

This morning, I am in the second week of a sermon series that I've entitled "The Spirit-Formed Life." During this series, I will be looking at what is known as the fruit of the Spirit, a phrase Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 to describe the kind of character that is formed in the person who lives under the influence of the Holy Spirit, walking not according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit of God. In case you're unfamiliar with the concept of the fruit of the Spirit, it comes from Paul's words in Galatians 5:

Galatians 5:22-23 - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.

This, Paul says, is what the Spirit produces in the life of the person who walks in step with God's Holy Spirit. People marked by love, not hatred, hostility or indifference. Joy, not despair, depression or cheap thrill-seeking. Peace, not anxiety or conflict. Forbearance or patience, not anger, irritability, or impatience. Kindness instead of meanness, callousness or cruelty. Goodness instead of selfishness, corruption, or perpetrating evil. Faithfulness instead of faithlessness, unreliability, or a lack of integrity. Gentleness instead of harshness, abusiveness, or aggression. And self-control instead of living a chaotic, out of control life enslaved to desires. And Paul tells us that these qualities will be ours in increasing measure as we learn to walk with the Holy Spirit of God and to yield ourselves in obedience to His fruit-producing work in our lives. That is the Spirit-formed life.

This morning, we will be looking at the first characteristic on the list: love. It is important to know that when Jesus or Paul speak of love, they are speaking of a specific kind of love. It is the Greek word "agape," a love that is not the same as "eros," from which we get erotic love, or "philein," from which we get the city Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, a love characterized by affection. Paul tells us that God's Holy Spirit produces in us a specific kind of love known as agape.

What is agape? Where does agape love come from? How can we become people who demonstrate agape love?

1) What is agape love?

Jonathan Landry Cruse, in *The Character of Christ* explains agape love this way: "There is eros, which is romantic love. Philia is the love of friendship and affection. And finally there is agape, which is predominantly used to denote selfless, sacrificial and unnecessary love. It is unnecessary in the sense that I do not gain anything by showing this love. In eros I sense a need for one other person. In

philia I have a strong desire for the company and companionship of a handful of others. But in agape I need or desire nothing. It is the person whom I love who has the need. I see *their* need, and, simply to benefit them, not because I am going to get anything out of it, I show them love.”

John Stott defines “agape” love as **the sacrifice of self in the service of another**. This is the kind of love produced in us by the Holy Spirit of God. This is the kind of love portrayed by Jesus, and the kind of love that we are called to embody.

Scholars believe that this idea of “agape” love is essentially a Christian invention. Outside of the Bible, it was used more interchangeably with philia; it was Jesus and the writers of the New Testament that give the term its deeper significance.

Agape love is not using people; it is not manipulating people, liking someone because of how they make you feel and what they can do for you. Agape love is sacrificial, self-giving love for another, even when we get nothing out of it.

With that in mind, read these key New Testament passages about love:

Matthew 22:36–39 - “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus replied: “‘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. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

And when Jesus says this to his disciples:

John 13:34–35 - “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.”

And finally, when Paul talks about the preeminence of love:

1 Corinthians 13:1–8 - If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, 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 dishonor 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.

In all these cases, followers of Jesus are encouraged or commanded not to have romantic feelings, or feelings of affection, but to love in a selfless, sacrificial way that does what is best for the other person, regardless of how we feel. Listen again to Jesus:

Matthew 5:43–48 - “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Is Jesus asking you to have feelings of affection for your enemy? No – practice sacrificial, self-giving love for people who do not deserve it and to whom you owe nothing, because that is how God is. Consider:

Romans 12:19–21 - Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Burning coals refers to the sting of shame and remorse.

When Jesus wanted to give a demonstration of this agape love to his disciples, he did this in John 13:

John 13:1–17 - It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and **was returning to God**; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with

the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷ Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸ “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have **no part with me**.” ⁹ “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” ¹⁰ Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. ¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and **returned to his place**. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. ¹³ “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

This is what agape love looks like. Washing feet, even of your enemies.

And when Paul wanted to speak into the household codes of his day in order to encourage husbands and wives to love, he said this:

Ephesians 5:22–33 - Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. ²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but **holy and blameless**. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” ³² This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. ³³ However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.

Don’t just have romantic feelings or feelings of affection, but lay down your lives for each other to help each other become more like Christ.

And when Paul wanted to encourage the believers in Philippi to love each other, he wrote:

Philippians 2:1–11 - Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.³ 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:⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—**even death on a cross**!⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Take the lowest place. Lay down your life. Elevate others above yourself. This is the radical kind of love we are called to embody. Are you overwhelmed yet? We have all fallen woefully short of exhibiting this kind of love. We need a Savior, and we need help.

2) How does the Spirit produce agape love in us?

Here is the good news:

1 John 4:16–19 - God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.¹⁷ This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus.¹⁸ There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

We love because he first loved us. Our ability to demonstrate agape love will come by first experiencing His agape love for us. How did he love us?

Romans 5:6–10 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

There are two critical elements to this picture of love. The first is our unworthiness. Look at the words that are used in this passage to describe us: powerless, ungodly, sinners, enemies. Some of you get it. You've been through it, you've failed, you have hurt others. Some of you have a harder time seeing yourself this way. But these words are not used to beat you down and destroy you. Because the second element is that Christ died for the ungodly. He demonstrated his love for us by dying for us when we were still sinners, justifying us – declaring us not guilty – by his bloody death. He saved us from the wrath of God on sin. He reconciled us to himself. He has rescued us.

We deserve nothing. He owes us nothing. And yet He loves us.

Last week, I was watching a podcast interview with a movie star. He shared how he had done some terrible things and wound up at a rehab. Every week they would have a day where the people in the program would gather in a room and their family members would show up on a Skype call to encourage them. Week 1, no one showed up for him. They got the calls, but no one showed up – no mom, dad, manager, or friends. Week 2, same thing. Week 3, he says to his therapist he's not going to go. She encourages him to show up. And this time, an ex-girlfriend is on the screen and says hi. And he starts crying. I don't deserve that kind of love. I put her through so much pain, and I have nothing to offer her. She had no time, but she made the time to be there for me. She saved my life by her presence, when I had nothing to give and deserved nothing good.

Why was this story so emotional? He deserved nothing. She owed him nothing. And yet, she showed up for him. Agape love. Amazing grace. Transformative mercy.

When it becomes personal, when the gospel becomes your story, that is when salvation comes to you.

But you have to be honest. That's why justify is such a great word, because we all try to justify ourselves, to excuse our own behavior. Why not take the opposite approach? In the recovery groups, Step 4 is to make a fearless and searching moral inventory. To be completely honest, to stop trying to justify ourselves. What happens? We stop pretending that we are better than we really are. We admit our need for grace, our need for help. As Step 5 goes: "We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." And Step 6: "We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character." And Step 7: "We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings." Our honest confession magnifies the love and grace of our God, who knows all of this and more about us.

1 John 1:8–9 - If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Everybody is looking for love. But the agape love of God is true love, a love that forgives, cleanses, and never condemns or rejects us.

Isaiah 49:15–16 - "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."

I used to think God was lucky to have me on his team. But the longer I walked with Him, the more I came to realize that He loves me despite my sin and unworthiness. All my righteous acts are like filthy rags. Every good thing is stained with self-centeredness. But He loves us with a perfect love that drives out fear. When you understand the depth of your sin and unworthiness and the magnitude of His sacrifice for you, you are experiencing His transformative agape love.

Ephesians 3:18–19 – And I pray that you... may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

3) How do we become people who demonstrate agape love?

- **Repent of your lack of love and ask Him to help you love like Him.**

Be honest. Be fearless. Confess to yourself. Confess to others. Ask Him for help. Ask others for prayer. Ask Him to fill you with His Spirit.

Psalm 139:23–24 - Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

- **Remember His agape love for you**

While you were a sinner, He died for you. Listen to Brennan Manning in his book *The Signature of Jesus*:

“On the night of December 13, during what began as a long and lonely hour or prayer, I heard in faith Jesus Christ say, ‘For love of you I left my Father’s side. I came to you who ran from me, fled me, who did not want to hear my name. For love of you I was covered with spit, punched, beaten, and affixed to the wood of the cross.’

These words are burned on my life. Whether I am in a state of grace or disgrace, elation or depression, that night of fire quietly burns on. I looked at the crucifix for a long time, figuratively saw the blood streaming from every pore of his body, and heard the cry of his wounds: ‘This isn’t a joke. It is not a laughing matter to me that I have loved you.’ The longer I looked, the more I realized that no man has ever loved me and no one ever could love me as he did. I went out of the cave, stood on the precipice, and shouted into the darkness, ‘Jesus, are you crazy? Are you out of your mind to have loved me so much?’ I learned that night what a wise old man had told me years earlier: ‘Only the one who has experienced it can know what the love of Jesus Christ is. Once you have experienced it, nothing else in the world will seem more beautiful or desirable.’

- **Love with your actions, even when you don’t feel like it**

“I don’t love her anymore.” You are commanded to love her as Christ loved the church. It’s not optional. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. There is nowhere to go.

1 John 3:16–18 - This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity

on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

James 2:14–17 - What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

Matthew 25:34–40 - “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ ³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Agape love is selfless, sacrificial love, even when we don’t feel like it. And sometimes what people need most is the truth, spoken in love. Sometimes they need boundaries, in love. I am not suggesting that you be a doormat at all times. But agape love is willing to love our enemies as Christ loved us. Let’s take time to repent of our lack of love, to ask Him to fill us with His love by His Holy Spirit, that we might be transformed into people of agape love.