

The Fruit Of The Spirit Is Love
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A year and a half ago my son Chris and now daughter in-law Katie were married here in this sanctuary. When they visited us this Christmas they told us again how much they love this little church – how much WVPC means to them.

They now live in Pasadena and they still have stuff in our back room that is piled high. Their stuff! I keep telling them to please take it with them.

They keep saying “We will. We will.”
But its still sitting in our back room!!
So annoying...

But do you know what they did take with them? Sealed in a ziplock bag so it didn't get ruined? Which now has an honored place in their apartment on a top shelf in their bedroom?

Chris' old stuffy. The ugliest threadbare raggedy thing you could ever imagine. Formerly known as Gray Kitty Cat.
What a creative name that was!

Why did Chris bring this rag to Pasadena carefully placing it in a Ziploc bag, while leaving mounds of other stuff in the back room for me to stew about?

Because this rag of a stuffy is just so gorgeous to look at?
Because Gray Kitty Cat has all this high tech stuff on him that is so cool....

No....

Gray kitty cat went with Chris and Katie to Pasadena...

Because this sad looking stuffy... was Chris' object of total devotion and affection growing up...for years...

He slept with grey kitty cat

He ate with grey kitty cat;

He swung grey kitty cat around by the tail...and gray kitty cat never complained....

GREY KITTY CAT came everywhere with us; and it didn't take long before he looked the way he does now

Because Chris dragged him across the floor

Pulled him through the dirt

Flung him across rocks at the beach to watch him fly

And left him numerous times in hotel rooms, and at restaurants and at friends houses

And Chris would always yell out with desperation from his car seat "Where's grey kitty cat?" not as we were leaving somewhere, but as we pulled triumphantly into the driveway of our home....

And we'd have to turn around and go back, sometimes many miles, to wherever we'd been and retrieve this

limp worn out thing

That looked bad

And smelled badly – I was afraid to wash it – it might cease to exist

So Chris has an amazing immune system these days.... BTW...rarely gets sick... because he dragged this germy cat around.

But...no one looking at gray kitty cat would ever think much of him...

He wasn't a toy that had won the *parents choice award* for the year

He didn't have a lot of doodads and buttons and noise makers on him...that would catch your eye

He's limp, scratched up, and threadbare

His value existed and still exists today

Not because of qualities intrinsic to him....because he's such a great toy.

His value exists for one reason and one reason alone: Christopher loved him

It is that fact, and only that fact, that has preserved his life; that caused him to go to Pasadena preserved in a Ziplock bag...while many other things were left behind...

Today we are starting a new series on the **Fruit of the Spirit**

There are nine fruit mentioned in Paul's letter to the Galatians

And each week we're going to do a different "fruit";

The nine fruit that we will have on this tree after we are done with this series are as follows:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

Today we start out by talking about the fruit LOVE
(Please bring the love ornament down)

And what I want you to get a handle on today with regard to love is this...

That our value and our worth cannot be found anywhere else
But in the truth that God loves us...we'd be a lost cause if it wasn't for God's love

There is nothing about us, nothing we can do to impress or make ourselves worthy of God's love
We are full of warts, and wrinkles, and this life has left a lot of us with scars and heartache....and some of us are weary and worn...
We are sinners... we are unworthy and unfit to be God's children...
there is nothing about us that is "so great"
Except...ONE THING....we are loved by God
And until you know this...and until you find your value there
In God's love
Everything else will disappoint you....

Brennan Manning wrote a book that is called the Ragamuffin Gospel
Brennan says that we are all Ragamuffins
Weary, threadbare, unable to do anything to impress God

Why God loves us...we don't know
That's the biggest mystery of all
Because we're broken as a human race; we're flawed
We can't even approximate holiness

I actually had the opportunity and honor to meet Brennan one day
At Menlo Park – he sat next to me in worship and he was going to be the speaker

And everyone was always dressed to the hilt at MPPC; from trunk sales and Nordstrom's....

Do you know how Brennan came to worship?

He was dressed in dirty blue jeans with a blue denim jacket.

With frayed square patches of different colors sewn all over his outfit, to cover over the holes....

He looked so strange when he got up there to speak; but his message came through...

We're frayed on the inside...he said...we may look great on the outside

But on the inside...we're just as shoddy and threadbare as we can be....BUT...

For some strange reason Jesus loves us he said...

In fact he said **the cross was just a hint of the magnitude of God's love for us...**

Think about that

The cross was just a hint of the magnitude of God's love for us

He said the love of Jesus was the only reason he was standing there that day...and it was all that mattered to him anymore

He'd spent a year and a half drinking in the gutter until he experienced Jesus love for him....quite a dramatic story....

The love of Jesus

That was Brennan's big theme.

It was Walt Gerber's big theme – my mentor and friend

Both of them would get criticized because they would talk about the love of Jesus over and over – Sunday after Sunday

For Brennan it was book after book...

People would be deeply healed by hearing about Jesus' love for them again and again. Yet, they were often criticized.

I remember one elder saying, "We've heard enough about the love of Jesus. Let's move onto something else that is deeper."

Friends, there is nothing deeper than the love of Jesus. We can't go deeper than that. And as a very old song says...

**If we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made
Were every stalk on earth a quill
And every man a scribe by trade**

**To tell the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry
Nor could the scroll, contain the whole
Though stretched from sky to sky**

As St Paul writes in describing God's love in **Romans 8:38-39** **"I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Everything we say and do and pontificate about in the Christian Church comes back to the powerful truth of God's love for us in Jesus.

There is nothing more powerful and deep and transforming than this
Without the love of Jesus we're sunk.

We don't measure up. Like gray kitty cat we are nothing in and of ourselves.

And yet...although we have no value in and of our own ...

God's love for us gives us our value...AND

When we surrender to God's love for us in Jesus Christ....

And let the Holy Spirit pour through us....

We begin to love other people...

And when he sat down, after this amazing talk, he said to me...I can't do this anymore

And I said "Why not?"

He said, "I don't know these people. How can I tell them God loves them if I can't get to know them and love them too...if I can't help them...and sit with them in their pain...and go through life with them? I've got to stop doing these big things he said, and get small; do the one on one;

You see, once you know you've been loved as a Ragamuffin or as a Gray Kitty Cat

Not because you're so great...but because God is so great
All your judgment of others goes by the wayside
And you just naturally start to love people the way Jesus does

You don't have to try so hard...it becomes who you are as you let yourself be loved by God....
Once you know it's not about you...it's about God's amazing love for you - that sets you free to love others

And when you've figured that out, you've got the concept of what the Fruit of The Spirit is all about....

How many of you have a fruit tree in your yard...a lemon tree...an orange tree...
A strawberry tree?

Do you ever go outside and see that tree sweating and straining to produce that fruit...
Do you ever hear the tree muttering in the wind...gosh...is this ever hard...trying to pop out these limes...
Man...is this ever a work out...trying to create my oranges...
No...**A fruit tree naturally produces fruit...**
Why? Because that is the nature of the fruit tree...based upon the fact that it is grounded and rooted in rich soil.

God's love for us is that rich soil.

Until we're rooted there first...until we really get our value and life from that... Until we get that God's love is constant, unending, abundant, unconditional for us...our focus is going to stay on ourselves and how well we're measuring up...

God's love is covenantal...not contractual...

A contract says..."You do your part...and I'll do mine".

It's conditional.

God's covenant love for us is unconditional

We ought to be the happiest people in the world....

Or....we can spend our lives trying to convince people that we are
important enough
or successful enough
or smart enough
or talented enough
or attractive enough
or impressive enough
—to get love.

And Jesus tells us today “You are loved” but not because you have
convinced me that you are so impressive
But because you are my child; that’s your value

Christianity is not about impressing God...performance...
Jesus did all the performing on the cross; when he forgave our sins...
all our righteousness is as filthy rags...scripture says

We are simply called to do the receiving...
“Receive the Holy Spirit” Jesus says...”I know you’re threadbare and
weary...but I love you...So I’m going to give you what you need...
....Receive me...receive the Holy Spirit.”

Do you know what keeps
Good religious people from God?
They aren’t humble enough to get in the bread line and receive God’s
handout of grace in Jesus Christ

Sometimes good religious people want their religiosity, their faith, to
be all about them...and the plain and simple truth is...it just isn’t...
Sorry....

That’s not the arrangement...that’s not how God has worked it out

“This is love... not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:10

Again... not about us...it’s very clear here....its about who God is
Taking initiative to love us first...while we were messed up

Flunking out of life; caught in the clutches of death...
God came...and loved us in Jesus Christ

If you want to follow a bunch of rules and work your way up to heaven
You are in the wrong place...
BC just about any other religion than Christianity will let you do that
And will make it all about what you do and don't do
But when you come to Jesus, it's the exact opposite; you've got to
know that you don't have in you what it takes...to be a Christian

That's why these nine qualities are called the **FRUIT OF THE....**
No...not of the loom....
And **not of human effort and performance**
But **of the Holy Spirit....**

So, rather than seeing this list of nine fruit that we will be focusing on
in this series as a "TO DO" list that we must try hard to comply with
I'd rather have you think about it this way...

That...

These fruit represent the personality...the characteristics of God...
himself

Ever wonder what Jesus was really like?

Read the list of the fruit of the Holy Spirit...because it says that Jesus
was full of the Holy Spirit....

And God gives this same gift to us too...Just like he gave it to
Jesus...he gives the Holy Spirit to live in us as well...that's how...we
become like Jesus...

The fruit of the Spirit...

**"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness
and self-control..."**

***is a natural outflow of the work of God's grace in us... as long as
we're willing to get in the breadline and receive the handout...of
the Holy Spirit.***

Now of course there are things we can do to “keep in step” with the Spirit as Paul writes at the end of this passage (we will be talking about this in future Sundays during this series)

....we need prayer, and community, service and daily scripture reading, and worship to keep us in touch and abiding.

But the first step is surrender...you’ve got to say, *Lord I can’t be like Jesus*

What an impossible task! Please, you do what I can’t do...through me...

Do you want to know my favorite scripture verse is in the whole Bible? It’s God saying this...

“He (God) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness... “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me...For when I am weak then I am strong”.

2 Corinthians 12:9

I want to close with a story today about a father/son team that used to compete in the Boston Marathon.

When I lived in Boston I saw this duo, and I was reminded of this story when I recently learned that Joy Ebertz has qualified to run in the Boston Marathon. Joy would you please stand so we can congratulate you!

Rick and Dick Hoyt were a team for a long time

Competing in Triathlons together

Rickie, Dick's son has cerebral palsy – born with the umbilical cord around his neck

And when they took Rick to the Dr. the Dr. told them...forget about your son...he’ll never amount to more than a vegetable...put away in an institution...

But Dick and his wife refused to give up on their son

And committed to raising him like any other human being

They could tell Rickie was intelligent by his eyes, they said

He listened when they talked to him

So they managed to raise some money to get him a computer, built by some Tufts University engineers, so he could communicate with head motion

And the first day they got it a bunch of people came over to the house to see what Rickie's first words would be

His Mom thought they would be "Hi Mom"

His Dad "Hi Dad"

But the Boston Bruins were going for the Stanley cup at that time

And Rick's first words ever on that screen were "GO BRUINS!"

That's when they knew that Rick loved sports and had been following the games when they hadn't even known...

And then one day Rick heard about a charity run for a paralyzed athlete

Rick said, "Dad, can we run in that race – we've got to do something for that athlete"

And Rick's Dad said yes...I'll push you in your wheelchair...

They ran all five miles and when they got home Rick looked at his Dad and said "*Dad, when I'm with you, and we're running it feels like my disability disappears.*" Dick said that was a powerful message for him...

And that was the beginning...Dick began to train and get into shape for his son...They became known as the Hoyt team from MA...

And as I said I actually saw them competing in the Boston Marathon many years ago – very moving...

and they ran for years - continuously in marathon races...and if they weren't in a marathon they were in a triathlon Together... they have climbed mountains, and once trekked 3,735 miles across America.

Ricks Dad for 25 years pulled his son across the country and over hundreds of finish lines...

"I loan him my arms and my legs...Dick says...and together as a team we go faster."

Some people have told Dick that if he just ran alone, he'd win all kinds of races, because often the two of them, father and son together come out in the top quarter of their competitions.

But Dick would never dream of leaving his son behind because his love for his son is what it is all about...

In the same way God loans us his arms and legs – out of his great love for us - or his power through the Holy Spirit – to do what we cannot do on our own. To bear the Fruit of the Spirit for his glory and honor so that when we cross the finish line of this life we will do so in victory!!

Let us pray.