

# **The Fruit Of The Spirit: Love**

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"What the world needs now is love, sweet love" are the opening words to a popular ballad of a number of years ago. It expresses a desire that virtually everyone holds. But what is love? Judging by the commonly held understanding of "love," the world does not need any more of it! If what is happening in the world is evidence, it is very clear the world has only the foggiest of notions of what love is. If it does know, it is not doing it, or the song would not be making the statement of need.

Love is a much abused term. Because of our experiences, we all have somewhat different ideas about it. The most prevalent notion in the Western world is that love is a warm, topsy-turvy feeling, a thrill one gets in the pit of the stomach or a tingle running up and down the spine. We think of it as a warm sense of regard, a strong desire to be with or be satisfied by someone or something.

Some have equated it with caring, benevolent giving or nothing more than sheer emotionalism. On occasion, we use the term very casually and loosely. People express their "love" for the liturgy of a certain church. Some will say they just "love" ice cream, a certain beer, pizza, style of house, color, automobile, fashion, performer or team. People say they love an endless number of things. What some call "love" a theologian might call unbridled lust.

But these statements become ridiculous once we begin to understand what biblical love is. People's "love" of something is merely an opinion, a preference. A preference is not love, and to use "love" in this way devalues it.

To care about something is not love either. One can care to the point of obsession or lust. A measure of caring must be a part of true love, but by itself, that caring feeling or preference is not love.

## **Love's Supreme Importance**

In I Corinthians 13, the Bible reveals love's supreme importance to life. Paul directly compares love's value to faith, hope, prophecy, sacrifice, knowledge and the gift of tongues and indirectly with all other gifts of God mentioned in chapter 12. He in no way denigrates the others' usefulness to life and God's purpose, but none can compare in importance to love.

The Corinthians took great pleasure in their gifts, just as we would, but a gift's relative importance is shown in its temporal quality. That is, there are times when a gift is of no use. But love will never end; it will always be of use.

Indeed, the receiving of gifts from God—unless accompanied by and used with love—have the potential to corrupt the one receiving them. God's gifts are powers given to enhance a person's ability to serve God in the church. However, we have all heard the cliché, "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." If gifts are not received and used with love, they will play a part in corrupting the recipient, just as they were corrupting the Corinthians. Love is the attribute of God that enables us to receive and use His gifts without corruption.

The Bible says in I Corinthians 8:1, "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies [builds up]." "Puffs up," when opposed to "edifies," implies tearing down, destruction. Paul is saying that pride has the power to corrupt the bearer of knowledge. This statement is part of the prologue to the great chapter on love, written because the Corinthians had allowed their emphasis to drift into the wrong areas. Even as a gift from God, knowledge has the potential to corrupt its recipient, if it is unaccompanied by love.

Paul thus begins chapter 13 by contrasting love with other gifts of God. He does this to emphasize love's importance, completeness, permanence and supremacy over all other qualities we consider important to life and/or God's purpose.

Prophecies end because they are fulfilled. The gift of tongues is less necessary today as then because of the widespread use of English in commerce, politics and academia. Its value depends on specific needs. Knowledge is increasing so rapidly that old knowledge, especially in technical areas, becomes obsolete as new developments arise. Yet the need for love is never exhausted; it never becomes obsolete. God wants us to use it on every occasion.

Paul also admonishes us—by instructing us "to put away childish things" (verse 11), as well as his reference to a mirror (verse 12)—that love is something we grow in. It must be perfected. What we have now is partial. Therefore, God does not give it to us in one huge portion to be used until we run out of it. In that sense, we must always see ourselves as immature. But a time is coming when love will be perfected, and we will have it in abundance like God. In the meantime, while we are in the flesh, we are to pursue love (I Corinthians 14:1).

This indicates that the biblical love is not something we have innately. True, some forms of this quality we call love come unbidden; that is, they arise by nature. But this is not so with the love of God. It comes through the action of God through His Spirit, something supernatural (Romans 5:5).

### **Love, Debt and Motivation**

In Romans 13:8-10 Paul injects love into the context of law, showing that it is the sum of all duties:

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

He does not say love *ends* the need for law but that it *fulfills*—performs or accomplishes—the law.

Notice love's relationship to law in context with what immediately precedes it. The context is a Christian's response to government. He should submit to and honor human government as God's agents in managing human affairs. A Christian is indebted to the government to pay tribute and taxes. When we pay them, a Christian is no longer financially indebted to the state until it imposes taxes the following year.

Regarding men, we are not to be in debt. He is not saying a Christian should never owe anybody money, but that there is a debt we owe to every person that we should strive to pay every day. This

debt is one of love, paid by keeping God's law, and this Paul illustrates by quoting several of the Ten Commandments! Inherent in this debt is that no matter how much we pay on it each day, when we wake up the next day, the debt is restored, and we owe just as much as we did the day before!

This sets up an interesting paradox because we owe everyone more than we can ever hope to pay. The paradox, however, is more apparent than real because this is not what Paul is teaching. He is teaching that love must be the driving force, the motivation, of everything we do. This points out a weakness of law regarding righteousness. Law, of and by itself, provides neither enough nor the right motivation for one to keep it.

Notice verse 3. "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same." Laws are stated and have penalties. Rulers enforce them, but that does not stop people from breaking them—in many cases with impunity—especially if they feel no government representative is watching them. The government's power lies largely in coercion, meaning forcible constraint or restraint, whether moral or physical. In other words, it is government by force.

For instance, most people flagrantly disobey the speed limit on freeways and interstates, especially when they are not crowded, until they spot a patrol car with a trooper or two in it. Suddenly the speed limit becomes the norm until the trooper is again out of sight. That the law is on the books, prominently displayed and common knowledge are insufficient motivation for many people to obey.

But love toward God, the love of God, can motivate us to do what the law says to do but cannot motivate us to do. We can conclude that Paul claims that if one exercises God's love in paying his debt to man, he will keep the commandments.

We could also conclude that Paul says that if one does not break the commandments, he is acting out of love. This is the weaker of the two. Within this context, then, every phase, every facet of our responsibility to God and man, is covered if we make sure love has its place as the motivation for all we do.

If we really love another person, we cannot possibly injure him. Love would immediately stifle any thought that leads to adultery, murder, theft or any form of covetousness because love cannot harm. Since love cannot break the laws designed to protect another, it is supreme in providing the right kind of persuasion.

### **Love as a Bond**

In Colossians 3:12-14 Paul shows another aspect of love's supreme importance to community life:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

Paul puts love "above all," showing that love is the epitome of virtues. Here, its importance is as "the bond," something that binds or holds things, like a congregation, together.

Eventually, all groups tend to fly apart. They do not remain united by magic. Generally, a group maintains its unity through a common cause. As each person contributes to attaining that cause, unity is generally served. However, even though individuals expend effort to achieve the cause, frictions arise from a multitude of reasons. Love is the supreme quality that enables the members of the group to maintain unity and keep it from flying apart. This is achieved by each person constraining or restraining himself to act in love.

Interestingly, qualities that we normally think of as being manly—like drive, courage, determination and aggressiveness—are missing from this list in Colossians 3. Though they are not inherently evil, they play directly into the human ego, frequently resulting in crass individualism.

Because it tends to produce division, individualism is not what Paul is aiming for here. Without strong spiritual control, those traits tend to descend into competitiveness, anger, wrath, malice, dissembling, accusation, slander, and foul talk. These in turn are nothing more than unashamed self-seeking, traits that split and divide.

Each virtue Paul lists is actually an expression of love, traits that make it possible to live in a community. There is nothing weak and effeminate about them: It takes a strong person to resist what comes naturally and do what God commands rather than go along with urges of our carnal feelings. Paul lists love as a separate attribute here to show that it is not limited to the qualities he names.

## **God, Man and Love**

Some have called I John 4:7-12 the most sublime statement in all the Bible regarding God's nature:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

If we are going to be like Him, these verses are important to us because they tell us much about Him and our responsibilities. First, love is of God—He is its Source. This love the apostles write about comes from God and is not normally a part of man's nature. It is *agape* love. Human love apart from God is at its best a mere pale and vague reflection of what God is eternally.

Next, John says "God is love." Sublime as this is, some have misunderstood it because it can be misleading. God is not just an abstraction like love. He is a living, dynamic and powerful Being whose personality has multiple facets. He cannot be boxed, wrapped and presented as merely being one attribute.

John's statement literally reads, "The God is love." The Greeks used an emphatic form of writing, and here the emphasis is on the word "God." The syntax means the two words "God" and "love" are not interchangeable. "Love" describes God's nature. A good paraphrase would read, "God, as to His nature, is love." God is a loving God!

This does not mean that loving is one of God's activities, but that every activity of God is loving. If He creates, He creates in love. If He rules, He rules in love. If He judges, He judges in love. Everything He does expresses His nature. God and His nature are manifested by what He does. By love God is revealed and known.

The very existence of life in others besides Himself is an act of love. His love is revealed in His providence and care of His creation. Since we are not robots, free-moral agency is an act of His love. God, by a deliberate act of self-limitation, endowed us to respond with mind and emotion. We are not animals. God's love is the explanation for redemption and our hope of eternal life. Out of love, God has given us something to *live* for. Life is not just a matter of going through the paces. We do not live our lives in vain.

God made humanity in His image and likeness. But the Bible says, "God is Spirit," and "God is love." Man, though, is flesh, and the Bible describes us as carnal, self-centered and deceitful. In practical fact, this means that man cannot be what he is meant to be until he loves as God loves. Only then will he truly be in the image of God because he will have the same nature as God. So, to achieve his potential, a person must love, but he must love with the love of God.

John 13:35 adds, "By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Even as God is revealed by what He does, so will His children. Our love for God has not made this possible, but His love for us, as I John 4:19 says, "We love Him because He first loved us." Thus, our love for Him is a response to His love for us. Since God shows His love for us by drawing us to Him, it behooves us to do acts of love toward others to draw them.

God's act of love in giving His Son defines the ultimate requirement of true love, the giving of our most beloved possession in sacrifice for another's gain. We can understand, then, that godly love will almost always have sacrifice involved in its giving. Sacrifice is the essence, the essential or vital part, of love.

God's love originates in Himself, was manifested in His Son and is perfected in His people. God's love is perfected in us when we reproduce it in or among ourselves, primarily in our fellowship. We either use love and perfect it or lose it. This partly explains the apostle John's intense concern about fellowship. What concerned him is not just an optional blessing to believers, but a fundamental outlet for the manifestation and perfection of God's love among and in the saints.

### **How May We Have This Love?**

It should be obvious that we neither have God's love by nature, nor is it self-generated. Romans 5:5 verifies this understanding: "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which was given to us." We receive godly love from its Source, God, by means of His Spirit.

Only by knowing God can we have this love, and only by loving can we know Him! This may sound like a vicious cycle, but the two go together. Only by learning to love God can we learn His nature, that is, what He is like. We cannot have that love until we first come to know Him. By fellowshiping with Him, we come to know Him and receive His love, and in using His love, we become like Him and really know Him. We can only really come to know God by experiencing the use of His love ourselves.

All this is possible because God, in His love, initiates a relationship with us, grants us repentance, gives us His Spirit, and then, because of His love, takes the lead in sustaining the relationship. This is why Paul says in Romans 5:10 that "we shall be saved by His life." He primarily shouldered the burden of our salvation. How comforting!

### **What Is this Love?**

I John 5:1-3 is helpful in defining God's love in a practical way:

Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.

God intends the love of Him and the love of man to be inseparable parts of the same experience. John explains this by saying that if we love the Father, we also love the child. If we love the Father who begot the children, we must love the children, otherwise we do not have God's love. In I John 4:20, he amplifies this: "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?"

I John 5:3 is the Bible's basic definition of love. The commandments define, make clear, what the basic elements of love are and what direction our actions should take if we would show love. This means that obedience to God is the proof of love. Obedience is an action that submits to a command of God, a principle revealed in His Word and/or an example of God or the godly.

In a sense, this is where godly love begins in a human being. Obeying God's commands is love because God is love. Because His very nature is love, it is impossible for Him to sin. Thus He gives us commands in love, and they will produce right and good results. Any command of God reflects what He Himself would do were He in the same situation.

Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Keeping the commandments is how one expresses love. He adds in John 15:10, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."

A person may have a thought to do good or to refrain from evil. He may have a feeling of compassion, pity or mercy. One may feel revulsion about doing an evil action. But none of these become love until the thought or feeling motivates one to act. In the biblical sense, love is an action.

Love has yet another aspect, however. We can show love coldly, reluctantly, in "dutiful obedience." We can also show it in joyous, wholehearted enthusiasm or warmhearted, thankful devotion. Which is more attractive to God or man as a witness?

Regardless of the attitude, it is far better to obey than not at all (Matthew 21:28-31). If we cannot get beyond *doing* what is right, the proper feelings will never be formed. Experience is largely responsible for training attitude and emotion. We will never form proper emotions without first performing the right actions with the right spirit, God's Holy Spirit.

### **Coming to Know God**

I John 2:3-6 helps us understand how we can have the right attitude and emotion in our obedience:

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

We come to know God through the same general process we get to know fellow human beings—by fellowshiping or experiencing life with them.

Around 500 years before Christ, Greek philosophers believed they could come to know God through intellectual reasoning and argument. This idea had a simple premise: that man is curious! They reasoned that it is man's nature to ask questions. Since God made man so, if men asked the right questions and thought them through, they would force God to reveal Himself. The flaw in this is seen in the fruit it produced. Though it supplied a number of right answers, it did not—could not—make men moral beings. Such a process could not change man's nature.

To them, religion became something akin to higher mathematics. It was intense mental activity, yielding intellectual satisfaction but no moral action. Plato and Socrates, for example, saw nothing wrong with homosexuality. The gods of Greek mythology also reflect this immorality, as they had the same weaknesses as human beings.

A few hundred years later, the Greeks pursued becoming one with God through mystery religions. One of their distinctive features was the passion play, which always had the same general theme. A god lived, suffered terribly, died a cruel, unjust death and then rose to life again. Before being allowed to see the play, an initiate endured a long course of instruction and ascetic discipline. As he progressed in the religion, he was gradually worked into a state of intense expectation.

Then, at the right time, his instructors took him to the passion play, where they orchestrated the environment to heighten the emotional experience: cunning lighting, sensuous music, fragrant incense and uplifting liturgy. As the story developed, the initiate became so emotionally involved that he identified himself with and believed he shared the god's suffering, victory and immortality.

But this exercise failed them in coming to know God. Not only did it not change man's nature, but the passion play was also full of lies! The result was not true knowing but feeling. It acted like a religious drug, the effects of which were short-lived. It was an abnormal experience, somewhat like a modern Pentecostal meeting where worshippers pray down the "spirit" and speak in tongues. Such activities are escapes from the realities of ordinary life.

### **God Reveals Himself!**

Contrast these Greek methods with the Bible's way of knowing God. Knowledge of God comes, not by speculation or emotionalism, but by God's direct self-revelation. In other words, God Himself initiates our knowing of Him, beginning our relationship by drawing us by His Spirit (John 6:44).

What God reveals is equally important. He reveals Himself as a holy, loving and giving God with a purpose so awesome that our minds cannot grasp its full implications, though we can appreciate it. He shows that if we truly desire to be part of His awesome creative purpose, our covenant with Him obligates us to be as holy, loving and giving as He is!

God guides and empowers us in this great pilgrimage by the Holy Spirit, but obedience, following God's commands, is the way we begin to experience and grow in God-life, called "eternal life" in the Scriptures. By obedience we come to know God. It is like walking in His shoes, as it were.

In its biblical usage, the word "know" implies intimacy. From biblical examples, this implication can even mean sexual intimacy. That is really knowing someone closely, especially considering how long a relationship with God exists. When we apply this to our relationship with God, the sexual dimension disappears, and the intimacy becomes a deep and abiding reverence, devotion and loyalty.

People may think of God as nothing more than an intellectual exercise. They might say "I know God," or believe in a "first cause" or Creator without having any moral compunction. They go to church on Sunday and live the rest of the week just like all their neighbors and coworkers.

People may be emotional, saying God is in them and that they are filled with the "spirit," yet fail to see God in terms of commandments. They see God as something warm and snugly, a grandfatherly figure who rushes to their aid to blow away their problems, but they do not see Him as still purposefully creating.

Unmistakably and without compromise, Jesus, Paul and John show that the only way that we can show we know God, that He is in us and we love Him is if we have been regenerated by His Spirit and are obeying Him.

### **How High Is the Standard?**

We can approach this question in a number of ways, but in comparing some scriptures, the answer becomes clear as we see a pattern develop. Jesus states the second great commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). All by itself, this establishes a very high standard because we love ourselves so much. We will sacrifice a great deal to please ourselves.

He raises this a notch or two when He says in Matthew 5:44, "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you." This is a great challenge, confirming that the love of God is certainly not natural to us.

Our Savior also says in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." Paul draws this standard out even further by reiterating Jesus' own example in Romans 5:7-8:

For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.



He adds in Ephesians 5:25 that we are to love "just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it."

We are dealing with a love of such towering strength and determination that one with it will sacrifice himself over a long time even for his enemies. And if that is not enough, he will finally give himself totally in death for their well-being before it is reciprocated!

Will we ever live up to that? It is possible but only because God has made us partakers of the divine nature. We now have the same Spirit in us that enabled and empowered Jesus. Peter writes:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (II Peter 1: 2-4)

Love, godly love, is the fruit, the product of that Spirit which now courses through our lives. That Spirit guides us and leads us into truth. It remains our responsibility, however, to choose to follow its guidance, to obey the truths of the great God who is creating His image in us. Obedience to His commands is godly love, the fruit of His Spirit that empowers us, the supreme virtue of the Almighty Creator.