

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

2. Love

John 13:1,33-38

How do we live fruitful lives as followers of Jesus? What are the attitudes we need to cultivate in order to overcome the deep desire we have within us to indulge what Paul calls in *Galatians 5*, “*the acts of the sinful nature*” – those things we find ourselves doing because of the broken nature of our human condition? Well, we’re looking at the qualities which Paul suggests to those same Galatian Christians are the “*fruit of the Spirit*” – the result of our walking the way of the Holy Spirit and so displaying in our own lives something of the values of the Kingdom of God.

If you were here last week, you’ll remember (I hope) that the nine qualities which Paul list under the heading of “*the fruit of the Spirit*” are a single package. It’s not a checklist or a menu from which we can pick and choose. As followers of Jesus we should be aspiring to demonstrate them all in our lives, and over the next few weeks we’re going to look at each in turn. This morning we begin with **LOVE**.

Love is a word that we use with glib abandon in our conversations, so it ends up meaning all kinds of things depending on the context, the speaker, the person to whom it’s being said and so on. We say we love football or chocolate. We tell our partner we love them. We sing about our love of God. We end ‘phone conversations with “Love ya!” and write “Lots of love” on greetings cards. They each mean slightly different things in terms of intensity, sincerity and, indeed, truth.

The Greeks to whom Paul was writing had four different words for love, so they could be a little bit more targeted with their use. There was *eros*, which means, as William Barclay coyly puts it in his *Daily Study Bible*, “*the love of a man for a maid*”. This is passionate, erotic love – the word “erotic” comes from *eros*. Then there’s *storge*, which is really affection and is used for such things as the love between children and their parents. There’s *philia* or *philadelphia*, a kind of soft, cheesy love that is easy to spread, brotherly love, the love of friendship and kinship. And finally, there’s *agape*, which is the word least used in Ancient Greek but the most commonly used in the New Testament.

Agape is a word which has overtones of sacrifice and invincibility. It means seeking the highest good of the one you love, wanting always the best for him or her. It is to do with the mind as much as the heart, a definite decision to love someone, an effort of will as much as emotions. As with all these qualities which are included in “*the fruit of the Spirit*”, for us humans it is to be a reflection of the character of Christ, in this case a reflection love of God, the love of Jesus, for each of us. That’s why we read that passage from John’s Gospel a few moments ago. So we’re going to focus our thoughts there

this morning as we think about what love means for us in the context of following Jesus. Now, this is a huge subject and we can't fully do it justice this morning, but let's see where we get.

The beginning of chapter 13 is the start of a new and important section of John's Gospel and he introduces it by saying, "*Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.*" In the chapters that follow, we see just how "*the full extent of his love*" was shown. Here is the example of a Saviour and Lord who is also a servant and sacrifice, who goes to the very uttermost (another way of saying "*the full extent*") to demonstrate what love is all about.

It starts here in the upper room, as they gather around the table for the special Passover meal. After they have sat down for the meal and it has been served, Jesus gets up and begins to wash their feet. This is a deliberate and calculated action. Much has been said before about the way in which Jesus here takes the servant's role and washes the feet of the disciples when they arrive, dusty and dirty for the meal. But that's not actually the case, is it? He doesn't do it as they arrive, which would be normal. He makes the point even more starkly by interrupting the meal to do it (v4). They couldn't ignore what was happening. This is still the servant's job, Jesus is still behaving in a rather unorthodox manner. But he is showing that his love for them is a love which involves humility and service. There is no place to which he will not stoop in the exercise of his servant role, in the demonstration of his love for them.

The story continues and Jesus sits with his disciples around the table, telling them of his plans for the future. After a while, they get up and leave (14:31), but the talking continues. They are, of course, a bit bemused by all this as they can't really foresee the things that are going to happen within the next few hours. It's obvious, though, that there are difficult times in the offing. So Jesus continues to show his love for them by his words of promise and encouragement. Much of the conversation is taken up with what Jesus has to say about the Holy Spirit, but at the heart of it all is the promise of his presence and his love. He wants that to continue, to be a mark of their relationship with him and with one another. Chapter 15 is all about the ways in which his disciples are to remain in his love – look especially at 15:9. He will demonstrate his love on into the future by his continuing encouragement of them, comforting and consoling them.

Eventually, they pause and Jesus begins to pray. In chapter 17 we read the words of his prayer – for himself, for his disciples and for all believers. Here again, Jesus' love is shown in its full extent. Only he knows what is about to happen. His mind must have been full of anxiety and fear. It's natural that he should ask for God's help for himself. But he also prays for his disciples, for his friends. And that section of the prayer (17:6-19) is the longest. There is real emotion in what he says and he is clearly

desperately anxious for them. He wants the best for them, he wants them to be protected and helped and built up. There again is love – selfless intercession on behalf of his friends.

Then comes the final and ultimate demonstration of his love – love to the uttermost, the full extent of his love. Yes, service and encouragement and prayer are all important – vitally important – but then there is his sacrifice. Look at what he says in *15:13* – “*Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*” Jesus goes to the cross – innocent and unblemished – for the good of those whose lives are sinful and condemned. This is true sacrifice: this is love to the uttermost. As Jesus says, no-one could have any greater love than this. That’s what we have been remembering over the past couple of weeks, in this Easter season and what we remember particularly each time we receive the bread and wine at communion, the sign and symbol of that infinite love.

“*The full extent of his love*” – isn’t it amazing? But then look at what Jesus says to his disciples in *13:34,35*. As he prepares to leave them he gives them a new command – “*Love one another,*” using this very Greek word “*agape*”. I’m sure they all felt that they did love one another fairly well. But he continues, “*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*” His disciples, those who follow him, who take his name, are to show to one another the same kind of love that he shows them. And that, he goes on to add, is how “*all men will know that you are my disciples.*” Now there’s the rub! The defining mark of the disciples of Christ, the most important credential, if you like, is that there are to be seen to love one another.

Over the centuries that has indeed been seen. Tertullian in the second century (in his *Apology 39.7*) wrote: “*But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another, for themselves are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner put to death.*” The love which those early Christians demonstrated was a love that was quite remarkable in a society which, like ours and like every one in between, saw self-preservation and self-advancement as the main motives in life. It wasn’t long, though, before St John Chrysostom, in words that could have been written today, said (in his own comments on these verses): “*Even now, there is nothing else that causes the heathen to stumble, except that there is no love ... Their own doctrines they have long condemned, and in like manner they admire ours, but they are hindered by our mode of life.*”

Now Jesus says that this is a “*new command*” here, but it is clearly not a new command in itself. Those disciples – all Jews – would have known that this was the foundational commandment of all of the Law of Moses: love God with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself. What’s new about it, though, is the *motive* – “*As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*” Our love for one another,

which is to be the means by which others identify us as the disciples of Christ, is to be modelled on and motivated by the love of Christ himself. So what have we seen about that love?

Well, it's to be a love which is expressed in humility. There's plenty in the New Testament teaching about considering others' needs before your own, about preferring others above yourself when it comes to making decisions. We may try to express it symbolically in foot-washing itself (although, as one writer points out, that is inappropriate in an age and a culture when the need for foot washing is no longer apparent). Calvin was vehement in his views on the subject, having seen the Papists, as he called them, washing each others' feet on Maundy Thursday: *"Every year they [the Papists] hold a theatrical foot-washing, and when they have discharged this empty and bare ceremony they think they have done their duty finely and are then free to despise their brethren ... At any rate, Christ does not enjoin an annual ceremony here, but tells us to be ready all through our life to wash the feet of our brethren."* We might be quite good at showing a sense of concern for one another here in church, but what happens once we've left? How often do we find ourselves looking down on and running down other people from the church (and other churches) – other disciples?

There was Jesus' encouragement of his disciples. He wanted them to know that he would always be there for them. He knew that they would be helped by his presence – expressed in his case through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Are we always there for each other? Can we be relied upon in times of emergency, in times of trouble, in those difficult periods when people don't necessarily need advice or counsel, but just need someone else to be there? I have heard people from outside this church say how impressed they have been at the support that has been given to those in crisis. But there are those who would love the encouraging presence of others even when there isn't a particular crisis. How do we measure up then?

Prayer, too. Now there's a way of expressing our love for others. It's good to hear people saying when they have things to be thankful for how much they have been aware of the prayers of other people when they've been facing real problems. Do we really pray for each other as we should? Are our prayers for our fellow disciples as important – more important – than our prayers for ourselves? We need to be praying for each other all the time, too, not simply when there's trouble. I've said before about using the list of members and friends to form the basis of regular prayer for everyone in the fellowship. And why not use those words of Paul in the first chapter of Colossians (1:9-14) as a pattern for prayer for the spiritual growth and development of others. I am still convinced that we could be far more effective as a body of God's people, as a group of disciples, if we prayed more for each other. And that is a way of demonstrating our love.

And finally, of course, there's the notion of sacrificial love. I suppose more than anything else this is the kind of love that makes Christianity distinctive. In the last interview he gave before he died, the late Dr Lesslie Newbigin said that he had recently been asked by a television producer, "*Why do you think the teachings of Jesus have been so much more influential than many of the great teachers of antiquity?*" I said, "*Because he died and rose again and they didn't.*" Jesus was prepared to give up everything because of his love for this world. He showed us the way forward in selfless love. All the glory and power which was his in heaven, he relinquished because he loved us so much. That's quite some example to follow, isn't it? How do we measure up?

I doubt very much indeed whether any of us here this morning will ever be asked to sacrifice our lives for our fellow Christians. But we may be called upon to make other sacrifices as a measure of our love for one another. We may have to sacrifice our standing, our possessions, our prejudices, our security, our privacy. There may be occasions when we have to give up our time, our money, our energy on behalf of others. We don't do it to be noticed, I hope, but it gets noticed, as I've said. And that is as powerful a witness as anything we might say or proclaim.

Indeed, remember what St John Chrysostom said – and don't negate the message of the gospel by your lack of love for others who are part of the body of Christ. If you love one another, then others will see that as a mark of the disciples of Jesus Christ. If we don't love one another, however much we talk and argue, however correct and error-free your doctrine, we'll have no positive effect whatsoever. Donald Carson (the main speaker at this summer's *Keswick Convention*) writes in his commentary on John's Gospel, "*Orthodoxy without principal obedience to this characteristic command of the new covenant is merely so much humbug.*"

And don't forget what we said earlier: this kind of love, this "*agape*" love, is not simply a feeling of the heart, a warm, fuzzy glow when you're with someone you like. This love can be a real effort of will as we try to reflect the love of Jesus Christ to those who, quite frankly, we would rather not even be talking to. This is a love which overrides any other emotion or feeling, and which reaches out to the people who may have no-one else at all to love them.

In our worship this morning we've thanked God for his love to us demonstrated in Jesus, and we'll continue to do that in our last hymn today. So let's praise God the love of Jesus – that humble, comforting, prayerful, sacrificial love – for without it we wouldn't even be here. Let's be constantly reminding ourselves and each other of that love, resting in it, basking in it! God loves you – never, ever forget it – and he has shown that most amazingly in Jesus. But let's also ask for his help to show that love in our own lives as the authentic mark of our discipleship – so that others might see and believe.

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The Greeks to whom Paul was writing had four different words for love – **eros**, passionate, erotic love: **storge**, affection, for example, the love between children and their parent: **philia**, brotherly love, the love of friendship and kinship: **agape**, which is the word least used in Ancient Greek but the most commonly used in the New Testament. **Agape** is a word which has overtones of sacrifice and invincibility. It is to do with the mind as much as the heart, a definite decision to love someone, an effort of will as much as emotions. It is to be a reflection of the character of Christ, in this case a reflection love of God, the love of Jesus, for each of us.

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Jesus shows that his love for the disciples is a love which involves **humility and service**. There is no place to which he will not stoop in the exercise of his servant role, in the demonstration of his love for them. Jesus continues to show his love for them by his words of **promise and encouragement**. He will demonstrate his love on into the future by his continuing encouragement of them, comforting and consoling them.

In chapter 17 we read the words of Jesus' prayer – for himself, for his disciples and for all believers. Here again, Jesus' love is shown in its full extent. He wants the best for them, he wants them to be protected and helped and built up. There again is love – **selfless intercession** on behalf of his friends.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) What do you mean by "love" when you use that word? Does it depend on circumstances, the object of that "love", your feelings – or what?
- 2) "Agape" love is an effort of will not of emotion. How does that work?
- 3) Can we truly love as Jesus did? Why/why not?
- 4) How can we show love to one another most effectively within the church? And how can that be a witness?
- 5) What do you find difficult about this? What will you do about it?