

The Unforbidden Fruit

Why power, knowledge, orthodoxy, faith, and service are not the mark of a true Christian.

JOHN STOTT

One biblical text has been especially significant to me over the years. I have quoted it in prayer daily, I think, for 20 years. I have come to see it as of key importance to anyone concerned about holiness. I refer to Galatians 5:22–23, the great verses about the fruit of the Spirit: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” (all Scripture quotations NIV). From these verses come five affirmations about love.

The first is that love is the pre-eminent Christian grace. It is quite true that the apostle lists nine qualities that he calls the fruit, or the harvest, of the Spirit, but love has pride of place; it is the first fruit of the Spirit.

We hear a great deal about the Holy Spirit today. He is no longer the neglected member of the Trinity. Many people claim rather spectacular manifestations of the Holy Spirit. I sometimes think that he is positively embarrassed by the publicity he is given today. But the first fruit of the Spirit is not power, but love.

People have other ideas about the hallmark of the follower of Christ. When asked what is the chief distinguishing mark of the child of God, some reply, “Truth, orthodoxy, correct belief, loyalty to the doctrines of Scripture, the so-called catholic creeds, and the Reformation confessions.”

To some degree they are right, of course. Revealed truth is sacred. Biblical doctrine is vital. We must contend earnestly for the faith that has been once for all delivered unto the saints. Nevertheless, though all that is true, Paul says elsewhere, “If I . . . fathom all mysteries and all knowledge . . . but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Love is greater than knowledge.

Other people reply that the authentic mark of the true believer is faith, because we are justified by faith only. Luther was right when he said that justification by faith is the principal article of all Christian doctrine. Sixteenth-century English Reformer Thomas Cranmer said, “This doctrine whosoever denieth is not to be counted for a true Christian man.” Not bad for an Episcopalian! Or I could turn to a mod-



ern evangelical statement: “Justification by faith is the heart and hub, the paradigm and essence of the whole economy of God’s saving grace.” That is true: *sola fide*, by grace, by faith alone. The watchword of the Reformation should be our watchword, too.

Nevertheless, “If I have a faith which can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor. 13:2). Paul, the great champion of grace and faith, says love is greater than faith.

Others reply, “No, the authenticating mark of the true believer lies in the realm of religious experience.” Often it is an experience of a particular and vivid kind, which they sometimes insist must be reproduced in everybody else.

To some degree, they are right. Religious experience is very important. A first-hand, personal relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is an essential part of being a true Christian believer. The Holy Spirit does witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. There is such a thing as joy unspeakable and being full of glory. Nevertheless, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and if I have the gift of prophecy [claiming direct revelation from God] and have not love, I am nothing” (1 Cor.



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13:2). Love is greater than religious experience.

Those of a very practical bent say that the authentic mark of a true believer is service, especially service to the poor and the needy. Once again, they are right in what they affirm, because without good works of love, service, and philanthropy, faith is dead. Since Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life in service, we must give our lives in service, too, if we are authentic followers of Jesus. Since he was the champion of the poor, we must be champions of the poor as well. We can thank God for the recovery in recent days of the temporarily mislaid social conscience of evangelicals.

Nevertheless, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames"—presumably in martyrdom—"but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:3).

Paul's priority is quite clear. Love is the greatest thing in the world. It is no accident that the first and greatest two commandments are to love the Lord our God with all our being and then to love our neighbor as ourselves. For God is love in his own innermost being. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are united eternally in self-giving, reciprocal love.

Moreover, God has set his love upon us, and he has come in the person of his Son and given himself in love, even to death on the cross. The Holy Spirit pours God's love into our hearts. And he who loves calls us also to love. There is no holiness without love. That is the first thing I learned from my text.

SSecond, love brings joy and peace. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, and peace; the sequence is very significant.

Human beings have always pursued happiness, joy, and peace. Thomas Jefferson was so convinced that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable human right that he wrote it into the Declaration of Independence and called it a self-evident truth.

But Christians have this to add: those who pursue happiness never find it. Because joy and peace are extremely elusive, happiness is a will-o'-the-wisp, a phantom, and even if we reach out our hand to grasp it, it vanishes into thin air. God gives joy and peace not to those who pursue them but to those who pursue *him*, and strive to love. Joy and peace are found in loving and nowhere else.

We must bear witness to this today,

when self-realization has become the rage and the human-potential movement continues to gather momentum. One of its fathers was Carl Rogers, the influential past president of the American Psychological Association. Much of Rogers's message focused on the need to actualize the potential of the self, to live with unconditional self-regard. Others carried on the emphasis, such as Thomas Harris in his *I'm O.K., You're O.K.* Such perspectives helped the idea take hold that Jesus taught us to love *ourselves* and that the second commandment, to love your neighbor as yourself, is a *command* to love self.

When you stop and think about it, however, this is not so. Self-love in Scripture is the synonym of sin and not the path to freedom. Besides, to love your neighbor is *agapē* love. *Agapē* has to do with sacrificing yourself to serve another, whether God or a person. If *agapē* is sacrificial, how can it be self-directed? How can I sacrifice myself to serve myself? The very concept is nonsense.

No, Jesus said we find ourselves when we lose ourselves. We live when we die to our own self-centeredness. We are free when we serve. When we love, joy and peace follow as natural consequences. Love is the pre-eminent Christian grace, and it brings joy and peace in its train.

TThird, love issues in patience, kindness, and goodness, according to Paul. Love, in other words, is not romance. It is certainly not eroticism. Love is not even pure sentiment or emotion. It is sacrificial service. As Dostoevski rightly said, "Love in action is much more terrible than love in dreams."

Love is active, constructive, serving, sacrificial. The word *love* sounds very abstract, but it manifests itself in concrete attitudes and actions. Negatively, its quality is patience, longsuffering, bearing long with aggravating and demanding people. Longsuffering is an essential attribute of love. There are many demanding and aggravating people in our Christian congregations.

If patience is a negative quality, kindness and goodness are the positive complements. Kindness is wishing good to people, and goodness is doing good to people. As Paul writes elsewhere, all three are the outworkings of love because love is patient, love is kind, and by love we serve one another.

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Fourth, love is balanced by self-control. The last three fruits of the Spirit are faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All three contain different nuances of self-mastery. Faithfulness is keeping our promises and fulfilling our responsibilities. Gentleness or meekness is not the same as weakness; gentleness is taming our strengths and harnessing our energies. Self-control is disciplining our instincts and mastering our passions.

The Buddha once said that if one person conquers in battle a thousand times a thousand, while another conquers himself, the latter is the greatest of all conquerors. But how much do we know about self-conquest, self-mastery, and self-control?

We cannot rightly give ourselves in love until we have learned to control ourselves. Our self has to be mastered before it can be offered in the service of others. I find it significant, then, that the fruit of the Spirit begins with self-giving and ends with self-control.

Finally, the fifth and last affirmation is that love is the natural result—the fruit—of the supernatural work of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Paul's words on the fruit come in the middle of the section in Galatians in which he contrasts the flesh and the Spirit. The works of the flesh are immorality, anger, and self-centeredness, while the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and so on.

Paul means by *the flesh* not this soft, muscular tissue that covers our bony skeleton, but our fallen human nature that is depraved, tainted, and twisted with self-centeredness. By *the Spirit* Paul means the Holy Spirit himself who comes to dwell within us when we are born again, the Spirit who is able by his indwelling presence and power to subdue our fallen human nature, and produce in its place the fruit—his fruit, which is love, joy, and peace.

Here within us, as we know from experience and Scripture, are two irreconcilable forces. They engage us in a fierce tug of war. The flesh pulls us down and the Holy Spirit pulls us up.

Which prevails in this contest depends on the attitude we adopt toward either side. According to Galatians

5:24, we are to crucify the flesh with its affections and desires. Paul is not being literal, of course, but he means that we are ruthlessly to reject the claims of our fallen nature to rule over us. According to the next verse, we are to walk in the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit, and surrender day by day to his indwelling power and control. Crucify the flesh, Paul says, and walk in the Spirit.

I remember reading about a California shepherd who had a couple of sheep dogs. When somebody who was hiking in the mountains fell in with the shepherd, he noticed that the two sheep dogs were always fighting. He said to the shepherd, "Which of your two dogs

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usually wins?" The shepherd replied, "The one I feed the most."

Our new nature will gain the ascendancy over the old only insofar as we feed the new and starve the old. That's not the metaphor Paul uses here. He prefers an agricultural metaphor. Indeed, if he speaks in Galatians 5:22 of the harvest of the Spirit, he writes in 6:8 that we are to *sow* to the Spirit, and then we reap what we sow. Whether we reap the fruit of the Spirit depends on whether we sow to the Spirit.

The seeds we sow to the Spirit that produce this harvest are what the Puritans used to call a disciplined use of the means of grace. That is daily prayer and meditation on the Scriptures, regular public worship and attendance at the Lord's Supper, reading Christian books, making Christian friends, and getting engaged in Christian service. It is by a disciplined use of these means of grace that we grow in grace, and the Holy Spirit within us is able to produce the beauty of holiness.

One of my great heroes, Charles Simeon, taught me something here. Simeon was the vicar (or senior pastor, you might call him) at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge for 54 years during the last century. He had an enormous influ-

ence upon generations of students in Cambridge University, and he really changed the face of the Church of England.

When he began his ministry, he was a very angular gentleman by nature and disposition—hot tempered, proud, and impetuous. One of his biographers writes that on his first visit to the English missionary leader Henry Venn, Venn's oldest daughter, Nellie, wrote, "It is impossible to conceive anything more ridiculous than Mr. Simeon's look and manner. His grimaces, the faces he pulls, were beyond anything you could imagine. So, as soon as he left, we all got together in the study and set up an amazing laugh."

But their father summoned his daughters into the garden. And although it was early summer, he asked them to pick one of the green peaches. When they showed surprise, he said, "Well my dears, it is green now, and we must wait. But a little more sun and a few more showers, and the peach will be ripe and sweet. And so it is with Mr. Simeon." As the Holy Spirit got to work within him, his character and conduct were beautifully refined and changed.

Of course, there is only one person in the whole long, checkered history of the world in whom the fruit of the Spirit was ripened to perfection—Jesus of Nazareth. If the fruit of the Spirit is love, he loved as no one has ever loved before or since.

Love, joy, and peace were characteristics of the life of Jesus. He was patient and kind and full of good works. He was reliable, meek, and gentle in heart, and he had perfect self-control. When he was insulted he never retaliated, so complete was his mastery of himself.

In a real sense, the fruit of the Spirit is Christlikeness. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that "we . . . are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Christlike holiness is God's purpose for you and me. It has been my personal goal for many decades, and I hope it will remain my goal until I die. Paul would have us all pray to be filled with the Spirit, for the fullness of the Spirit leads to the fruit of the Spirit. □

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