

# FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: LOVE

SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



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Galatians 5:22-23  
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Galatians 5:22-23

How do you love someone?

Peter Lovenheim, a writer, tells this story:

*When I was growing up in upstate New York in the late 1950s and '60s, people didn't exercise in public the way they do now. You didn't see adults jogging, biking or power-walking on the street.*

*Except one. Nearly every day, a middle-aged woman of slight build walked rapidly through our suburban neighborhood, usually with her head down. No one knew her name, so we called her the Walker. She usually wore a simple blue or yellow dress, if memory serves, and when it rained she would wear a clear plastic raincoat with a hood pulled over her head. In the winter I recall a long, cloth coat, also with a hood; in driving snow she'd cover her face with a scarf.*

*Forty years later, when I'd moved with my wife and children back to what had been my parents' home, I was amazed to see the same woman still walking through the neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>*

Again, how do you love someone?

We're studying the fruit of the Spirit this summer. The first fruit is love.

**Galatians 5:22-23:**

**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.**

## Pride of place

The list of fruit has a certain random feel to it and is in fact incomplete: the fruit listed are among "such things." Nevertheless, love, which leads the list, occupies pride of place. The other fruit are an outgrowth of love.

In Galatians 5:23, love is not God's love for us or our love for God but our love for others, especially our love for others in the church. Of course, God's love is primary, and our love for others grows out of God's love for us.

Paul, in Galatians 5:14, emphasizes both the importance of love and the meaning of love in this context: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:14). Note also what Paul said a few verses earlier: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love"—that is, love for each other (Galatians 5:6).

Biblically, love for others is self-giving love. It is not the North American version, in which what I do or feel for you is for the sake of my own fulfillment. That doesn't mean our love for others is void of feelings. Indeed, good feelings can motivate us to love, and good feelings can result from decisions to love. However, we cannot depend on good feelings, which are ephemeral.

Paul is especially concerned that the people in the churches in Galatia love each other in light of what he noted earlier: "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another . . . But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another" (Galatians 5:13, 15).

Moreover, the majority of the "works of the flesh," which are in opposition to the fruit of the Spirit, are self-centered sins of discord that create breakdowns in social relationships.

## Open to the love of God

The aim of the Spirit is to reproduce the character of Christ in the church so that people in the church love like Christ loves. For that to happen, of course, the people in the church must learn to "walk by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16). The Spirit produces the fruit in us and among us, but it's not as if we're passive observers. No, we must walk by the Spirit, one step at a time.

Especially as it concerns the fruit of love, walking by the Spirit involves opening to the love of God, especially as it is seen in Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Or, as Paul says in Romans, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us,” and, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:5-8).

God holds nothing back. He pours his love into our hearts through the Spirit.

The extent of God’s love is seen in those for whom Christ died. One might be inclined to die for a needy person with attractive qualities, but Christ died for undeserving sinners who spurned the love of God.

It’s not simply that God loves unsavory individuals, nor is it simply that God loves unsavory individuals who don’t love him. It’s that God loves unsavory individuals who are hostile to him. It’s one thing to die for a friend; it’s quite another to die for an enemy. Christ died for us, the enemies of God.

The Spirit makes such love real to us in a personal, intimate way.

Walk by the Spirit: marvel at the torrent of love that has swept you from hostility to worship, the costly love that flowed along with the blood of his Son right into your heart.

## God writes a poem

If you love someone, how do you express that love to that person? The most obvious way is simply to tell that person. You use words. If you’re serious, you write those words in a card and give it to that person. By writing, you’re committing your words to record. If you’re serious and inspired, you write a poem. Writing a poem connects with and conveys your deepest feelings.

In Isaiah 43:1-7, God writes you a poem. That means he’s serious about you and that you inspire him. At the center of this poem, we find God’s outrageous love for us that motivates his outrageous actions.

The inverted structure of the poem serves to feature the center stanza (Isaiah 43:3b-4) and to highlight the center of that stanza. The center stanza features six lines that break down into three couplets. The first and third couplets treat the same theme—the price the Lord pays to redeem his people, forming the arrows that point to the center couplet, in which the Lord expresses his love for his people:

**“I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.  
4 Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give men in return for you,  
peoples in exchange for your life.”**

## What we’re worth

The price of Israel’s redemption from Egypt is Egypt, which includes Cush and Seba. The tenth plague that finally convinced Pharaoh to release Israel killed all the first-born of Egypt. The angel of death passed over the houses of Israel. The Lord also promises future redemption, with the price being the death of other peoples.

How are we to understand the Lord’s killing people of one nation to redeem people from another? When the Lord redeemed Israel, he was also judging Egypt, a pagan nation. The other peoples he would give in exchange for Israel would also be experiencing the Lord’s judgment. The Lord waited before leading Israel to conquer the peoples of Canaan until their iniquity was “complete” (Genesis 15:16). The price the Lord is willing to pay—the death of other peoples—shows forth the value of those he redeems.

At the center of the poem, the Lord expresses something from the center of his heart. Why has the Lord redeemed Israel, and why will he redeem Israel? Because she is precious in his sight, because she is honored, because he loves her.

Near as I can tell, this is the only passage in the Scriptures where God says to us, “I love you.” Why isn’t it better known? I suspect it’s because we recoil at the thought of God giving some people in exchange for others. It doesn’t seem fair.

In reality, though, we all deserve death and eternal separation from God. Sin is that destructive. If God were “fair,” he’d kill us all and send us all to hell. The fact that he spares some, first Israel and then the church, so that

they can save others is attributable to his mercy—even his mercy for all.

Moreover, as we take in the whole of biblical revelation, we understand that the Lord's payment expressed in the death of Egypt and other nations isn't payment enough. Sin costs more than that, and we're worth more than that. Sin costs God his Son, and that's what we're worth.

## **'I love you'**

The Lord uses some choice words to express his feelings for us—words such as “precious” and “honored” and “love.”

We are precious in his sight. God sees everything; he sees everything about you. His assessment, after his all-perceiving eyes have seen everything there is to see about you, is that you are precious. In God's estimation, the only one that really counts, you are of inestimable value. You are not simply a lump of flesh or a collection of molecules; you are precious.

We are also honored by God. To be honored is to be recognized favorably, to be praised. Every child wants to be honored by his or her parents. That is why children, before performing some new trick that they've learned, will often first get their parents' attention and say, “Watch this.” They want to be honored. We want to be honored. The Lord, your heavenly Father, honors you; he recognizes you favorably; he praises you.

He also speaks to you those three words many of us most want to hear, “I love you.”

You make yourself vulnerable when you use such words. Many parents never work up the courage to tell their children that they love them. You will hear many adult children say something like, “My father never told me he loved me; he showed me his love through actions.” If you really love someone, why is it so hard to tell that person? Because you're afraid that person won't love you back.

In saying “I love you,” you open your heart and risk rejection. The Lord becomes vulnerable, he opens his heart; he risks rejection to tell you that he loves you. Not only do you make yourself vulnerable when you say “I love you” to someone, you also commit yourself to that person, and you know commitment can be costly. It was for God. It cost him his Son.

Therefore, substitute the words “my Son” for “Egypt,” “Cush,” “Seba,” “men,” and “peoples”:

**“I give my Son as your ransom,  
My Son, my Son in exchange for you.  
4 Because you are precious in my eyes,  
and honored, and I love you,  
I give my Son in return for you,  
My Son in exchange for your life.”**

What did Jesus say? “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

## **The heart of God's heart**

Note that the Lord's stunning assessment of us as precious, honored, and loved is not the result of his actions; it is the motivation for his actions. Because you are precious in his sight, because you are honored by him, because he loves you, he acts; he lets go of his Son. The Lord's outrageous love for you motivates his outrageous actions.

Through the Scriptures and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Lord speaks the words in Isaiah to you right now. Listen carefully and imaginatively to what the Lord says to you, for these words can change your life: “you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.”

At the heart of the poem, we find God's heart. At the heart of God's heart what do we find? We find ourselves. We find God's love for us. We were made in God's love and redeemed in God's love that we might receive God's love and know that we are loved.

## **Rivers of living water**

What then happens when we open to God's love for us? Listen to Jesus:

—“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

—“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

—“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38).

When you drink from the love of Jesus, something changes within you. Streams of life-giving water flow from you. What pours into you pours out of you. There may be a logjam of internal fears, ambitions, and ambiguities that restricts the flow, but the water of Jesus' love sweeps it away twig by twig, stick by stick, log by log. At some point, if we keep drinking from the love of Jesus, we love because we can't help ourselves.

If we obey Jesus' instructions to lay up treasures in heaven, then, in the words of singer David Wilcox, we will always have what we give to love.

## Particular sensitivity

During a rehearsal of Beethoven's "Ninth Symphony," the musicians under the direction of Arturo Toscanini responded to the maestro's wishes with particular sensitivity. The musicians were awed by Toscanini's direction and gave him a thunderous ovation at the conclusion of the rehearsal. Toscanini, though, tried desperately to stop them. He waved his arms and shouted at them to be quiet. When the ovation subsided, he said in a broken voice: "It isn't me, men—It's Beethoven."

Toscanini recognized his complete dependence on Beethoven. It was Beethoven's brilliance that enabled the conductor to bear fruit, so to speak. He received the music of Beethoven. As Toscanini was dependent on Beethoven to convey music, we are dependent on the Spirit, who nourishes us with the love of Christ, to bear fruit. We receive the nutrients of Christ and convey them.

Toscanini's brilliance as a conductor in the rehearsal was commensurate to his perception of the brilliance of Beethoven. As he saw the notes on the page, he was no doubt awed. His wild attempt to stop the applause also indicates he was awed. But mostly, the manner of his sensitive direction indicates that he was awed. He bore fruit because he was in awe of Beethoven's brilliance.

Are we in awe of Christ's love for us? Have we given ourselves a chance to be in awe of Christ's love for us? Have we opened to him? If we understand and appreciate the brilliance of Christ's love for us, we'll love. You could hardly put it more succinctly than the apostle John: "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

Some time ago, I had the privilege of watching tears roll down the face of a friend as she began to see herself as loving some people who didn't seem able to love in return. She couldn't quite describe how it happened. But

they were tears of joy on her face. The love of Jesus was being reproduced in her life. She cried tears of living water.

## Ask questions

How, practically speaking, do you express love for someone? The answer, of course, is multifaceted. Nevertheless, let me offer one simple suggestion: ask questions. Specifically, ask people questions about themselves. A lot of people, maybe most people, want to tell you at least something about themselves, but a lot of people, maybe most people, think you don't want to know. If you ask a question, you let someone know you're interested.

I've been involved in leading many men's groups through the years. In every group, I ask each man to tell his story. Well, to be honest, I give them no choice in the matter. "No one gets out of here without telling his story," I tell them.

I usually give them forty-five minutes. Several men have told me there's no way they can fill forty-five minutes. However, I cannot remember even one man ever going less than forty-five minutes. Once they start talking and see that the other men are interested, they keep talking.

Everyone has a story to tell. Everyone's story is interesting. If someone's story involves Christ, it's transcendent. Sometimes, with some people, all it takes is one question to open the floodgates.

As preachers, we want you to hear not just from us; we want you to hear from each other. We will often include personal stories in our sermons. However, because everyone has stories to tell, we make regularly make space in our worship services for congregational sharing. This summer, during our Fruit of the Spirit series, we're making even more space.

## The rest of the story

Remember Peter Lovenheim, who was amazed to see the same woman walking through the neighborhood he returned to forty years later? He resolved to meet her and approached her one afternoon in 2003.

*"Excuse me," I began. "I've lived on this street a long time and have always noticed you walking."*



*Up close, she looked older, smaller and frailer than I had imagined.*

*“Yes,” she said. “I’ve been walking here a long time.”*

*Her voice was shaky, but she spoke with a clear diction. She said she’d walked in the neighborhood almost every day since 1960.*

*“You’ve walked on our street every day for more than 40 years?” I asked.*

*“I didn’t miss many,” she said, smiling.*

*“In just one more year, I’ll be 90,” she added.*

*Her name was Grace Field.*

*In answer to my question, Grace said that in all the years she’d been at it, few people had stopped to speak with her.*

*I was, at the time, writing a book about how Americans live as neighbors and asked Grace if she’d be willing to talk with me about that. She agreed, and a few days later, I met her at her home. It turned out she lived in an apartment nearby. She’d never married, lived alone and walked each day, she said, for exercise.*

*Among the things I learned about Grace was that as a young woman she had studied at the Juilliard School and was an accomplished harpist and pianist.*

*What a waste, I thought; if only we’d gotten to know her, Grace might have made an interesting friend. Maybe she even could have given music lessons to children in the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>*

Lovenheim simply asked the woman questions about herself.

Open to the love of God, and ask people questions about themselves.

## Endnotes

1. Peter Lovenheim, “Social Experiment: Know Thy Neighbor,” Los Angeles Times (April 8, 2011).

2 Lovenheim.