

I assume at least some of you have heard the name Bill Belichick. Mentioning his name usually creates response and/or conversation with both causal and fanatical football fans, as he is the coach of the New England Patriots and the currently the longest tenured football coach in the National Football League. What makes Bill Belichick controversial is 1) he is innovative, 2) he is successful, 3) he doesn't say much, 4) his knowledge of football is far beyond most coaches and players, and fans, and 5) coaches, players and fans of other teams hate him because they don't trust him – *because* he is innovative, successful, doesn't say much and his knowledge of football is far beyond most coaches, players, and fans. But while Bill Belichick is vilified by many in football today, those who know him and those who have coached with him and those who have played for him *love him and respect him* - and it shows in that over the past 15 years his players and coaches have helped him win four Super Bowl championships, six conference titles, and 12 division championships. While many suspect his victories have been won through deceit and deception, the truth is that early in his coaching career Bill learned the secret to winning football games when he came to understand that - *the best football players are those who are smart enough to see the value of playing out their assigned role rather than being a star*. The best football teams are those who have players who sacrifice their egos for the good of the team.

The same could be said of any group of people whether it be a sports team, a business, a family, and even a church. In fact this was the issue that the church in Galatia was struggling with, the issue, which the apostle Paul addressed in the words that wrote that we are looking at today. Paul himself had planted this church in Galatia (modern day Turkey) – but not long after he left, false teachers infiltrated the congregation and began to teach those in the church that their salvation was not acceptable in God's eyes unless they were circumcised. The apostle clearly saw this for what it was. These folks were pseudo-Christians who merely want to win converts to Christ for their own prestige as they would become stars in gaining the approval of the Jews in showing how effective they were in converting Gentiles into a Christianity that also conformed to the Jewish faith. Since the Jewish leadership approved of the fact that they are making Gentiles Jewish, the false teachers were taking center stage in having created a sect of which they are the leaders, which would keep them from any Jewish persecution. Paul speaks of this in Galatians 6:12: *“It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”* The effect of this false teaching of these false teachers was that it caused conflict and division in the church. And so Paul wrote this letter to the church to address the issue and call them back to the truth.

Now this is not the first time we have seen Paul do this. We've seen this before when we were going through Paul's letter to the church in Rome. After using Romans 1-11 to show us how sinful we are and how desperately we need God's righteousness, and how God has graciously and sovereignly provided the righteousness of God we need through Jesus Christ – Paul then speaks to us in chapters 12-13 about how we are to live out God's righteousness in our relationship with God, and how we can live out God's righteousness in our relationship with other Christians, and how we can live out God's righteousness in our relationship with and towards those all who have authority over us in the world we live in. Paul told us our continued resistance against authority reveals the rebellion that still lies deep within our hearts, as God does not allow us to resist and reject authority because we disagree with or dislike the one whom He has placed in authority over us. We are to obey *“all”* authority God has put over us because to resist authority is to resist God. Paul closes chapter 13 by revealing to us the secret to obeying all the authority God has placed over us is to understand that obedience to God, more than anything else, is about love. Obedience to God and His Word and His Holy Spirit is a loving response of gratitude to who God is and what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

These are the foundational concepts Paul laid down before us as we then stepped into Romans 14 where Paul addressed conflicts and divisions that occur in the church over opinions preferences and convictions. It was here where that apostle taught us that spiritually mature Christians do not force their preferences, opinions and convictions onto others – but rather the most mature Christians are those who are smart enough to see the value of playing out their assigned role in the church as being humble servants of Christ rather than being star who promotes their own preferences, convictions and opinions over others. In speaking of both the Law of Love and the Disunity of Judgment the apostle Paul shared with us that God our Father is pleased when he sees his children making sacrifices for the sake of each other. We see that in God Himself as He started his church with the greatest and most loving sacrifice of all— that of the death his only Son on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Just like the best football teams are those who have players who sacrifice their egos for the good of the team – so are the best churches filled with mature Christians who sacrifice their egos to the good of the church.

These are the same issues Paul is addressing in his letter to the Galatian church that caused those in the church to drift far from the gospel he had shared with them went he planted the church. After he opens with a greeting, he then gives them a short rebuke: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ”* (Galatians 1:6-10). Paul then uses the remainder of chapter one and all of chapter 2 to remind them that God had called him to share the gospel of Jesus Christ and to oversee the planting of churches among the Gentiles – and he had the affirmation of the other apostles in Jerusalem to do so. He also references his need to stand in opposition to the apostle Peter, regarding the very same issue about salvation and circumcision and the law and the truth of the gospel that the Galatian church was currently struggling with.

In chapter three Paul directly attacks the false teaching about the need for circumcision for salvation by giving five examples that demonstrate the sufficiency of justification by faith in Christ alone. He first tells them they came to faith by turning to the gospel without circumcision. And then he speaks to them about how Abraham was saved (justified by faith) 430 years before the law of God was introduced to God’s people. Then Paul reminds them that the purpose of the law of God was not to condemn us for our sin - but rather to point out our sin and point us to God and prepare us for a Savior. The apostle then speaks of Christ’s work on the cross: Jesus redeemed us from the curse of the law; Jesus became a curse for us on the cross; Jesus died on a cross to fulfill the promise God gave to Abraham. And then Paul reminds them of the work of the Spirit of God: the Holy Spirit baptizes repenting Jews and Gentiles into the body of Christ, fulfilling the promise of God to Abraham that his ancestors would be a blessing to all nations.

In chapter 4 Paul calls the false teaching of requiring circumcision for salvation and the issue of promoting personal preferences, opinions and convictions just as it is: *legalism*. He then gets personal with them, seeking to free them from the heavy yoke of legalism by appealing to their heads and their hearts through a number of illustrations regarding law grace and slavery and freedom that can be seen in the lives of people in the Bible and in the lives of people from life itself. His last words in chapter four are: *“So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman”* (verse 31) and the Paul opens chapter five by declaring: *“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery”* (Galatians 5:1) – and he uses the next 14 verses to blatantly speak of the judgment of God that will come on those who turn away from or change or add to the gospel that was given to him by Jesus Christ himself.

And he closes this section by warning them: *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another”* (Galatians 5:13-15). And its at this point we step into today’s text, which will also be our context for the next three months as we look at what God’s Word says about the foundation and the reality of the Fruits of the Spirit in our lives.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Galatians 5:16-26

In these words we again hearing the echo of the truths Paul spoke about in his letter to the Romans. Specifically here we are reminded of Romans 7-8 where the apostle spoke of the inner conflict between the indwelling Spirit of God and the old fallen nature of the flesh that lies deep within the heart of every follower of Jesus Christ. In Romans 7 he wrote: *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”* (Romans 7:15, 19) – and in his letter to the Galatian church we now read: *“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”* Now remember that when Paul speaks of *“the flesh”* he is not speaking literally about the flesh of our physical body but rather about the carnal *“flesh”* - the *“desires”* and longings and yearnings and lusts and appetites that lie deeply embedded in our fallen, sinful, human nature.

As he also had done before in Romans 1:29–32, Paul speaks of the *“works of the flesh”* (actions, behaviors, attitudes) that arise in our lives when we seek to *“gratify the desires of the flesh”* rather than *“walk by the Spirit”* of God: *“sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.”* While this list is most likely not all-inclusive, there is enough here to point out something that applies to everyone one of us here today – and if not, he adds the qualifier *“and things like these.”* And just in case we still don’t think any of these apply to us Paul boldly and mercifully challenges us to make the extra effort to uncover any and all blind spots that might be hiding any and all *“works of the flesh”* within our hearts: *“I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* These words of warning from Paul are an act of grace on God’s part because *“for freedom Christ has set us free”* and we can know freedom in the battle against the flesh, when we *“stand firm”* and humbly allow ourselves to be *“led by the Spirit.”* When we do so we will no longer *“submit again to a yoke of slavery”* of the *“desires of the flesh”* because *“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit”* (Romans 8:1-4).

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . . For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” In these opening words of Galatians 5 and in the words we just looked at, Paul has been telling us and the church in Galatia that the “*freedom*” we have in “*Christ*” that has “*set us free*” is not freedom from the *struggle* of sin but freedom from the *habit* of sin; the “*freedom*” we have in “*Christ*” that has “*set us free*” is not the freedom to do what we want but rather the freedom to choose God’s divine will over our fallen, human will; the “*freedom*” we have in “*Christ*” that “*set us free*” is not the freedom to *change* the gospel of Jesus Christ regarding the Law’s requirement of circumcision or *adjust* the gospel to fit any of our personal preferences, convictions and opinions - but rather the “*freedom*” we have in “*Christ*” that “*set us free*” is the freedom to “*love*” and “*serve one another*” by “*walking*” together “*by the Spirit*” which does fulfill the Law of Love and enables us to overcome the flesh “*by the Spirit*.” This is the work of the “*Spirit*” in us when we embrace the powerful reality of Romans 5:1- 5: *“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”*

But, by God’s grace, there is more. Yes, it is of essential significance that by the “*work*” of the “*Spirit*” God has provided the means by which the requirements of the Law of God are fulfilled and we are also given the ability to battle against our fallen sinful nature. But God has also given the “*Spirit*” another function in our lives; it is by the “*Spirit*” we are enabled by God to *produce fruit*: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self- control; against such things there is no law.”* Take note that the apostle Paul speaks of the contrast between “*works*” and “*fruit*.” A machine in a factory works, and turns out a product, but it could never manufacture fruit. Fruit must grow out of life, and, in the case of those who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior, it is the life of the “*Spirit*.” When we think of “*works*” we think of effort and labor and strain; but when we think of “*fruit*” we think of beauty and quietness, and the unfolding of life. “*The fruit of the Spirit*” in the life of a born-again Christian is the emotional, intellectual, and physical manifestation of that Christian’s transformed spiritual life.

The “*fruit of the Spirit*” Paul lists in our passage for today has to do with humble character that *produces the fruit of unity and service*. It is significant that Paul begins his list of the fruits of the Spirit with “*love*” because all of the other fruit of the Spirit is really an outgrowth of love. The original Greek word that we translate “*love*” in English is *agape*. This is a word we’ve looked at before. *Agape* is God’s faithful, covenantal love towards us, the apex of which is Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for our sins, so we might be forgiven and redeemed and cleansed and restored back to be with God forever and ever – and *agape* is also used in terms of restored humanity’s reciprocal love for God, which joyfully responds in obedience to extend *agape* love to each other and all others. God’s love - *agape* love – is a love that is beyond our understanding. In Mark 12:28-34 we read a scribe of the Law of Moses approached Jesus and asked him the question: “*Which commandment is the most important of all?*” To which Jesus answered: “*The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.*” And the scribe said to him: “*You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*” And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him: “*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*” And the gospel of Mark tell us that, “*after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.*”

In his answer to the ultimate question regarding what is most in all of life, Jesus didn't quote the Ten Commandments nor of any man-made laws; instead he references a foundational text from Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a text which commands God's people to love God with everything that is within their being, a command to God's people to give their full heart-devotion to Him. Furthermore, another command comes on the heels of the command to love God with our all: a command to love our neighbor as ourselves from Leviticus 19:18. Though the context of the passage in Leviticus describes the Hebrew people loving their fellow Jews, Jesus broadened this command in his teachings to include love for all people: those who are in need, those who cross our paths in this life, and even those who are our enemies. Jesus tells us that when we love God we will then also love our enemies, even to the point of praying for them and blessing them.

In Isaiah 43:7 God declares the created purpose of our lives: *"Everyone who is called by my name . . . whom I formed and made . . . I created for my glory."* In answering the question *"Which commandment is the most important of all?"* Jesus was telling us we were created for a love relationship with God, a love relationship that is so full of God's love for us and so full of our love for God, that our love should "glorify" (overflow, reflect, shine out) God's love into the lives of all we meet in life. The Bible speaks about this in regards to the church's failure to live this way in the book of Revelation in Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus: *"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent"* (Revelation 2:2-5).

The Bible tells us Jesus drove the moneychangers out of the temple because they were using God's house for the purpose of doing their own business. The business of the church is not to be about our business but about God's business – and God's business is the business of love: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). In his book *Follow Me* Jan David Hettinga writes: "Jesus gave us the great key to understanding God's plans and priorities when He distilled the Old Testament law and prophets down to this: "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind and 'love your neighbor as yourself'." In this succinct paragraph the Master gives us the basis for understanding that God desires a love relationship with us. It tells us that the bottom line for God is relational. Love is the goal of life. Loving God and each other is the central purpose of our existence. . . . Clearly, God's intention is to offer the truth of the gospel on the silver platter of relational excellence. The loving way Christians behave toward each other is designed to catch the world's attention and create an entry point for the message of the good news of the gospel."

The Word of God both affirms and clarifies how our love for God and our love for each other is to be lived out as a fruit of the Spirit of love. In 1 John 3-4 the apostle John declares: *"For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another"* (1 John 3:11); *"By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* (1 John 3:16-18); *"God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us"* (1 John 3:20-24).

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. 1 John 4:7-21

One of the clearest pictures God's Word gives us regarding what the fruit of the Spirit of love looks like in the church is the apostle Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church. He sets the context in 1 Corinthians 12 by writing: *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. . . . God has so composed the body . . . that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another"* (1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 24-25). In the context of these words, Paul then declares: *"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love"* (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

During World War II, Adolph Hitler demanded that all religious groups within the Nazi empire unite as one so that he could keep them under control. Among the Brethren assemblies, half complied and half refused. Those who went along with the order were protected. Those who did not, faced harsh and violent persecution. In almost every family of those who resisted, someone died in a concentration camp. When the war was over, feelings of anger, hatred and bitterness ran deep between the two groups. Finally after some delicate and extended discussions, leaders from each group met at a quiet retreat. For several days, each person spent time in prayer, examining their own hearts in the light of Jesus command that they love one another. Then they came together and confessed their hostility and bitterness to God and yielded to His control, and the Holy Spirit created a spirit of unity among them - as forgiveness was offered and received – and anger, hatred and bitterness dissolved as the love of Christ filled their hearts.

Years ago Oswald Chambers wrote: “Being a disciple means deliberately identifying yourself with God’s interests in other people. Jesus says, ‘*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another*’ (John 13:34–35). The true expression of Christian character is not in good-doing, but in God-likeness. If the Spirit of God has transformed you within, you will exhibit divine characteristics in your life, not just good human characteristics. God’s life in us expresses itself as God’s life, not as human life trying to be godly. The secret of a Christian’s life is that the supernatural becomes natural in him as a result of the grace of God, and the experience of this becomes evident in the practical, everyday details of life.”

The bottom line for God and for us is relational. Love is to be the goal of our lives. Loving God and each other is the central purpose of our existence. God’s intention for us is to offer the truth of the gospel on the silver platter of relational excellence. The loving way we are to behave toward each other is designed by God to catch the world’s attention and create an entry point the good news of the gospel to penetrate the hearts of those who don’t know Jesus Christ. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. May God use the truth of His Word today to empower us as His people to humbly glorify God by bearing “*The fruit of the Spirit*” of love together. Amen.

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Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church