

# **“THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE”**

## **Galatians 5:22, 23**

**It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.**

**2 Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. 3 Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. 4 You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. 5 For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.**

**You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh<sup>[a]</sup>; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>[b]</sup> 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.**

**16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do**

whatever<sup>[c]</sup> you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The entire letter to the Galatians is an effort on the part of the apostle Paul to counter the wrong teaching of the *Judaizers*.

These were **Jews who had converted** to Christianity but believed that in order to be saved you still had to keep the commandments of the Law, especially **circumcision**.

Paul sees this insistence on circumcision as a way of continuing the Jewish teaching that **salvation is by works and not by faith**. He also understands that this is a subtle way of glorifying the flesh instead of the Spirit.

It reduces salvation to an action that is performed on **the body**, instead of leading Christians to put the emphasis on **the attitude of the heart** and of the **spirit**.

Over and over in the book of **Galatians**, Paul emphasizes that **nothing that we do**, no external action, can obtain salvation for us.

According to him, salvation has been and always will be **the product of faith, to believe God** on something that he says.

**Even Abraham**, According to Paul, was considered righteous only when he trusted and obeyed God concerning God's promise to give him a son. He was not saved by obeying the Law, because the law of Moses didn't even exist at that time.

In **Galatians 5** and all through the letter, the works of the **law** and the works of the **flesh** are seen as one. Paul sees the works of the law as a stumbling block to the process of salvation. **Only faith and love are capable of bringing us closer** to God. In Galatians 5:6 Paul declares, "For in Christ Jesus neither **circumcision nor uncircumcision** has any

value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”

In chapter **5, verses 19 through 21**, Paul speaks directly about what the flesh produces. This list is what he calls “**the works of the flesh.**” In contrast, he offers what we as Christians should go after, which is the Fruit of the Spirit.

The works of the flesh are **easily identifiable**. They are **actions** that can be easily seen. They are negative, destructive and are all actions that have evil results.

The **fruit of the Spirit**, on the contrary, is something that emanates or **comes from the inside**. It is not an action, but rather a result. It is the **spontaneous expression** of the personality of the Holy Spirit.

This is **one of the first things** that we must pay attention to when we meditate on love. As we said last Sunday, **the generous expression of the Spirit** in us is not something that we can produce. It is something that comes from having **an intimate relationship with the Spirit**, who then expresses himself through us and our actions.

Before **trying to imitate the actions** of the Spirit, we first need to **establish such intimacy** with him that he will be able to transmit his loving energy through us and our character.

As we saw in the earlier text that we quoted, for Paul **the only thing that counts is “faith expressing itself through love.”**

For Paul, **love** is the most important of all virtues. It is the fountain of all good things.

**Love is the essence** of the character of Christ. It defines the gospel. God himself is love, the Bible says.

*(God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> There is no fear in love.)*

Love is the beginning of **true Christian character**. Without love as the foundation, **mere good actions** are ultimately lacking in meaning.

Paul declared this eloquently in **first Corinthians 13. Even faith**, which he sees as the foundation for salvation, if it is not penetrated by love, loses all significance: “if I have a faith that can move mountains, **but do not have love** I am nothing.”

To the apostle Paul, **love is like the color white**, that includes within itself all the other colors of the rainbow. **All the other Fruit of the spirit** is incorporated into the quality of love.

It's **no coincidence** that Paul begins his list of the fruit of the spirit with love. It is the most important quality of all. It is the **foundation** of everything. The Greek word that Paul uses is *Agape*, of course. It is the classical Greek biblical word for the highest form of love. Interestingly enough, it is **almost an exclusive Christian word**. It appears approximately **120 times** in the Bible.

There are **many other expressions of love**, such as love of family, sexual love, or the love between a husband and a wife or between friends. But the love that Paul is referring to here is the love of which God is the best expression.

God's love is **unconditional**.

It is **sacrificial**.

It loves the **unlovely**.

It **allows him to forgive** the greatest offenses and to continue expressing itself.

It prevents him from **doing harm** to anyone.

It always **seeks the greatest good** of those that he loves.

It **overlooks faults** and concentrates on the intentions of the heart.

The point is that **we are called to express that same love of God** in our own relationship with others.

**By ourselves** we cannot do that, of course. But God, living out his love through us, can do this. This is why it is a fruit of the spirit, His Spirit.

It has often been said that **love is a verb**, not an emotion. It is a heroic decision of the mind and the spirit. This is totally true.

(Read here the words of **William Barclay in NEW TESTAMENT WORDS**, page 21).

Our **human emotions are not capable** of producing such a perfect love as the *agape* love that the Bible speaks about. The love we express as believers can only be **the product of prayer, reflection, discipline** and the **power** of the Holy Spirit.

It can only come about as **the result of a lifetime of God dealing with us, breaking** us and slowly forming Christ within us.

Like any of the other Christian virtues, we must first **become aware of the radical importance of having love** as a quality of our character and our relationship with others. **We must prioritize it. We must want it with all our hearts.**

We must **reject its opposite**, which is **selfishness** and a lack of generosity and grace toward others.

We must be **ruthlessly honest with ourselves** and acknowledge **when we are lacking in *agape* love** in some measure, and cry out to God to produce it within us.



We must **diligently search** wherever it manifests itself in Scripture and **let those texts take root** within us. **(See, for example, Jesus having compassion on the widow who has lost her only son, or expressing concern for his mother even as he hangs on the cross.)**

By **looking with profound attention into these scriptures**, they will transmit their energy to us and strengthen us in the desire to become more loving.

One thing is clear: **no amount of piety or good works** will be able to replace a lack of love. A person who does a lot of good things for the kingdom but is lacking in the love of Christ is like a **beautiful white silk dress with a huge stain** in it. It is ruined and ultimately unpleasant to look at.

**Unfortunately**, many believers place a lot of importance on **external acts of service to God** and even others, but give very little attention to cultivating the character of Christ, of which love is probably the most beautiful expression.

**Love is so profound and has so many facets** that all we can do through a sermon like this is to provide an almost childish drawing of it.

**I pray that the Lord will pierce our soul** with a deep sense of need to receive the love of Christ in our hearts, and to make it the distinctive quality of our lives.

I leave you with a simple anecdote from Dwight L. Moody, the famous evangelist:

Show me a church where there is love, and I will show you a church that is a power in the community. In Chicago a few years ago a little boy attended a Sunday school I know of. When his parents moved to another part of the city the little fellow still attended the same Sunday school, although it meant a long, tiresome walk each way. A friend asked him why he went so far, and told him that there were plenty of others just as good nearer his home.

"They may be as good for others, but not for me," was his reply.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because they love a fellow over there," he replied.

If only we could make the world believe that we loved them there would be fewer empty churches, and a smaller proportion of our population who never darken a church door. Let love replace duty in our church relations, and the world will soon be evangelized.

[Moody's Anecdotes, pp. 71, 72](#)

