

07/07/19

**“What’s the Most Important Thing
About Being a Christian?”
Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a

This winter we had a worship series on the seven deadly sins—envy, vainglory, sloth, greed, gluttony, anger, and lust. We talked about how we need to be on our guard against giving in to these vices, practicing them, and letting them shape our life. For the summer, from today through Labor Day weekend, we’re going to be hearing about **the fruit of the Spirit** that Paul describes in *Galatians 5:22-26* (NRSV). In many ways, the fruit of the Spirit are the opposite of the seven deadly sins. They are the virtues that God wants to cultivate, grow and develop in all of us. “By contrast, **the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

As we begin this series on Living by the Spirit, I encourage you to think about this passage like a mirror for your life. How evident to other people are the nine fruit of the Spirit in your life? How much are you reflecting them and living them out? I hope by the end of the summer we’ll all see growth in the fruit of the Spirit that is obvious to those around us. The first fruit of the Spirit is love. Perhaps the most famous scripture passage about love is *1 Corinthians 13*.

“If I **speak in the tongues** of mortals and of angels, **but do not have love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have **prophetic powers**, and **understand all mysteries and all knowledge**, and **if I have all faith**, so as to remove mountains, **but do not have love**, I am nothing. If I **give away** all my possessions, and if I **hand over my body** so that I may boast, **but do not have love**, I gain nothing.” *1 Corinthians 13:1-3* (NRSV)

If you were to ask a group of people, What’s the Most Important Thing About Being a Christian, you’d get a variety of answers. Some people would answer religious experience, especially of a particular and dramatic kind must be reproduced in everyone else. Speaking in tongues is viewed by some as the authenticating mark of a real believer. There are some people whose view of the Holy Spirit can be condescending toward others who don’t speak in tongues or show other more outward behavior that some people associate with the Spirit. But Paul says, “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, **but do not have love**, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” Love is greater than religious experience.

Some people might say that **knowledge** or correct doctrine is the mark of a believer. Only those who agree with our theological perspective are to be accepted as true followers of Christ. This is very common. I suspect many of us have interacted with individuals, many of whom don’t even have any theological education or training who mistakenly believe their understanding and knowledge of Christian doctrine is the only correct one and the most important thing about being a Christian.

Some might answer **faith** is the most important thing about being a Christian, because by grace we have been saved through faith, not works, so that no one may boast. Some believe faith alone is the mark of a Christian. But Paul says, “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all **knowledge**, and if I have all **faith**, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” **Love is greater than knowledge.** Paul claims, “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” **Love is greater than faith.**

Another answer to what’s the most important thing about being a Christian is **generous service**. Service, especially to the poor, giving our resources, time and compassion to alleviate suffering is a mark of true disciples and is very important for all Christians to do. But Paul says, “If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, **but do not have love**, I gain nothing.”

The first fruit of the Spirit is not dramatic manifestations of the Spirit, or prophetic power, knowledge of Christian doctrine, faith, generous service, or even martyrdom; it’s love. Love is the most important thing about being a Christian. I’m not talking about romantic love (what the NT calls “eros”). I’m not talking about our love for our brothers or sisters (what the NT calls “philia”). We’re talking about what the NT refers to as “agape” the kind of love that seeks to serve the other, that first seeks the good of the other. Agape Love is the authenticating mark of a follower of Jesus. The *New Testament* clearly teaches that love is what distinguishes a follower of Christ. The life of a person who is truly a Christian and not merely deceiving oneself or others is characterized by love for God, our neighbors, all people, and all that God has made. *1 Corinthians 13* teaches us to aim at love above all else. The Corinthians had been placing too much emphasis on their individual gifts and not enough emphasis on the right use of their gifts to build each other up. **Love must govern the use of all the gifts of the Spirit.**

What does love look like? Paul tells us (*1 Corinthians 13:4-8a*), “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

It is love that does these things, not us, and what we’re to do is to pursue love. These godly actions and behaviors are the result of dwelling in love. We become the kind of person who is patient, kind and free of jealousy. Dallas Willard states, “Is it hard to do the things that Paul says love does? It is very hard indeed if you have not been substantially transformed in the depths of your being, in the intricacies of your thoughts, feelings, assurances, and dispositions, in such a way that you are permeated with love. Once that happens, then it is not hard. What would be hard is to act the way you acted before.”

Love, then, is not a higher or better gift. It’s the manner of life in which all the spiritual gifts find their proper place. Love is more than a feeling, more than a second-hand emotion. Love

consists of specific acts of patient and costly service on behalf of others. Paul presents no mushy, sentimental notion of love. Paul describes, “a rigorous vision of love that rejoices in the truth and bears all suffering in the name of Jesus Christ.”

77 years ago last week, on June 29, 1942 during World War Two, Lieutenant Commander John J. Shea, who was serving aboard the aircraft carrier the USS Wasp in the Pacific, wrote home to his five-year-old son Jackie. As we reflect on love being the most important thing about being a Christian, listen to a loving Father’s words to his son.

“Dear Jackie,

This is the first letter I have ever written directly to my little son and I am thrilled to know that you can read it all by yourself. If you miss some of the words, I’m sure it will be because I do not write very plainly. Mother will help you in that case I am sure.

I was certainly glad to hear your voice over the long-distance telephone. It sounded as though I were right in the living room with you. You sounded as though you missed your daddy very much. I miss you too, more than anyone will know. It is too bad this war could not have been delayed a few more years so I could grow up again with you and do with you all the things I planned to do when you were old enough to go to school. I thought how nice it would be for me to come home early in the afternoon and play ball with you, and go mountain climbing and see the trees, and brooks, and learn all about woodcraft, hunting, fishing, swimming, and things like that. I suppose we must be brave and put these things off for a little while.

When you are a little bigger you will know why your daddy is not home so much anymore. You know we have a big country and we have ideals as to how people should live and enjoy the riches of it and how each is born with equal rights to life, freedom, and the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, there are some countries in the world where they don’t have these ideals, where a boy cannot grow up to be what he wants to be with no limits on his opportunities to be a great man, such as a great priest, statesman, doctor, soldier, business man, etc.

Because there are people and countries who want to change our nation, its ideals, forms of government, and way of life, we must leave our homes and families to fight. Fighting for the defense of our country, ideals, homes, and honor is an honor and a duty which your daddy has to do before he can come home to settle with you and Mother. When it is done, he is coming home to be with you always and forever. So, wait just a little while longer. I am afraid it will be more than the two weeks you told me on the phone.

In the meantime, take good care of Mother. Be a good boy and grow up to be a good young man. Study hard when you go to school. Be a leader in everything good in life. Be a good Catholic, and you can’t help being a good American. Play fair always. Strive

to win but if you must lose, lose like a gentleman and be a good sportsman. Don't ever be a quitter either in sports or in your business or profession when you grow up. Get all the education you can. Stay close to Mother and follow her advice. Obey her in everything, no matter how you may at times disagree. She knows what is best and will never let you down or lead you away from the right and honorable things in life. If I don't get back, you will have to be Mother's protector because you will be the only one she has. You must grow up to take my place as well as your own in her life and heart.

Love your grandmother and granddad as long as they live. They too will never let you down. Love your aunts and see them as often as you can. Last of all, don't ever forget your daddy. Pray for him to come back and if it is God's will that he does not, be the kind of boy and man your daddy wants you to be.

Thanks for the nice sweater and handkerchiefs and particularly for the note and care. Write me very often and tell me everything. Kiss Mother for me every night. Goodbye for now. With all my love and devotion for Mother and you. Your daddy"

(Written 6/29/1942, from Lt. Commander John J. Shea, USN, USS Wasp, to his son)

Lt. Commander Shea never lived to see his son fulfill those dreams. On September 15, 1942, the Wasp was steaming toward Guadalcanal when three torpedoes ripped into its hull, igniting the ships' ammunition and fuel tanks. According to eye witnesses, Shea repeatedly ran into the flames to rescue his men before he vanished in the inferno.¹ For his bravery, Shea was awarded the Navy Cross and Purple Heart medals and was promoted to commander, all posthumously. Just this past January, wreckage from the Wasp was discovered at the bottom of the Coral Sea off the coast of Australia.

"Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (*John 15:13*)." Love is ultimately about treating others as more important than yourself. Love is giving yourself, often in small, sometimes significant, and even totally for the sake of others. The words Jesus spoke continue to live, preserved through the years like a precious letter from a beloved daddy. Jesus taught us about ourselves and other people, about life and love. His words continue to touch our hearts and inspire us to be the kind of boys and girls and men and women our daddy in heaven wants us to be.

Examine your life this week, asking, "How much love is demonstrated in my life?" List what you need to change about your attitudes and actions toward those around you. In what small or significant ways can you demonstrate the gift and fruit of love this week? John Wesley wrote, "We should always remember that love is the highest gift of God. All our revelations and gifts are little things compared to love. There is nothing higher in religion. If you are looking for anything else, you are looking wide of the mark. Settle in your heart that from this

¹ The Boston Globe (6/14/01)

moment on you will aim at nothing more than that love described in the thirteenth chapter of *1 Corinthians*. You can go no higher than this.”

Life and the gifts of the Spirit are fleeting, but love is eternal. **“Love never ends.** But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”**

Blessing: One of the first songs I ever heard or learned told me, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong, they are weak, but He is strong.” May we be the kind of loving boys and girls and men and women our daddy in heaven wants us to be. **“Let all that you do be done in love.”** *1 Corinthians 16:14*

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. While many people associate *1 Corinthians 13* with weddings, it’s more directly related to Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter 12 (you may want to read that chapter). What becomes of spiritual gifts if they’re exercised without love (*1 Corinthians 13:1-3*)?
2. Identify or list all the virtues that Paul mentions in *1 Corinthians*. How do they compare with love?
3. Some people associate love with a feeling or an emotion (read *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*). What do these verses tell us about what love is like? Why can love not be reduced to a feeling that comes and goes?
4. If love is not arrogant, what is it? If love is not rude, what is it? If love does not insist on its own way, how does it act toward the other person? If love is not irritable or resentful, what is its attitude?
5. What does it mean to bear, believe, hope, and endure “all things” (*1 Corinthians 13:7*). How do you think love might respond to falsehoods, lies and personal attacks? What does God ask of us when the going gets rough?
6. Examine your life this week, ask yourself, “How much love is demonstrated in my life?” List what you need to change about your attitudes and actions toward those around you. In what small or significant ways can you demonstrate the fruit of love this week?

10 WAYS TO **LOVE**

- 1. Listen without interrupting.** (Proverbs 18)
- 2. Speak without accusing.** (James 1:19)
- 3. Give without sparing.** (Proverbs 21:26)
- 4. Pray without ceasing.** (Colossians 1:9)
- 5. Answer without arguing.** (Proverbs 17:1)
- 6. Share without pretending.** (Ephesians 4:15)
- 7. Enjoy without complaint.** (Philippians 2:14)
- 8. Trust without wavering.** (1 Corinthians 13:7)
- 9. Forgive without punishing.** (Colossians 3:13)
- 10. Promise without forgetting.** (Proverbs 13:12)



CHRISTIAN
TODAY