

Followers of the Way

The Fruit of the Spirit – Love

Steve Campbell 14-04-24

Gal 5:13-26

'Have you had your five-a-day?' You remember the 2003 government campaign aimed at getting us to eat more healthily, stating that eating five portions of fruit and veg every day would help protect against common health problems like heart disease? The Bible goes even further and advises we ought to have nine-a-day! I am, of course, talking about the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22f, 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.'

This passage, I'm sure, is familiar to us all. Irene-Maria and I taught this to a group of young people in a summer Bible school many years ago; and John Stott prayed each morning that he would bear the fruit of the Spirit in his life, a discipline we all could benefit from.

In the passage, Paul contrasts these spiritual virtues with the acts of the sinful nature which, he claims, are obvious: 'sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.' This is not an exhaustive list.

It's interesting that Paul uses the term '*acts of the sinful nature*' as opposed to '*fruit of the Spirit*'. The Greek word *ergon*, from which we get ergonomics, means deed or work and denotes a deliberate choice. Those who carry out the acts of the sinful nature choose to do so, whereas fruit is something that comes naturally. An apple tree doesn't choose to grow apples, it does so simply because it is an apple tree. In the same way, a Christian will bear the fruit of the Spirit because they are abiding in Christ.

The Fruit of the Spirit is nine-fold and the first is love.

Love is a universal theme; it is the subject of books and poetry, painting and sculpture, and film. Also many songs have been sung about love -

1950s, Elvis sang, Love Me Tender;

1960s, Beatles declared, All You Need is Love;

1970s, Bee Gees asked, How Deep is Your Love;

1980s, Stevie Wonder dialled up, I Just Called to Say I Love You;

1990s, Wet Wet Wet reminded us, Love is All Around. That's where my musical knowledge ends!

Of course, the love proclaimed by the world is very far removed from what we find in the Bible. A dictionary definition of love is: to have a great affection, passionate desire, longings or feelings for something or someone. It is led by our feelings or emotions, whereas in the Bible it is an act of the will.

There are two words in the New Testament translated love – *phileo* = brotherly love, and *agape* = divine love. It is the latter, *agape*, that is used to describe the first fruit of the Spirit. *Agape* was uncommon in Greek until the apostles used it to describe the self-giving love of God. No other word could do it justice, and since Christians began to use it, this has become the standard word for that kind of love.

We are told that ‘God is love’ (1 Jn 4:8) and he loves us with that *agape* love, the kind of love that can only come from him. How did he show us his love? That’s easy – John 3:16, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’ We are over familiar with these words and we read it as if it says, ‘God loved the world *so much...*’ Some versions actually put it like that, but that is inaccurate. A far better rendition is given by the GOD’S WORD Translation:

God loved the world this way: He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life.

God’s *agape*, self-giving love for us is shown supremely in the giving of his Son, who gave himself up on the cross for us. But how are we to display that *agape* love?

We must first listen to Jesus: in the Upper Room he spoke to his disciples, saying, ‘Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command’ (John 15:13-14). Jesus laid down his life for us, and we are counted as his friends if we do what he commands. I want to focus on three commands of Jesus, all pertaining to love:

The Greatest Commandment;

the Second Greatest Commandment;

the New Commandment

1. The Greatest Commandment

When Jesus was asked by an expert in the law, ‘Of all the commandments which is the greatest?’ He replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, part of the Shema, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ (Mk 12:30)

This was standard fare, every faithful Jew would have known this; in fact they would recite this prayer each morning and evening as part of their devotions. God had made a covenant with Israel, but rather than it springing from a barren legalism based on necessity and duty, it was to arise from a relationship based on love. As Moses said in Deut 7:7-8, ‘The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you’

The LORD chose Israel because he loved them, and they were to reciprocate that love. Jesus declares this to be the greatest commandment, which is now for *all* people, because God’s love is shown not only by redeeming Israel from slavery in Egypt, but by redeeming all mankind from slavery to sin through the blood of his precious Son.

So how do we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? Some have tried to break this down into its component parts. I don't believe this is necessary, it just means loving him with our whole being, all that we are and all that we have. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:1, 'offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship' (or reasonable service). This is what loving God looks like.

2. The Second Greatest Commandment

Closely tied with the first, so that they really go together, Jesus this time quoted from Leviticus 19:18 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Paul actually used this quote in Galatians 5:14 in the build up to the Fruit of the Spirit, saying 'the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command'. Paul is not here contradicting what Jesus said, and we can be sure he has the Greatest Commandment in mind also. He is summarising the law just as Jesus did, and he is not claiming that loving your neighbour is an alternative to loving God, but a concrete expression of that love. As John later wrote in his first epistle, ch.4:20:

'If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates a brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has *not* seen.'

In Luke's version of the Greatest Commandment, it is the expert in the law who gives the answer, prompting a further question from him, 'And who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:29). This leads Jesus to tell one of his most well known parables – the Good Samaritan. We all know the story, how a Jewish man was attacked on the road to Jericho and left for dead; a priest and Levite from his own religious community both saw him and passed by on the other side; but when his sworn enemy, a Samaritan, saw the man, he did the unthinkable – he stopped and tended his wounds, placed him on his donkey and brought him to an inn, stayed to look after him and paid the expenses of his keep.

Then came the nub, instead of answering the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' Jesus asked, 'Who was a neighbour to the man?' The expert in the law had to admit it was the hated Samaritan by saying, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Then came Jesus' challenge, 'Go and do likewise.' To fulfil the Second Greatest Commandment we mustn't ask, 'Who is my neighbour?' but rather, 'Who can I be a neighbour to?'

Jesus' parable is eminently memorable, but here's the thing, I don't believe the Good Samaritan existed. To a first century Jew the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan! He only existed in Jesus' mind, because *he* is the Good Samaritan. No-one other than the Son of God, who came to this earth full of grace and truth, could treat an enemy with such self-giving love. That's why we need Jesus if we would ever hope to love our neighbour as ourselves, because he alone can give us the grace to fulfil the commandment.

Richard Wurmbrand was a Romanian pastor, imprisoned and tortured for 14 years under Ceauşescu. After his release, he moved to the West and founded the Christian Mission to the Communist World. On learning of the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, he said, 'I regret not having been in Romania when Ceauşescu was judged. I would have volunteered to defend him.'

That's what it means to love your neighbour as yourself.

3. The New Commandment

Again, speaking to his disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus declared, 'A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13:34-35)

This is another commandment of Jesus, but why is it new and how does it differ from 'love your neighbour as your-self'?

The two commandments, to love God and love our neighbour, sum up the law and the prophets, and are universal, showing all mankind how they ought to live. This New Commandment is intimate, personal, meant only for his disciples, his brothers and sisters, those who love and follow him. We are to love one another as he has loved us. This is even more demanding than loving our neighbour.

At the beginning of the Upper Room discourse in John 13 we are told, 'Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.' (Jn 13:1) The foot washing was an example of Jesus' self-giving love which was fully played out on the cross. He laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for each other. This is a high cost indeed, that we can only hope to fulfil by faith in our Saviour.

Again, he alone gives us the grace to offer this *agape* love to one another.

The apostle Peter arrogantly proclaimed that he was willing to die with Jesus, but when the hour of testing came, the mighty rock crumbled and he denied his Lord. Jesus did not reject him, but met him on the shore of Galilee after his resurrection and gently restored him with a three-fold question, 'Do you love me?', echoing Peter's three-fold denial, and a three-fold commission, 'Feed my sheep.'

I mentioned that the New Testament uses two Greek words for love but our English translations don't always pick up on that. The first two times Jesus asks, 'Do you love me?' he uses *agape* and Peter answers with *phileo*; but the third time Jesus also uses *phileo*. Some see no significance in this, but I believe nothing in the Bible is there by chance. Initially, Peter is asked if he loves Jesus with the same self-giving, self-sacrificing love that the Master has shown him; in other words, is he willing to give up his life for him. At that time, he was not, as he could only answer, 'I love you with a *phileo* brotherly love.'

Jesus came down to Peter's level and asked, 'Do you love me with a *phileo* love?' I believe this is why Peter was hurt by this third question.

Nevertheless, according to the love Peter had at that time, Jesus still commissioned him and called the apostle to 'Follow me.' However, after the Spirit came at Pentecost, Peter was filled with the fruit of the Spirit and was able at last to display that *agape* love he had lacked. And he did, as Jesus had predicted, gave up his life for the Lord when he was crucified in Rome upside down.

The fruit of the Spirit is love.

If we love Jesus, we will do what he commands by fulfilling:

The Greatest Commandment: love the Lord...
the Second Greatest Commandment: love your neighbour
the New Commandment: love one another...

I close with the prayer which John Stott began his day with:

Heavenly Father, I pray that this day, I may live in your presence and please you more and more.
Lord Jesus, I pray that this day, I may take up my cross and follow you. Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen and my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. Amen.