

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 8, 2022**

**THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT #1: LOVE
GOD'S FAVORITE FOUR-LETTER WORD
1 John 3:16-18; 4:7-12**

Say it with me: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

In our countdown of these nine varieties of "the fruit of the Spirit," we have arrived at #1, which, not surprisingly, is love. The Bible, not surprisingly, has a lot to say about love and its primacy in the lives of Jesus' followers. For a taste of what the Bible says about love, I invite you to turn to the first letter of John. I will read 1 John 3:16-18 and 4:7-12. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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The subject of today's message is *God's favorite four-letter word*. It should not surprise you that there are some four-letter words God does not like, some four-letter words that would absolutely not be on the list of God's favorite words. You can probably guess what words I mean. These are words that should not be part of your vocabulary.

I'm not going to dwell on them today. Those words are not what this message is about. But I do want to remind you of something God says in His Word about the words we speak. Listen to what the Bible says in Ephesians 4 and 5:

"Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (4:29-30, NIV).

In *The Message* it says:

"Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift. Don't grieve God. Don't break His heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for Himself. Don't take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk.... Though some tongues just love the taste of gossip, Christians have better uses for language than that. Don't talk dirty or silly. That kind of talk doesn't fit our style. Thanksgiving is our dialect" (4:29-30; 5:4, *MSG*).

The message is clear: For followers of Jesus, some kinds of talk are out of bounds. Some words are out of place. The way we talk and the words we use are to honor God and to reflect our identity as followers of Jesus. So, there are some four-letter words (and words with more or fewer letters) that God does not like. I trust we're on the same page about that.

But there are some four-letter words that God is very fond of. Words like *HELP*, as in: “(Our) help is in the name of the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth” (Psalm 121:2) and “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

HOPE is another four-letter word God loves. The Bible says: “Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31). Colossians 1:27 says that “Christ in you” is “The hope of glory.” In Romans 5:1-5 we read: “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope” – the hope we have in and through Jesus – “does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”

PRAY is another of God’s favorite four-letter words. In James 5:13, we’re told that if anyone is in trouble (*when* any of us is in trouble of any kind), we ought to pray. And we ought to pray continually (1 Thessalonians 5:17), which means there is never a time when it is not time to pray. We are to devote ourselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2), knowing that the faith-filled prayers of God’s people are powerful and effective (James 5:16).

There are other four-letter words that God loves, too – like *GIVE*, as in “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good” (Psalm 136:1); and *SING*, as in “Sing to the Lord a new song” (Psalm 96:1; 98:1) and “I will sing praise to my God as long as I live” (Psalm 146:2).

Here is one more: *DONE*. *D-O-N-E*. The message of the gospel is that the work of salvation is done. “It is finished,” as Jesus said (John 19:30). The message of the gospel is not about what you must do to attain salvation or make yourself acceptable to God. It is about what God has done for us in the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Your salvation and mine is a God-thing from start to finish. We contribute nothing to our salvation. The only thing we contribute is our need for salvation and our inability to do anything to make ourselves right with God. God does it all. He has *done* it all. All that is left for you and me is to receive it as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of sinners. Lest you think that your faith is a “work” you contribute to your salvation, even saving faith is a gift from God. You will never get to heaven on the basis of what you do. Our hope of heaven is based on what Jesus has done for us.

We could go on and talk about other words, including the word *WORD* itself. But God’s favorite four-letter word, the one He loves most of all, is the word *LOVE*.

Preaching about love can be a bit daunting. So much has been said and written and sung about love from pretty much every angle imaginable that it is virtually impossible to say anything new that hasn’t been said before. So, if you’re looking for originality, you’re going to be disappointed today. At the same time, *talking* about love is a lot easier than actually *loving* people.

That said, I want to share with you a few things I've learned from God's Word about God's favorite four-letter word and #1 on the list of the spiritual fruit God wants us to exhibit in our lives.

THE CENTRAL CORE VALUE IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

The first is this: *Love is the central core value in the Christian life.* It is the main measuring stick by which the genuineness of your faith and mine will be evaluated. It is more important than charisma, visionary leadership, inspirational communication skills, beautiful music, extraordinary talent, or a brilliant mind. More important than all of them put together.

If you read what Paul says in his magnum opus on love in 1 Corinthians 13, you will see that what Paul says there is that even if you can comprehend the incomprehensible, explain the unexplainable, unscrew the inscrutable, and amaze the masses, if you don't have love, it doesn't amount to a hill of beans.

Without love, Paul says, the most moving, eloquent words in the world are just noise. We are easily impressed by great communicators. God is not. God takes pleasure not in communication skills but in love.

In the same way, knowledge without love is ultimately worthless. It doesn't matter what school you went to (or go to), what you got on the SATs, what your grade point average is, or how many letters you have after your name. God is not impressed by how much we know, or think we know. What God cares about is the quality of love in our lives.

In addition, doctrinal orthodoxy, as important as it is, is not enough, if love is missing. Belief in the essentials of the Christian faith is, well, essential. The Bible says in Hebrews 11:6 that without faith (which involves believing the core doctrines of the Christian faith), it is impossible to please God. What you believe matters. But the Bible also says in Galatians 5:6 that the thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 13 that, regardless of how much you give, giving without love does not accomplish God's purposes. Sometimes people give for the wrong reasons, with wrong motives. Sometimes people give to a cause to be seen and praised by others. Sometimes people give out of a sense of guilt or duty. God takes pleasure in our giving when we give out of love – love for Him and love for people. He is more concerned with your heart than with the amount. *The Message* paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:3 goes like this: "If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love."

Paul's message of the centrality and primacy of love in 1 Corinthians 13 is sandwiched between 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, where he talks not about the #1 fruit of the Spirit but about the gifts of the Spirit. His main point is that love is more important than gifts. The gifts of the Spirit are important. Don't disparage them. Don't ignore them. Don't neglect them. Don't

hide the gifts God has given you. Desire God's good gifts. Pursue them. Develop them. Use them. But understand that love matters more.

Here is what Paul is saying in the form of a mathematical equation:
GIFTS minus LOVE equals NOTHING.

Do you see that?

So, let love be your highest aim (1 Corinthians 14:1), because it is the central core value in the Christian life. It is the quality that should characterize your life as a follower of Jesus more than anything else. The sign of a true follower of Jesus is not a cross around your neck or a fish on your car, but the expression of love in your life. There is nothing wrong with wearing a cross necklace or having a Christian symbol on your car. What matters far more is the spiritual fruit of love exhibited in your life.

LOVE IS A GOD-THING

The second thing to glean from the Bible is that love itself is a God-thing. By which I mean that love comes from God. The source, the origin, the root of love is God Himself. Love did not originate with us. It is not a human invention. Love is rooted in the heart and character of God Himself.

1 John 4:19 says: "We love ..." Why? "Because He (God) first loved us." In painting a picture of this love for us, the Bible says: "This is love, not that we loved God" – not that love got its start in us or from us – "but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4:10).

This is what love is and what love looks like. It is not about something we do but something God has done (there is that four-letter word again!). Our love is simply a response to His love for us. God's kind of love is what you might call *in spite of* love. It is not *because of* love. God doesn't love us *because of* the good things we do. He doesn't love us *because* we deserve His love or *because* we have proved ourselves worthy of His love. No. God loves us *in spite of* our unworthiness. He loves us without reservation and without condition, *in spite of* who we are and the ways we have failed Him.

God's love is not just for us or people like us. It is not just for "good" people. It is not just for people who go to church. It is not just for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or for Christians in general. It is not just for Democrats. Or Republicans. It is not just for people who favor Roe v. Wade, or for people who oppose it. The love of God is for the whole world. Think John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" The love of God is for winners and losers, rich and poor, weak and strong, young and old, liberals and conservatives. It is for people who have it made in life and for those who have fallen through the cracks. It is for people who love Him and for those who won't give Him the time of day. It is for people who think like we do and for those who don't. It is for the whole world. That is the scope of His love, which extends to you and me.

Sometimes it may be easier to believe that God only loves people like us, because we find it so hard to love people who are, well, hard to love. Or sometimes it may be easier to believe that God loves the world than to believe He can love a loser – a failure, a sinner – like me. Some of us may have a hard time loving ourselves, and we persuade ourselves that not even God could love us.

Don't you believe that! It is a lie from the devil, who is, as Jesus says, "a liar and the father of lies. When he lies," says Jesus, "he speaks his native language" (John 8:44). Don't listen to the devil. Arm yourself with the truth of God's Word so that you will be prepared when the devil tries to deceive you and rob you of the joy of your salvation.

Jesus, of course, is the supreme demonstration of God's love. The demonstration of His love is there for everyone to see in His incarnation and atoning death. It is not just that Jesus came, not just that the Son of God willingly left the glories of heaven and came to earth and became a man – as if that weren't enough. It is that He came to die for sinners like you and me.

As Paul says in Romans 5:8: "God showed His love for us in this: While we were still sinners" – before we ever turned to Him in repentance for our sins and trusting faith – "Christ died for us."

The love of God is not just words; it is action. Not just sentiment but sacrifice. Not like a card and flowers for your wife or mom on Mother's Day, but a cross. Love is a God-thing. And ... if you want to know what real love is, all you need to do is look at Jesus.

LOVE IS A VERB

Here is a third principle gleaned from the Bible: Love is a verb. An action word. More than something you feel (though it may be and often is accompanied by feelings), love is something you do.

We don't have time today to explore this adequately, so we will come back to it next Sunday.

You probably know that the Greek language, the language of the New Testament, has four different words for love, each with a different nuance. C.S. Lewis has written about it in his book *The Four Loves*. *Agape*, the most prominent word for love in the New Testament, is used 115 times in the New Testament, including nine times in 1 Corinthians 13 and 12 times in 1 John 4. The verb form, *agapaō*, which means "To love," is used 140 times in the New Testament, including 15 times in 1 John 4. Another form of the word, *agapētos*, which is a form of address – "beloved" – occurs 62 times in the New Testament.

Agape love is the kind of love God has for sinners, and the kind of love He longs for us to exhibit in our lives. One pastor (Bryan Wilkerson, Grace Chapel, Lexington, MA) defines love this way: "Love is giving of yourself for the good of others, even for those with whom you disagree" (Sermon, "Deep Love," www.preachingtoday.com).

Another pastor (Vaughan Roberts) says:

“When you love people who are like you, that’s ordinary.
When you love people who are unlike you, that’s extraordinary.
When you love people who dislike you, that’s revolutionary.”
(Quoted in Bryan Wilkerson, “Deep Love.”)

The love of Jesus for us is not ordinary; it is extraordinary. It is not just extraordinary; it is revolutionary. In the way we love, in these polarizing days and always, Jesus wants us to be revolutionary.

Paul sums it up pretty well at the end of 1 Corinthians, where he says: “Do everything in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14). *Everything*.

The fruit of the Spirit is love. Always will be.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.