

“Love in a Time of Self-Interest” June 12, 2022

So I've got a friend of mine, who shall remain nameless, who's into gardening. It became a COVID hobby that he's grown to love. And one thing that's struck me with this nameless friend of mine, who I work with, is just how much time and effort and care goes into gardening. He's constantly tending to it, doing the research to see how to get a better yield on his crops. And to be honest, in the past couple years since he's started this hobby, his love for it is pretty infectious - like, I'm not at the point to where I want to do actually do it, but there's been this part of me that has thought, “Should I get into gardening?” Anyway, this nameless friend of mine, who is a pastor at our downtown church, started to become aware of squirrels and other critters getting into crops, and a little over a month ago he bought a cat to take care of that and protect his garden - at which point I said to myself, “Oh, I'm out. If I have to be a cat person to be a gardener, thanks, but no thanks.” But anyhow, this friend of mine named Ryan Rike, after putting in all the time and effort and intentionality into it, over time literally sees the fruit of his work.

Similarly, in the Christian life, one of the dominant ways the Bible talks about following Jesus is with garden imagery. Bearing fruit. Pruning. Being planted by streams of water. It's this idea that, like gardening, to be a person who becomes more and more like Jesus requires time and effort and intentionality as His Spirit works in us.

And for this summer we're starting a nine week-long series on what's called the Fruit of the Spirit, which is taken out of **Galatians 5**. This idea that, by God's grace and through His Spirit, I will begin to supernaturally exhibit the qualities and characteristics of Jesus.

So let's get into it. If you have a Bible, turn to **Galatians 5**.

Let's start at verse 19.

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident:

Alright, so here, Paul, the author of Galatians, when he says the flesh, he means our sinful, selfish desires. This part of us that naturally wants to indulge and give into our inclinations. He says here is the outcome or fruit of what happens when you give yourself over to that:

sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, **21** envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Now this list is not meant to be cumulative, but you get the idea. Living a life of following and listening to all your heart's desires and inclinations inevitably turns you into a destructive person.

But Paul goes on to say that, for those in Christ, there is another option. We who trust Jesus have been given His Spirit and now when we choose to turn away from our flesh and turn toward what God wants for us, there is an alternative outcome that is produced in our lives:

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

So here we're meant to see the contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. One leads to darkness and unhealth and spiritual decay, whereas the other brings out supernatural life and health and restoration to our souls. And like a garden, these things don't happen overnight. These things, by the power of the Spirit, will take time to see. But the more we walk in the Spirit and commit ourselves to the pattern of life we see in Scripture, the more we will see that supernatural fruit begin to grow in ways you will never expect. And for what it's worth, as pastors and staff, we are committed to see this in all of you.

So for these next nine weeks, we are going to take a look at this list of the fruit of the Spirit, taking a look at each one, painting the picture for us to help capture a vision for the types of people we want to become.

So taking it from the top of the list, we'll be looking at the first fruit of the Spirit: love.

And before we get into that and unpack exactly what that means, I feel like we need to do some prework, so follow me on this one. I'm going to say a statement and explain how it applies to our topic today because I think it's pretty critical.

Imprecision is the death of wisdom.

Here's what I mean by that: our words matter. Our word choices carry a tremendous amount of weight because language is the primary tool we use to communicate meaning and feeling and truth. So when we use imprecise words, or when we don't select our words very carefully, it actually sets people up to be really confused or hurt about what we're truly thinking and feeling. Case in point: just look at 80% of the content on Twitter, you can't exactly pull much wisdom and precision in 280 characters.

But let me give you an example to clarify this in our English language: I love Jesus. And I love breakfast tacos. I love my wife, and I love Star Wars, especially this new series going on right now on Disney Plus. I love my kids, and I love taking naps on Sunday afternoons.

Now someone from another time and culture upon hearing that list would probably reply back and say, "I'm sorry. What are you talking about exactly?" And the reason is, the word "love" in our culture and in our English language is a very imprecise word. When we say love, are we talking about romantic love? Are we talking about hobbies? Are we talking about devotion?

So when I say "I love Jesus," a more precise, wiser way of saying it would be, "I am fully devoted to following Jesus for the rest of my life because He's saved me and I owe Him my existence and my eternity."

When I say “I love breakfast tacos,” a more precise, wise way of saying that would be, “I prefer and enjoy eating that over other things.”

When I say “I love my wife,” a more wise and precise way to say it is, “I am committed and devoted to my wife over any other human being or anything else on the planet.”

When I say “I love naps on Sunday afternoons,” the more precise way is to say it is, “I enjoy the warm fuzzy feelings I get when it’s one in the afternoon and the kids are quietly playing in their rooms, and I can pass out for an hour.”

So when you hear that the fruit of the Spirit is love, I’m not sure what thoughts pop into your head, because in our English language, love can be an imprecise word even though it sounds nice.

So is the fruit of the Spirit warm fuzzy feelings? Or is it the way I feel about breakfast tacos and Star Wars?

So where the English language fails us, Greek - the language that the New Testament was written in - comes in to offer some precision. In Greek, there were four different words you could use for love to more accurately describe what you were talking about. In fact, C.S. Lewis wrote a book on it called *The Four Loves*, where he defines these four types of love:

- **Storge** - family love. How you feel about your aunts and uncles and cousins and parents. It’s this family reunion kind of love.
- **Eros** - romantic love. How you feel toward your spouse in a healthy marriage. We get other English words that derive from eros, but I’ll let you all figure that one out on your own.
- **Philia** - sibling/friendship love. It’s where the name of Philadelphia came from, the city of brotherly love. When I think about my friendships and the people I enjoy, that is philia-type love.
- **Agape** - And this one is far above all the others. It is radical self-giving love, a love that that is so committed to another person that they will do anything for them. This is the word the New Testament often uses to describe the sort of radical love Jesus shows for us.

And this is helpful because in Galatians 5 when Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is love, he is saying in the Greek the fruit of the Spirit is agape.

And this is what happens to us when we keep in step with the Spirit. When we seek to follow after Jesus. It’s not a family reunion type love or a friendship type love, but something bigger and better that is supernaturally produced in us over time.

Here's how my boy Tim Keller defines agape: To serve a person for their good and intrinsic value, not for what the person brings you.

A person who serves with purely unselfish motives, not hoping to get anything out of it, but simply wants the other person to flourish.

In fact, earlier up in Galatians 5, Paul says this in Galatians 5:14:

Galatians 5:14

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In other words, all 613 commands stated in the Old Testament, if you had to get the Spark Notes to summarize what it was all getting at, it's that you love your neighbor, or you *agape* your neighbor as yourself. When you give of yourself to meet the needs of others with the same eagerness and knowledge you have to meet your own needs.

And we could rattle off more verses in the New Testament that shed further light on agape love, but for the sake of time I will give you one more, this time straight from the words of Jesus:

John 15:13

Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

In other words, the greatest form of agape love one can possibly do is when they give their lives away and die for someone else. When they willingly give their life away for another. So *agape* is not the warm fuzzies you feel when you take a nap or eat your favorite food. And it's not the same feeling you get when you see your aunts and uncles. To agape is to steadfastly commit to put someone else's life before your own, to the point of, if necessary, you lay down you life so that the other one can live.

Now with all that said and this definition is fresh in our minds, let me show you what's really interesting about this concept of *agape*. I'll give you two data points.

- Data point number one - Hollywood can't stop making movie after movie about this agape type love, and we as an audience can't stop watching them. The story of the hero who sacrificially lays down their lives so that someone else can live; it's basically every good hero movie you see.
 - Whether it's Aslan in the Chronicles of Narnia laying down his life upon the magic altar so Edmund the prisoner goes free
 - To Anakin Skywalker in Return of the Jedi who throws himself in front of the wrath of the emperor so that Luke doesn't die
 - To Katniss Everdeen volunteering herself as tribute so her sister Prim goes free
 - To Tony Stark saying in his final breath "I am Iron Man" and then gives his life away so that Thanos is obliterated and turns to dust. (Also major spoilers, sorry guys)
 - But like, me and our fam we watch a movie together every Saturday and we watched the new Chip 'n' Dale movie on Disney Plus, and it's such a

silly goofy kids movie, but towards the end, Dale throws himself in front of Chip so Chip doesn't get hurt. And it's all in slow-motion and so over-the-top – you know exactly what's coming – and midway through that slow-motion I look over to my wife, and we both have tears in our eyes.

Because we as human beings are drawn to this story. Time and time again. This agape type love that lays down their life for their friends.

Now that's data point one. Let me give you the other.

- Data point two - Even though we can't get enough of those stories and movies of self-giving, sacrificial love, most of the accepted wisdom of our day is almost the exact opposite of those stories and movies. The advice of our day is more so one of self-protection and self-love: Love yourself first. Put yourself first. Love yourself above all.

It's like, I don't know if you mess with the Enneagram or not – it's a personality test that's pretty big right now. And there's a type, called the type 2, that is wired as the helper. So they naturally gravitate towards meeting other people's needs and serving others, and it's great and beautiful and needed. But like any personality strength, take that too far and it becomes potentially dangerous for them. So when an Enneagram 2 who's wired to help others is in an unhealthy place, their tendency is to become overly dependent on other people. Like, they can *only* be happy if they are needed by someone else, and they will neglect their own emotional and spiritual health because of their need to be needed.

Here's why I say that: in an age where self-protection and self-love are the cultural currents, it's almost like the whole world just sort of assumes everyone is an unhealthy Enneagram 2. It's like yeah, if someone is literally depriving their own emotional and spiritual needs so that someone else becomes emotionally/spiritually dependent on someone else, then yeah, that's not a good thing and that person probably needs some help figuring that out and establishing healthy boundaries and all that, sure.

But that does not mean *everyone* needs to hear that. Most of us aren't wired in that way and aren't in that particular place of unhealth. But when that becomes the major messaging from our culture that you should love yourself first and put your needs before others, what happens is this produces over time an anti-agape nature in us.

Now with those two data points in mind, just think through what the ramifications of that might look like.

Imagine watching the Avengers and right before Tony Stark snaps his fingers, he was to say, "On second thought, I ought to put myself first," and doesn't sacrifice himself. That wouldn't be much of a story.

Or if, right before Aslan marched up to the White Witch to give up his life so that Edmund goes free, imagine if, at the last moment, he backed out and said, “You know what, sorry, guys, this is not loving myself. Plus Edmund is a bit of a punk anyway, so you do you.” And then bam, cut to the credits. That would be quite a dark ending.

Author Brad East wrote an article called *Four Loves Loss* where he described the four loves C.S. Lewis taught. He argued that in modern culture, we are living in a time where all four loves - not just agape - are increasingly “lost.” Here’s what he said (and it’s a bit long but bear with me):

Our society is awash in loneliness, apathy, despair, and even sexlessness. The youngest generations (“Gen Z” and Millennials) are marrying later or not at all, and (thus) having fewer children or none at all. Divorce is rampant. Kin networks are declining in both quantity and quality, and what remains is fraying at the seams. Regular attendance of church (or synagogue, or mosque) reached historically low numbers before Covid; the pandemic has supercharged these trends beyond recognition. Even friendship, the last dependable and universal form of love, has seen drastic reductions, especially for men. I heard one sociologist, a middle-aged woman, remark recently that our young men are beset by “the three P’s: pot, porn, and PlayStation.” You can’t open an internet browser without stumbling upon the latest news report, study finding, or op-ed column on opioids, deaths of despair, hollowed-out factory towns, fatherless children, lethargic boys, screen-addled kids, housebound teens, risk-averse young adults, social awkwardness, and all the other symptoms of a sad, isolated, and unloved generation. They are like a car alarm ringing through the night. Eventually you get used to it and go back to sleep.”

East says it bluntly: we live in a sad, isolated, and unloved generation. But this is the consequence of the idea that we should above all be true to ourselves and look after ourselves first. That’s the fruit of self-interest and self-protection above all. And personally, I don’t want to see that type of movie, and my hunch is neither do you, but it doesn’t matter because this is the world we’re living in. And part of me even thinks the reason why we gravitate towards these movies more and more is because we desperately want in our souls for the world and our lives to work this way - where agape was within our very nature to live out.

But the path to be an agape person, as much as we may want it in our bones, only happens when we deny our wants and our self-interest and instead take the path of self-denial. Because to be a person of others-centered love necessitates that you deny the self:

- Because if you can’t learn to deny yourself, then you can never truly belong to a group of people, because it will require of you to abandon your agenda
- If you can’t deny yourself, you can’t ever have good, lasting friendships because you’re not willing to make concessions at any point or deal with conflict because it will require you to confess and forgive
- If you can’t learn to relinquish yourself, you’ll never devote yourself to God because you’re stuck in this mode of self-protection.

If the story we subconsciously believe is that we are at the center of the universe, and we should love ourselves first at all cost - then we will never actually live into the story that Jesus has written for us.

You see, all of the scenes in all the great movies, the great moments in the stories we love, they are just shadows of something deep and beautiful at the center of the universe. All those movies and stories, they don't even fully know the story they are actually acting out (except maybe Narnia) because Christians are the only ones who have the secret, who know the deeper, truer story going on behind it all.

And the deeper truer story behind it all is that there is a God at the center of it all who is Himself the embodiment of pure agape love. And at the very center of his being is self-giving love: One God in three persons, a Trinity of perpetual, self-giving agape love within His persons. Never once lacking. Never once acting in self-interest. Never using the other in neediness or selfish motive. Only radical commitment and trust.

And this Trinitarian agape love at the center of it all is what everything was created through, and this is the aim of all of the universe, to exist and forever be enthralled in this pure agape love. And in this deeper truer story behind all other stories, our own selfishness and sin severed humanity from this agape love we've been offered.

And through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, Jesus make clear that the love he is calling us to is not any of the lesser loves but the type of love that is woven into the fabric of existence. The radical, self-giving, agape love that God put on display to bring us into His forever family.

Jesus is the better and truer story behind all the other stories we hear and watch.

- Jesus, who sacrifices himself upon the altar of the Cross so that we the sin-enslaved prisoner could go free
- Jesus, who throws Himself in front of the wrath of sin and human rebellion so that death can not have the final word over us
- Jesus, who volunteers himself as tribute, if you will, so that we could live
- Jesus, who, in His final breath, says, "It is finished" so that the power and penalty of sin and death can be obliterated like Thanos turning into dust

And now, Jesus intends to work this same agape love in you.

1 John sums it up concisely when it says:

1 John 4:19

We love because he first loved us.

The only way we can actually become people of agape is when we look to and are empowered by the person who is Agape. It's no sales pitch or gimmick. It's the expectation. Just as planting requires time and intentionality, so agape will be produced in us over time. This is the intent.

And the beautiful thing is, because God is agape and created us through His agape to become people of agape, it's only when you have this sort of love are you then able to make sense of and live out the other loves. From *storge* love between family. From *philia* love between friends. From *eros* love between husband and wife.

- God intends for our marriage to take on a quality that is not seen in our non-Christian friends. To demonstrate an agape love to our spouse, to serve the other in such a way that reflects the beautiful cosmic nature of the Trinity. To display a devotion that confuses people on the outside, even as they tear up when they see the shadows of it in movies.
- God intends for our family relationships to be remade by agape love, even when some of our deepest pains and wounds comes from family members, even when generational sin and brokenness trickles down and causes so much heartache. Jesus intends for us to be the kinds of people to begin to heal our families and break generational sin through our agape love.

So to wrap up our time this morning, I would like us to do a quick diagnostic.

Think about your relationships, with your spouse, your kids, with your LifeGroup, with your leaders, with your friends, and roommates, and extended family:

Do you see the growing evidence of agape love towards them? Do you see a Jesus-motivated, Spirit-empowered, Trinitarian-type commitment towards the people in your life? Do you notice this agape-like growth in your relationships? Or do your relationships often feel dry and withered?

And let me just say, if you're anything like me, it is perfectly normal to look at agape love and to at first glance feel a little discouraged. Like, okay, if God's love is the standard, how on earth can I possibly live up to that?

And the good news is found in the metaphor in Galatians 5 - to be a person of agape love is not the fruit of hard work. It's not the fruit of getting your act together. It's the fruit of the Spirit.

It's through the very power and person of God dwelling with us that comes alive in us when we show up day in and day out and submitting our lives to Him. Just like a garden where you water and you tend to it, and then wait. So we too show up day in and day out, and we wait.

- We show up on Sundays, and we listen, and we sing our hearts out to Jesus, and we participate at the communion table, and we wait.
- We read our Bibles even when we don't feel like it, and ask the Spirit to work in us, and we wait.
- We pray at disciplined times and spontaneous times, and we show up to LifeGroup and share what's broken in us and speak good news to our friends, and we wait.
- And we ask the Spirit to supernaturally help us when we're parenting our kids, or to love our spouse, or our coworkers, or our neighbors....even our enemies, and we wait.

And slowly but surely, you'll see something grow within you that wasn't there before. You'll respond and act in such a way to the people around you that you didn't used to, and it will be the supernatural fruit of agape love taking root in your soul.

And just like when you plant something, at first you may see the tiniest, wimpiest looking stem poke out of the soil. But in the right conditions, with enough time, that wimpy stem will grow fast and tough, and bear fruit left and fruit until it just takes over everything - so too this is what's possible for us: we can become the types of people who can exude and be taken over by this type of Trinitarian agape love to others.

And that's just one fruit of the Spirit. That's just one way the Spirit works in us. We've still got eight more to go. So we hope you stick around this summer as we hear more about how God intends to work in us and through us to look more like Jesus.