

FRUIT OF SPIRIT: LOVE (John 15:9-17, Col 3:12-17)

Begin new series today on Fruit of Spirit. (QUICK PAUSE – (1) WHAT'S FAVOURITE FRUIT? ASK NEIGHBOUR – FEEDBACK (2) AND WHAT'S FAVOURITE SPIRITUAL FRUIT? (SLIDE) ASK NEIGHBOUR AGAIN)

Idea well known – talk a lot about it – let's remind ourselves briefly where came from. St Paul in Galatians (one of his earliest letters) was trying to describe what it looked like to live as a Christian. Key point is that it's a life of freedom, not bound by religious rules. In short, it's about character – who you are. The old way of life was a life dominated by what he calls the *acts* of the sinful nature. But the new life is one of the *fruit* of the Spirit – i.e. virtues. **Really what it means to live like Jesus:** they are the virtues that Jesus had, so this is what his Spirit starts to form in our lives. He lists 9 (refer to slide): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness & self-control.

Over next 8 weeks, we'll look at each one and ask ourselves: what actually is it? And what does it look like? How can we cultivate these things more and more in our lives?

And that's the point, isn't it? Analogy of fruit a good one: fragile, takes time, needs cultivation – just like character virtues. Can also be a bit sharp when not ripe! But when ripe or mature – there's nothing like it. Imagine if our lives were like the equivalent to other people of biting into their favourite fruit? So my hope and prayer is that this season is a season of cultivation – both growing in our existing strengths, and working on the tricky ones.

Start where Paul starts with love. Good place to start: cover-all. It's the summary of Jesus' own interpretation of the law: (love God and love neighbour – or as he says in passage in John: love me and love each other). And as Paul says (v14): 'love binds all the other ones together in perfect unity.' But that also means it's hard to pin down. What can we learn about love today? Were the Beatles right after all? Is love all we need?

1960s often referred to as age of Revolution – much of it about love. Word on lips of hippies and radicals – 'free love' – greatest expression in Beatles 'All you need is love' broadcast live around the world to 400 million people in June 1967. Many people at the forefront of that era still believe that the love revolution was their heritage.

But real revolution in love 2,000 years earlier. And it was caused by Christians. Love is a complex word. Everyone thinks they know what it is but very hard to define. Can be used in lots of contexts. Now Greeks at time of Jesus understood that, they realised that love was a multidimensional word: so had 3 different words for it:

Eros = lurve, sexual love. Storge = kinship or family affection. But don't always like your family, so also... Philia = friendship or liking kind of love.

Doing 3 times better than us – but interestingly, early Christians decided to invent a new word for love – agape, word used in both of these passages. Reason was that Jesus had taught them something revolutionary: love not primarily about people you naturally have affection for, but for everyone, even your enemies. **Love was really self-giving, selfless service of others.** That was Jesus taught, and modelled – but there was no word for this. It was revolution. So they came up with agape. And agape love came to define what it meant to be like Jesus, to love like Jesus and therefore how Christians are also meant to love.

What mean in reality? 3 simple things from passages:

Love is really what it means to obey Jesus: READ John 15 v10,12 – it's the one non-negotiable. On one level the Beatles were right: love is all you need – but their definition of the word was completely wrong. They were thinking about some vague form of sentimentality, with to be honest probably some hippy sexual overtones thrown in. Agape love, Jesus love, is quite different – it's not the indulgence of self but the giving up of self, the offering of self for others. That is true love, and it's that love that lies at the heart of the Christian faith and life. Love God and love others: which means we offer ourselves to God and we offer ourselves on behalf of others – that's the love of the 2 great commandments in action. Which leads to 2nd point:

Love is really about laying down of self. Jesus puts this quite bluntly: v13. For Jesus that was quite literal – the cross lies at the heart of what it means to truly love. For those of us trying to follow Jesus, that sense of laying down may not be quite as literal. The passage in Colossians helps us to understand that in lots of other ways. Love is really a set of behaviours, which all manifest at their heart that sense of laying down self. Let's read them: READ v12b 'clothe yourselves' onwards. That is love in action, isn't it?

Starts with compassion – if don't feel compassion for other person, then can't offer yourself to them. Needs humility and patience too. Bear with each other and forgive grievances. No relationship with each other can last unless you can put up with people and forgive rather than hold grudges. This is what laying down of self looks like. No wonder love binds all the other stuff together which we'll be looking at over next few weeks. In fact my advice today is to take this passage away and read it again this week, and ask yourself: what do I need to grow in love? I would suggest we don't even use the word 'love' when talking about this, as it's so general: take this list of 6 or 7 things and say, which bit of love do I need more of? And pray for that, think of ways you can invest in that bit.

One final key: real love starts with being loved first – EXPAND Col v12, John v9. Take love and pass it on. To truly love, we need to recognise we are loved first by God. Agape love is not a natural human inclination – both bible and biology tells us that (selfish gene) – can only receive it from God and pass it on. So if we want to grow on fruit of love we have to start by allowing ourselves to be loved by God. Need to dwell on that, and let it fill us to overflowing, so that God's love flows out of us.

How do we do that? Needs focused time with God. Why coming to worship is so important. Church should be like a filling station. But can I also suggest that what really makes the difference is making time during the week. Before I was a vicar, doing a regular job, with time pressures etc, I quickly found that getting a boost on Sunday morning wasn't enough for a whole week. I needed some time every day, even if it meant making time first thing in morning or last thing at night to do that. We pray 'Give us each day our daily bread' – need spiritual feeding daily, or we start to use up our love reserves.

I also needed one other dedicated time in week to be with other Christians, to pray or read the bible or worship or all 3 of those. I want to encourage all of you to consider committing to one other thing outside Sunday morning to feed your faith. Whether that's the prayer meeting, or the evening group or a compass course, or time to pray with a couple of friends, maybe something at work if you know Christians there. Whatever it is, in the end we can only grow if we are being fed, we can only give out what we put in. God's love is what fires our love. Let's offer ourselves to God again, let's find ways to give him that time – and let God's love overflow from our lives into others. Amen.