

The Fruit of the Spirit - Love, Legalism & Antinomianism

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm sure most of you will be aware, we are currently doing a study on the fruit of the Spirit and so we can turn to Galatians chapter 5 verses 22 and 23.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. We have spent a number of weeks really just introducing ourselves to this wonderful topic of the fruit of the Spirit and today we are now going to begin going through each one of these and see what they teach us in more detail. So today our focus is on the first item mentioned in the fruit of the Spirit, love.

Now in many ways a sermon on love is a huge challenge because it's a bit like trying to paint a picture of Scotland. Imagine someone said to you, paint a picture of Scotland. You could either paint it from a distance and get it all in, in which case it would be a very, very, very broad scale and you wouldn't be able to get much detail into particular aspects but you would get the whole thing in. Or you could focus on one area in particular, perhaps the Cairngorms or the islands or the border and you could look at that in more detail. But to paint a picture of Scotland with everything in it is impossible. And of course a full picture of love in our experience as Christians is way beyond the limits of a sermon and it's probably beyond the limits of a lifetime of sermons. So for that reason today, although we're trying to look at love, our focus will inevitably be selective. But even a glimpse of the love of God in Jesus Christ will be a great blessing to us. So in order to focus, I want us to in many ways make sure that that our attention is really directed towards the issues that are being emphasised in Galatians itself. And really when we look at love as part of the fruit of the Spirit, our great desire is that we would learn lessons for living the Christian life. When Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit this is what we are to look like. This is how we are to live. This is what people are to see when they look at us. So in many ways our focus will aim to be practical but there are obviously important doctrinal lessons that lie behind that. When you look at the list of the fruit of the Spirit,

Paul mentions love as the first item. Now I think when we look at that list it's important that we don't think of it as a list of descending order of importance. We shouldn't think that joy is more important than peace and that goodness is more important than faithfulness. There is obviously an element of equality to them all but having said that I do think that we can justifiably say that love comes first because it is the most important. And the reason I think we can say that is because if you read the whole of Galatians 5 as we've studied numerous times over recent weeks you see that Paul constantly emphasises love. And in doing that he's echoing the words of Jesus himself who prioritised love as the greatest commandment of all. And so although all these marks of the fruit of the Spirit are hugely important, love is the most important of all.

And I think one of the reasons why Paul emphasises love is because love is key to solving the problems that he is addressing in this letter to the Galatians. And when you look at this chapter and when you consider it in light of the whole of the message of Galatians you see that Paul is addressing two big mistakes that are often made in terms of understanding how to live the Christian life.

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What are these two mistakes? Well you'll remember that Paul is addressing the problem of circumcision whereby people have come to the Galatians and have said if you want to be a Christian you need the output mark of circumcision in accordance with the Old Testament law. That was the specific problem in terms of the Galatians. But of course that specific problem is simply reflecting a wider issue and it is a wider issue that plagued the Galatian church and it's an issue that has plagued the church ever since. That is the issue of legalism. That's the first of the two big mistakes that Paul is trying to address. What is legalism? Well basically legalism is the view that we earn God's favour by keeping the law. Some view that in terms of salvation itself and we would refer to that as salvation by works, the idea that we are saved by being good. A lot of people think like that. But other people can be a bit more subtle in terms of their legalism. They reject the idea of salvation by works but they still fall into the trap of thinking that God's love for them is increased because of the good things they are doing. Now it's very important to think about legalism because it's a mistake that we can all make. And we have to pause and ask ourselves are we making any of these legalistic errors in our own minds? Do we think or do we know people who think I will be saved because I am basically good? A lot of people think that. They think I am good enough because of the things that I am doing and therefore I will be saved. Now it's vitally important that we see that that is not the gospel. In fact that is the basis of nearly every false religion in the world. If you meet a Muslim it's very unlikely that you're going to find a violent terrorist. You are going to find if you meet a typical Muslim you're going to find somebody who says I am trying my best to be good enough for God and I hope that that would be good enough one day. Your ordinary Muslim is very very devout but he is ultimately trying to save himself by the things that he is doing. I remember recently I had a conversation with a Mormon and it was interesting because I wasn't really that sure of what Mormons believed and I said to this person how is a Mormon saved and she said we're saved by trusting in Jesus Christ and by doing our best and I said that's what we don't agree with but doing my best bit because they're adding their own works they're saying yeah I trust Jesus and then I have to do my best.

That's simply legalism working our way to salvation and many many many false religions are based on that that is not the gospel. Paul makes that abundantly clear in Galatians it is not by works that you are saved but even as Christians even as those who firmly believe in justification by faith we can become legalistic in our minds because we can think that God's love for us and God's acceptance of us is based on what we do. Now you might say to yourself I never do that but ask yourself do you ever think things like this do you ever think to yourself I should not go to the Lord's table because I am not doing very well in my Christian life. Now that's a common thing to think it's an easy thing to think but if you look at that statement it's a legalistic statement because it's saying I shouldn't do this because I am not this it's all about me it's all about what I'm doing. Other ways of thinking I've neglected my devotional life therefore

I am now less in God's sight do you ever think like that or maybe you think the opposite I'm thriving my devotional life I've read in my Bible every day for the last 10 years therefore God will love me more that's just as legalistic or we may look at other churches and we think they're doing things that are wrong I'm not certain that they are converted again there's a hint of legalism about that and we might even think to ourselves I have sinned so badly God could never love me.

Thinking like that is very very understandable and and I want to emphasize the fact that these are very subtle mistakes that we can make they're so easy to make but they are all legalistic because they are basically saying what God thinks of me is dependent on what I am doing and that is legalism. All of these things are making our conduct a condition for earning God's love but when we try to deal with legalism we can very easily fall into the opposite problem and the opposite problem to legalism is antinomianism. Now maybe I don't know you may have heard that word before maybe you haven't if you haven't don't worry at all the word basically means against the law so anti is like against anti-clockwise going against the clock we know how that word and nomos is the Greek word for law so it's somebody who is opposed to the law and so basically the mindset is I believe in Jesus Christ therefore the law doesn't matter and I can do whatever I want and this is the problem that Paul anticipates in verse 13 of chapter 5 he says you were called to freedom brothers only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.

Paul is very aware of the fact that people might think I have been forgiven by Jesus Christ I've been set free from the law therefore I can do whatever I like and people think like that some people think I'm a Christian I don't need to go to church I'm a Christian I'm forgiven I don't need to bother praying I don't need to bother reading my Bible some people think God knows my heart so it doesn't really matter what I do if I make a mistake it's not that serious if I disobey God's word doesn't really matter some people might think I'm converted but you know I can still go out I can still drink irresponsibly I can still watch whatever on TV I can still just live a lifestyle that's no different because God's going to pick up the pieces anyway. All of these things are antinomian because we are putting God's law to one side and we're saying I don't need it and antinomianism can be very very subtle as well just like legalism sometimes people might think

[12 : 37] God will save his elect therefore we can't do anything now there's an element of antinomianism to that statement because our witnessing is not primarily about reconciling the fact that God has elected certain people and the fact that the gospel is offered freely to everyone our witnessing is not primarily about trying to get our heads around that our witnessing is primarily a matter of obedience God has said go and make disciples that's a command we must obey so these two problems have always arisen in the church and they've plagued the church and they still do today you've got the legalists on the one hand who believes that you've got to keep the law otherwise you're not going to be saved you've got the antinomian on the other hand who says you're going to be saved you don't need to bother with the law and you have to ask yourself what is the answer to these two extremes and the answer is that we have to remember that at the heart of the gospel is love this is what paul emphasizes in galatians 5 verse 6 is a good example he says in christ jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything now notice what he's saying there circumcision that's the legalist that doesn't count for anything uncircumcision that's the antinomian doesn't matter what the law says again that doesn't count for anything what counts is faith working through love now that's a really important phrase but we have to ask us what exactly does it mean well the great message of galatians is that we are saved by faith and not by works but through faith works through love now that means that love is at the heart of our saving faith we're saved by faith and at the heart of that is love and there's two elements to that first of all there is the love that god has for us that's what we would was emphasizing the verse that we read at the very beginning i have been crucified with christ it's no longer i who live but christ who lives in me and the life i now live in the flesh i live by faith in the son of god who loved me and gave himself for me the whole reason that we have salvation in jesus christ the whole reason that we have the gospel message the whole reason that we have the holy spirit dwelling in our hearts now is because of god's love for us now we often hear people give their testimonies and they can talk about how they came to faith and the one thing you will find is that people's testimonies will be very very different sometimes a testimony will be a very long and gradual process sometimes the person will say i can't really identify the moment when i came to faith um i just know it happened sometime for other people it's very definite and very dramatic and neither is right or wrong sometimes it can be a process that takes years sometimes it can be a change in a specific moment for me it was a very gradual process i didn't have a sudden conversion at all but the one thing that could and should be common of every conversion account is the fact that the first sentence of any testimony

should be this i am here today because god first loved me because that's how everybody's conversion begins we have our salvation first and foremost because of the love of god and when you look at the saving work of jesus christ it's one glorious expression of god's love from start to finish you have a father who loves his son and who sends that beloved son to a world whom god loves you have a son who loves the father and who delights to obey him and we have jesus as our loving brother who loves us so much that he will lay down his life for us because we are his friends so when it says faith working through love at one level that's pointing us to the amazing love of god but there is also our love for god our faith works through love as well your faith works through love now what does that mean well think about it faith does not work through a spirit of fear you don't become a christian by saying to god please don't hurt me god doesn't want us to come to him like that faith does not work through a spirit of reluctant compliance we don't go to god saying well you know i suppose i'm going to have to follow you i realize that i i can't i can't manage myself so as much as i don't want to i'm going to that's not how faith works faith doesn't work through a spirit of selfish ambition nobody comes to god thinking well let's see what i can get out of this faith doesn't work through any of these things faith works through love in the sense that when we come to god we come with weak but sincere hearts and we say lord i love you and i want to follow you please have mercy on me so faith works through love we trust god as our loving father and as his children we love him and it's by keeping our eyes on these things that we will avoid the two mistakes that we mentioned the mistake of the legalist and the mistake of the antinomian and we'll just look at these together very briefly when we are drifting towards legalism in our minds if we are thinking that we have to earn favor with god we must remember that god's love for us is in no way earned or shaped or affected even by one tiny fraction by anything that you do now you must let that sink in and i have to let that sink in because there's so much of me that thinks i must earn god's favor i must be good at good enough because he's going to be disappointed otherwise the bible teaches us that god's love for you is unspoilable that means you can't spoil it it is unchangeable that means you cannot make it smaller you cannot make it greater and it is unbreakable god loves you and legalism will always lead us to despair because we tie and tie and tie and tie and tie and if you're anything like me you will always

And that is why God is such an amazing God. But in terms of the other mistake, Antinomianism, again the answer is to focus on God's love.

[24 : 53] We obey God because we love him. God is our loving Heavenly Father, and knowing God means knowing that he loves you as that perfect Father.

How can we say that we love God, but we're not going to do anything that he says? The two just do not go together. That's why Jesus says, if you love me, you will keep my commandments.

So love is at the very, very heart of the Gospel. And it is that love that keeps us from these two mistakes.

Not in order to be saved, but because we are saved. Not in order to be God's children, but because we are God's children.

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But we must also be careful not to be led into a mess by antinomianism, whereby we just live the way the world is living.

The answer is to keep love at the heart of everything that we do. And I had planned to go on and look a little bit more about how to apply that in our lives, particularly from 1 Corinthians 13, but the time has gone, and we'll pick it up again next time.

[27 : 35] Let's pray.