

“FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: Love”

1 Corinthians 13:1-13 • 1 John 3:11-18

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
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If you want an honest answer to a question you should ask a child. A group of elementary-aged children were asked several questions about love and marriage and the answers are fantastic. For example, when asked why people fall in love, one nine-year-old girl said, “No one is sure why it happens, but I heard it has something to do with how you smell. That’s why perfume and deodorant are so popular.” Leo, who is seven, said “If falling in love is anything like learning how to spell, I don’t want to do it. It takes too long.” When asked how to get someone to fall in love with you, one boy said, “Don’t do things like have smelly, green sneakers. You might get attention, but attention ain’t the same thing as love.” And another, who is six, suggested, “Tell them that you own a whole bunch of candy stores.”

Seems that kids have a lot to learn about love. Sadly, so do adults. We are usually not much better. We tend to get our definition of love from places like Hallmark movies, which all seem to have the same plot and the same actors, or Disney princesses who are waiting for their prince to show up. Or worse, you get your ideas about love from popular music. Maybe your preference is old blue-eyes Frank Sinatra who sang, “I never caught stardust that fell from the skies. I never saw moonlight in anyone’s eyes, Then suddenly love kicks in the window, Love knocks down the door. Love suddenly grabbed me, and ooh, was it cozy and warm ‘Cause I found you, now I no longer just exist, Ooh, what a change, it started from the time we kissed.” Somehow it just doesn’t sound quite as romantic if he’s not singing it. If Sinatra’s not your thing maybe you prefer the deep thoughts of Justin Bieber who sings, “Baby, baby, baby ohhh; Like baby, baby, baby nooo; Like baby, baby, baby ohhh; I thought you’d always be mine.” If that doesn’t capture true love I don’t know what does.

The problem is that the world tries to tell you that love is a feeling, an emotion. In fact, the first definition of love in the dictionary is “an intense

feeling of deep affection.” The world sees love as a noun. It’s something you either have or don’t have. You can “fall” in love. Or out of love when the feeling goes away. And the feeling *does* go away. Researchers over the years have discovered that what we consider the feeling of love is primarily a chemical reaction. It’s really infatuation. I’m not saying the feeling is not important. God has designed you to have those kinds of feelings. What I’m saying is that love is not that feeling.

The first characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence that God is at work in your life, is love. The understanding we get of true love from the Bible is that it’s really a verb. Love is actions and intentions, often in spite of our feelings. Love is hard work and requires a significant commitment. A hundred years ago writer Helen Rowland said, “Marriage is like twirling a baton, turning a handspring or eating with chopsticks; it looks easy until you try it.” A successful marriage requires real love.

One of the favorite Scripture passages for weddings is the one we heard earlier from 1 Corinthians 13, the famous “love” passage. If those young couples actually understood what Paul is saying I suspect many of them would choose something else to read. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, writes, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” That sounds so nice. Not “baby, baby, baby, ohh” nice but it sounds like a nice thing to read at a wedding. But try this: when you read that passage, put yourself in place of the word love and see if it’s still true. *I am patient and kind; I am not jealous or proud; I am not rude. I do not insist on my own way; I am not irritable or resentful. If you do that and think that it perfectly describes you, you’re probably*

not being honest with even yourself. But the truth is that God wants that passage to actually describe you in your relationships with others.

Jesus said that the most important commandments were to love God and love other people. All the other commands are simply specific ways we are to love God and people. The Apostle John considered the command to love one another the most important thing Jesus ever said. He records it four times in his gospel and then repeats it five times in 1 John and then again in 2 John. The early church Father Jerome, in his commentary on Galatians, wrote, "The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, 'Little children, love one another.' The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, 'Teacher, why do you always say this?' He replied with a line worthy of John: 'Because it is the Lord's commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.'"

I can't tell you how hard it was to choose only two passages about love. The whole Bible is about God loving us and about how we are to love Him and love other people. But I think our reading from 1 John 3 sums up what Scripture tells us about love. John tells us that the message we have heard from the beginning is that we should love one another. What beginning is he talking about? The beginning of creation. He says, "don't be like Cain who murdered his brother out of hate." We are to do the opposite and love. In fact, John reminds us that loving each other is the proof that are united with Christ. Verse 14 says, "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers." The word "brothers" here does not refer just to men. It means brothers and sisters – in other words, all Christians.

Then John tells us what real love is. "By this we know love, that Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." Jesus demonstrates that love involves

sacrifice. In John 15 Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." Sometimes people will say something like, "a good marriage has to be 50/50." That's just not true. A good marriage—actually any loving relationship—has to be 100/100. Love is a sacrifice. You must be willing to love 100%, regardless of whether the other person loves you the same way.

We learn how to love like this from God Himself. The heart of the gospel is that God loved you first. He loved you sacrificially before you could even love Him. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." Romans 5:8 says, "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Paul says something very similar in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who *loved* me and *gave himself* for me." This is the message of baptism and the reason we baptize infants. Baptism doesn't save anyone but it's the visible sign to the church and the world that God loved you first. That's why when we get older we need to stand before the church and publicly profess that our personal faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

So here's the question for us today. How do we love one another the way Jesus loves us? In particular, how do we love the people who are difficult to love? How do we demonstrate that radical, sacrificial, surprising love to people who are outside the church, who don't have the same values we have? How do we love people in a way that surprises the world? John gives us the answer in verse 18: "let us not love in word or talk only but in deed and in truth." You and I are called to love our neighbors sacrificially. Love should cost us something. And it's not enough to just say you love. You must demonstrate it and if you truly love you *will* demonstrate it, because it's a fruit of the Spirit.

Amen.