

Fruit of the Spirit. Love  
(1 Corinthians 13. 1 John 4)

What is the first and most obvious evidence of God's influence in a person's life? What is the first sign someone has become a Christian? We might suggest various answers. But the Apostle Paul, writing under the influence of God's Holy Spirit lists the fruit, the natural result of someone living submitted to the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and according to Him the first of these is love. The Apostle John agrees, in his typically blunt and absolute language suggesting that someone who exhibits no love in their lives may not be a Christian at all!

Do you want to be a godly person? Then you must be filled with love for God is love. Do you want to be Christ like? Then like Him you must be constantly motivated and guided by love.

Writing to a jealously divided congregation in 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth the Apostle Paul was inspired to write the memorable words in 1 Corinthians 13. Without love, he says, words are empty. What good is it if I can preach like Billy Graham or sing like an angel if I don't really care? If I'm not moved by the compassion of Christ it's just empty noise, not even musical.

Without love, Paul says, knowledge is worthless. What good is it to know the scripture, what benefit if you can repeat the Catechism, quote from Calvin's Institutes or the Presbyterian Code of Practice? If we're not applying it lovingly to convert the lost and build His Church we are empty. Without love, he claims, service is useless. Charity and dramatic gestures will convince no one. If we're not an attractive, loving fellowship of servants who would want to join?

Why is love given first place among the fruits of the Spirit? Maybe because it's eternal, the greatest over even faith and hope. We'll not need those any more in heaven, but we'll enjoy love with God forever. Maybe also because simply, like Jesus, love is so beautiful, so good. We could paraphrase 1 Corinthians 13 v 4-8 in many ways.

Perhaps something like this: Love is wonderful – instead of being impatient, unkind or jealous it is humble and helpful. Polite, patient and forgiving, instead of always finding fault and criticising, it wants to believe and hope for the best, holding on, giving every possible chance. Love is unfailingly kind, generous and considerate to imperfect, disappointing people, even those who behave like real enemies.

Think of Jesus on the cross, praying for His executioners. “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” This was no empty gesture – it was the Son of God, overflowing with love for sinful humanity, submitting to agonizing death to save us from our sins, sins which grieve Him to the core! The Spirit comes to fill us with this quality of Jesus – love. Will we submit our proud, hurting hearts to be thus filled? How fruitful, how productive our lives might become if we were indeed ruled by this love of Christ!

*Love for God.* In the Gospels we observe Jesus’ love for His Father, love demonstrated in constant, adoring prayer and perfect obedience. Walking in step with the Holy Spirit will prompt us to love our Heavenly Father more than any sin that would separate us from Him. To pray constantly because we love to be in His presence. To gratefully obey the instructions of His Word, serving Him in building Christ’s Church.

Love not just for God, *but for other Christians.* Fellowship. This kind of humble, affirming, considerate family loyalty which Paul urges these argumentative Corinthians to practice. Doesn’t every congregation need a little more of Jesus’ love toward each other? Isn’t this His command that we love one another? Isn’t this what He prayed for on the night He was betrayed – that all His followers might be united harmoniously as one? To proudly refuse can be nothing less than sinful disobedience.

And also love for others, love for those outside the Church, strangers to God’s grace, possibly even antagonistic to Christians and the Gospel. Christ came to earth to redeem people who hated Him or

couldn't care less. Such was His compassion, His concern for the lost. We His followers are called to share His compelling love for those heading for an eternity in Hell. To pray and do all we can to persuade them to turn while there is yet time.

Love. It's what saved us. It's what makes the change. It's the beginning of our Christian walk. And it's the end. Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 13 speaks of maturing between now and the perfection of heaven. The more we give way to the love of Christ, the more ready we become.

Let's allow His Spirit to fill, to flood our hearts and lives afresh with a love far beyond our own capacity, that we might mature in Christ, to His glory and the building of His Church.

Amen