

**“The Fruit of Love”**  
**1 John 3:11-18; 4:7-12**  
**July 2, 2023**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We are considering this summer Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit. If you weren’t here last week, I challenged us all to memorize these nine qualities and to pray John Stott’s prayer daily through the summer. “Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” The first three are godward in their direction, the next three manward, and the final three selfward. As a memory aid, it was pointed out to me last week by one of the clever ladies in our church that the first three are all single syllable words, the second three two-syllables each, and the final triad three syllables each.

These nine qualities describe Christlikeness. If you want to know what Jesus was like, consider the ultimate expression of each of these qualities, and you would have a pretty good summary of Jesus. Jesus was the most loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle and self-controlled person you could possibly imagine. And Jesus tells us also that when we see him, we have seen the Father. So God the Father could also be described by these qualities. And God is at work in his people to give us this family likeness.

It is unsurprising that Paul begins his list of the fruit of the Spirit with love. This is now the fourth time he mentions love just in this chapter. He said early in the chapter that what really matters is “faith working through love” (5:6). Then he said that the freedom provided for us in the gospel should be used not to do what we want but “through love serve one another” (5:13). Third, he pointed out that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14). It also makes sense that love would be mentioned first because love is generative of these other qualities. I think that is another reason that the word “fruit” is singular. The remaining eight qualities simply tease out the further features of love.

Is Paul referring to our love for God or our love for other people in this first quality? I agree with the most prevalent opinion that he is talking about our love for one another. That has been his focus throughout this chapter and seems to be so here as well. As we look more carefully at this important quality of love, I would like us to do so by considering the writings of another New Testament author who wrote extensively about this. I’m referring to the apostle John, and I would like for us to look today at his first epistle.

## I. Love's Prototype – 3:11-18

These verses are the second of three lengthy sections John devotes to the topic of loving one another. We'll look at the third one in our next point, and I want to make just one point about the first one (2:7-11) here. John calls this love imperative a "new commandment" (2:8), following the teaching of Jesus who also referred to it in that way (John 13:34). It is a little puzzling to refer to the command for neighbor love as a *new* commandment in light of the fact that it was commanded in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18). What did Jesus mean by describing it as new? I think Jesus meant that it belongs to the new age which Jesus came to make possible. There is an old world that came into existence with the introduction of sin through Adam and Eve, and now there is a new world that comes through the second Adam, Jesus. This new world is marked principally by the love that is the central essence of trinitarian life.

This interpretation is bolstered by the two examples John offers in the following verses, one a negative example and the other positive. The negative example is the earliest that could be offered of the opposite of love, the murderous hate of Cain. He is the prototype of the old, sin-filled world. Cain was the son of Adam and Eve. In the very first generation following Adam's sin, hatred has ripened to murder. The account in Genesis 4 tells us that Cain and his brother both came and did the same thing: they brought an offering to the Lord. Cain's offering was from the fruit of his labor and consisted of the fruits of the soil. Abel tended sheep and brought a lamb as a sacrifice. We are told too that God accepted Abel and his offering, but he did not accept Cain and his offering. We're not told how they knew that God accepted one but not the other. Perhaps it was through the means that occurs elsewhere in the Bible where God sends a fire to consume the offering he accepts. But we know that both Cain and his offering were not accepted. The writer to the Hebrews comments on this in a way that helps. **"By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings"** (11:4). There was a deficiency in Cain's faith that led to a deficiency in his offering. Remember what an offering does. An offering is something we give to God to satisfy his just anger against us. Abel was saying by his offering that he could do nothing to satisfy God's anger. The life of a substitute was needed. Cain was saying that he could satisfy God's anger by what he did, by the fruit of his hands. Instead of responding with repentance, Cain responded with self-righteousness. John words it like this. **"And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous"** (3:12). The righteousness of his brother was such a painful reminder to Cain of his own unrighteousness that his remedy was the permanent silencing of this painful reminder.

The positive example of love is the prototype of the new age, the second Adam, our Lord Jesus. Instead of self-righteousness leading to hatred and even murder, Jesus is the model of self-sacrifice leading to life and love. **"By this we**

**know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (3:16).** We need to be specific about this, because it would be easy to judge ourselves as loving because we conclude that we would be willing to lay down our lives for others if the need arose. It’s just that the need hasn’t arisen. There are two specific ways these verses call us to love one another as we follow the one who is our prototype: forgiveness and generosity.

Let’s start with forgiveness. Jesus laid down his life in order that we might be forgiven. Even on the cross, he prayed for his accusers and enemies that they might be forgiven (Luke 23:34). Throughout the New Testament we are told to forgive as we have been forgiven. Forgiveness is part of the new world that Jesus brings about. In his book on forgiveness, Tim Keller makes the point that forgiveness as we know it today did not exist before Christianity. One of the most alarming things to me about the drift of American culture away from Christianity is the growing loss of forgiveness. Instead of forgiving others, we cancel them, treating them as non-persons who shouldn’t even be able to speak. Cancel culture, which exists on both the left and the right side of the political spectrum, is a form of retribution against one’s enemies. But retribution always escalates. The enemy who is shouted down today will be shot down tomorrow.

The way to back away from this cliff of retribution is the way that Jesus taught, the way of forgiveness. But forgiveness is a tall order. When hurt, our instinct is to hurt back in even greater measure. Verse 16 shows the way. Jesus **“laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”** Perhaps one of the biggest reasons our society is experiencing a decline in forgiveness and a rise in vengeance is our emphasis on self-fulfillment instead of self-sacrifice. For example, we are sometimes told that the reason we should forgive is for our own sakes. We will be held captive by an abuser until we can forgive the abuser. Someone has said, “Resentment is like drinking poison and then waiting for the other person to die.” All of that is very true. Resentment and the failure to forgive will do damage to a person. But knowing and believing that will not give us the power to forgive.

This verse teaches us that it is only the cross of Christ that is sufficient to empower forgiveness in our hearts. It is only as we experience the forgiveness Jesus gives us that we will be able to forgive others. What that means is that we have to see ourselves as we are, natural enemies of God. We have brought great pain to God. We have hurt his bride, his Church. And how does Jesus respond? He takes the loss himself and dies in our place that we might be forgiven. Forgiveness lies at the heart of God’s love for us. It lies at the heart of every good marriage, every good family, and every healthy church. A nation will be destroyed from within without it.

Bryan Chapell tells the story of a young girl who brought home a chocolate teddy bear that she had acquired in a gift exchange at school. The very next

day, while the girl was at school, her three-year old little brother went into his sister's room to eat her chocolate teddy bear. His mother walked in on him and caught him red-handed, with chocolate smeared on his hands and cheeks. As soon as he was caught, he melted faster than the chocolate had, sobbing his confession and saying how sorry he was. His mother told him that in spite of his being sorry for his offense, he would still have to tell his sister what he had done when she got home from school. The rest of the afternoon was pure agony for this little boy, as he sat pondering how his sister would react to the news that her treasured teddy bear had been eaten. When she finally got home, he ran to her and his tearful confession poured out of him like water from a broken water main. He said, "Sally, I'm so sorry, I ate your teddy bear." His sister had been looking for a chance to love her brother, so she said to him, "It's okay, Johnny, I will love you anyway and always." Though the tears still flowed, when she said that he began to giggle. He still felt shame at his actions, but now it was mingled with joy. It is only when we come to understand something of God's love for us that we will be empowered to forgive and love others.

Generosity is the next feature of the love we learn from Christ. John words it like this. **"But if anyone has the world's good and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him"** (3:17)? It is an easy thing to love people in general, and quite another to love people with specific acts of kindness and generosity. I notice that John moves from the general love of brothers (plural), to the love of a brother (singular) that is right in front of a person. Notice what is forbidden here. It is the "closing of the heart" toward a brother or sister in need. Love opens the heart to respond with compassion and to do whatever we're able to do to help someone in need. An open heart looks to do what it can instead of finding excuses to do nothing. We have to be careful here, because sensitive Christians will easily load themselves with guilt over this. There is no shortage of needs in this world, and God doesn't call us to assist with them all. We are finite creatures with finite resources of both time and money. There is only so much we can do. But if the heart is in the right place, and we encounter a brother or sister in need in the sovereign providence of God, love would lead us to respond as we are able.

## II. Love's Origin – 4:7-12

The third time John circles back to this theme of love for others is in chapter 4. We are commanded once again to **"love one another, for love is from God"** (4:7). He is its origin because **"God is love"** (v. 8). John then goes back to the cross of Christ for the demonstration of God's love. **"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"** (4:9-10). And then he ends this paragraph with a

stunning statement. **“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”** (4:11-12).

Why does John say that no one has ever seen God? Didn't God appear to men and women in the Old Testament? Theologians refer to those appearances as “theophanies,” which is a Greek term meaning “appearance of a god.” But they were not seeing the essence of God in those Old Testament appearances. After all, God is a spirit and doesn't have a body like ours. But this verse says that the essence of God can now be seen in the love God's people have for one another. Jesus taught the same thing when he said, **“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”** (John 13:35). This is also why Paul said that three qualities stand out from all the others: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of the three, he said, is love.

I think God is the most misunderstood being in the universe. He is marginalized, falsely accused, insulted, and even hated. Such a misunderstanding is tragic on many levels. Not to know the true God is like not knowing gravity; it will destroy a person. How are people outside the church going to come to know this God? John says that they will see him through our love for one another. As you have heard me say many times, we are called to be an outpost of the coming kingdom. Or to change the metaphor, we are the model home of heaven. The church is to show people what God is like and what his kingdom is like by the quality of our love for one another.

On this day two days before we celebrate our nation's independence, I would say to you that the most important thing you can do to love your nation well is to love well your brothers and sisters in Christ. Check your heart for any resentments that remain unforgiven. Ask God for a heart that is like his heart.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I am reminded of one of Jesus' final acts before his death. In love, he took up towel and basin and washed the feet of his disciples. At the time, they were all preoccupied with their competition about which of them would be the greatest. They all wanted to be like a king, while the one who was the true King became a servant. May God's Spirit ripen in all our hearts this fruit of love, that we may become more like our Savior and show the world what God is really like!