

Spiritual Gifts

Week 1: Love

1 John 4:10-11, 19

Dr. Matt Cassidy ---- June 11, 2023

Well, hey, good morning, Grace. It's summertime! It's summer now—it was a hundred degrees, I think, yesterday. So, here we go. And tomorrow morning we start one of our three camps that we're going on. We'll be praying for that at the end. Some of our little kids will be going up north.

We ended the school year learning, briefly, about the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. We talked about His work in our life. And then Kevin just did two weeks on what are called the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and we're asking everyone to find out and discover their gift. What is your gift and how are you using it at church?

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness and self-control.

Now in the summertime we're going to be studying what are called the fruit of the Spirit. These are characteristics that God is developing in us. And love is the fruit of the Spirit. It's singular—it's not "fruits" of the Spirit—but "fruit" of the Spirit. We'll be looking at Galatians chapter 5 where it has a list of those fruits. Look what it says in chapter 5, verse 22 and 23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

We'll spend our time together looking at what that means and how the Spirit can cultivate that in our lives. A fruit of the Spirit is a characteristic, a Christ-like quality. When we say we want everyone to grow and become like Christ in all of life and to guide other people to become like Christ in all of life, what does that mean? Well, here's a list of attributes. Here are some descriptive terms. These are supernatural characteristics in us that the Spirit brings out and causes into existence and to do well.

We're going to have fun with it. I hope you saw the little fruit cart out front. That's beautiful. The creative team did that. We have these little stickers that you can get each week. You can put the stickers on—all the kids do this, the cool kids are doing this—water bottles or all sorts of things. Next week we'll have a devotion. The whole church can go through this together, looking at each of these fruits.

This week we're going to look at love. The fruit of the Spirit is love.

G. K. Chesterton was one of the earliest people to notice that in fairy tales, while they're simple and for children to enjoy, there is actually profound meaning and wisdom. While it's a diversion for children, there's a grownup lesson in each and every one of them—to encourage courage and scorn cowardice; to learn how to be shrewd without losing your innocence. The idea is that we can find truth and wisdom whispered to us in these storylines—something deeper in the fairy tales.

His most cherished story or fable was “Beauty and the Beast.” He says that the story is telling us this: that unlovely things must first be loved deeply to become lovable. Unlovely things must be deeply loved so that they would become lovable. And he said that's based on a true story, a historic event found in the Bible, where it says, “While we were enemies with God, Christ died for us.” We were unlovely, and then we were first deeply loved, and we became lovable.

Colossians 3:14

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Love has the power to make us lovable. Just a passing glance at the Bible shows you that's the theme. You can see it everywhere. Even Paul, when he lists various virtues, says, *But the key virtue—the hub—is love.* Look what he says in Colossians: “And over all of these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Jesus was asked, *Hey, how can You summarize the entire Old Testament?* And He says, “Love—love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It goes throughout every author. John says, “God is love.” He says, “Yahweh is love.” And he says this is how you know you are in God’s family—by the way you love one another.

When Paul’s talking about the spiritual gifts that we’re given, he says, *Look, if you’re enjoying the practice of supernatural power by the Spirit and His giftedness, but don’t have love, it doesn’t count for anything. It’s worthless.*

Love Is a Supernatural Fruit

And that’s why love is the supernatural fruit. It is a supernatural fruit. I want to say again and again, it is not our love trying to get tuned up; it is the fruit of the Spirit. And that’s why, if you look at the summary of the Bible and how pervasive it is, you could say this: the goal in life is to have on your headstone your name and “He loved well” or “She loved well.” If that’s all you want to work on for the rest of your life, to become a great lover of God and a lover of other people, that would be a godly goal. And what we’re talking about today is a supernatural, spiritual fruit. Not like mushy love that’s emotion-driven. Sometimes love is tough, which is why they call it “tough love.” It’s difficult at times. And that’s why this type of love is a choice. And then sometimes emotion follows. It doesn’t have to, but it is a choice to have this spiritual fruit. It is from God.

And He’s going to say that we’re going to need this type of supernatural Spirit-given love because of how we’re to love and who we are to love.

Sometimes I find it hard to grasp conceptionally what this Spirit love is. Mark Buchanan, who is one of my favorite authors, writes about this type of love by calling it “unprovoked love.” He says, *Look, we all know about unprovoked anger and what unprovoked violence looks like. We watch TV or read in the newspaper that someone was like a John Doe, sitting at a bus stop, minding his own business, and a truck full of thugs jump out, mug him, take his money, and it was an act of unprovoked violence.* Sure, we know exactly what that looks like.

So, Mark Buchanan says, *Okay, just tell the story again, but make it unprovoked love. So, there’s John Doe sitting at a bus stop minding his own business, and it’s a truck full of do-gooders, brothers and sisters in Christ, that jump out, bless him, pray for him, leave him some money, in an act of unprovoked love.* And then Buchanan says that’s the story of the Good Samaritan—unprovoked violence and hatred followed by unprovoked love. It’s a spiritual fruit. It’s the fruit of the Spirit.

We want to be seeking out those people who never saw it coming—they never had it coming—and then they just get, unannounced, unexpected, unprovoked, undeserved love. That’s how we’re to love, that’s who we are to love. We’re to make it our goal in life to be known for this epithet: that you were a great lover—a lover of God and a lover of people. It’s going to have to be supernatural. It’s not your love; it’s the love of the Spirit in you, overflowing.

Love “the Least of These”

Because Jesus says you’re to love “the least of these.” In Matthew chapter 24 Jesus is telling a bit of a parable about what it means to be one of His followers. And He talks about loving the least of these. And He describes them as the hungry and the thirsty, the naked, the shamed, the imprisoned, the impoverished. And He says that in our life, the people who quite often just go unnoticed because we’re too busy or too competitive or just doing whatever is next ... we’re not open to what God has already put right in front of us. It’s the people we kind of step over on the way to whatever our agenda is.

And Jesus says in this story, this parable, that this is how you define yourself as a disciple—the way you love these people, the least of these. It’s the least of these, the unlovely. They need to first be loved deeply to become lovable. We’re to have our eyes open for that. We’re to be looking for it. It’s there.

Beth Moore tells a wonderful story about just this thing. Beth Moore is a very popular Bible teacher. And she was at the airport one time on her way to her next gig, her next Bible teaching event, studying her notes. And as she was waiting for her plane to take off she noticed a man not far from her in a wheelchair. He looked pretty ragged. He was bent over and just skin and bones. His fingernails had grown out and his hair was matted and tangled up. She said it was just hard to look at him. She went back to studying her notes and felt like the Lord was telling her, *You should go talk to this man.*

And Beth Moore said back, *Well, Lord, I’ll talk to him on the plane. I’m working on a Bible study here.*

And the Lord said, *I don’t want you to just talk to him; I want you to go brush his hair.* She said, *What? I would, Lord, but I’ve packed my brush in my suitcase and it’s on the plane.*

The Lord said, *You can ask him for a brush.*

She goes back to studying, and then finally, she's just overcome with this pressure. She goes over to the man and says, "Sir, may I have the pleasure to brush your hair?"

And he said, "What?"

"Sir, may I have the pleasure to brush your hair?"

"What?" And then he said, "Listen, little lady, I'm sorry, but if you want me to hear you, you're going to have to all but shout."

So, in classic Beth Moore style, she takes a big, deep breath and just yells, "Sir, if you would allow me the pleasure, I would like to brush your hair."

And he said, "I guess, if you want to."

She said, "I don't have a brush."

He said, "I have one. It's in my bag right here."

So, she gets out that brush and it mentions in the book that she doesn't know how to do a lot of things, but getting tangles out—she knows how to do that--she had two daughters. And his hair was actually quite clean, it was just unkempt. She worked out all that and brushed his hair. And during that time, she said that's when the miracle took place. In that moment she felt like everyone in that airport had vacated. There were only three people there. "There was me, this old man in a wheelchair, and the Holy Spirit." She said, "I had never loved anyone in that way, that deeply, in my entire life."

When she finished, she went around to the front and got down on her knees, and she looked at the older man and said, "Do you know my Savior Jesus?"

And he said, "I do, I do. My bride introduced me to Him decades ago. She brought me to church and I understood who He is, and we've been living our lives for Him. I've been away from her for months. I had to come to the city to have open heart surgery. She was too weak to travel with me, and I haven't seen her in months now. And now I was just thinking to the Lord, *The first time she sees me I'm going to look like this ratty old man.* And then you came to brush my hair."

When Beth Moore was getting on the plane, the hostess right before you go into the tunnel was weeping. And she looks at Beth Moore and says, "Why? Why did you do that?"

And Beth Moore said, "Do you know my Savior Jesus?"

She said, "Yeah."

"He can be the bossiest thing, you know."

She tells the truth. Her conclusion? God knows the divine moments and the plans that He's set up beforehand for us to enjoy. And He doesn't have to tell us how it ends or how it's influencing us. We're just to be aware, take notice, and look at the least of these.

You know, most of our God moments are moments of undeserving, unprovoked love. Unprovoked love. Love the least of these.

You know, sometimes it's as simple as the next time you have a little family reunion, getting over and sitting across the table and being the first one to sit across from the relative that people just want to be away from—the most critical uncle you have. Just start a conversation.

Around this church, boy, we love the least of these. And Keaton, our pastor of mobility, has done a wonderful job of helping us roll up our sleeves and teaching us how to do and when to do the love of the least of these. We've provided welcome home packages for some of the refugees that are moving to Austin and have put together care packages when we give and volunteer in ministries that are for the men and women who are living homeless in town.

The least of these? Those are mothers or pregnant women who are pregnant unexpectedly and don't know what to do with this child. And so, we get involved in Austin's The Source. We give, we volunteer, we do whatever we can.

We're going to have a backpack drive for the ministry we started called Mission Possible in east Austin, and fill backpacks full of school supplies. When Keaton brought it up in staff meeting, we told him to brace himself—we might have too many backpacks, because we know how to do that.

We're sending people around the world this summer to care for the least of these. And when you cross the grounds on this little campus to care for our children, that's caring for the least of these. If you mentor our young men and women in our youth ministry, it's caring for the least of these.

So, this week, like the song said—"Your will, Your way"—let's look for opportunities. Let's open up our minds and our hearts. Let's have a game to look for people that we might consider the least of these, and give them a dose of unprovoked love. They'll never see it coming. They never had it coming.

Love Your Enemies

That's why the passage says "the fruit of the Spirit." It's because this fruit is supernatural. God is asking us to love, who we love and how we love. And that's not just the least of these. Now it gets ugly. He says to love your enemies, the people who are the easiest to hate and the hardest to love; the people who have cheated us, betrayed us, stolen something from us, whatever it might be. He says it's spiritual fruit, supernatural fruit, that will give you the ability to override your lustful desire for revenge. It's a supernatural love that quiets that and opens you up to the idea that maybe there's something mysterious here.

Matthew 5:43-47

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.⁴⁵ He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

Jesus says this in His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5: "You have heard it 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 children of your Father in heaven. He causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Now 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 own people, what are you doing more than anyone else? Don't even the pagans do that?"

Now when I read this passage (and I've read it a lot), here's the biggest problem that I have with it. It's clarity. There's no ambiguity. What the Greek means is "love your neighbor." The original text says "pray for your enemies." He means what he says. Pray for your enemies ... and I bet by praying for them, you're going to end up loving your enemies. And that's why it's the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He's asking us to do things we wouldn't do any other way.

A woman named Karen Koval wrote in a Christian magazine called *World Magazine* a number of years ago about an incident when she was the executive producer of a show. I think it was on NBC and the name of it was “Headliners and Legends.” And her first assignment in “Headliners and Legends” was to be the executive producer with an interview of Hugh Hefner, the founder of *Playboy* magazine.

Her initial response was to figure out some way to get out of this particular assignment and move on to week two. She prayed about it a lot. And she just asked the Lord to open up her heart and make something out of this.

She told her team, *Look, let's go into this and ask questions that aren't about infidelity and pornography. Let's find out how a person becomes a Hugh Hefner. What makes that happen?*

So, they went to the Playboy mansion and sat down with Hugh Hefner, and the first few questions were not what he was expecting. “Tell us about your parents. What was life like growing up for you?”

And Hefner said, “Well, I grew up in a Puritan family. There was a lot of talk about God.”

Everybody was thinking, *What?*

“But it was the wrath of God, not about grace, not about love.” He said that he and his brother never once heard their parents say “I love you.” Never once did he ever receive a kiss from his mother, because she would get germs.

And then in a pause, his eyes filled with water, and then he started talking about his blanket when he was a toddler. He had this blanket that he carried wherever he went. He snuggled it every night. It was the only thing that gave him warmth. And he went into vivid story after vivid story. And he said that the blanket was beautiful when it started and it was trimmed all the way around with little bunnies. And he called it his bunny blanket.

When he was around five years old, they found a tumor in Hugh Hefner's ear. And he had always wanted a puppy. And his mom would not allow it because of the germs. But because of his tumor and to help with him, she acquiesced and allowed him to get a puppy. They bought him a puppy and brought it home. And a four or five-year-old boy with a puppy ... he never put it down. He slept with puppy, everywhere he went, he went with this puppy. But it was obvious from the day he brought it home that it was not well. And after four days it was very sickly, and

so Hugh Hefner wrapped that puppy up in his bunny blanket to give it warmth, maybe to make it better. By day five, the puppy had died. And they buried the puppy, and then they burned his blanket because of the germs.

And after he tells that story there's a long pause. And then just as a statement of fact, like he was just figuring it out for himself, he said, "You know, I guess I'm just that little boy still looking for love."

Karen sat and watched. And she realized that she came in to kind of fight with an adversary. And because she opened herself up to loving her enemy, she was able to hear a story of a man who confused sex with love, and what it looked like to be a beast, having never loved, having never been loved, his whole life; not receiving and maybe rejecting the supernatural love of God, and that's what you get.

Love your enemies. Unlovely things must first be loved deeply to become lovable. And day in and day out I think we're surrounded by people that need unprovoked, supernatural love; people who never saw it coming, people that never had it coming, and the love knocks them down.

And so, my prayer for us today is that God will bring us the face and the name of people that we would consider hostile or enemies to us; that we might bring this love, the love that comes from the fruit of the Spirit, and see what God does with that.

How Does This Love Happen?

Well, by now you're probably thinking, *Okay, how does one get that kind of love?* Because as I said, it's not maturing our love. It's not tuning up the love that we have within us. This is a foreign love. How does this happen to us?

Well, the Bible says that Yahweh, God, is love, and that He started it. He was the first one to give unprovoked love.

1 John 4:10-11, 19

This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

¹⁹ We love because He first loved us.

Look what it says in 1 John: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”

And then a few verses later in verse 19, it says: “We love because He first loved us.”

We never saw it coming. We never had it coming. We received this love—if you follow Jesus Christ, the Son whom God sent to atone for our sins—that’s the love that’s coming in and out of us. That’s what he’s talking about.

So, I’ve been thinking about this for literally months. What does that mean and how does that happen? “God demonstrates His own love for us while we still sinners. While we were enemies of God, Christ died for us.” I understand that. But how does that change the nature of who I am so that I might be that kind of lover? I want a headstone that says, “He loved well.” I don’t know how to get it.

So, I’ve been praying for a while, “God, help me with this.” Just recently it hit me. I’m going to kind of change subjects to show you how it works, and then I’m going to apply it to love.

So, not very long ago—I’ve been praying, “What does this look like?”—and we had some furniture delivered to our house, and I had to run to a meeting, and so I told Melinda, “Hey, don’t forget, go to the envelope full of money. Make sure you tip these guys. Man, make them pause. Make them celebrate that they know our address, okay?”

She said, “Oh, yeah, I know. We’ll do that.”

And then I got in the car to get to the meeting and I almost looked in the rearview mirror and laughed. *Who are you? What happened to you? Since when are you generous?*

Because it took me back to my original state of condition. I was born stingy. I think it was the way I was made, honestly. It's the Dutch in me. I've got to take one of those tests. And then it's my nature, I think. And the way I was raised, there were seasons when we did not have very much money and we were living paycheck to paycheck. Some of you understand Hamburger Helper without the hamburger. Yeah, those were hard times. And I think because of the fear that was maybe pervasive in my own soul and in the environment, I clung to money. And it wasn't greed; it was stinginess, which is different. It was like I had to hold onto it for safety.

And when I became a follower of Christ, I knew it was gross, it was pathologically sick. And so, here's what I did. I went to the Bible and I looked at passages about God's generosity towards me. And I read myself into those storylines—how God was generous to me. I memorized passages about being generous. He started it and I take on His image and I can be generous.

And the second thing that happened to me is God's people. The Church shows the attributes of God. We put skin on God. And this church has been exceedingly generous to me. They help provide for my family. The people in the church, my brothers and sisters in Christ here, are over-the-top generous. They want me to enjoy life. They lend me their property or their vacation destinations, sometimes even their cars. And when I was needing care, people cared for our family and me. And to be a recipient of that supernatural kind of generosity—oh, it feels so good. And it changed me—so much so that I wanted to be the purveyor of that kind of generosity. I wanted other people to feel that.

And so, these days I want the lady who cuts my hair to celebrate my name on her calendar. I want people who deliver stuff or work on our house to go home startled. If some kid rings our doorbell to raise money for whatever club they're in, oh, I'm buying that. I want my reputation to be known as being a sucker for that kind of stuff. And when I look at my life, at who I was, I can absolutely identify how God has changed me. And now I just love being generous. And now I understand why Jesus said that it is better to give than to receive.

So, now, that same model ... we just do that with love. How can I become a greater lover? I go to the Bible. He started it. He was the first one to throw an unprovoked act of love on me. I read stories of love in the Bible and I insert my life into that to see how He treated me. I'm

the woman that was caught in adultery. I'm the woman who's washing His feet. I'm the leper who's filled with shame, and yet He gives honor and dignity to me in front of other people.

Then I look at the people of God, the family. This church has been unconditionally loving to me so many times. The leadership has given me unprovoked love. If you are my friend, you have loved me unconditionally. It's the only way we can stay friends. And that is going to make me a great lover. That's going to make it to the headstone for my epithet, because I received the love from God, I saw the love of God from my brothers and sisters, and now it just goes places.

The goal of life, friends, is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself; to love the least of these, to love your enemies. And if we look at all of life as a paradigm just to learn how to love—if that's the end, then everything can be like a means to that end. And we look at our successes where we loved well and learn from that to do it again. We can learn from our failures and say, *Okay, what did we learn today?*

Here's one I want to tell you about. My father passed away three years ago this week. And my father and I didn't have much of a relationship. Frankly, he didn't like me. I think everyone were in agreement with that. He wasn't mean or cruel; he was just unconcerned. He didn't care about me. And then, his last year of life he needed a great deal of care. So, my younger sisters took the vast amount of responsibility of that, running to San Antonio and taking care of him. He was not going to leave the house that he had been in, so we all had to care for all of his needs in that house. And then when it was my turn to do my shift, every time I drove down I-35, I thought, *Man, I can love this guy who didn't like me.* I've got to tell you, I didn't. I wasn't mean, I wasn't cold. I was just cool. I was just a client. I might have been a stranger.

And at the end of the day when I look back, I just have regrets, mostly because I'm out of parents. I don't get a do-over here. And I'm telling you this story because of this. So many of you have aging parents. And they might not deserve love. But I want to tell you, you need to love them all the way to the end.

I have found this to be true. I have never in my life regretted loving someone who was unlovable. And I have deep regrets for not loving someone that was unlovable. And I'm asking you to join me in trying to live the rest of our lives without regret. Let's get that tombstone right. "He" or "She loved well."

John the Apostle—do you know about John? You know his nickname, right? "Sons of Thunder." I know how nicknames are given, okay. This guy's got a short fuse. He's been in a

series of bar fights. He is probably known for his temper. Son of Thunder? Yeah. What a beast. And then he spends three years experiencing unprovoked love. He never saw it coming, he never had it coming. His nickname at the end of his life is “the Apostle of Love.” His epistles are just full of stories about how to love. In his gospel his nickname is “the one whom Jesus loved.” Unlovely things must first be loved extravagantly to become lovable. John is the apostle who was a beast who was transformed by the power of love.

On his deathbed, the story goes like this. He is surrounded by all of his friends and his followers, and he’s struggling for each breath, and he’s almost in the next life. And they lean into him and ask him, “Do you have any last words? What last piece of wisdom have you not given us?”

And John said, “Love one another.”

And then the people stopped and paused, and they leaned back in and said, “Is there anything else?”

And he said, “That’s enough.”

Son of Thunder. Not anymore. The Apostle of Love.

That’s what we all have. Unlovable things first loved deeply become lovable because the power of love is to make us lovable.

So, let’s be a church that’s recklessly loving. Each other? You bet. The least of these? Uh-huh. And our enemies.

Let’s put on the headstone of the church itself—Grace—it says it right there on the side of the wall “Grace . . . boy, they loved well.” If we do that, we’ll do right.

Let’s pray.

This is how we know what love is, that Jesus laid down His life for us. We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Lord, I’d ask that You would call to our minds the people that we might have been arranged before time, the least of these; that we might have been ignoring or stepping over; that You would bring those people to mind that we might love them, recklessly, unprovoked, never knowing that it’s coming their way.

And the enemies too, Lord—I ask that You would help us transcend our own need for cowboy justice, our lust for revenge, and our need to hold onto bitterness. And I’d ask that You

would help us love; not with our love, but that Your foreign love would cause it to well up inside of us and we would find a way to love our neighbor and our enemy and the least of these.

Let us be a loving church. Help us become famous for our love.

Lord, I lift up our little campers who will be leaving tomorrow morning. I'd ask that they would find the power of the love of Christ at that camp, in the worship and the teaching and the way our counselors will be caring for them. I'd ask that You would cause their hearts to be open—the somewhat innocent hearts that they have at this age, that they would just be open to the rush of Your love and Your truth. I pray for the counselors as well, that You would give them stamina and strength, but insight; that You would speak to them about the souls who they're talking to.

I'd ask for a blessing upon the moms and dads. Some of these are first-time campers, and they'll be trusting You in a new way for that little girl or that little boy to be gone. They'll be trusting in You and knowing that they're going to be well cared for.

Lord, we ask that You would bless this church in a great way. If we're known for anything, we'd like it to be love. I pray this in Jesus' name. And everybody said, Amen.