

Introduction: Last Sunday Pastor Jeremy kicked off this new series called **Marks of a Flourishing Life: Fruit that Nourishes Relationships**. We're talking more than building self-awareness and developing people skills.

It is about the flourishing of our relationships with God and others, fuelled by the development of our Christ-like character and one's maturity is best manifested as the fruit of the Spirit that the Apostle Paul writes in Gal. 5:22-23:

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

This morning we shall look at the first fruit of the Spirit – Love

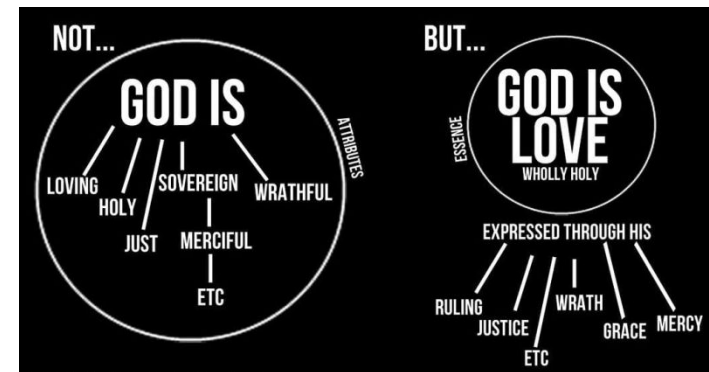
When I first came to Canada, I learned to play a game in the first Youth Group I joined; it's called, "If You Love Me, Please Smile." Ironically, the object of the game is withholding your smile, when people are using whatever means to get you to smile.

I wish loving people is just that simplistic – smiling at them; sure, smiling is a good beginning.

But there's a lot more involved in cultivating loving relationships with our families, relatives, colleagues, and friends.

Whatever relational wounds or brokenness that were hidden, hurt, or unresolved before the pandemic, all is intensified, heightened, and flushed out in the open and with a bang – stress and anxiety, despair and desperation, conflicts and rivalries of all kinds are seen everywhere.

But the essence of the Christian faith is love:



God is love – *hesed/agape* – a sticky love that never fails and defines God's holiness, justice, righteousness, and even His anger.

Let just pause for a few seconds and say this short prayer together (cf. Jon Bloom):

Whatever it takes, Lord, increase my capacity to love until I love you with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind, and love my neighbour as I love myself. Amen.

Love is not a rule, not a principle, not a maxim, not the result of people "doing what comes naturally."

When we practice love that has its root in "a pure heart, a good conscience, and genuine faith,"¹ the Holy Spirit is the empowering and transforming agent of all that God is doing in the lives of His people:

"For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love."
(Rom. 5:5 NLT)

While "love" is not the only "fruit" of the Spirit, it is the most important because love summarizes God's instructions to His people in the OT.²

Whatever spiritual gifts, experiences, and good works are **worthless without love** - love unites all the virtues of life and endures forever.³



¹ Cf. 1 Tim. 1:5.

² Gal. 5:14, "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Rom. 13:8-10, "For the whole law can be summed up in this one command ... 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law."

³ 1 Cor. 13:1ff., 13; Col. 3:14. Cf. Scot McKnight, *Galatians*, p. 271.

The eight other virtues that follow in Paul's list might best be considered to magnify and further identify what is entailed by this way of love.

Just as light travels through a prism and breaks into its component colours, these other eight dispositions characterize a life lived in, by and through God's love.⁴

If so, how can we unleash God's love and develop the heart and skills that would ...

bring joy into our relationships,

nourish our souls,

enrich our community,

and create curiosity in those who are in our circles of influence?

Phil. 2:1-4 gives us a few practical lessons. We begin first with the first critical factor of a flourishing community:

Be Like-minded: Work WITH not AGAINST each other.

"Therefore ***if*** you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, ***if*** any comfort from his love, ***if*** any common sharing in the Spirit, ***if*** any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by ***being like-***

⁴ Cf. Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, p. 37.

minded, having the same love, **being one in spirit and of one mind.**" (Phil. 2:1-2 NIV)

The four if's in v. 1 are not the "iffy" kind of if's; they are not meant to cast any doubt on the reality and richness of what belongs to our common life in Christ.

Paul's intention is to underscore the facts that since certain things are true in their lives, then the logical consequence is that they should relate to one another in a certain way, i.e., being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.⁵

The working together with one mind and purpose here refers back to 1:27, "you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ ... I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News."

And it points to Christ's example in 2:5ff.; working together in unity is a missionary endeavour that is motivated and modelled by Jesus himself.

Here is Cornerstone Mission Statement:

MAKING SPACE FOR JESUS TO SHAPE PEOPLE TOGETHER IN GOD'S LOVE

⁵ Cf. Howard Marshall, *Philippians*, p. 41.

The multi-dimension of God's love and its power would not be fully realized on our own; we need each other to materialize its full potential!⁶

So each one of us needs to ask this question: ***How am I making space for Jesus to shape and be shaped together in God's love?***

Here are a few suggestions: Attend corporate worship regularly; Join a small group; Serve in areas of ministry needs, e.g., StarKids; Participate in community events; Build closer relationship with neighbours; Joining Cornerstone Prayer Team.

Let say this together:

***If we are not working with each other,
we are working against each other!***

The second practical lesson of how we could unleash the power of love is this:

Be Humble: Put SELF aside and help OTHERS flourish.

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Phil. 2:3 NIV).

⁶ "I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." (Eph. 3:18f.) N.T. Wright writes, "Since 'love' is the primary virtue ... community is the primary context." (*After You Believe*, p. 144.)

Love expresses itself in putting aside ...

1. **Selfish ambition** – this stands at the heart of human fallenness; it’s the kind of motive which tries to ***promote self-interest at the expense of others***; it’s the expression of superiority and the desire to boss other people.

2. **Vanity** – this is a kind of “empty glory,” ***boasting with the hope to receive praise and applause of others***, and in contrast to Christ as indicated in 2:5ff.⁷

Love expresses itself positively in ...

1. **Humility** – it’s acknowledging and accepting one’s “creatureliness,” ***trusting in God rather than our own strength and smarts***.⁸

2. **Valuing others** - our response of gratitude to God’s initiating grace is not separated from our love of our fellow human beings. As with God’s love, the defining nature of such love is its other-directedness.

We are called to initiate the love of God by getting out of ourselves, showing genuine concern for the well-being of others.⁹

⁷ Cf. Howard Marshall, *Philippians*, p. 45.

⁸ But this should not to be confused with a sense of false modesty wherein the “humble one” by deference gains more self-serving attention. True humility is therefore not self-focused at all ... (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, p. 188).

Cf. Doug Conant, an internationally renowned business and thought leader, says that there’s a need for better relationships in the context of today’s evolving landscape – we have shifted

from a **VUCA** environment (***Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous***)

to a **BANI** environment (***Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible***).

Today, “**the soft stuff is the hard stuff**,” and the leaders who will prevail in the future are the ones who can “**build relationships and create cultures of caring and support**.”¹⁰

In a **VUCA-BANI** world, “love” gives strength, security, and safety to nurture relationships and foster joy-filled community.

This leads us to the third practical lessons of unleashing love in this world:

Be Considerate: Bent DOWN to bring others UP.

When people are down don’t push them deeper but bent down to lift them up!

⁹ Cf. Philip D. Kenneson, *Life on the Vine*, p. 41.

¹⁰ ‘The Power Is Inside of You’ – Jon Gordon, Jade Gordon & Doug Conant on How to Use Positive Leadership to Make a Difference by Amy Federman, <https://conantleadership.com/power-inside-you-jon-gordon-positive-leadership/>

Instead of leading a flourishing life, many are “withered by life’s hardship” and experiencing what Paul & Christie Borthwick called “Shriveled Soul Syndrome”:¹¹



Whatever that feeds our sense of pride and prejudice, whenever we raise our emblem of superiority and wave our badge of honour at other’s expense, we diminish their humanity, alienate them, and vandalize the God’s image in them.

“[Do] not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (Phil. 2:4 NIV)

Just as the Philippians have received God’s tenderness and affection as well as His compassionate pity and bowels of mercy, Paul instructs them to have the same sort of feelings toward those who are in need, who might be facing most

¹¹ <https://www.paulborthwick.com/10-ways-for-avoiding-shriveled-soul-syndrome/>

trying circumstances – not just to show empathy, but putting aside whatever self-interests aside and pursue the interests of those under more challenging season in their life.¹²

My experience as a Residence Advisor in bible college helped me not to see my role/job from a purely selfish, monetary perspective, but to take genuine, personal interest in others”, to find out about their interest and how I could “lift them up,” i.e., “to love the sheep” God entrusted to my care.

As Jesus-followers we should be concerned to help other people to attain what is good for them, to reach their goals, to bring out the best Jesus-version in them, and to inspire them to accomplish things that they scarcely thought possible for themselves.¹³

Conclusion: We, as God’s people, are called to partner with Him to fulfill His restoring purpose and become a display community of His love.

God’s love is active but it’s not just for our own personal benefits – He is on a mission to restore the whole cosmos.

¹² “... we are so to consider others, not in our estimation of them ... but in our caring for them, in putting them and their needs ahead of our own” (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, p. 189).

¹³ Cf. Howard Marshall, *Philippians*, p. 47.

The bible says that no one has seen God, but we – all Jesus-followers, the body of Christ - embody the invisible God of love; we love because He first loved us.

A loving community is the best defence and offense of the good news of Jesus. Francis Schaffer writes:

“... without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers ... we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians for true Christians.”

As we celebrate the Lord 's Supper this morning, we are reminded by Jesus' self-giving example of servanthood:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk. 10:45 NIV)