

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT 1

Love: The First & Finest Fruit

God is love.¹ Therefore it would be foolish to presume that anyone could accomplish the task of fully describing the nature of this all-encompassing fruit. Imagine trying to describe the ocean to a person who had never seen or experienced it. They might get an idea of a very big lake, but they could not grasp the depth, power, and magnitude of the sea. So it is with divine love. The natural love with which we are acquainted is only a lake compared to the ocean that is the love of the Spirit.²

Pre-Article Questions:

1. How would you describe the word “love”?
2. Have you ever been “in love” before? Did it make listening to, serving, and caring for the person more natural? Can you give an example?

Love is the beginning and end for us as believers. In 1 Corinthians 13 we see that you can have a heart for the poor, give yourself unto death for the cause of Christ, and function in some of the most profound spiritual gifts such as tongues and prophecy, yet if not firmly rooted and grounded in love, apparently all of this is for nothing. Love is our motivation, driving force, and supernatural gift to this broken world.

Let us compare natural love, that which “loves its own, flourishes in an atmosphere of friendship, and is fed by mutual affection,” with the kind of love mentioned in Galatians 5:22. Agape, or the divine love Paul speaks of is not an emotional state, it is a supernatural and unconditional love that only believers in Christ can possess. Greek scholar Rick Renner describes it this way: “This is what I call high-level love, for there is no higher, finer, or more excellent love than agape love. In fact, the word agape is so filled with deep emotion and meaning that is one of the most difficult words to translate in the New Testament...Agape occurs when an individual sees, recognizes, understands, or appreciates the value of an object or person, causing the viewer to behold this object or person in great esteem, awe, admiration, wonder, and sincere appreciation...agape love will even sacrifice itself for the sake of that object or person it so deeply cherishes. Agape is the highest form of love—a self-sacrificial type of love that moves the lover to action.”³

This love is characterized by a love for enemies – such as when Jesus prayed on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”⁴ We cannot “summon” this type of love from somewhere within us, rather it is “God [who] has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”⁵ Not only does this love care for its enemies, but it is unchanging, just as God Himself is unchanging. It is truly that “Love that will not let me go.”⁶ No matter the changing circumstances around us or the fickle nature of our own hearts, divine love that flows from the Spirit will not shift. Agape is also sacrificial. There is no doubt that the greatest example of this fruit comes to us straight from the cross, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”⁷

It is this love that has transformed you and me from the wretched, helpless, depraved men and women we were into beloved sons and daughters of the Most High God. This fruit is what makes unity within the body possible; it

1.1 John 4:16

2. Gee, Donald. *The Fruit of the Spirit*. Gospel Publishing House: Springfield, MO. 1934. p. 11.

3. Renner, Rick. *Sparkling Gems from the Greek*. Teach All Nations: Tulsa, 2003. p. 524,525.

4.

is what binds all the other fruit and the gifts of the Spirit “together in perfect unity.”⁸ Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”⁹ It is powerful to think that every believer has this potential to express divine love. It is something we must recognize and release as the Holy Spirit stirs it in our hearts. Our capacity to love well grows as we spend time with our Creator.

Biblically speaking, if it's not present in the life of one who calls him or herself a follower of Christ, one must question the authenticity of faith. In 1 John, it states that this love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God. It's a sign of authentic faith in Christ. When you are in love and enjoying the rich love of Christ, it is normal to obey and give love away. This fruit keeps us from sinning, sustains us in trials, is the foundation that allows the other fruits of the Spirit to function as intended, and fuels us with the motivation and the power to reach the world. May we walk in the most powerful force ever created and the gift this world so desperately needs: Agape.

Luke 23:32-43, NIV

Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. 33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. 34 Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. 35 The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One.” 36 The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar 37 and said, “If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself.” 38 There was a written notice above him, which read: this is the king of the jews. 39 One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40 But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence? 41 We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” 42 Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43 Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

John 21:1-19, NIV

21 Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It happened this way: 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. 3 “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. 5 He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. 6 He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. 7 Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. 8 The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. 9 When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. 10 Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.” 11 So Simon Peter climbed back into the boat and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153, but even with so many the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came, took the bread

6. Luke 3:22

7. John 15:16

8. Renner, Rick. p. 523

9. Galatians 5:24-25

and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. 15 When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." 16 Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep." 17 The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. 18 Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

Study Questions:

1. In what ways does Jesus' statement in Luke 23:34 display agape love?
2. Hanging on the cross, bruised and crushed, Jesus Christ took time to grant eternal paradise to a deserving criminal. Discuss how agape love was poured out in this situation. What does this entire scenario of the cross and criminals reveal about the profound agape love our God and Savior possess?
3. In John 21, Christ meets the physical need of the disciples to catch fish and eat, how does this impact you?
4. Peter denied Christ a few days earlier and was extremely down. Christ knew all things and understood where Peter was at emotionally and spiritually. Christ asked Peter two times if he agape loved Him. Peter responded two times, "yes, I love you," with another Greek word for love, phileo, a form of brotherly/friendly love. The third time Christ asks Peter if he loved him using Peter's word phileo. Peter responds a third time with the word phileo. Why do you think Christ kept asking him this question? How do the different uses of the word love here reveal Christ agape love and understanding of Peter? In what ways does this scenario with Peter serve as one of the greatest examples of agape love?
5. Have you ever had a moment with Christ like Peter did? How did this change your life? As we find out later in Peter's life, he becomes one of the most powerful and influential apostles.
6. Can you discuss how Christ' or fellow Christians' agape, or no strings attached, love has impacted you?
7. When we become a follower of Jesus Christ, agape love is poured immediately into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. What are some practical ways or steps we can take that allow the Holy Spirit to grow this fruit in our lives and display it in our relationships?
8. Are there relationships or things in your life that you believe the Holy Spirit may be revealing that are keeping you from growing more in this fruit of the Spirit?

Prayer Partner Assignment:

Meet with a brother or sister from your small group this week to pursue the Lord together and deepen your relationship as brothers or sisters in Christ.

Memorize John 15:13 and John 13:35

1. Read 1 John 4:7-19 and discuss initial thoughts and/or comments
2. How do these scriptures on God's love impact you? How does 1 John 4 says about our love as His followers challenge you?