

Cultivating Other Centered Love in the Midst of a Self-Interested Market

Galatians 5:16-26

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Imagine with me that Canadian hospitals are desperately short of blood. They send out a nationwide appeal for blood donors of all types. Now suppose you were walking through a mall and you saw a sign promoting 2 blood clinics. One sign said – “Blood, it’s in you to give. Please go left to donate your blood.” The other sign said – “Your blood is valuable. We will give you \$100 for your blood. Please go right to get paid to give your blood.”

Which direction would you most likely go: To the left to donate your blood or the to the right to receive payment for your blood? If you go left, you will give up a portion of your precious life blood. You may experience a little weakness or light headedness after you give. But after you feel better you get up and go home less a bag of blood. If you go right, you will give up a portion of your precious life blood. You may experience a little weakness or light headedness after you give. But after you feel better, you get up and go home less a bag blood but with a 5 \$20 bills.

What’s the difference between the two? Well if you go to the left, you give blood and you don’t really get much back for yourself. On the right you give blood but you get money back. The option on the right is a better deal if we view giving blood solely from a self-interested perspective. We give. We gain. So we come out even. But the option on the left requires we give and we gain nothing. So we come out losing if we look at this solely from how it affects us.

But what if we looked at it from the perspective of the person who needs that blood? What if our primary motivation was to give our blood so that others would live? We might choose the option on the left. After all, a blood company that pays people 100\$ every time they receive a blood bag will go out of business pretty fast unless they get a massive subsidy from the government. But an organization that receives blood donations can actually give blood to many without the concern of having to pay for it.

This example exposes 2 life perspectives that can guide our choices and decisions. One perspective asks “what’s in it for me?” The other perspective asks “What’s in it for them?” These often conflicting perspectives can affect the way we relate to one another especially when it comes to love.

A person who asks “What’s in it for me,” expects the other person to provide or produce something that will make giving love worthwhile. But the person who asks “What’s in it for them,” will be able to give love without expectation that they must receive something back. The second option sounds more noble and honorable.

Yet, it is not a simple black and white issue. We are human and have limitations. We need to care for ourselves before we care for others. There are times we must ask questions like “do I have the emotional and physical resources to keep giving love to someone who gives nothing back?” Is it safe or healthy for me to keep offering love to this person? And even though we may want to offer a more selfless love, our sin nature constantly directs us to a self-interested love.

So what kind of love does God call us to offer others? What help does He provide to enable us to love this way? We begin our journey through the Fruit of the Spirit. Love is the first one. Today we will look at the passage where the Fruit of the Spirit come from. There we will find a very good explanation for why we struggle so much with love. Then we will follow the pattern I talked about last week for each Fruit of the Spirit. What is the fruit and how is it portrayed throughout the Bible? How does our dominant culture hinder or warp this fruit? What can we do to ensure the Holy Spirit has a good environment to grow His Fruit in us? Then we will meet at the Lord’s table.

Galatians 5:16-26 (ESV)

¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, 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. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to a group of churches in the ancient region called Galatia. It was a province in what is now known as Turkey. The churches had a huge problem in their understanding of the Gospel. Basically some false teachers came in and taught that you were saved or right with God by trusting in Christ and keeping the law. So your standing with God depended on whether or you did certain actions or laws.

Paul considers this issue so serious, that he barely extends the Galatians a greeting. After the customary opening, he jumps right into the problem. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the

grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel. . . . If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.”

Paul emphasizes one of the key parts of Christianity that separates it from every other faith system. Our salvation and good standing before God depends on His grace. We can't do anything to earn favor before God that obligates Him to look favorably upon us. He made the way through Christ's suffering and death on the cross. So he says in Galatians 2:16 “We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.”

Then Paul makes a case for this truth through chapters 3 and 4. Once he has reestablished the gospel in their minds, he goes on to the daily reality of living the Christian life. He talks about it in terms of freedom. We are free from the oppression of living like we have to do a certain number of good works for God to accept us. But this freedom is not license to do whatever we want. We are called to live lives that honor and glorify God.

Yet that's not easy because of the two natures, the flesh and the Holy Spirit, that dwell within us. Paul describes them in the passage just read. Every Christian has a fleshly or sinful nature and the Spirit in their lives. Paul tells us they are opposed to each other. They have opposite desires. Every Christian has a choice to make with respect to these two natures every day and multiple times a day.

Which nature will I follow? Which nature will I live by or walk by? Which nature's desires will I give in today? We can discover which nature we follow by looking at our lives. So Paul talks about the works of the flesh or the acts of the sinful nature in verses 19-21. When we see actions or feeling in our lives that go along with this list, then we're following our sinful nature in those moments.

But if we walk by the Spirit, then we will see His fruits grow in us. I think Paul makes a significant distinction in these lists. He doesn't talk about the fruit of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. He describes works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit. We can all do works. But we can't fruit. This indicates to me that we can naturally do the works of the flesh. But we need the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit in us. So we will be talking a lot about how do we get out of the way so the Holy Spirit can grow His fruit? The first fruit is love. We will return to this Galatians passage again & again.

How do we cultivate our hearts for the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit of love in us?

We must learn the nature of God's other-directed love. Now love is central to the Christian faith. The famous verse John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world, that hostile place filled with rebels against him, that He gave His only

Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. God is in His very nature love according to 1 John 4:8. We find the expectation that God's people would love throughout Scripture. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength." "This is the greatest commandment," said Jesus. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. Paul closes the great love chapter in 1st Corinthians 13 like this: Now faith, hope and love remain. But the greatest of these is love." The Colossians are urged to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance and forgiveness – but above all to clothe themselves with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Love leads Paul's list of the Fruit of the Spirit. In fact, many Christian thinkers believe that we don't have 9 separate fruits here but 8. Love is the one from which all the others flow. Or according to Phil Kenneson love is like the light that goes into the prism and then distills in 8 different variations. So we can view the 8 others as amplifying or further specifying what this kind of love looks like.

But what is the character of this love. In the English language, we face a great challenge. We have one word for love – 4 letters – L O V E. In Greek, the language of the New Testament, they had at least 4 words for love. There was phileo – friendship, storgw – family; eros – physical between man and woman and later agapao. That's the word Paul uses here. It was a less defined word for love and perhaps he wanted to separate God like love from every other type of love known. But we don't have that in English. So we use the same word to describe our feelings or affections towards a pizza and to God. "I love pizza. I love God." God loves us. Is that the same kind of love? Hopefully not. We learn about the character of love by observing God Himself.

Kenneson points out some distinguishing characteristics of God's love.

One – it is completely unmerited or undeserved. God consistently shows mercy and grace to people who didn't deserve it. Jesus was willing to empty himself and become our suffering servant to reconcile us to God.

Two – It is a steadfast love. God does not stop loving. Nothing can separate us from God's love. God is by very nature love. His love is not fickle and mood dependent. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end.

Three – God’s love is a suffering love. God does not love us from a distance. God entered into the very fabric of human life. Jesus was our suffering Messiah. He continues to bear the scars of the cross on His resurrection body. He continues to intercede for us at the right hand of God.

Four - God’s love is boundless. It goes beyond the boundaries of time, space and boundaries constructed by human society. Jesus says “Love your enemies.” The parable of the Good Samaritan exposed our tendency to offer love only to those who meet certain criteria. This falls far short of God’s way of loving.

This is the kind of love that Paul talks about. Now of course, we are not God; we don’t have the capacity to offer unlimited or unbounded love. There are times when our limits may be reached. But we need to guard against automatically withholding love from people that don’t meet our criteria like they need to look good; they need to be in my age group; I need to know them. I definitely need to like them.

Yet though we’re not God, we can still offer a God empowered love. Love is a Fruit of the Holy Spirit. So we can offer such a love to others as a response of receiving such love from God. We are commanded to be imitators of God’s love. We ought to lay down our lives for others. Kenneson argues that the defining feature of God’s love is its other-directedness. So we must learn the nature of Biblical love.

But to cultivate our hearts to make room for the Holy Spirit to grow His fruit of love in us, **We must acknowledge how the dominant culture trains us to a self-interested love.** Our culture promotes self-interest and individualism as key values.

We are encouraged to enter the market place where we do business or shop or work as a self-interested person. We aim to secure our own existence in the midst of others doing the same. So we tend to view other people not as unique and splendid in their own right who warrant our attention but as actors in our drama. Other people simply play the parts of producers of goods and services for us or as potential customers for our goods and services or as competitors whose own attempts to secure their own livelihood may threaten our attempts to do the same. Can we really be other directed when many of our interactions encourage us to be self-interested, to pay attention to others only to the extent they can benefit us?

Our dominant culture encourages us to put a price on everything and everyone. We learn at an early age that nearly everything is for sale – food; clothing; housing; entertainment; art; physical ability; expertise; knowledge; insight;

image; prestige; health-care; security; time; affection; sex; loyalty; bodily tissues and organs. So we can equate a person's worth to how much they are paid – the higher the salary; the more important the person. Or we play down in significance those that cannot or do not automatically have a dollar system assigned to them – stay at home mom – does innumerable unpaid tasks. This might show itself in our choice of work or career. We choose it not because we may like it but because it pays well.

But perhaps most damaging is the encouragement to evaluate our relationships on the basis of self-interest. We can even do a cost-benefit analysis on our relationships. So if the cost is high and we're not getting benefits, we can just end the relationship. Or we view our relationships as more contracted than covenantal. If each person delivers the goods, the relationship can continue. But if one fails to deliver the other begins to think about pulling out. In Christian circles we can talk about mentoring someone. We describe our relationships as "we're investing in someone." Well what do we expect from an investment? A return. So if the relationship we've invested in doesn't give us the return we expect, then we can justify ending the relationship. We can even approach our faith and conversion in a cost benefit way. We ask "What's in it for me if I come to Christ? So we offer the promises - Eternal life; Forgiveness; Heaven. Some may be converted less out of a sense of their estrangement from God but more out of a sense they are savvy consumers, knowing a good deal when they see one. Evaluating our relationships with a crude cost benefit analysis can be a great obstacle to other-directed love.

So to cultivate a heart that makes room for the Spirit's growth of love in us, we must learn about the nature of God's other directed love, acknowledge the dominant culture's influence towards a self-interested love. Then **we must repent of our tendency to a self-focused love.** God may have been speaking to you about this already. But there's one reality in our culture and in the people of our church that really shows how much we've bought into this. **This is how we view love & sex.** I was listening to a Desiring God podcast that interviewed Paul David Tripp, a pastor & counsellor, who has written a book called *Sex and Money, Pleasures that leave you empty & grace that satisfies*.¹ The interviewer from Desiring God told Paul about a survey of their listeners about ongoing struggles with internet porn. The interviewer shared that nearly 50% of visitors ages 18-29 to the Desiring God website have ongoing struggles with porn on the internet. Most of them had accountability partners in their lives, yet they continued to struggle.

¹ <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-porn-ified-culture-does-to-marriage>

Tripp responded to this by first declaring that we now live in a pornified world. It is western culture. It's everywhere. You can't go to your computer, watch a movie, watch TV, look at a magazine or even go the mall without having your morals assaulted in some way. But Tripp went on to say the more important question is our view of sex. Tripp states that we have been taught that sex is primarily all about our pleasure. So if a guy especially views sex that way, then he will only care about his satisfaction. That reduces sex and a person's wife as little more than an object for his pleasure. It's totally anti-relational sex. It's about the guy's body and giving his body what it wants. If we view sex as it's all about me, then we have little defense against the computer or a movie or whatever we face. Then females get the same message from the culture. You have to behave like an object to get a guy's attention. They learn that if they want a guy to love them, they've got to be his object of love. They've got to get his attention for love and keep meeting his self-love needs. So their told to dress or do or be whatever will catch the attention of this guy's eye.

But if it's about God and relationship and directing my love towards my spouse or if you're not married, your future spouse, then the computer is weird. The TV or a magazine can't provide that. The love is other centered rather than self-centered. I think there's wisdom there. Instead of focusing so much on the issue of port or internet, we need the focus of our love. If you see some of the acts of the sinful nature in your life, you need to repent of following that nature and giving into the self-love addiction that leads to those sins. So we repent of the unhealthy self-focused love.

But then how do we actually see this fruit of other-centered love grow in our lives? Well what does Paul tell us in Galatians 5? Walk by the Spirit. Be led by the Spirit. Live by the Spirit. Keep in step with the Spirit.

4 – We live by the Spirit. Remember, we don't' grow the fruit. We try to make room for the Spirit to work. Then we follow Him by faith every day. So each day, we begin with a prayer like "Holy Spirit, please lead me today." Or "Lord Jesus, I want to follow the Spirit today. Please guide me through Him." We must trust in Christ to enable us to live far beyond our own natural strength. We can trust Him because we have this new nature in Christ. Paul writes in Galatians "I have been crucified in Christ and I no longer live. But Christ lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." So every day is lived by faith. We don't grow the fruit of the Spirit through our resolve. It's through faith and following the Spirit each day. Sometimes, the Spirit will bring a dramatic or sudden change in a person's life. But often it's gradual like the growing of a garden. Walter Marshall, pastor in the late 1600's writes this about God's work in our lives. *The kingdom of heaven, the grace of Christ within you, is like yeast in*

batter. The yeast unites itself to the batter in an instant but it takes a long time for the whole batch to be leavened. The grace of God is like the morning light, which gradually expels the darkness, shining more and more unto the perfect day. (Proverbs 4:18).

Fruit takes time to grow. Our part is to turn to the spirit. Keep in step. Continually pray. One way Kenneson suggests we can open the door for the Spirit's work is to begin each day by asking God to give you eyes to see the needs of others, even if this means setting aside your own agenda and preoccupations.

Trust in Christ to enable you to live far beyond your own natural strength, because you have a new nature in Christ. Christ's Spirit now lives and works in you.

So as we come to the Lord's Table we are reminded of the new nature purchased for us by Jesus' death. Then we live out our new nature through faith each day.

How do you actually do this? You can only live out your new nature when you live by faith. Particularly, you must believe that all your sins are blotted out, that you are reconciled to God, that you have access into his favor by the blood of Christ, that God is your Father, that he loves you and that you have all you need for your eternal happiness in Christ.