

Practicing Love
1 Corinthians 13:1 – 13; Galatians 5:16 – 25
Sunday, June 30, 2019

A few weeks ago, I was sitting at the ballfield on a *beautiful*, warm evening, watching my boys' baseball game. There were several other parents sitting around me, including this one dad and his daughter who was around 12 or 13. The daughter was doing her homework, and this other mom who was sitting by us started asking her about school – *Where do you want to go to college? What do you want to do when you grow up?* that kind of thing. The girl wasn't really sure. I mean, she's only 12; she's got a while to figure it out. But this mom who was talking to her started saying, "Neiman Marcus. You need to go to a good college and get a job that will allow you to shop at Neiman Marcus." And they were kind of laughing about it, but she kept saying it. "Remember, Neiman Marcus. Do something that will help you afford that kind of lifestyle."

I'm sitting there, not a part of the conversation, but I'm overhearing all of this. And I'm thinking, "They may be joking (although I know this mom, and she's probably *not*), but they are sending this young girl a *very powerful*, formative message about what's important in life." So at that point, in my infinite wisdom, I decide to chime in. I say, "Or, you could go learn something that helps you grow as a person and get a job that allows you to *help* other people and make a *difference* in the world." The girl's dad and this other mom are just staring at me, and I'm not sure if I'm about to get told off or punched in the face or what. But then that other mom turns back to the girl, without even missing a beat, and she says, "Neiman Marcus." Oh well.

We all face a choice as to what kind of people we want to be; what we want our lives to be about. Do we want our lives to be about money and material things, or do we want them to be about something *greater*? And this is not a new question. It's the question that *Jesus* was

asking, and it's the question that *Paul* was asking. Paul essentially asks the Galatians, "Do you want your life to be about the desires of the flesh, which only lead to jealousy and anger and quarrels and idolatry? Or do you want your life to be about the desires of the *Spirit*, which lead to love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control?"

Paul refers to this as the *fruit of the Spirit*. Like, "What do you want your life to *produce*? What kind of *person* do you want to be?" It's like when you look at an apple tree, you *know* it's an apple tree because it has *apples* growing on it. It is producing a certain kind of fruit. In the same way, if we are striving to live our lives according to the Spirit of God, in harmony with God and with our neighbor, our lives will produce certain things. People will see you living in ways that bring about love and joy and peace; they'll see you living in ways that are patient and kind and generous and faithful and gentle; in ways that show self-control. People will see your words and your actions, and they will know what kind of person you are. They will know what your life is about and not just *what* your life is devoted to, but *who* it is devoted to.

So we are going to spend the rest of the summer looking at the Fruit of the Spirit. What does it look like for us to bear this kind of fruit in our lives and show the world something about who God created and calls us all to be?

And as we start today, what we see here is that it *all starts with love*. Paul leads off this list of the Fruit of the Spirit with love because, he says, if you don't have *love*, then you won't have any of this other stuff. If you aren't striving to live in ways that are loving, then you won't really be able to live in ways that are patient or peaceful or kind or generous, because those things all

grow out of love; they are all *motivated* by love. As followers of Jesus, everything that we do, every *act*, every *word*, is all to be driven by our love for God and for our neighbor.

Paul talks about this in this chapter in 1 Corinthians that we read. He says that you can have great spiritual gifts. You can speak in tongues. You can prophesy, or speak for God. You can preach. You can teach. You can perform miracles. You can heal people. You can have every word of the Bible *memorized*. You can practice tithing and fasting and you can pray for *hours* every day. You can give *everything you have* to the poor. *But* even if you do all that stuff, Paul says, if you don't have *love*, then you've got *nothing*.

And it's important to note here that when Paul talks about love, he is not just talking about an *emotion* or a *feeling*; something that exists in our *hearts* or in our *heads*. What Paul is talking about here is love as an *action*; as a *way of life*; as something that we *do*.

In the movie *Contact*, Jodie Foster plays a scientist who discovers extraterrestrial life in another solar system. And throughout the movie, Jodie Foster's scientist character has this ongoing relationship and conversation with another character played by Matthew McConaughey, who is a theologian. So there's this whole interplay throughout the movie between *science* and *faith*, *proof* and *trust*. There's one scene in particular where these two characters (the scientist and the theologian) are talking about the existence of God, and *she* says, "Yeah, but how do you *know*? I'd need *proof*." And he says, "Proof. Did you love your father?" Her father died when she was just a child. And she says, "Yes, very much," to which he says, "Prove it."

Now, I get the point that they're trying to make there. That there are some things in life that we can't prove or explain or quantify; things that we know to be true just because we *feel* it, deep in

the core of our being. But the thing is, you *can* prove your love for someone. By how you *treat* them. By the things you *do* for them. The ways you *speak* to them. We prove our love all the time. I prove my love for my family by taking care of them, providing for them, spending time with them, hugging them, kissing them, laughing with them. My love for them is not just a feeling or an emotion in my heart or in my head. It is a *lived reality* that can be *demonstrated* through my *actions*.

There's an author named James K.A. Smith who wrote a book called *You Are What You Love*. In it he says that human beings are not primarily *thinking* beings, like how Rene Descartes famously said, "I *think*, therefore I *am*." The capacity for rational thought is not what defines us as human beings. What *he* says defines us as human beings is our capacity to *love*. We are not primarily *thinking* beings but *loving* beings. And love, he says, takes *practice*. We are shaped in our capacity to love by our *practices*. Smith would say that that mom at the ballfield was not *born* with a love for Neiman Marcus or shopping or materialism. She was *shaped* in that love. She was *taught* that. And as she *practiced* that love over the years, it only *reinforced* her love for it. So the question for *us* is, how can *we* practice love in a way that builds us up in the Spirit of God and reinforces our love, not for the things of the *flesh*, but for the things of the *Spirit*?

Paul says that we do that by being *patient*. When someone is pushing your buttons or getting on your nerves and you are *losing* your patience with them, love is saying, "I'm going to slow down and take a step back and give them some room to be who they are."

We practice that kind of love by being *kind*. Like when you go out of your way to do some small, unexpected gesture that shows someone they are important to you. You don't make them *earn* it or *deserve* it. You just *do* it.

We practice that kind of love by *not* being envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The *opposite* of being *envious* of someone is being *happy* for them and *rejoicing with them* in their successes. The opposite of being *boastful* and *arrogant* is being *humble*; not talking about *ourselves* all the time (what *we* have or what *we* have done), but showing an interest in this other person and who *they* are.

We practice this kind of love, not by insisting on *our own* way, forcing people to do things the way *we* think they should be done, because this other person might not be where we are. We allow them to do it *their* way and give them space to be who *they* are, and we *accept* them that way.

We practice this kind of love, not by rejoicing in *wrongdoing*, looking for opportunities to prove someone wrong or say, “I told you so,” celebrating when someone makes a mistake or throwing it back in their face. We practice this kind of love by rejoicing in the *truth*. It means we don’t point out to people the things they’ve done wrong or the mistakes they have made. We look for the *good* in this situation and celebrate *that*.

We practice this kind of love by *bearing with people*, hanging in there with them and sticking by them, even when it gets tough.

We practice this kind of love by *believing* people and believing *in* them, looking for the *best* in them and taking them at their word; not looking at them with skepticism or suspicion.

We practice this kind of love by *hoping* for people, praying for them and desiring the best for them.

We practice this kind of love by *not giving up* on each other, because love *endures all things* and *never ends*.

And the thing is, this is not just with our family and friends and people we already get along with. That's easy (most of the time). Jesus calls us to practice this kind of love with our *enemies*; the people we *don't* get along with. To show *them* patience and kindness, as hard as that might be, and to *hope* and *pray* for *them*.

If we can *practice* love in this way, speaking and acting toward each other in this way, it reinforces itself. It builds us up in our capacity to love. It's like when you eat a potato chip, you can't just stop at *one*, you want to have *more*. When we practice this kind of love with each other, you start to want it *more*. It's *hard*, and it takes *practice*, it takes *work*. But over time, we start to desire the things of the Spirit, and *that* is where we find *real life*, the kind of life that *matters* and makes a *difference* in the world.

And the *reason* that we do this is because that's how God is with *us*. We practice this kind of love with *each other* because that's how *God* loves *us*. *God* is patient with us. *God* is kind with us. *God* isn't envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. *God* does not *rejoice* when we make mistakes or do something *wrong*. *God* rejoices when we do *well* and live in the *truth*. *God bears* with us and *believes* in us and *hopes* for us and *sticks with us*, especially when things get hard.

When we practice this kind of love, we are practicing the very *life* of God, and we are bearing *good fruit* for a world that is hungry for it.