

## **“Empowered – Love First, First Love”**

May 23, 2021

*Empowered - Fruit of the Spirit series*

Pentecost, In-person & Livestream

The Holy Spirit - this incredible gift that Jesus promises before his death, after his resurrection, and at his ascension. This amazing, mysterious gift that blows through as the people are gathered in Jerusalem for a celebration of the harvest. I imagine the air filled with the aroma of fresh bread and the sounds of many people from many places in a festival atmosphere - and then the power descends. People are confused because they understand one another even though they don't speak the same language. It's chaotic and hard to follow - but all a part of how the church becomes the gathered community led by the Holy Spirit of God. And I laugh every time when I read that others thought they were drunk!

It's good to celebrate today - to wear the bright colors that remind us of the fire of Pentecost - the Spirit burning in us and motivating us. The Holy Spirit is Comforter and Advocate - but also Convector and Challenger. And there are more times that I can count when the Holy Spirit has been Convector and Challenger, especially in this past year. Sometimes the Spirit is Dis-comforter.

Sometimes the Spirit shows up in ecstatic worship, and sometimes the Spirit quiets us and calls us to examine ourselves. I read someone else's words: sometimes the Holy Spirit tells us to shut up - to be quiet and reflect.

Today we begin a series on the fruit of the Spirit. Maybe you know the list of these nine characteristics or qualities. If you don't know them by memory, I hope they'll become a part of us by the time we complete the series. For those of you who love lists, the apostle Paul offers one to keep - not to check off - but to take in, to reflect on, and most of all, to allow God to cultivate in us.

N.T. Wright says, “when the Spirit is at work, these characteristics and qualities will begin to happen.” Do we allow the Spirit in so that God can work in us to bear fruit? One goal is that we might understand each one better so that we call them out where we see them in the Body of Christ and take Jesus' words to hear: "You shall know them by their fruit."

Paul's offering of the fruit of the Spirit convicts us as we seek to show it to the world! And it's important that we read it as a follow up to the other list - the works of the flesh. They are easy to identify, and the list is long. If we claim to follow Jesus, then we also claim to be people who are led by the Spirit. If that's true, then we show the fruit of the Spirit. Notice that it's fruit - not fruits - all of these are connected to each

other, and the ordering of the list matters.

First things first ... LOVE. There are different ways to say love in Greek. There's eros - romantic, sexual love - that's where we get the word erotic. There's phileo - friendship love - think of Philadelphia or philanthropy. There's storge - family love - love for people who are like you. In all of these forms of love, something is received in return.

That's background for us. The word for love in Galatians is *agape*.

**SHOW SLIDE:** Greek word for LOVE – AGAPE - ἀγάπη

John Wesley commented that love is the root of all the rest of the fruit of the Spirit. Perhaps that's why it comes first! Agape love seeks goodwill for another ... promotes another's well-being .... sacrifices for the sake of others.

Agape has more to do with attitude and action - not so much with emotion and feeling. Agape love gives - receiving nothing in return, expecting nothing in return. Agape love doesn't look for a reward. Agape in us is cultivated when we consider Jesus' love for us. Agape shows in acts of care, support, and justice.

Right away, maybe you're thinking - that's not easy. And you're right! Agape is used in the verses that come to mind when we think about God's love in Scripture.

**SHOW SLIDE:** *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3: 16)* From I Corinthians 13 - "Love is patient. Love is kind..." John 13 is powerful because of what Jesus says about agape love: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

Certainly, agape refers to the nature of God's love for humanity, but it's not just about God's love. Agape also refers to the love we are to show God - and by association - the love that we're called to show one another. Jesus' demonstration of love during his life and ministry makes it clear, but even more, his demonstration of love for his disciples - many who betrayed him - shows agape. And clearer still is Jesus' offering of himself on the cross for our salvation - for the world. Can we even contemplate love so deep and wide that it gives up life for others?

Certainly, we're called to show it to one another in the Body of Christ. And yet, don't we struggle sometimes, to show agape love? We have disagreements. We hurt each other with words. We disregard others' feelings. And that's in the church!

It's important to know that Paul is writing to the church in Galatia. He had started new churches there. He had shared the Good News of Jesus Christ: everyone could have a direct relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God sent Jesus to set us free and gave us the Holy Spirit as a sign that we are heirs and children of God.

But there were some issues around what would happen to Jewish Law. Some

Jewish Christians thought that Gentile Christians had to first follow the Law before they could have a complete relationship with Jesus. There were issues around circumcision and eating together. All this was creating division in the Galatian church - not unity.

When Paul heard this, he wrote to them. He tells them not to reject God by trying to earn their salvation through keeping the Law. Jesus died for them, and there was nothing else to do but believe in Jesus and accept the gift of salvation and live out of that gift. There were no conditions on God's grace.

They received freedom in Christ. Paul didn't want them to go back to their old ways of trying to follow the Law as a way to earn God's favor. Paul had been a devout Jew for his entire life, but meeting Jesus had changed how he thought and how he lived. There was freedom in Christ - not freedom to do whatever we want, but freedom to love and serve God... freedom to love and serve others... freedom to live together in community.

We can imagine what happened when Paul told the people to rely on God's grace and the Holy Spirit rather than the Law. Sometimes we need rules and order, don't we? And when those things are changed, we struggle. We need structure. Those who were struggling with how to follow God probably thought that abandoning the Law would leave them without guidance and structure.

Jesus had won freedom for those who believed in him, so Paul tells them to act like free people - not being slaves to the law. Then he says that we are free to love - to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

If we don't love as Jesus calls us to do, then the consequences are dire. Paul gives a list of works of the flesh. This list offers a picture of when we seek our human desire over God's will, anything that causes us to live at odds with God: when we treat our wants as top priority, keeping enemies, living with jealousy and anger, holding up our own ambitions without asking God to guide us, shutting others out of the community. All of this fractures Christian community and breaks it down. That's what was happening in Galatia - the emphasis on human law over God's grace was disrupting community.

So, we have LOVE as the first fruit of the Spirit. We may disagree on some issues, but we can't let it fracture community. Jesus' words are clear. Our witness is powerful when we love one another. Jesus knows that love within the Christian community is the only way that everyone will understand God's love for them. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another..." And I'm sure he wasn't limiting it to a small Christian community. He was calling his disciples to love one another - period - no matter what.

We can debate social issues until we're blue in the face, and we have. We can

label people. We can ignore them. We can disown them. We can assume that someone else will love them as Jesus does. Or we can love them as Jesus calls us to do. With love that doesn't end. With love that is patient and kind. With love that doesn't envy. Love that doesn't boast. Doesn't put the self first, but puts others first. Love that speaks with compassion and caring. Love that shows compassion and caring. We can love because Jesus first loved us, and we would be lost without agape love. We can love because that's how everyone will know who Jesus is and what he stands for. **SHOW SLIDE:** *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (1 John 4: 7-8)*

The fruit of the Spirit isn't just a given for anyone who claims to be a Christian. We don't automatically have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control when we enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. These are cultivated in us as we grow in God's grace and reject selfish desires. When the Spirit leads, we take on a specific character that enhances relationships and community. We live our faith out in community.

Tony Campolo tells a story of flying to Hawaii to speak at a conference... It's a moment when people were surprised by agape love. It's a Pentecost moment when the Spirit flooded a place and people formed a community of care.

Friends, love is first on the list. It's not easy. It's not without risk. It's not spic-and-span. But what a fruit to allow the Spirit to nurture in us! We are free to love and free to live like Christ because of God's amazing grace to us! Love is a mark of our freedom in Christ. Love is where it all starts. Agape is the fruit that we are called to bear as God nurtures it in us. Our witness as the Body of Christ depends on our ability to embrace Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

So remember the man's question to Tony Campolo: what kind of church do you belong to anyway? Will we be the people of God who show agape love - not expecting anything? Will you, a disciple of Jesus Christ, show agape so that everyone will know who he is and who you are? Will you love because you were loved first? Thanks be to God. AMEN.