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Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 5): The Fruit of the Spirit Love - Part I

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

In this lesson, we begin our study on the first Fruit of the Spirit – Love.

In putting “love” first, Paul is echoing Jesus. In the book of Matthew, when someone asked Jesus about the greatest commandment in the law, he responded with two, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus:

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:37-40, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18)”

It is that second kind of love—neighbor love—that Paul means by the fruit of the Spirit here. That is, he means that the first fruit of the Spirit is not so much our love for God, but our love for one another as Christians—across all our differences and barriers.

And Paul is talking about not just sentimental feelings of being nice, but real practical proof that we love and accept one another, in down-to-earth caring, providing, helping, encouraging, and supporting one another, even when it costs a lot or hurts a lot to do so. In other words, Love in action. Love that dissolves divisions. Love that brings together people who would otherwise hate, hurt, and even kill one another.

Just how important is loving one another in that way? Why is it the very first in Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit?

Let’s turn to John as our guide for this first study. Three times in his Gospel, John records Jesus telling his disciples that he commanded them to love one another:

- I) A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)
- II) My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:12)
- III) This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:17)

Five times in his first letter, John reminds us that this is God’s command, and goes into a lot of detail about how we should love one another not just in words but also with actions and in truth:

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- 1) For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. (1 John 3:11)
- 2) If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. “(1 John 3:17-18)
- 3) And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. (1 John 3:23)
- 4) Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. (1 John 4:7-8)
- 5) Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us. (1 John 4:11-12)

Therefore, if anything can be said to be primary, central, and essential to being a Christian and becoming more like Jesus, it must be this. That is why Paul speaks of this kind of love as the first evidence that God is at work in our lives, the first fruit of the Spirit of God within us.

When Christians love one another, says John, it is evidence of some very important realities: love is evidence of life, evidence of faith, evidence of God, and evidence for Jesus.

1) Love for One Another Is the Evidence of Life

How can you know you've got the life that God gives? When you see the evidence of the love that God produces in your life. “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death” (1 John 3:14)”

How do you know if a believer, or a church, is alive? Look for the love. Where there is love, there is life. When Christians truly put love into practice, it is evidence that the life of God is present among them and in them. But when we don't put love into practice, when we fight and squabble, divide and denounce each other... what does it say about us? If there's no love, says John, we have not come to life at all; we “remain in death.”

Christ was filled with love, and his love led him to give his life (not to take life, as Cain did). So, the essence of love is self-sacrifice for others. That's how Jesus himself described his coming death as the good shepherd (John 10:11, 15). And as Paul put it, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).”

Just in case we might imagine that the principle of self-sacrifice, of laying down our lives for others (1 John 3:16) means dying for somebody else, John clarifies in verse 17 that he is talking about the simple, ordinary, everyday opportunities to show real practical generosity, care, and kindness. “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:17).

We can't claim to love God, or that God's love is within us, if we don't help the needy when we have the ability to do so. Well, we may claim to love God, but it's simply a lie—as John later says, “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever

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does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen cannot love God, whom they have not seen" (1 John 4:20).

2) Love for One Another Is the Evidence of Faith

The point that John makes about love (that it needs to be proved in action) is very similar to what James says about faith in this familiar passage:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

John would have agreed, of course—and so would Paul. But John connects faith and love in a way that makes them just as inseparable as faith and good deeds. In fact, he puts them together as a single command: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 John 3:23).

Notice that John says, "This is his command (singular)." But then he goes on to state two things! We are commanded not only to believe in the name of God's Son, Jesus Christ, but also to love one another—and together they are one integrated command. If you do the first (believe), you will do the second (love). If you aren't doing the second (loving one another), you aren't doing the first (believing in Jesus). Don't try to split them, for they are both the single command of God: believe-in-Jesus-and-love-one-another. They go together.

So, love for one another is not only the evidence of the life of God within us, but also the evidence of the faith through which we came to receive that life in the first place. James said that faith without deeds is dead. John would agree by saying that faith without love (love that is proved in good deeds) is also dead—nothing but an empty claim. In fact, since "this is his command," it means that if we aren't showing practical love for one another, we are disobeying the commands of the Jesus and we are not true followers of Jesus.

Reflection/discussion:

Is the Fruit of the Spirit – Love for one another evident in your life and faith?