

**THE EVIDENCE OF LOVE****GALATIANS 5:22-23; 1 CORINTHIANS 13**

Years ago a sermon was preached. The speaker asked this question of the congregation, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” One young man was deeply affected by that question that day. As a result, he put his faith in Jesus Christ. His name was Jimmy Carter and he grew up to become the 39<sup>th</sup> President of our country. “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Today we start a new messages series. I’ve changed the wording of that question just a bit, but the meaning is still the same: “If you’re accused of being a Christian, what evidence will convict you?” Imagine living in a country where it’s illegal to be a follower of Jesus. If you were arrested and accused of being a Christian, could a court of law find enough evidence to convict you? Is your life different enough from those who don’t follow Jesus that people can tell the difference? Would anyone say of you, “Oh, he’s obviously a Christian” or “Well, of course, she’s a follower of Jesus”? What kind of evidence would be brought against you in such a country? Your church attendance? Your Bible knowledge? Someone catching you praying to Jesus? A specific political or social philosophy that you proclaim? What evidence would convict you?

Interestingly, the Bible itself makes it clear what attitudes and actions point to a genuine follower of Jesus. They’re called the fruit of the Holy Spirit. No, we’re not talking about apples, oranges or pears. The fruit of the Holy Spirit are character traits and they’re listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Let’s take a moment to remind ourselves of what they are again. The presence of these character traits in your life is the best evidence that you’re truly a child of God. Their absence might cast doubt on whether you could ever be convicted of being a follower of Jesus. So, how does the Bible define these “fruits” and how are they expressed in everyday life? That’s what we want to consider together in the coming weeks. But today I want to reflect with you on the fruit of the Spirit as a whole by looking at five key truths about them. Then, I want us to think about the first fruit – or the first evidence - in that list: love, the greatest and most important fruit or evidence of all. Let’s get started!

**FIVE KEY TRUTHS ABOUT SPIRITUAL FRUIT**

The fruit of the Holy Spirit, first of all, describe God’s character. These nine character traits are all found in their fullness in God Himself. The Bible says God is love. It says that He is the source of joy and peace. Many times, it describes God as patient and kind towards us. He is filled with goodness. How many times have you sang the wonderful old hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness”? It’s based on a Bible verse that tells us God is faithful. God is all-powerful, to be sure, but He is also gentle. He is at all times and in all ways perfectly self-controlled. Believe it or not, God wants to see those character traits in you and me. And because the Bible says we are created in God’s image, all of those character traits are ultimately and perfectly fulfilled in God Himself first and foremost.

Second, the fruit of the Holy Spirit is produced by the Holy Spirit. An obvious point, to be sure, but an important reminder, nevertheless! Let's suppose you're going to plant a vegetable garden in a couple of months from now. The soil doesn't naturally produce tomatoes, green beans or corn. The seed comes from the outside and is put into the soil and then you get vegetables. Nobody can produce these nine character traits by his or her own will power or effort. Nobody is genetically patient, kind of faithful. Self-control, joy and peace aren't produced in you naturally. Love, goodness and gentleness don't just happen in you and me spontaneously. You must become a follower of Jesus to begin the planting process. Once you surrender your life to Jesus, the Holy Spirit enters your spirit. And from that day until the day you die, the Spirit of God is going to be working hard to help you produce those qualities in and through your life.

Third, producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit is a command. Does that sound like a contradiction? I just said that only the Spirit can create and produce these qualities in your life. So, how then can God command me to love, to be patient, or to be self-controlled? It's like the farm boy who was disappointed with the small eggs his chicken was laying. They were downright puny! He went downtown, returned with a parcel, knelt down in front of his underperforming chicken, unwrapped the parcel and revealed an ostrich egg. Now, that's a big egg! The boy held that great, big egg in front of his chicken making sure it saw it from every angle. Then he said to the chicken, "Take a good look at this and try harder!" How can God command you to do something which He alone can produce in you? The simple fact is this: God will not produce anything in you without your daily surrender to Him which involves a willingness to change, to grow and to get rid of the spiritual garbage in your life. When you follow Jesus, it's a combination of God's empowerment and your willingness. The Bible describes it like this, "...Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him." (Phil 2:12-13 NLT)

Fourth, the fruit of the Holy Spirit are all expressions of one characteristic: love. Fruit here is singular not plural. In other words, they aren't "fruits" of the Spirit, but rather "fruit" of the Spirit. You can't say, "Well, I'd sure like to have peace, but I'm not interested in patience" or "I'd like to learn how to be more gentle, but self-control just isn't going to happen." True, the Holy Spirit might have an easier time producing peace or gentleness in your life than patience or self-control, but the idea here is that you and I are supposed to have all nine of these qualities fully developed in our lives. That's the goal, the mission and the ultimate plan.

You might already know that the great Bible passage on love is 1 Corinthians 13. It's often read at weddings and rightly so, but it applies to far more than marriage. It applies to every human relationship. Here's something interesting! You can find most, if not all, of the fruit of the Spirit in this description of love. Let's read it together and I'll show you what I mean. Is joy an aspect of love? "It does not

rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out” (v. 6). How about peace? I see it there in v. 5, “... It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.” Patience and kindness? “Love is patient and kind...” (v. 4). Goodness? “...Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude...” (v. 4-5) Faithfulness? “Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.... But love will last forever!” (v. 7-8) Gentleness? Self-control? We’re told here that love isn’t “... proud or rude. It does not demand its own way...” (v. 4-5) Love never behaves in an out of control way that hurts others.

Fifth, of all of the fruit of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5, love is the greatest. In other words, it’s the most important evidence that you’re truly a follower of Jesus. The Bible says, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor 13:13 NLT) So why is faith even greater than faith and hope? Only love is eternal. When you get to Heaven, you won’t need to have faith anymore. You’ll be in the presence of God forever. When you get to Heaven, you won’t need hope anymore either. Every hope will have been fulfilled. But even when you get to Heaven, love will still be there. In fact, that is the primary reality – the atmosphere, the environment – of Heaven itself. Let’s think a bit more about love – the first of these nine fruit or evidences.

## **FIVE KEY CONTRASTS CONCERNING LOVE**

In the time we have left today, let’s contrast what our culture believes and assumes about love with what the Bible says and teaches. Here’s the first contrast. Our culture has only one word for love. If I say, “I love my wife, Cheryl”, “I love my dog, Gracie,” or “I love ice cream”, I use the same word. But, I’m not talking about the same kind of love – trust me! We all know there are different kinds of love, but we all use the same word which can be confusing.

You might know that the New Testament was written down in the Greek language. And the Greeks had at least four different words for love to describe four different kinds of love. Three of them are used in the New Testament. Contrary to our culture, the Bible has three words to describe love not one. The Greek word for love that doesn’t show up in the Bible is *eros* from which we get the word “erotic.” *Eros* is about romantic or sexual love. Now, just because it doesn’t show up in the Bible doesn’t make *eros* bad automatically. After all, God created sex for the enjoyment of human beings and He delights in romantic love between men and women. He’s provided marriage between men and women as the context to experience and enjoy *eros*. The other three Greek words for love do appear in the Bible. There’s *philia* which refers to the warm affection and caring that close friends have for each other. You hear it in English words like “philanthropy.” There’s *storge* which means the kind of love between parents and children. But, most importantly, there is the word *agape*.

*Agape* is the Greek word that appears most frequently whenever you read the word “love” in your Bible. It describes God’s love for you and the love that God wants to produce in you. *Agape* is the fruit of the Spirit. It has nothing to do with *eros* – a love based on physical attractiveness. It’s not *storge* – a love based on family allegiance. It’s not *philia* – a love based on mutual interests and personal chemistry. *Agape* is self-giving, unselfish love. It continues to love despite the fact that the person being loved is unworthy of it. You can never earn or deserve *agape*. It’s the kind of love that always takes the initiative and doesn’t wait to be loved before it acts. It keeps on loving even when it’s absorbed hurt from the one loved. It always seeks the benefit of and the best for the person being loved.

Now here’s a second contrast concerning love. Our culture believes and assumes that the greatest reality in all of life is human love. It might be romantic love, parental love, patriotic love, but ultimately what gets celebrated and acknowledged in our culture is human love in some form. But the Bible says and teaches that the greatest reality in all of life is God’s love. The Bible says, “Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Cor 13:13 NLT) *Agape*. God is love and the source of all true love. The Bible says, “Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8 NLT) Love finds its greatest dimension and definition in God. God loved us when He created human beings. He created us to have an eternal relationship with Him based on love. God’s love was ultimately expressed in and through His Son, Jesus. Jesus was and is the embodiment – the fullest expression – of God’s love.

A third contrast to consider: our culture believes and assumes that the very best kind of love is romantic. That’s simply an observation based on what gets the most attention. What kind of love gets celebrated the most, examined the most, sung about the most, featured in books, TV shows and movies the most and discussed among friends the most? Romantic love. The Bible says and teaches that the best kind of love is sacrificial. The clearest, best, deepest and highest demonstration of sacrificial love is what happened at the cross. There Jesus gave Himself up to death for you and for me. He died as an act of sacrifice. He took our place. He suffered the penalty that rightfully belonged to you and me. The Bible says, “But God put his love (*agape*) on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.” (Rom 5:8 MSG) Jesus said, “There is no greater love (*agape*) than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13 NLT) And then Jesus went out and did exactly that! You might sum up this contrast by holding up a picture of two people kissing. That’s our culture’s definition of love. The Bible, instead, holds up a picture of Jesus dying on the cross. That’s God’s definition of love.

Contrast number four: the culture we live in believes and assumes that love is uncontrollable. It’s something that happens to you and over which you have little power or control. Again, the context is romantic love. People get giddy, their

heads spin, they get weak in the knees. People fall into and fall out of love. Love is pictured as a force that comes over you and leaves you without either your consent or your permission. If you feel or don't feel loving towards someone, there's not much you can do about it. Love just happens to you.

The Bible says and teaches that love is a choice. You can choose to love God. How? You choose to care about God. You choose to make the things that matter to Him matter to you. You choose to help Him further His plans for this world. You choose to offer up your life to help Him accomplish His purposes in this world. You choose to love other people. True love demands that you make a choice. Because love is a choice, God can rightly command you to love. Jesus said, "...“You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”” (Matt. 22:37-39 NLT) Here's something else Jesus said, “Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another.” (John 13:34 NLT) How can God command you to love Him or other people? Because love is a choice. You either choose to love or not to love. Whether you're fully conscious of it or not, you can and do choose to love your spouse, your child, your parents and the other people in your life. Sometimes it's easy. At other times, it's very hard. God says, “Love.” But the choice to love is yours.

Let me mention a fifth and final contrast. The culture we live in believes and assumes that love is an emotion. Love is a feeling – more or less. When the feeling of love is there, you're experiencing love. When the feeling of love is absent, love is gone. The Bible says and teaches that love is action. Sometimes loving feelings are there; sometimes they aren't there. But, true love doesn't quit or check out because loving feelings aren't there all the time. *Agape* keeps on acting, keeps on giving, keeps on seeking the best for the person who is loved. Just one example will help us here. We've been reminded that love is patient. If you are going to love some people, you will have to decide to be patient with them. The Bible even says, “Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love.” (Eph 4:2 NLT) Do you see there how you will have to act in a certain way to express love? You will have to put up with people's faults and failings. You will have to wait for some people to change, to grow up, to get motivated, to become mature.

Here's another example. If you are going to love people, you will have to practice kindness. One aspect of kindness is simply taking care of all the little details of everyday life with a great attitude attached. It's things like changing the diapers, washing the dishes and taking out the trash. It's listening to the hurts of a friend and praying for him or for her. It's remembering to call or visit someone who's lonely. It's forgiving someone who offended you rather than indulging in some well deserved payback. The Bible says, “Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32 NLT) When it comes to love – real, genuine love – you and I

need to reject a lot of what our culture believes and assumes. Instead, we need to learn what the Bible says and teaches. Most importantly of all, we need to invite the Holy Spirit to plant the seeds of God's love more and more in our lives so that His fruit – His love – germinates, pops up out of our lives and matures into something beautiful for God.

Five days before Christmas a stranger approached ten-year-old Chris Carrier, claiming to be a friend of his father. "I want to buy him a gift, and I need your help," said the stranger. Eager to do something good for his dad, Chris climbed into the stranger's motor home. He took Chris to a remote field, claimed to be lost, and asked Chris to look at a map. Suddenly Chris felt a sharp pain in his back. The stranger had stabbed him with an ice pick. The man drove the wounded boy down a dirt road, shot him in the left temple, and left him for dead in the alligator-infested Florida Everglades. Chris lay there for six days until he was found. He miraculously survived his injuries, though he was blinded in his left eye. Because he was unable to identify his attacker, police couldn't make an arrest. For a long time young Chris remained frightened despite police protection. Three years after the abduction, Chris trusted Jesus as his Savior after an evangelistic invitation given at a church hayride. He eventually decided to pursue full-time ministry, helping others find the peace he had discovered in Christ.

Twenty-two years later, a detective told Chris that a man had confessed to the crime that had cost Chris his left eye. The man's name was David McAllister. Chris made plans to visit this now feeble, blind man aged 77 years old, living in a nursing home. Chris learned from the detective some of the background of what had happened years ago. McAllister had been hired by Chris's father. Chris's dad had caught McAllister drinking on the job and had fired him. The senseless attack on Chris had been motivated by revenge.

At first McAllister denied knowing anything about the kidnapping. But as Chris revealed more about himself, the old man finally softened and eventually apologized. Chris told him, "What you meant for evil, God has turned into a wonderful blessing." Chris told McAllister how God had allowed his wounds to become open doors to share the good news of Jesus. Chris went home and told his wife and kids about meeting the man who had tried to kill him. The entire family began almost daily visits to McAllister's nursing home. During one Sunday afternoon visit, Chris asked McAllister a very important question: "Do you want to know the Lord?" McAllister said yes. Both men basked in forgiveness as McAllister gave his heart to Christ. A few days later David McAllister died—peacefully—in his sleep. Chris Carrier says, "I saw the Lord give that man back his life, and so much more. I can't wait to see him again someday—in heaven."

If you're ever accused of being a Christian, what evidence will convict you? I submit that there's little doubt that Chris Carrier is a follower of Jesus. Why? The evidence of love. God's love. Supernatural, beyond anything human love. If you were accused of being a Christian, what evidence would convict you?