

Galatians 5:22 The fruit of the Spirit is love
Scripture reading John 15:1-17

Introduction

What do you most desire in life? Or if God would answer one prayer in the way you wanted, what would it be? Maybe you would need time to think what might be the item or items at the top of your list. I suspect that the age we have reached will have a significant impact on the way we approach it. It can be a good thing to set goals or have an ambition to accomplish something. However, as followers of Jesus our priorities should be different to many other people around us – at least in some respects. There is another question we could ask that might tip the scales in the direction our thoughts ought to progress. What does God most want for my life? What are the priorities He wishes to suggest to us? The simplest answer is given in Romans 8:29: *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son...* What God most wants for you and me is for each one of us in our attitudes, speech and actions to be increasingly Jesus-like; in daily life we comment that in a mannerism or turn of phrase or something else someone is ‘like their mother’ or ‘like their father’. It is not an unqualified statement concerning all their behavioural choices, but in that particular it is the case. The challenge that rebounds to you and me is simply this: how Jesus-like have I been this last week? Or this last month or year? Is there progress in my journey of faith so that other people around us recognize more of the characteristics of Jesus in the way we think about things; or in the way we spoke to someone or in the way we acted in a particular situation? I think it likely that most of us would admit we have made progress in some things, but inadequate progress in others. The question is this: does it matter enough for me to want to make progress in the areas where I know I am weak? If need be will I seek out an accountability partner who I give permission to ask me periodically the awkward questions about my level of progress. This section of God’s Word is like a mirror that reveals to us areas where we might make improvements – if we want most of all to please our Lord and Saviour?

1. Fruit not ‘fruits’ – the calling entrusted to us

(a) **Jesus’ clear instructions** (John 15:8) *This is to My Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit (καρπον singular), showing yourselves to be My disciples* (John 15:8). Although there is always great value at looking at a passage in its immediate context there is also significant merit in seeing its message in the wider biblical context as well. In John 15 our Lord at the Last Supper made it abundantly clear that abiding or remaining in Jesus is the only way to fruitfulness. John 15:8-14 states: ⁸*This is to My Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.* ¹⁰*If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commands and remain in His love.* ¹¹*I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.* ¹²*My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.* ¹³*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.* ¹⁴*You are my friends if you do what I command.* What is it that Jesus was asking His followers to do to demonstrate that they are becoming more like Him, however imperfect they may be? He was asking them to watch over their lives to see how they are progressing in the journey of faith. Some Christians can be excellent at noting the shortcomings of other believers, but much slower at acknowledging their own weaknesses. The test of our claims to be His followers and of our growth in grace is by the level of spiritual fruitfulness in

our lives. A genuine believer will show some signs of God at work; a believer who is maturing in the faith should show more of God's work on their character and in their conduct. Jesus said: *This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit* (καρπον singular), *showing yourselves to be My disciples*. What is it that Jesus has in mind and how can we bring joy to Him? John 15:12 states: *My command is this: love each other as I have loved you...* In John 13:34-35 in the course of the same message Jesus gave the same command to His disciples and explained why this was so important. ³⁴ *'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* ³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.'* If we see the pattern at work in the New Testament then we will recognize that our faith journey is not just 'me and Jesus', but each believer in community with others in a local congregation and Jesus. Our progress in holiness is measured by the quality of our relationships with others.

(b) **Paul's clear instructions** (I Corinthians 13:1-8) Paul in I Corinthians 13 challenged the congregation in Corinth about this very subject. The apostle in the opening verses of that chapter lists some of the most amazing spiritual experiences possible – or at least hypothetically possible – then he lists the most extreme sacrifices of apparent Christian service, but concludes with these words: *but do not have love, I gain nothing.* ⁴ *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* ⁵ *It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* ⁶ *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* ⁷ *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* ⁸ *Love never fails* (I Corinthians 13:3b-8). Evangelical Christians in the United Kingdom have an excellent track record of Christian service and other voluntary community work. When it is all added up the statistics are most impressive. A message is given out loud and clear that we are good and enthusiastic about doing what we can in our local communities and sometimes further afield as well. However, our area of weakness is that sometimes in our busyness we can be weak at being the person God wants us to be. We can struggle with finding time to be alone with the Lord for personal time in God's Word and prayer. Some Christians also have real difficulties with diary priorities and without intending to allow time for worshipping God collectively with His people on a Sunday to be squeezed out of the schedule with too much other stuff crowding it out. Paul's clear instructions to the Corinthian congregation and subsequent generations of believers are a constant reminder to us that who I am in Christ and how I invest in my relationships with fellow believers is foundational to my identity in Christ. We do not do this in our own strength but through the enabling and equipping power of the Holy Spirit. Fruit does not come overnight but is a longer term result of growth and investment in the necessary nutrients to produce it on your apple or pear tree at home. Likewise in spiritual terms the level of investment we are putting into our lives just now will show up in the next few years of our spiritual journey. You may have been investing in a pension plan over a good number of years. It is only when you want to draw on it that you find out whether you had been given good investment advice or put enough money aside for your commitments at that time.

(c) **But the fruit of the Spirit is love** (Galatians 5:22) once again the word rendered *fruit* is in the singular form. It is interesting that the sins or 'fruits' of the sinful nature are plural. The apostle Paul cites a longer list of sins but that is not a complete list as he adds *and the like* at the end (Galatians 5:21a). Sin although in some cases it can bring pleasure in the short term; it ultimately brings division and diminishes people's lives. Christians have sometimes been too eager to skip to the longer term negative consequences of sin and almost deny that in the first instance wrong choices people make can sometimes bring a short-term 'gain', albeit one with a cost over the longer term. By contrast the work of the Holy Spirit is to renew and refresh us equipping us to

worship together, witness together and share fellowship with one another. Day by day in the newspapers or on television or online the stories of people who made bad choices appear one after another. Sometimes we think –‘how foolish, did ‘x’ really think they could do ‘y’ and avoid any negative consequences? The answer is probably ‘yes’. Human sinfulness distorts our perceptions of reality. We need the aid of the Holy Spirit to help us get things back in focus. It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to experience the love of God and to then share it with other people. Paul expresses it this way in Romans 5:5: ...*God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.* And what is most encouraging of all is that for the child of God who has truly trusted their heavenly Father through Jesus and become a part of His family that nothing *will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:39b). Praise God for this wonderful blessing that is ours in Christ.

2. The primacy of love

The vocabulary of love is so prominent in our culture but its depth and vitality is often significantly absent from many social contexts from families to work places; from social settings to internet communications. The latter especially can be deeply disturbing; a small minority of individuals feel at liberty to send the most appalling communications to others via social media that they would never dream of saying to someone face-to-face; at its heart such poor choices of behavior is motivated by an absence of what the Bible describes as genuine practical love for the other person. What is it about love that results in it being placed in this central position in Paul’s list in Galatians 5? There are some simple reasons:

(a) Love includes all the other character qualities I have already that the New Testament is very clear in its use of *fruit* singular rather than plural in respect of the work of the Holy Spirit transforming us to become like Jesus. The repeated emphasizing that Christian love is central to each aspect of it is a very big hint to us that Christians all too often forget this central truth in our relationships with one another. It is based on the character of God. I John 4:7-8 states: *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.*** There is, therefore, only one fruit of the Spirit which has a series of different flavours outlined by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. These flavours should become evident in the way we respond to God and to one another in the full range of life situations; both joys and sorrows; celebrations and struggles; setbacks as well as successes. When they are clearly displayed in our lives it is like the beautiful sight of a rainbow which reveals the different colours that are present in the light on which we depend day by day. God has seen fit to labour this point in the Bible because His people at times miss the point.

(b) Love is the ‘glue’ that binds everything together In a passage that covers similar ground in Colossians 3, the apostle says these words: *Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, **which binds them all together in perfect unity.*** (Colossians 3:12-14). There are different ways in which this is true. For example, in view of a discussion I observed amongst professing Christians on Facebook this week, it appears there are some people who have not grasped how marvelous it is when people of a diverse range of ethnic social and cultural backgrounds are worshipping witnessing and working together in a local church context.

Inevitably things are done differently and understood differently in particular contexts. So there is inevitably work to do to build good quality relationships amongst a diverse group of people. The same is true in terms of priorities and emphases. Inevitably particular people have a greater passion for one form of ministry or one style of worship services, or one approach to carrying out particular tasks in congregational life. However, we have a calling in Christian love to try our very best to maintain the best possible harmony in a fellowship because of our love for God and our love for one another. It does not and will not mean we are ‘best friends’ with everyone who walks through the door of the church, but our calling is to model Christ-like love towards one another.

(c) **Love fulfills God’s Law** Jesus was once asked by a teacher of the law to state what was the greatest commandment of all, from the many held to be binding on practising Jews of His day. In Mark 12:29-31 we have the record of Jesus’ response.²⁹ ‘*The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. **Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”*³⁰ *The second is this: “**Love your neighbour as yourself.**”* There is no commandment greater than these.’ Jesus was quoting the Old Testament here from Deuteronomy 6:5 with respect to God and then Leviticus 19:18b with respect to our neighbour. Paul in Galatians 5 is highlighting what it means *to love our neighbour* because he also quotes Leviticus 19:18b in Galatians 5:14. This commandment was clearly central in Paul’s thinking as well as it appears elsewhere in his pastoral letters to churches, for example in Romans 13:9b-10. The challenge to each one of us to ask ourselves is how do other people see us? The challenge of how God sees us is always before us too, but with Paul’s emphasis here on our relationships with other people, for example, in our families or church family the test is to ask how do other people see me? When they think of you or me- do they think of us as a person who genuinely displays Christian love in their care for other people? We all make mistakes and are imperfect – but in terms of the longer term what are we normally like? How do others perceive our inter-personal skills? It might be a sobering exercise or an encouraging one or a mixture of the two if we actually knew what other people were really thinking.

(d) **Love is the key to producing spiritual fruit** Paul wrote I Corinthians to a congregation that was wealthy and self-sufficient. It had a significant proportion of members who saw themselves as having superior spiritual gifts in comparison with other Christians (I Corinthians 12-14); they viewed themselves as superior in knowledge to other Christians as well (I Corinthians 8). Some even looked down on Paul as an inferior figure compared to the charismatic charming self-promoting super-apostles (II Corinthians 10:12-18); Paul has to remind them that it is not knowledge but *love* [that] *builds up* (I Cor. 8:1b); if we think we are superior to other Christians because of the spiritual gifts we possess we need to be reminded that if we *have not love*, as Paul declared in I Cor. 13:1: *I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*. The community of God’s people, says God’s Word, is built up by the way we think of, speak to and encourage one another in the local Christian Church. When we put ‘doing’ things ahead of ‘being’ whom God has called us to be, we are likely to risk viewing people as a means to getting jobs done rather than fellow disciples of Jesus growing in Christ together as we serve others in His name. Love, genuine Christian love, is the key to producing spiritual fruit.

3. Love in action

(a) **Loving with our minds** Jesus' words in Mathew 22:37-38: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*"³⁸ *This is the first and greatest commandment.* Our love for others – when it is genuine and sincere begins in our minds. We are whole people and our whole being needs to be committed to endeavouring to act in a Christ-like way which at its heart is what the Bible describes as Christ-like love. In our contemporary society for many people love is primarily about 'my feelings'; the problem with this mindset is that feelings change depending on circumstances and a marriage or relationship based on how I feel at any given time is very vulnerable to breakdown. The disposition to love other people in whatever context must begin in our minds. Paul's words in Romans 12:2 apply here as well as in many other contexts: *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.* We have to value other Christians says Paul in I Corinthians 8:11, as a brother or sister *for whom Christ died*. That is, they are incredibly special to Jesus; therefore, I am required to value each and everyone as far as I am able with that truth in view. The bottom line starting point is what Jesus declared in Matthew 7:12: *In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you...* Any sensible thinking person will affirm these words in principle. The test is whether we can think outside the box and be willing to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; It is easy to project our opinions or priorities onto someone else and assume they think the way we do. Loving with our minds involves taking the necessary time to listen to others and to grasp where they are coming from or seeking to communicate or accomplish, rather than simply waiting for a gap to insert more of our own words or opinions. It is a long-term lifestyle to which we are called by Jesus, the One who is Lord over all, but lived on earth as a humble servant-leader. Paul reminded the Christian congregation in the Roman colony of Philippi of what this means in practice. *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*⁵ *In your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:3-5). For these former army families these kind of values would have contrasted sharply with the mindsets of the vast majority of people in that town. However, are we following Jesus' way or that of the self-centred way of many people around us today?

(b) **Loving with our wills** Christian love is not just a mindset, an approach to life in general it is also something we consciously choose to practice even in contexts where our feelings may be struggling to catch up, but we do it for Christ's sake. The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is almost too familiar for many of us who have grown up in church to grasp how radical the choices this man made in the story. The Samaritans had for roughly two centuries been treated very poorly by the Jews; if this had happened in real life everything in the man's being would have screamed out - 'He wouldn't lift a finger to help you'. What is more the chances of genuine gratitude from the man being helped would be limited. It was not guaranteed. When Jesus is asked about how God calls us to live; or how to be a good 'neighbour' the bar is set very high here and makes for uncomfortable reflection for us at times. Do I, do you simply gravitate to those who will reciprocate love to us? Or will we consciously be the one to take the first steps to build relationships with people who might be less than willing to reciprocate? or with people with whom our relationship has broken down? Loving with our wills is that determination to say I will put myself out to be the one who makes the first move. The man who has asked the questions to Jesus about the greatest commandments and what being a good

neighbor means was told at the end of the encounter: *Go and do likewise* (Luke 10:37b). Are you and I willing to model Jesus' costly command?

(c) **Loving with our emotions** In our secular society today the primary emphasis in any discussion about love would centre on feelings or emotions. This is part of it. As most people will know the Greek language of Jesus' day had four words in use for 'love'; 'eros' was the term used for physical or sexual attraction and emotions; 'storge' was the term for family love or the bonds that should unite people in relationships in a physical family. 'Philia' was the term used for friendship; the people we choose to spend time with, those with whom we gravitate towards and want to spend time in their company. In different ways there is significant emotional content in each of these kinds of relationships. Sometimes they can be the best thing in the world but they can also be the context for our greatest heartaches. Relationships can be one of the most fulfilling parts of human existence when all is well, but the potential for the opposite is true as well. In a sinful broken world we will experience the range of emotions over our lives –the question is how will we respond to life's challenges? If we are followers of Jesus we need to continually remind ourselves that we take our lead from Him not others around us. Christian love 'agape' is the term normally used in the New Testament. It is practical love, a 'doing' word. It is something we keep on doing even when it is not reciprocated because we are following in the footsteps of one who modeled it for us. In John 13 for a group of men who repeatedly argued amongst themselves 'who was the greatest' (for example Mark 9:33-35) and who would shortly desert Him when He most needed them, Jesus took a towel and washed their feet, much to their horror. In His silence He modeled for them the fruit of love. He demonstrated to His followers in an unforgettable way that He really meant them to love this way. The challenge He left with them He now leaves with us: *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them* (John 13:17). Amen