*agape*) one another as I have loved (*agaped*) you. Greater love (*agape*) has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (Jn. 15:12-14)

We hear that and we say, “Okay, all right, I get it. I'm supposed to show “unconquerable benevolence and goodwill” to my friends. I think I can do that. I mean, it's not going to be easy, but even if I had to lay down my life for my family or friends, I would do it with God's help.”

So yes, that's what Jesus said on the night of His arrest. But we need to remember the context of this. Jesus was speaking to His closest friends on earth about what He was going to do within hours FOR THEM. He was going to “lay down his life” for *these* friends. But those weren't the only friends He was laying down His life for and this wasn't all He had to say about whom we should love. Three years earlier, in one of His first sermons, Jesus said this:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall (*agape*) love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, (*agape*) Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ... (Matt. 5:43-44)

And in Luke's account of this sermon, he adds this:

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you... And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. ...(*agape*) love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” (Luke 6:27-31, 35)

This is so profound, I'm just struck silent by it. What I've just read, is so radically different from what we hear, see and feel in our world today, isn't it? I don't know about you, but just reading it causes Satan to go nuts in my head. He's literally shouting, “What??? No, no, no! No one can live that way!! You'll be crushed living like that. You can't love your enemy, you've got to resist your enemy; strike first! The best defense is a great and aggressive offense! Don't listen to that irrelevant teaching from the ancient past. It doesn't work today!”

But is this irrelevant? Is Jesus telling us to lay down our weapons and surrender to our enemies or is He calling on us to fight, to go to war only to fight with different weapons. This is the biblical definition of love, which is a strategy to win a spiritual war. Next, we need to ask...

II. What's the Reason for It?

Why does Jesus tell us to practice this divine love? Frankly, Jesus gave the clear reason for it in verse 45 and 48 of Matthew's account.

“... so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. ... “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:45, 48)

Let me clarify something here in the grammar. Jesus is NOT saying, “You must be perfect SO THAT you may be a son or daughter of the Father in heaven.” Without getting too technical, Jesus is completing His argument about the law. Throughout the whole sermon, He's been quoting the law and saying, “You've heard that it was said...” meaning, “you've heard that

it was said in the law.” But many of the things Jesus says that they’ve heard aren’t even IN the law. This passage is an example. Jesus says... (Matt. 5:43)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”

And yes, the law says we must love our neighbor. But nowhere does it tell us to hate our enemies! We are told to hate some of the things our enemies might do, but we are never commanded to hate our enemies as people.

So, Jesus is correcting false teaching and is more clearly describing God’s goal in the law which is to win people over to become His sons and daughters. But Jesus also clarifies that obedience to the law is not possible in our own strength. This is the Catch – 22 of the law! If we could keep the law perfectly it would save us. But no one can perfectly keep the law! Obedience is only possible AFTER we’ve entered into a saving relationship with God the Father through Jesus. Listen carefully to what Jesus taught in John 14:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him ... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” (John 14:15, 23-24)

Do you see it? A love relationship MUST come before we will be able to keep the law. Once we’ve entered that love relationship with the Father through Jesus His Son, NOW our sins will be forgiven and with the Holy Spirit enters us and helps us, as we begin to obey.

But no one will ever be forced into this relationship. If your objective is to gain rights here on earth, to get ‘your piece of the pie,’ to ‘hang on to your stuff,’ be ‘compensated for emotional damages;’ then, revenge, retribution and jumbo lawsuits are your best play. Love your friends, liquidate your enemies. Or, liquidate your friends and make them your enemies.

And you can choose to go that route. God does not force anyone to obey Him. Even if you’re His son or daughter, He gives you the freedom to hold a grudge, to hate your enemy, to refuse to forgive. But there’s one thing that will never be true of you if you choose to live that way. You will never on this earth, know the joy of being a son or daughter of God.

Russ Ford is a death row chaplain. He knows first-hand about the effects of unforgiveness. Russ says this, “Jesus didn’t teach us to love our enemies for their good. It is for our own good – to keep us from becoming the enemy.”³

Jesus speaks of us choosing his version of radical love, not to make our lives difficult but to fill our lives with divine joy! Eugene Peterson translates Luke 6:32-36 this way:

“Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them*! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that’s charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.” (Lk. 6:32-36, The Message)

This is why Jesus, at the end of His life, said to His disciples:

“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11) So, one question remains...

III. How Do I Get This Flavor of Love Activated in My Life?

How can I possibly love like this? Let's look at what Jesus said in John 15. Ten times in the first 15 verses, Jesus uses the word "abide" which simply means "remain." In verse 5 Jesus plainly shows us where the fruit comes from; how it is produced:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Please notice that it doesn't say, "Apart from me you can do less!" No, it says that apart from Him we can do nothing. In fact, He went on to say that if we're separated from Him, we'll face very negative consequences. He warned:

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." (John 15:6)

Then, in verse 11, He repeats the message that He gave back in His first sermon:

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:11)

Does that describe your Christian life today, full of joy? At the end of his book, *Secrets of the Vine*, Bruce Wilkinson admitted he didn't have complete joy at one point of his own life, even though he was a mature Christian. He was the president of a major ministry, but deep in his heart, the joy was gone. A ministry that once had seemed so important, now tasted like sawdust in his mouth.

He called a good friend who lived in California and went to see him. His friend was a Christian counselor named George, who sat Bruce down and said, "Tell me your whole life story and don't hurry." Several hours later, when Bruce finished, George said, "Well, you're right on schedule." Bruce said, "On schedule for what?"

George said, "I've seen this in a thousand men just like you." Then, he held out both hands at different heights and said, "When you began your ...ministry, you relied heavily on God because your competence was low. But over the years, naturally, your competence increased. As it did, your reliance on God decreased. It wasn't that you didn't love God, you just didn't think you NEEDED Him as much. Today, your competence is high. You've seen a lot, learned a lot, done a lot and God has made you fruitful. Bruce," George said, "The Lord is saying, 'Put relationship with Me first again.' If you do, you'll find the joy that you're missing now, and so much more."

Bruce went home and began to spend time with God differently. Instead of praying, "Lord, give me peace and patience and self-control," he just prayed, "Lord, fill me today with Yourself. Teach me today more about who You are. Lord, today I'm going to carry on a conversation with You all day, as if You were standing right next to me."⁴

Do you see what Bruce was beginning to do? He was beginning to "abide," to remain in Christ all day long. Bruce admitted that it was awkward at first. His first journal entry was, "God, I don't know what to say to You." But after about two months, he wrote:

... things started to shift. It was as if a great Presence walked into my room in those early morning hours and sat down near me ... His passion for me, His purposes for my life – not just for the *idea* of my life, but for that particular day, hour, and minute – began to rise up from the pages of my Bible ... The pleasures of abiding – have redefined the scope and impact of God's work through me. I see fruit everywhere I turn. Yet not even one grape is a result of working harder.⁵

Oh, friend, have you discovered this true source of fruitfulness? Looking back, Bruce said, "I'd become an expert at serving God but a novice at being His friend." Today, right now, let's put down our tools, our computers, our big plans for a more productive future. Let's also put

down our fears of failure, of not being able to love our enemies. Put that aside. Let's come to Jesus just to be with Him, just to love Him and to let Him love us. If we're not connected to the vine, we won't produce less fruit. We'll produce NO fruit. Let's get connected, right now, to Jesus. Let's pray ...

¹ Craig Brian Larson, *Contemporary Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers and Writers* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1996), p. 27

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 173, 174

³ Russ Ford, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 34

⁴ Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of the Vine* (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 89-92

⁵ Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of the Vine* (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p.102