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Growing in Love
Galatians 5:22-23; John 21:15-19
February 15th, 2015, Jeff Germo

Last week we looked at Galatians 5:16-26 where we saw how Paul described the growth process of disciples. We grow in maturity as we walk in step with the Spirit of Jesus who resides in those who have received Christ. Growth doesn't happen automatically though. It takes training as we respond either rightly or wrongly to various stimuli in our lives. When we have trials or struggles they can serve either to bring us down or grow us up, depending on whether we depend on ourselves or on the Spirit.

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The goal of discipleship is to grow in Christ-likeness, that is **to grow in our capacity to love which will be evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit**. So, what we are going to do over the next nine weeks is take a look at each of the fruit of the Spirit and describe how each of them are worked out in the life of the Christ-follower. So, again, here are the fruit of the Spirit.

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Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Today we're going to just focus on one of the fruit — love. It may seem like I'm really smart and planned months ago that this sermon on love would line up with Valentine's Day. I'd like to say that's true, but it's not. God seems to be pretty good at working things out for good in spite of my lack of organizational skills.

Remember both Jesus and Paul said that all of Scripture is summed up in the one word. Love is the foundation of the Christian faith. Love is God's motivation for everything he does. The Bible says that **"God is love."** (1 John 4:8) It doesn't say that he has love, or that he loves, although both of those are true. He *is* Love. At his very core. In his very essence God is love. Love would not exist if it weren't for God. The only reason we have any hope at all is because God *is* love. The only reason we have any possibility of getting close to loving others or being loved by others is because God *is* love. This is the most foundational truth of the whole Bible. Without love, the Bible says, there is nothing.

So, because of that we are going to read a ton of Scripture this morning. We need to see just how foundational this is. And we are just going to scratch the surface. We couldn't possibly cover it all in one morning. And, as Paul said, it would be impossible to tap the depths of God's love for us.

The first thing I want to do is read all the verses in Galatians that mention the word love. And after we do that we will look at several occurrences in the New Testament that use the exact phrase "love one another." Now keep in mind that there are places that say things like "love each other," or similar phrases. We are looking exclusively at the "love one another." As I read them let the Spirit of Jesus speak to you. This should change us.

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Galatians 2:20 (ESV)

²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ. It is 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.

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Galatians 5:6 (ESV)

⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

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Galatians 5:13 (ESV)

¹³ 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.

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Galatians 5:14 (ESV)

14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

That was Galatians. Now for the rest of the New Testament.

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John 13:34–35 (ESV)

34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

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John 15:12 (ESV)

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

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John 15:17 (ESV)

17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

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Romans 12:10 (ESV)

10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

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Romans 13:8 (ESV)

8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

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1 Thessalonians 3:12 (ESV)

12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

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1 Thessalonians 4:9 (ESV)

9 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,

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2 Thessalonians 1:3 (ESV)

3 We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.

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Hebrews 10:24 (ESV)

24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,

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1 Peter 1:22 (ESV)

22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,

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1 Peter 4:8 (ESV)

8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

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1 John 3:11 (ESV)

11 For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.

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1 John 3:23 (ESV)

23 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.

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1 John 4:7 (ESV)

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

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1 John 4:11 (ESV)

11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

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1 John 4:12 (ESV)

12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

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2 John 5 (ESV)

5 And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another.

That's pretty amazing isn't it. And that is only touching the surface. There is so much more. Love is so foundational to the Christian faith. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13, we could be gifted in so many ways, but if we don't have love we have nothing. We need to know that we are loved. And the more we know that the more possibility there is that we will be able to love others.

Have you noticed how active this kind of love is? It's not the kind of love that we are used to hearing about in popular media. People say, "I love you" too easily without really knowing what love is. In English we have one word for love and we carelessly fling it around in so many ways. Someone could say, "I love grilled cheese sandwiches." Really? You love grilled cheese sandwiches? Do you love grilled cheese sandwiches unconditionally? Would you give your life for a grilled cheese sandwich? I hope not.

In Greek there are four words for love. The word that Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 is the word, *agape*. The Bible Sense Lexicon defines *agape* in this way:

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"A strong, non-sexual affection and regard for a person and their good as understood by God's moral character; especially characterized by a willing forfeiture of rights or privileges in another person's behalf."

This is what we would call unconditional love. This is how God loves us. His love for us does not change based on our performance at all. He does not love us just when we are good. He doesn't love us just when we don't disappoint him. He doesn't stop loving us when we fail in anyway. He loves us completely and unconditionally no matter what. The Bible says that ***"Nothing can separate us from his love."***

I don't know about you but that kind of love does not come naturally for me. It doesn't come naturally for me to believe that someone could love me like that, and it certainly doesn't come naturally for me to love others like that. I try, but it is hard to love someone who is not nice to me. We find that incredibly uncomfortable, don't we? But, this is how God loves us and it is how he has called us to love each other.

Ruthie and I, in recent months, have been working hard at trying to understand what this means in our relationship to each other. Think about this. When you say, "I love you" to someone what do you mean? Do you love them in the same way as you love a grilled cheese sandwich? Do you mean you have certain gooshie feelings for the other person? That's what it means in popular movies and songs. I cannot count the number of times in movies or TV shows I have heard someone say something like, "I have feelings for you," as if they think that means the same thing as, "I love you." "I have feelings for you." What does that even mean? What feeling do you have? That could mean anything.

So, what do you mean when you say, "I love you" to someone? Ruthie and I have started turning that around and instead of saying, "I love you" we ask, "Do I love you?" Of course, we still say, "I love you" very often. But do you see the difference when we turn that around?

I have heard husbands say they love their wives after treating them terribly. I've heard wives do the same. When we say, "I love you" and our actions and attitudes don't match the words, it cheapens love. What do we really mean when we say, "I love you" in situations like that?

So, when I say to Ruthie, "Do I love you?" she has a chance to respond. It's a risk because sometimes she might say, "No, not really." But, that's ok. Because then I have the opportunity to ask her how I can love her better. That is my goal and it's her goal for herself as well. We both want to know how we can grow in actively loving each other. The sweetest words I can hear after asking Ruth if I love her is when she says, "Yes, honey. You love me so well. Thank you."

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Biblical love grows. We are called to grow in our capacity to actively and unconditionally love. This is not natural for us because our most natural response is self-preservation. That means, I naturally put me before you, which is why I need a transformation of the heart and mind. I need the Spirit of Jesus to change my mind so I think about others before myself.

There is an interesting encounter Jesus had with Peter after Jesus had risen from the dead and he asks Peter if he loves him. Let's take a look at that.

Just to set the scene, the disciples had been out in their boat fishing and Jesus met them on the shore. After giving them a tip about how to catch fish, because they hadn't caught any up to this point, he cooked breakfast for them. Another thing to keep in mind is that this is after Peter had miserably failed Jesus by denying three times that he even knew him for fear he would be arrested. His fear kept him from loving Jesus.

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John 21:15–17 (ESV)

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

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16 He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep."

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17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."

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There is a lot more going on here than meets the eye. We need to try to get into the head of both Peter and Jesus. Remember, I said earlier that in the Greek language, which the New Testament was written in, there are at least four different words for love: **storge**, which is familial love, the kind of love parents would have towards their children; **eros**, which is sexual or erotic love; **phileo**, camaraderie or friendship love; and then finally, **agape**, which is unconditional love, the kind of love God has for us. It is not based on performance and it never stops giving, no matter what.

Well, in this conversation between Peter and Jesus there are two kinds of love used, *phileo*, or friendship love, and *agape*, or unconditional love.

Let's walk through that passage and see what's going on.

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15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] me more than these?"

I've heard a lot of different ideas about what Jesus meant when he asked if Peter loved him "**more than these.**" More than what? I've heard some say that he meant, "Do you love me more than the fish that were just caught?", meaning more than your work as a fisherman? I've heard others say that Jesus meant, "Do you love me more than you love your friends, the other disciples?" It may be one of those, but I think what makes more sense in the context is, "Do you really love me more than the other disciples love me?"

Remember in Mark 14:29 when the disciples were having the last supper together with Jesus before he would be arrested, Jesus broke the news to them that they would all betray him and Peter naively replied, ***“Even if everyone else falls away, I never will.”***

So, ... ***“Simon, son of John, do you [really] love [agape] me more than these?”***

Peter then defends himself, ***“Yes, Lord; you know that I love [phileo] you.”*** He said to him, ***“Feed my lambs.”***
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16 He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love [phileo] you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

Now, the third time it's a bit different.

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17 He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love [phileo] me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love [phileo] me?” and he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love [phileo] you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.

Now, you have to wonder what's going on here. It's hard to know, but I think a couple things. Firstly, Jesus is not trying to shame Peter, but he is trying to get him to get his head out of the clouds and think realistically about his love. Did he really love Jesus unconditionally? Absolutely not! He left Jesus high and dry. He not only ran away, but he had three chances to own his allegiance to Jesus and each time he denied that he knew him. He did not love him unconditionally. Peter was growing in his love for Jesus, but it is a human impossibility to love like Jesus does. We *can* grow in our love and we *will* grow in our love for him, and for people *if* we own our limitations. But, we will not grow at all if we pretend we are somewhere where we are not. This is one way Jesus loves us by using the Word to give us a reality check about our true heart motives, and showing us where we need to grow.

I can remember when I was a young boy at Bible camp in the middle of nowhere Saskatchewan. On the last day of camp we always had a revival meeting. The Chapel would be packed out. A time was always given for testimonies. I can remember vividly a very well respected, godly elderly man stand up and declare that he didn't know if he loved God like he should. He said he knew God commanded it, but he questioned himself and in so doing caused everyone present to question our love for God. That has stuck in my mind ever since.

We will grow in our love for God and for others, if we can admit that we are not there yet, and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us as we walk with Jesus.

The other thing to notice in this dialogue is that Jesus was actually giving Peter another chance to grow. Peter had failed miserably. He knew it. As a matter of fact, most scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was compiled by Mark from information given to him by Peter. So, this wasn't Mark telling about Peter's failures. It was Peter telling Mark to tell all. Peter owned his failure. So, now everyone knows Peter blew it. The beauty is that Jesus didn't give up on Peter. After each time Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, he also told him to take care of the other followers.

In other words, “Yes, you failed. So what! Everyone does. You've learned a valuable lesson. Turn it into a successful failure. Don't live in shame of the past. Help my other followers learn how to love God and others better.”

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Isn't that encouraging? You might be here today and looking back on your life thinking that you have failed too much and you've wasted so much of your life that it is irredeemable. It's not. Like I said a couple weeks ago, **God never wastes your pain. He can turn it into something good if you let him.** What God wants to do with all the stuff in our past that we want to forget is use it to help us learn how to love better. Don't live in shame of your past. Give it to God and let him turn it into something good.

Several times a day we have opportunities to exercise our faith muscles and growth in maturity. How many times a day do we have interactions with people and have to make a choice on how we respond to them? Each of those encounters we have an opportunity to choose to feed the desires of the old nature or the desires of the Spirit. When we chose to react in a way that is not loving we feed the desires of the old nature and it gets stronger.

Our old nature wants to get even. The Spirit, on the other hand, wants us to love our enemies. Our old nature wants to complain. The Spirit wants to bless and build up. Our old nature wants to judge and be critical when we don't understand someone. The Spirit seeks to help us understand the other person. Our old nature wants to just do

whatever feels good at the time. The Spirit gives us the desire and the will to ask, what does love and wisdom look like?

Every day we have numerous opportunities to choose growth and life. God will not force us to mature. His goal for us is that we would grow in our capacity to love. If we do, the Bible says that we will fulfill all the commands of God. This is his desire for us.

We have just touched the tip of the iceberg on the topic of love this morning. There is no way to do it justice in one sermon. I would encourage you to take your Bibles and marinate in passages on love. You might want to Google “Scriptures on love in the Bible” and see just how it is weaved through every page.

I want to close by reading a couple of passages that are very well known. Both are about love. The first one is how God wants us to comprehend the depths of his love for us and the second one is how God wants us to love in that same way. The more we understand God’s love for us the more we will be able to love others.

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Ephesians 3:14–21 (ESV)

14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,

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18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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1 Corinthians 13:4–13 (ESV)

4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

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9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 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. 12 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. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

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The more we comprehend this love of God the more we will be able to love like he does. The law will not changes us like this. What God wants to do is change our ought-to’s to want-to’s.

In his book *Changes that Heal* Henry Cloud illustrates this with the relationship between a mother and a baby. A mother doesn’t care for and love her baby because she read in a manual somewhere that mothers are supposed to love and care for their babies. She loves and cares for he baby because that is what love does. She wants what is best for her baby for the baby’s sake.

That is the kind of love God wants us to have for each other. The law won’t do that. But God can make those changes in us as we cooperate with him by starving the desires of the flesh and feeding the desires of the Spirit in us.

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1 John 4:18 (ESV)

18 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.



Galatians: Learning to Live in the Freedom of Christ

Growing in Love

Galatians 5:22-23; John 21:15-17

Week of February 15th, 2015

Objective of this study: To GROW in love, both in being more grounded in God's love, and in loving others more.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read **Ephesians 3:14-21** meditatively to the group. Then pause for about a minute and let it sink in.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

What is your favourite love story, either from movies or literature?

Word (20 - 30 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read Galatians 5:22-23.
3. **The foundation.** Read Ephesians 3: 14-19. Notice especially verse 17. Love is the foundation for our relationship with God, our life with him, and our life with each other. How is this described in this passage?
4. Read Colossians 1:13. What is being contrasted here?
5. What does it look like when love is the foundation of our lives? See Galatians 2:20 and Galatians 5:6,13,14. What does Paul say about this in these verses? What about in your own life: What does it look like when love is the foundation?
6. What does it look like when love is NOT the foundation? Again, see what Paul says about this in Galatians 5:1,15, 26. Then talk about some real examples from your own life.
7. **The results.** Sermon quote: **"The more we understand God's love for us, the more we will be able to love others."** Look at the "one anothers" in the sermon (see pages 2-3 of the sermon). What are the results of loving, that you see in these passages? Also, make note of anything else that jumps out at you in these verses.

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

1. Sermon quote: **"We need to know that we are loved."** Why do we need to know we are loved? What difference does it make in life? How has realizing you are loved changed your life? How would you like to realize it more?
2. Read John 21:15-19. What is going on here? Why is this encouraging?
3. Sermon quote: **"Jesus was not trying to shame Peter, but...was giving him another chance to grow...We will grow in our love for God and for others, if we can admit that we are not there yet, and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us as we walk with Jesus... How many times a day do we have interactions with people and have to make a choice on how we respond to them? Each of those [is] an opportunity to choose to feed the desires of the old nature or the desires of the Spirit. Our old nature wants to get even. The Spirit wants us to love our enemies. Our old nature wants to complain. The Spirit wants to bless and build up. Our old nature wants to judge and be critical when we don't understand someone. The Spirit seeks to help us understand the other person. Our old nature wants to just do whatever feels good at the time. The Spirit gives us the desire and the will to ask, 'What does love and wisdom look like?'"**

Take a few minutes to quietly consider the above quote, asking the Holy Spirit to show you an area where he would like to help you grow. If appropriate, you can discuss this as a group.

This week, watch attentively for nudges from the Spirit, for ways you can grow in love and wisdom in your responses to people. Come back next week with stories to share!

PRAYER TIME/HOMEWORK