

# THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE

## What Would the Fruit of Love Look Like in My Life?

In Search of the Hallmark of Genuine Christianity

In his work, A Vision of Holiness, Dr. John Stott poses and then moves to answer a question that ought to be asked by every would-be follower of Jesus Christ. The question is: "What is the hallmark of the truly Christian life?" What is that supreme value that unites Christians... that is both the goal and the path by which the devotee has to move? In short, what is the stuff that must be present in a believer's life for it to be called truly "Christian"? If I asked you that question, what would you say?

Maybe you'd answer "Why, it's powerful religious experience, of course." And there would be some of us inclined to agree. After all, vital Christian lives have often been marked by powerful, even ecstatic, experiences of the Holy Spirit that leave the believer convinced of the reality of God. Jesus promised that his followers would indeed be filled with the powerful presence of the Comforter, and there are many sitting among us today who can testify to feeling that dramatic comfort at a time of crisis, or of witnessing the outpouring of charismatic gifts, or of being overflowed with an almost physical sense of God's presence at one moment or another.

But someone else might answer: "Religious experience is all well and fine but, c'mon friends, the real key is truth -- a firm grasp of orthodox Christian doctrine -- that's the mark of a real believer." And this answer too would strike a responsive chord in many of us. Didn't Jesus say "I am the way, the truth, and the life"? Yes he did. At their best moments Christians have always stood up for the importance of sound, biblical thinking. We've rightly prided ourselves on a scholarly clergy and an informed laity. Every week this church offers a wealth of excellent classes and study groups in the conviction that Christians must know what and why they believe, particularly in this day of moral confusion and religious apostasy. The mark of a Christian is a firm hold of the truth.

"No, no," someone else might say. "The chief characteristic of genuine Christianity is faith! You can't read the Scriptures without noticing how often individuals are richly commended because they had faith." And here again a lot of us might agree. After all, the motto of reformation Christianity is *sola fide* -- "faith alone." The Apostle Paul tells us that we are "justified by faith"<sup>1</sup> and nothing else. I don't believe you can really know the power of Jesus in your life until you realize that you can't justify yourself before God on the basis of how many tedious sermons you endure, or what you give to charity, or the number of moral merit badges you've earned. That is the good news on which we stand -- that God is willing to accept and redeem us even when we are far from perfect, if we will only reach out to him with faith.

But I know there is another point of view out there. I can hear the voice who says: "I'm sorry, friend, but you're still missing the mark. Read your Bible. 'Faith without works is dead.' The hallmark of the genuine Christian life is not religious experience, or truth, or

faith; it is service." And it would be hard to argue with that. Jesus said: "There are many who cry 'Lord, Lord' who will not enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father asks them to do." "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve," said our Lord, and "as the Father has sent me, so I send you." It's wonderful to see that those of us who call ourselves evangelical Christians are finally recovering our traditional sense that we must be people who serve the least of these the way Jesus did.

## Heresies of Priority

But as vitally important as service is, is it really the heart of the Christian life? Consider the words of St. Paul about service in our text for this morning: "If I give all I possess to the poor, and surrender my body to the flames [of martyrdom], have not love, I gain nothing." And what was Paul saying about the place of faith when he wrote: "If I have a faith that can move mountains [with prayer], but have not love, I am nothing"? What do we make of the primacy of religious experience when he says that even "if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels...and if I have the gift of prophecy...but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal"? Or what of the priority of truth when we read Paul's statement that even "if I fathom all mysteries and [have] all knowledge, but have not love, I am nothing"?<sup>2</sup>

It seems clear that St. Paul believed that Christians are always in danger of falling prey to a variety of what we might call "heresies of priority." Of course religious experience, and truth and faith and service are vital elements of the Christian life. They ought to be dynamic parts of yours and mine. But there is something greater than these, something vastly more important than any of the other gifts and fruits of the Spirit, and that something is love. "Well, of course," you say. "Any blooming idiot knows that. Love makes the world go round. Love conquers all. Love is the answer. God is love." But do we really understand what it is we're saying? Do we really understand why love must be our primary ambition in life? Why it matters most?

## Why Love Matters

Elie Weisel, the storied survivor of the Nazi holocaust, once wrote of a life-shaking discovery made by those whose macabre task it was to clean out the ovens in which fellow prisoners had been incinerated. The heat of those furnaces was so intense that even the bones of their friends had turned to dust. Yet there amidst the ashes, the workers would find an occasional lump of gold -- the remnant of a tooth-filling which somehow the executioners had missed. Only the gold survived. Only that which was imperishable could stand the heat. So it will be with you and me, says the Apostle Paul. Only that within us which is imperishable or perfect -- the golden fruit of God's Spirit -- will remain after the heat of death has done its work on you and me. All else we've nurtured -- all our good looks, our fortunes, our best laid plans and institutions -- will pass away. Only faith, hope, and love will last to the end. And "the greatest of these is love."

But that's not the only reason that we must make love our aim. When we are not filled first and foremost with love, even the other worthwhile elements of the Christian life are doomed to perish. You've probably seen it happen. Without love as the supreme value, the devotee of religious experience becomes a selfish seeker after emotional highs, and the student of truth becomes an arrogant elitist. Without love motivating and replenishing a soul, the person of faith becomes an inactive dreamer, and the saint of service becomes merely a frenzied idealist destined for burn-out. This, I think, is what the Scripture means when it says: "If we have not love, we come to nothing." Love is what keeps the other marks of the Christian life from going bad.

But love does even more than that. You see, this four-letter stuff reminds the thinking Christian of another substance also known by four-letters. I'm thinking of A, T, G, and C – the letters geneticists use to signify adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine -- the chemicals that make up the strands of DNA. Every life form that has ever lived upon this planet was ultimately formed by chains of A,T,G, and C in some combination. And, in like manner, every aspect of character that God longs to grow in you and me will be produced as the result of the work of L, O, V, and E in us. Love is the underlying ingredient of the genetic code that produces all of the other fruit of the Spirit in a human life

Maybe you noticed that in our text for this morning. When Paul gets around to actually defining *what love is* in verses 4-7, he is really just giving us, in only slightly different words, the same catalogue of the fruit of the Spirit he provides in Galatians 5. That shouldn't surprise us, of course. Since God's fundamental character is love – we're told that in 1 John 4:16 – it's only natural to expect love to be at the root of whatever God grows. As the great preacher, Donald Grey Barnhouse, once observed: Love is the key to all the abundance of God. "Joy is love singing. Peace is love resting. Patience is love enduring. Kindness is love's touch. Generosity is love's character. Faithfulness is love's habit. Gentleness is love's self-forgetfulness. And self-control is love holding the reins."

### How Does Love Grow

My friends, would you like your life to be filled with greater joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Would you like to be someone who is more truly patient and kind... who does not envy or pridefully boast... who is never rude or self-seeking... who is not easily angered into being a record-keeper of wrongs... who doesn't delight in evil but rejoices with the truth... who is known by others as one who always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres? If your answer is yes, then your life must be filled, first and foremost, with greater love. You must make growing in love the number one priority of your existence. The question, of course, is HOW? How does love grow in us? I'll say a lot more about that in the weeks to come, but let me touch on the most important part and then send you on your way.

The story is told of a six-year-old girl who became deathly ill with a terrible disease. Her only hope was a blood transfusion but her rare blood type further complicated the problem. When all other prospects dissolved, the physicians approached the girl's nine-year-old brother and asked him if he would help. The young boy's lower lip trembled for a moment. "Will giving my blood save Sarah?" he asked. "Yes, we think it will," said one of the doctors. "O.K.," said the boy. As the procedure was begun, the child lay quietly with his eyes closed on the bed next to his sister. When the transfusion was complete, the doctors thanked the boy for saving his sister's life. The boy smiled weakly at first and then began to softly cry. "Doctor, when do I die?" the boy asked. All of a sudden it hit everyone in the room at once. The boy had made the choice to give his blood, believing that it would cost him everything to save the sister he loved.

My friends, once upon a time, someone made that kind of choice on your behalf and mine – to pour out his life's blood upon a cross, that you and I might live. The difference is that in his case, that choice DID cost him everything. Why did Jesus do that? I once read a comic-strip that answered that question. In the strip Charlie Brown is saying to Linus: "There I was just singing along -- "Jesus loves me this I know" -- when all of a sudden it hit me. Jesus loves me. Poor old block-headed me!" Has that truth really hit you? The more it does... the more your roots soak up the reality of the life-giving love that flows from the heart of God towards you... the more that love's life is going to bear in you fruit that look like it's source. As you go forth from this place, receive afresh the hope of which children and angels sing: "Jesus loves you, this you know, for the Bible tells you so. Little ones to him belong. We are weak. But He is strong."

Please pray with me....

*Great God of the Universe, there is only one thing we ask of you this day. By the power of your Holy Spirit, so fill us up with a sense of your excelling love, that it can't help but grow up and out of us like a golden tree bursting with fruit before your Son. In whose name we pray. Amen.*

## Introduction

Some of you will know that today is the day of Pentecost. It is the day in the Christian year when we remember how the Church was born when the Holy Spirit swept down upon a band of disciples huddled together in an upper room. What many will not know is how significant God's timing was in pouring out his Holy Spirit on that particular day long ago. You see, Pentecost was a holiday for the Jewish people even before it was given new meaning by the Christian faith. Known originally as the "Feast of the Harvest," or the "Feast of First Fruits," Pentecost was an annual Hebrew celebration directed at God's capacity to bring forth the fruit that sustains and blesses human life.

In a much deeper sense, that is what Pentecost still reminds us of. The Bible tells us that those who have received Christ into their lives have taken into themselves a remarkable seed. At the moment you said to God: "Lord, fill me with your power and presence," God faithfully planted inside of you -- whether you felt it or not -- the seed of his Holy Spirit. The scriptures say that that spiritual seed contained within it all the ingredients to begin to grow in you the Tree of Life -- a branch of God's own nature -- recognizable to you and others by the fruit it bears. And what is that fruit? St. Paul told us in these words once written to the Christians of Galatia: "Live by the Spirit, I say....for the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:16,22-23).

Does your life bear that fruit? Are these attributes of God's own nature growing in you, so that you feel the abundant power and presence of Christ in your life, and are able to offer them as a delicious present to the people with whom you live and work each day? Even if your answer is "I'm not so sure," there is good news for all of us in the message the Scriptures bring; for unlike the "gifts of the Spirit" -- gifts like teaching, or healing, or prophecy, which God graciously gives out to believers by the ones and twos -- the "fruit of the Spirit" are available in *full* array to every one of us who will cultivate properly the seed which God has planted within our hearts.

And it is towards a fuller understanding of these delicious fruits, and how we can cultivate them to God's glory in our lives, that we will be focusing our attention on Sunday mornings during these next two months. As we seek these fruit together, let us ask for God's help in prayer. Let us pray....

*God, you know how much we want our lives to be filled not so much with the perishable things of this earth, but with the imperishable fruits of your nature. Pour into us your living water, and open our hearts to the radiance of your Son, that from the soil of our lives might grow those very qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control whose powerful seed is you. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 2:16

<sup>2</sup>I am indebted to the incisive thought of John Stott's, A Vision for Holiness, for the concepts presented in this section of the sermon.