

Love • Galatians 5:22–23

There is a delicious beverage originating in Hawaii called POG. It is a mixture of passion, orange and guava juice. If you were to order some at a restaurant in Maui, you might refer to it as “fruit juice” . . . but probably not as “fruits juice”. Where there are separate parts to POG, it all mixes together to become one beverage. Singular. “Fruit” juice.

On the menu of Christian virtues, St. Paul used the same terminology. In Galatians 5:22, he wrote that “the fruit (singular) of the Spirit is LOVE, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

I tried putting that together and it comes out LJPPKGFGS, which isn’t very memorable and is certainly not as pronounceable as POG. But the idea is the same. The Bible here explains that the mixing of these nine flavors together makes into delicious Christians who taste like Jesus Christ.

It’s very important to know that all of these flavors blend together. So Christians can’t say, “I’ve got love, joy and peace, but I sure am impatient, unkind, no good, rough and out of control.” A person either has the fruit of the Spirit or doesn’t. We either taste like Jesus or we don’t. Just as you can’t leave out the orange and still have POG, so you can’t leave out one virtue of the fruit of the Spirit and still have the fruit of the Spirit.

The first flavor in God’s recipe for the fruit of the Spirit is love. It is clearly the dominant flavor. In fact, you could argue that the remaining eight are sub-flavors or expressions of love. Love has a stronger taste to it than anything else - - - love’s taste is so strong that it can often drown out some of the bad tastes from a person’s life.

Simply said, Christian love is extraordinary!

Let’s begin with a definition. The title of a 1930 play by Zoe Akins gave an interesting expression to our English language. The play was titled “The Greeks Had A Word For It”. That’s

because the Greek language is quite varied and very precise. They had a lot of words for many things, including love.

“Eros” is the Greek word for passion between a man and a woman. From it we get our English word “erotic” which often is associated with pornography in our culture. However, “eros” was not a bad word, although it never appeared in the New Testament.

“Philia” is the word for warm emotional love for those with whom we are closest. It probably comes closest to our usual use of “love” in English. It is what we mean when two friends or family members say, “I love you!” From it we get “Philadelphia” which means “love of brothers”, or “brotherly love.” That’s the way “philia” is used in the Bible.

The Greek word for affection is “storge”. It especially describes the affectionate love between parents and children. It, too, is a very good word, although it doesn’t appear in the New Testament.

“Agape” is the word for love used in the recipe for the fruit of the Spirit. It is a fairly uncommon word in ancient Greek literature, but

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it is a very common word in the Bible. “Agape” is more than emotion - - - it is a commitment of emotion, intellect and will. It is very intense. “Agape” is love that always seeks

the very best for the other person no matter what the other person says or does.

It is only when we grasp the definition of “agape” that we begin to understand some of the Bible’s descriptions of Christian love.

Matthew 5:43-48 says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons 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. If you love those who love you, what

reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

How do you love your enemies? If love means passion, feelings and affection, then it's a pretty tough assignment. But this love that God expects from us toward our enemies is love like God's love. God does what is good for people - - - even to the point of sending rain and sunshine on both the good guys and the bad guys.

In Romans 13:9-10 we are told:

The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Some people think that God is a puritan prude because he commands sexual fidelity. They think that his rules are heavy because he forbids stealing or coveting of what belongs to someone else. That is not the point. It is very unloving to commit adultery with someone else's spouse or steal someone else's possessions or even covet what belongs to another person. These are selfish things to do. They are not in the best interest of an enemy or a friend. Christian love always does what is for another person's good. Just like God!

I Corinthians 13 is probably the most magnificent description of love ever written. These words are familiar to many, although they are often thought to describe "philia" love when they really describe "agape" love. One way to better understand the meaning is to think of someone as you read the words - - - but don't think of a dear friend, family member or lover. Try to think of an enemy.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 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 have not

love, I am nothing. If I have all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Definitions and descriptions tend to satisfy the mind, but demonstrations touch the heart. It is one thing to talk about love, but quite another to demonstrate it. The perfect demonstration of "agape" love is Jesus. He said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." That, indeed, is the ultimate demonstration! And Jesus did it. He acted in the best interest of sinners by choosing to die in order that sinners could be saved.

On Palm Sunday Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem. The crowds waved and shouted and called him "King". But he had not come to be crowned like a king. He came to be crucified like a criminal.

What happened to Jesus the following week is beyond human description. He suffered the humiliation of crowds switching their shouts from "Hosana" to "Crucify him!" He suffered the degradation of being the perfect, righteous Judge who was judged by imperfect, unrighteous sinners and condemned. He who is the all-powerful God allowed human soldiers to strip him naked, beat him raw, pluck his beard, spit in his face and make him the butt of crude jokes. They cruelly nailed him to crossed timbers and watched as he suffered and died in excruciating agony.

I do not want to be melodramatic when I remind us that he suffered all of this for us. He died to take the penalty for our sins. Because sins are really against God and Jesus is God, we sinners are God's enemies. He suffered and died for us while we were still his enemies. That is love! Totally apart from our behavior, Jesus acted in our best interest and for our ultimate good. He loved us enough to lay down his life for us whether we wanted him to or not.

Jesus demonstrated love for us. Christ's love – Christian love – is EXTRAORDINARY!

Yet, just because something is extraordinary does not mean it is experienced. There are extraordinary medical cures many people die without experiencing. There are extraordinary sights to see in our world that many never visit. And, frankly, the only way to really understand Christian love is to experience it for ourselves.

To genuinely experience Christian love, we always must begin with God. We will never experience love if we begin with ourselves and our needs.

Meet God on the pages of the Bible. Read his autobiography. Soak up his words of self-description. It is like reading the letters, studying the portrait, looking into the face of your lover – until every feature is fully and permanently memorized.

Talk to God. Speak to him quietly, privately. Tell him you would like to know him. Ask him to show himself to you as he really is.

You will discover that he is astonishing, beautiful beyond description, intelligent beyond comprehension, powerful beyond comparison, perfect beyond our reach. His expectations are high – his standards are unattainable by human effort. Yet this great God loves us. Whatever you have previously thought or imagined, know this – God is not some ruthless celestial tyrant. He cares deeply. He gives infinitely more than he gets. God loves us. God loves you and me. “God is love!”

If we are ever to love as God loves, we must first be changed on the inside to be like God. That is what becoming a Christian is all about.

Some years ago I had a job installing home furnaces. Occasionally I was assigned to switch from fuel oil to natural gas. There is a type of furnace called a “gun furnace” where the basic burner can be removed and switched. So, I would take the furnace apart, remove the oil gun and install a gas gun. Without the change, there is no way a furnace could ever operate on an alternate fuel.

There is no way for any of us to operate in love or any other flavor of the fruit of the Spirit until first we are changed inside. Call it a heart transplant or an exchange of the gun that fires our souls. Until our old spiritual innards are removed and replaced with the heart of God and the gun of the Holy Spirit, there is no way we can or will operate on the fuel of God.

Or, if you are not into analogies, let me say it straight out: until a person is changed on the inside to become like God, there is no way we will ever love like God on the outside. A person must first be a Christian in order to taste like Jesus Christ.

Some of us claim we are Christians but our flavor sure doesn't show it. Seldom, if ever, do we love like Jesus. The problem may be sin that clogs the flow of Christian love. The solution is to get the sin cleaned out of our lives. It should be a regular happening. It's like cleaning the filter on your home furnace. If you want clean air, you have to keep the filter clean.

The Bible tells us how to do that. I John 1:9 says we should confess our sins to God and he will clean them all away. I try to make this a daily habit. At least once each day I pray and admit my sins to God and ask him to forgive

me. I also ask him for help to not repeat those sins. Frankly, it's embarrassing – but absolutely essential. God is so kind and forgiving. He forgives

every time. And the channels of his love flowing through are completely unclogged.

When a person becomes a Christian, God the Spirit moves in. This is no analogy or clever myth. It is a reality. God himself comes and lives inside of every Christian. He becomes the resident manager of our lives. Having a resident manager is great. He tells us what to do. He is loaded with good ideas. He tells us when we are wrong. He is our constant advisor and comforter and friend. He is God living inside of us! But, we must do what he says. If we are to look and act and love like Jesus, we must submit the management of our lives to the Holy

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Spirit.

Once these steps have been taken, just let love grow.

It is impossible to grow oranges on an apple tree. It is futile to try to burn gas in an oil furnace. It just won't work to love like Jesus if we are not Christians. But, once we are Christians, love grows as naturally as oranges on an orange tree. All we need to do is keep the tree healthy and the fruit naturally comes.

What does it look like? It's great! Christians managed by the Spirit consistently love like Jesus. They regularly act in the best interest of everyone else, even enemies. The basis for attitudes and actions is not the way we are treated by the people around us but on the basis of the Spirit within us. In a world with too little love and too many rotten tastes, the sweet taste of love is refreshing and thirst quenching.

Some quick thinkers may be saying, "All this sounds fine, except you can't change a lemon tree into an orange tree. It just can't be done. It would take a miracle."

Absolutely right! It takes a miracle to change sinners like you and me into lovers like Jesus called Christians. And Jesus performed that miracle nearly twenty centuries ago. He died on the cross because he loved us and in order to make us "agape" lovers just like him.

If you are not a Christian already, become one now. Talk to God about it. Tell him you are a sinner who wants to accept Jesus' love and the Spirit's management of your life. He'll perform a miracle for you. He'll forgive your sins. He'll make you a Christian. He'll turn you into a lover. The fruit of the Spirit will pour from your life.

And if you are already a Christian but your flavor has soured, go right back to Jesus. Confess every sin. Submit to the Spirit's management. Let the fruit grow. And you, too, will love like and taste like Jesus.

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