

Sermon – Fruitful Joy
Sunday January 14, 2024

Has anyone made a New Year's resolution?

They say that 38% of people make New Year's resolution but only 9% actually keep them.

Forbes magazine did a survey to see what resolutions people made for 2024. Any guesses what the most popular one was?

- Almost 50% of people wanted to improve their fitness
- 38% wanted to improve their finances
- And 36% wanted to improve their mental health.

I think it's great to have these goals. I have personal goals myself for my family, my fitness and my self-care.

But I also find it interesting. Most New Year's Resolutions seem to focus on the question: How can I get the most out of my life? Whether it's how I look or what I accomplish.

Now this isn't a bad thing. Again, I think these goals are great. But I think another question we need to ask ourselves as we begin this new year is, How can I live more intentionally to be a blessing?

Dallas Willard once said, **The main thing God gets out of your life isn't the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become. (Dallas Willard)**

So as you begin this new year, what if you asked yourself, Who am I becoming?

This past year has been hard.

- You feel the financial stress of rising prices.
- You feel the tension in your relationships.
- You feel more pressure at work.
- You feel your mental health taking a hit.
- You feel overwhelmed trying to keep up with all the changes.

What happens to your heart when you've gone through so much for so long?

For many of us, our hearts have become hard. We don't care like we used to. We're less loving and kind. There've been times over the past few years when I've been short and more easily irritated.

One time during the pandemic, I was playing outside with my kids. We were taking a break from online school, playing badminton on the street. When all of a sudden, a car drives towards us, really slowly and erratically.

I remember being really annoyed. Not just with by the driver but by all the stress in my life. I'm just trying to play outside with my kids and here's this driver taking her time driving slowly through our street almost hitting us. Doesn't she know how to drive? Doesn't she know much I'm going through?

But the driver doesn't just drive through our street. She parks on our street, gets out of her car and walks towards me.

She points her finger at me and yells, You know, you look really angry and irritated and I don't like that! I was taken aback. Not just because she was so rude and brazen. But because I was angry and irritated. And hearing her scold me for being angry and irritated only made me more what? More angry and irritated.

So I was about to give her a piece of my mind. And this could have been another bad pastor sermon illustration. But I stopped myself and thought, What am I doing? What's happening to

me? Has my heart become so hard that I would argue with a complete stranger in front of my kids in the middle of my street?

Maybe some of you can relate. On the outside, you seem to have all it together. But on the inside, you're hurting and your heart has become hard. You don't care like you used to. You feel bitter and resentful. You feel cynical and jaded. You're leaking on the people around you and the person you're becoming isn't the person you want to be.

So who are you becoming?

Are you becoming less caring and kind? Or are you becoming more loving and joyful?

We're in a new series called Journey Into Joy. During this series, we'll be studying the book of Philippians which is a letter Paul wrote while he was in prison. And even though Paul has every reason to be disappointed about his circumstances, he doesn't write with anger or frustration, he writes with joy.

Because despite Paul's hardships, his heart is so full of joy that he encourages the Philippians to rejoice with him. In fact, he does this more than 16 times in this short letter which is why many people call Philippians the epistle of joy.

Today we're talking about Fruitful Joy. Even when life is hard, even when we have every reason to be disappointed, how can we be so full of joy that God's love flows through us so that we become a conduit of his love.

Today we're going to look at a passage that shows us how. Our passage is actually a prayer Paul prays for the Philippians.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ —to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

Today, we're going to unpack this prayer. We're going to look at: What does Paul pray for? What does it look like?

First, What does Paul pray for?

What we pray for says a lot about our priorities. What do you normally pray for? I often pray for God to bless my family and my work and my relationships. Maybe you do too. And there's nothing wrong with that.

But what's interesting is that despite the hardships Paul endured, he never prays for better circumstances.

Here in this passage, what does Paul pray for? He prays for love. Why does he pray for love?

Because **Love is to be the defining quality of your life as a Christian.**

Paul talks about this in his letter to the Corinthians.

If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,^[b] but do not have love, I gain nothing...

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, 13)

Jesus talks about this as well. He tells his disciples:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35)

As a Christian, your accomplishments aren't to be the defining quality of your life. Love is to be the defining quality of your life.

So what does Paul pray for? He prays that **...[our] love may abound more and more...**

(Philippians 1:9)

What does it mean to abound? The word abound means to be over and above, to be more than enough, to be filled up so much that it overflows.

And then to emphasize his point, he says, may your love abound more and more.

This New Year, many of us are praying to be more blessed. Paul says, Why don't you pray to be more loving.

And it's not like the Philippians weren't loving because they were. But Paul prays this for them so that they would love more and love better.

Because it's easy to love people you don't know very well. But how many know it's a lot harder to love people who are close to you.

- Parents who don't listen to you.
- Children who disobey you.
- Spouses who disrespect you.
- Friends who hurt you.
- Bosses who overlook you.
- Colleagues who annoy you.

It's impossible for you to love certain people. Why? Because your capacity to love has limits. You only have so much love to give.

But here's the good news. There is a love that has no limits. As one song puts it, it never fails, it never gives up and it never runs out. Where do you find this love? You find it in God who is the source of love and who enables you to love.

The Bible says, **We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).**

This means that if you let him, he can fill your heart with his love. This love will refresh you, heal you and strengthen you.

But it doesn't stop there. God will keep filling you with his love until it spills over. Why does God do that? It's because **God's overflowing love enables you to love others well.** You don't need to scarp and claw to get love. You already have it. God has given you more than enough so that his love can overflow into the people around you.

- People who are hard to love.
- People you wouldn't naturally choose to love.
- People you'd rather not love.
- People you wouldn't be able to love if it were up to you.

But it's not up to you. God's overflowing love enables you to love others well. And his love never fails, it never gives up and it never runs out.

Who is someone in your life right now that you need to love more?

Who is someone in your life right now that you need to love better?

We're going to talk about what this love looks like in a moment, but first can I give you a challenge? Are you up for it?

Here's the challenge: Would you pray this week for God's love to abound more and more in your life. Just ask God:

May your love abound more and more in me. Help me to love others well this week - my family, my friends, the people at work and in my neighbourhood. And help me to love that person that I'm struggling to love right now.

How many of you would be willing to pray that this week?

We're talking about abounding love. Love is a word we all use but what does it actually mean?

What does it look like? Paul gives us three characteristics of this love.

First **Love is characterized by knowledge and discernment.**

How do you think our culture would characterize love? I think our culture would characterize love as cheesy and sentimental. Just listen to these lyrics from a 90s Boy Band.

I'll never break your heart

I'll never make you cry

I'd rather die than live without you

I'll give you all of me

Honey, that's no lie

Some people love these cheesy love songs. And of course by some people, I mean me. But while these songs are great at getting you to feel sentimental, they're not so great at showing you how to love.

Because just imagine if this kind of love was a flowing river, what would happen? All the emotions would flood over destroying everyone in its path. That's not love.

Because love needs banks on either side to keep it from flooding. Paul says that these two banks are Knowledge and Discernment.

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight (Philippians 1:9)

The first bank is Knowledge. This isn't just knowing information and facts. Paul says elsewhere that knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

The Greek word Paul uses here is a relational knowledge. It means knowing God intimately and knowing his ways - because God's ways are not our ways.

For example, we often think we're being loving when we're actually serving our own interests.

We do something for someone but it's really to get something out of it for ourselves. But God says, Value others above yourself. Don't look to your own interests but to the interest of others (Phil 2:3-4)

We also often think we're being loving when we tell people we're thinking of them or that we're praying for them. And yes that is a form of love. But God says, Don't just love with words and speech but with actions and in truth (1 John 3:18).

We also often think love should be easy. That if it gets hard it's time to move on. But God says, You need to pay the price when you love because love is sacrificial. Just look at the cross. Jesus died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8).

The first bank of love is knowledge because we need God, not our culture to define love and show us how to love.

The second bank is Discernment.

How did Jesus spend his time on earth? He healed, he taught and he forgave. Would you say Jesus's actions were loving? Of course they were. Now how about when he rebuked his disciples, called the Pharisees hypocrites or got angry and overturned the tables. Would you say Jesus was loving then?

Jesus is God who is love. This means everything he did was loving. Just because his actions

didn't always give people the warm fuzzies, doesn't mean he wasn't always loving. Why is that? It's because love expresses itself differently. Different situations require different expressions of love. That's why love requires Discernment.

- Should you confront that person or let it go?
- Should you speak up or be silent?
- Should you help someone or set clear boundaries?

Love is characterized by Knowledge and Discernment.

The second characteristic of love is **Love recognizes what's most important**

This year, you're going to face many decisions. Opportunities will come up and decisions will need to be made. Because you can't do everything, you'll have to choose which one is best. But how will you know?

Left to our own devices, we live through a filter of our self-centredness. We make decisions based on what's easy for me, what's best for me, what makes me feel good and benefits me the most.

But is living for your self-interest what's most important? Is this path the one you're meant to take?

Paul says that as **your love... abound[s] more and more in knowledge and depth of insight... you may be able to discern what is best (Philippians 1:9)**

The word discern here means to test and approve. It's a term used to describe testing metals to determine whether it's pure and excellent.

This means that as you grow in love. As you grow in your knowledge of God and what love looks like. As you grow in discerning how to express love in different situations. You'll be able to discern what's best and what really matters.

Instead of living through a filter of your self-centredness, you'll live through a filter of God's love.

- You'll make decisions based on God's purposes.
- You'll evaluate opportunities based what God is doing.
- You'll choose the path that will be harder, that may not always feel good and may not bring you immediate benefit.

Because when God's love is changing your heart, your priorities change.

- You're motivated to bless and to serve.
- You're motivated to use your time, talent and treasure for the sake of others.
- You're motivated to build God's kingdom and bring his healing into the world.

When you're growing in love, you realize this life changing truth:

I wasn't put on earth to live for myself. I was put on this earth for a greater purpose - to make a difference for Jesus in this world.

That's what's most important. And love is the filter that helps you discern that.

The third characteristic of love is **Love is the fruit of godly character.**

Paul talks about being **filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:11)**

What is this fruit? Paul says in his letter to the Galatians that:

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

This fruit is the character of God that his Spirit produces in your life when you give your life to

Jesus. He plants this seed in your heart and he grows it as he transforms your thoughts, your attitudes, your actions shaping them in his love.

This year, maybe your goal is to lose weight or get fit. Maybe it's to plan a trip or learn a new skill. These are all good goals to have. And here's another good goal, in my opinion an even better goal: To become a more loving you, a more joyful you, the you God created you to be. Because the main thing God gets out of your life isn't the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become.

And it's not just God that benefits when this happens. No, everyone wins. Your family, your friends, your church, your work, your community – everyone is blessed when you become the person you were meant to be.

But here's the problem, you can't do it. At least not on your own. Because on our own, we're naturally self-centred and live for our self-interests. The Bible calls this sin. That's why it's impossible for us to love when it gets hard to love. We simply don't have the power. Our hearts are too full of sin.

But here's the good news. Jesus – the sinless son of God came into the world to die for our sins. So that we could have new life, new power and new hearts to love God and to love others. To become the person we were meant to be.

Branches are meant to bear fruit. But to do that, they need life-giving nutrients and water. They can only get these things when they're connected to the vine.

Jesus says, I am the vine and you are the branches. Just as a branch can't bear fruit on its own, you can't become the person you were meant to be on your own either. It doesn't matter how hard you try or how much you want it.

Apart from Jesus, you can do nothing. You need his life-giving power that comes from staying close with him. Sitting in his presence. Listening to his voice. Opening your heart to him. These are the spaces where you receive his love, his grace and his power. These are the spaces where you receive all you need to become the person you were meant to be.

So how will you make space for Jesus this year? How will you make space for him to shape you in his love?

- Maybe you can start by praying this week for God's love to abound in your life.
- Maybe you need to make a daily habit of spending time in prayer and in his word.
- Maybe you need to get plugged into a community where you can grow with others.
- Maybe you need to make it a priority to worship weekly with God's people.

The main thing God gets out of your life isn't the achievements you accomplish. It's the person you become.

As we begin this new year, who do you want to become? Jesus invites you to make space for him, to draw near to him, to grow closer to him so that you will bear fruit, so that you will become the person you were meant to be.

I'm going to ask you now to close your eyes. What do you want God to do in your heart this year? What do you need to surrender and give him right now? Take a moment to pray silently to him.

You can open your eyes now. We're going to close our time by praying together. I invite you to pray this responsive prayer that's adapted from the Message translation of our passage today.

LEADER: Heavenly Father, may our love abound more and more.

PEOPLE: May we not only love more but love better.

LEADER: Help us to love well.

PEOPLE: Help us to use knowledge and discernment to test our feelings so that our love is sincere and not just sentimental.

LEADER: Help us to live an exemplary life...

PEOPLE: Bearing the fruit of Jesus' character and making him attractive to all.

ALL: We pray this all to the glory and praise of God. Amen.