



FIRST  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH  
SPARTANBURG

## THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: LOVE

Psalm 86:1-13; Mark 12:28-34

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“I want to see some evidence,” the young man said to me. “I want to see some evidence that Jesus makes a difference. I don’t see much difference between how Christians live and everybody else.” I thought to myself, “Well, he has a point.” If we claim to follow Jesus then his way, truth, and life should be visible in our lives. In Galatians, Paul puts it this way: if we have been given new life by the Spirit of God, then we will live by the Spirit of God. Then our lives will manifest the fruit of the Spirit which is “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22, 23). Today I want to talk about the love we show as everyday disciples of Jesus.

When my desk is piled high, schedule overfilled, yard untended, and household chores unaccomplished, I get distracted from what matters. I look to unclutter my life and get back to basics. So, I go to where every discerning person goes to seek wisdom: Amazon.com. I found a book entitled, *Simplify Your Life: 100 Ways to Slow Down and Enjoy the Things That Really Matter*. Going through 100 items seemed too complicated to me. Then I ran across *How to Simplify Your Life: Seven Practical Steps to Letting Go of Your Burdens and Living a*

*Happier Life*. I was hooked by #2: “Unpile Your Office.” In truth, I do not think any of these gets to the root of the problem. The problem is not so much what is “out there,” but what is “in here” – in our heart, mind, body, and soul. The root of the problem is the practice of love.

How do we sort out what really matters in life? I have a better book to help us: the Bible. As a people of faith, we turn to the scriptures to lift our burdens, balance our lives, and reset our course. The scriptures can seem overwhelming. How do we know what is important? The Jewish people faced this same question. The law guided their daily lives as they sought to live a holy life before God. To understand what the Lord required of them, they began to draw out the particular laws that the Lord commanded.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish philosopher, physician, and rabbi, Maimonides, helped the Jewish Community lift up the laws by which God called them to live. Maimonides was a significant figure in identifying the 613 Biblical commandments that faithful Jews must keep. These commandments concern questions of food and farming, legal matters and business matters, ritual purity and worship,

almsgiving and lending, clothing and hair, families and firstborns, marriage and sexual relations, taxes and tithing, keeping Sabbath and celebrating holidays.

Are some of these commandments more important than others? One time Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees for keeping the jots and tittles of the law and forgetting the important issues of the law. Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith... (Matthew 23:23).” With the coming of Christ, we consider the commandments about ritual purity, sacrifice, food, and clothing to no longer have authority in our lives. How do we know which of the remaining laws are the most important? Which laws demand our full obedience?

A scribe asked Jesus which commandment was first of all. Jesus gave the response we know by heart; we forget it when our lives are overwhelmed with too much cargo, and we cannot decide what to keep and what to let go. Jesus spoke the simple truth: “The first [commandment] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

We know the truth, but we struggle to practice it. Sometimes, I think we prefer confusion to clarity, grudges to grace, bitterness to forgiveness, and bondage to freedom. Such conflicted thoughts keep us from the clear command to love. Such ambiguity keeps us from tending to the simple, but hard, work of love.

If I were to cite one failure of the church, it would be the failure to love. I remember one particularly rancorous presbytery meeting some years ago at which controversial issues were being discussed. One pastor got up and said that the church was in danger of sinking because it didn’t stand for anything anymore. One of the elders from our congregation whispered to me, “The thing that bothered my children when they were growing up was not that the church didn’t stand for anything, but that the church didn’t practice enough love.” We are to speak the truth, yes; but we are to speak the truth in love.

Before we reduce the command to love to hopeless sentimentality, listen to what Paul says about Christian love: “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or

rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

We hear these words at weddings, but we ought to memorize them and say them to ourselves when we wake up, when we go out, and when we lie down. Christian love is strong as steel and as gentle as a kiss. It is not so much a feeling as an action, not an emotion, but an attitude toward life. In his catechism, Martin Luther said that if we love God and keep the first commandment, then everything else will follow.

Divine love takes human form in Jesus Christ. We see the evidence of the steadfast love of God in Jesus. When we practice love as Jesus commands, then we find the simplicity that comes with getting our priorities straight. We learn what to jettison and what to keep; we learn how to set a new course for our lives; we learn how to endure the winds that blow and the waves that swell. Our lives come into balance.

When we love as Jesus loves, then we cannot be satisfied with getting our own way; we can only be satisfied when justice is extended to the poor, the powerless, and the downtrodden. If we love, then we cannot be concerned only with our well-being, but with the well-being of

others. If we love, then pride has no place in our hearts, but in humbleness of spirit we come before God. The simple truth is that you and I as ordinary disciples of Jesus are called to love God and love our neighbor.

Over the years, I have seen congregations get tangled up in issues that have robbed the church of its energy and wasted its time over matters of little importance. I have seen some disciples so focused on one issue that they forget the greater commandment to love. On the other hand, there are many disciples who persist in love. I know a man in a former church who read every word of the Sunday bulletin – the liturgy, the announcements and even the words of the hymns – into a tape recorder so a blind couple in the church could type out everything in Braille to have the resources they needed to worship. There were people in another congregation who had the vision to create a Counseling Center where wounded and troubled people in the church and the community could find healing and hope. There were people in this congregation who developed our Weekday School so that children in our church and community can receive Christian nurture in a loving environment. There are people in our congregation who are working hard to prepare for three weeks of the CAST summer camp so that children and youth who live in motels can experience

the love of Jesus through the members of our church who will welcome and teach them. All of these efforts are the work of love.

Friends, our church, community, nation, and world have been through a difficult time. Over the past 15 months, we have endured a bitterly contested national election and a global pandemic. As a congregation we have experienced a pastoral transition and two interim pastors. We have wrestled with when and how to open the church for in-person worship, meals, classes, and children and youth activities. We have agreed and disagreed about the necessity of wearing masks and social distancing. We have been weary, discouraged, stressed, and sometimes angry. Through it all, no one has been 100% right and no one has been 100% wrong. Only God gets it 100% right all the time. Despite disagreements and different ways of doing things, we are called to love one another. Love takes the form of patience and forbearance. Love means listening to one another and respecting one another. Love means forgiving one another. As a congregation, it is time to unite in a spirit of love. It is time to move on with the business of the church to witness to the love Jesus Christ has for all creation and for all of God's children. If we want to unclutter our lives, simplify our lives, get rid of excess baggage, we don't need a "How to" book from Amazon,

we simply need to love one another.

Think about the issues that divide our families, the arguments that harden our hearts and the debates that split our nation. Love can teach us what is significant and worthy of our time and attention. Love can teach us how to be a friend. Love can mend a broken marriage. Love can train us in how to put people ahead of our prejudices. Love can coach us to see Christ in the people we find most difficult to like. Love can teach us how to forgive.

I want to talk with that young man again who asked for some evidence of love. I want to say to him, "Yes, you're right. We do fail to follow Jesus." But I also want him to see you. I want him to see love in action, the fruit of the Spirit, which flows from God through you.