

85 - Maintaining a Loving Heart

John 15:16-17

Love is the key to longevity, and longevity is the key to much fruit. That means that in order to bear much fruit we have to stay in relationship with people for a long time, and to do that we have to love them. If love declines, we withdraw, we become judgmental, we cease to pray for that person and stop serving them. And when those activities stop our positive influence comes to an end. We cease to be part of God's solution and become part of the problem. So, if you and I are going to bear much fruit, as Jesus has asked us to do, we must learn how to maintain a loving heart. We can't allow ourselves to grow sour. We can't permit offenses to accumulate. We can't let self-pity or impatience steal away our love. Yet the pressures of life wear heavily on all of us. Our physical health can vary. People can hurt us or disappoint us, and when they do we grow tired of them and just want to be alone.

When Jesus speaks about "bearing fruit" He's saying that He wants you and me to help others become His disciples, and for that to happen we have to have healthy relationships with them. So learning to tend our hearts becomes a skill each of us must master. We must learn to monitor the condition of our love on a day to day basis. Has our love declined? Have people become a burden rather than a joy? Has offense taken hold and begun to strangle our affection? If so, those wrong attitudes must be pulled out like weeds must be removed from a garden. The love within us needs to be refreshed by drawing close to Jesus. We need to remember His commands and let them confront the wrong attitudes that have begun to grow. And above all, we must again and again make that decision to put the needs of others ahead of our own. I realize that there are people who end up in unhealthy, co-dependent relationships, but that's not what Jesus was talking about when He told us to love one another as He has loved us. He was telling us to keep things in perspective, to remember how important each human being is to God. He loved us like that, and He wants us to lay down our lives so that others can live too.

It was late in the evening on that final Passover night, somewhere just outside the city of Jerusalem. Jesus was preparing His disciples for the new season that lay ahead of them. Their years of walking beside Him as He ministered throughout Israel were over. In only a few hours He would be arrested and executed. Then He would rise from the dead and ascend to heaven, so they were the ones who must carry on what He had begun. He told them, "You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain...." He assured them that they would have great authority in prayer, and then He said this, "These things I command you so that you may love one another" (literal) (v17).

Because maintaining a loving heart is the key to bearing fruit, let's sit with those eleven men and let Jesus teach us how to love one another for a long time.

Listening to Jesus (Jn 15:16, 17)

- DBS (Sun-Tues)

The Source of love

Love is something we borrow from God; it's not something we are able to produce for ourselves. He alone is the Source of all real love. It radiates from Him like warmth and light radiate from the sun. So, in order for us to genuinely love someone else, we must first draw close to the Source. When our relationship with Him is strong, He fills our hearts with love, but if that relationship grows weak, our hearts immediately turn cold. That's why our love for others is actually a very good indicator of our love for God. When we love Him, we love them. When our spiritual life is dry, people frustrate us.

I think this is the truth to which Jesus was pointing when He said, "These things I command you so that you may love one another" (literal). If He meant those commands He spoke to them after leaving the upper room (Jn 14:31), then there were three of them. The first was that they must maintain an active relationship with Him. They must stay attached to Him like a branch to a grapevine (vs1-6). If they did so, life would flow from Him into them, but if they became disconnected they would dry up and stop bearing fruit. The second command was that they must continue to submit to Him (vs7, 10). They must remember the things He had taught them, and continually allow themselves to be corrected by His words. Their obedience, He said, would bring God's manifest presence. And the third command was that they must decide to love each other, to such a degree that they would be willing to die for each other (vs12, 13). That painful choice would become the foundation upon which God would build His love.

Three commands

Those three commands are essential if you and I are going to maintain a loving heart. Let's try to understand each one, so we can continue to love people and bear much fruit.

1) Draw close: Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me" (v4). So, in order for me to love you, I have to first love Him. The two are deeply connected. When I'm close to Him, I'm able to be close to you. When I sense that my love for others is decreasing, when I see harsh attitudes rise up, I realize that I have a relationship problem, not primarily with people, but with Him. I've drifted away from the Source.



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Each of us must find our own ways of drawing close to the Lord, but inevitably it will involve silencing all the other voices and focusing on Him. I know I'm finally there when He begins to talk to me. I really don't care if He corrects me or encourages me; just being close to Him heals me. My attitudes change. Joy returns, and I'm strengthened. And these encounters must be regular, because without them we begin to act like the person we were before we met Him. Our ability to help others evaporates, and we revert to trying to protect ourselves from them.

2) Submit: Jesus' second command was simple, but hard to do. He told them to remember His words and obey them. And as we've all learned, what He wants us to do in certain situations can be very different from what we want to do. His ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. So, in those moments when we want to run away or angrily explode, certain commands will come to mind that forbid us from continuing down that path. They demand that we halt, turn around and go back. And if we look carefully at what He demands of us, we'll recognize that He is telling us to lay down our own frustrations and choose to love again. Submission in those situations is what allows God's presence to remain powerfully upon us. Jesus said it this way, "You will remain in My love" (v10).

3) Decide: This is by far the most painful of the three commands. Let's listen to Jesus' words again, "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (vs12, 13).

What He is telling us is actually overwhelming if you think about it. We are to put each other's needs ahead of our own, to the extreme degree that Jesus did for us. His love for us led Him to die for us, so we can expect our love for one another to be costly. In every relationship there come moments when we realize that for me to love you means that I am going to have to give up something that I really value. I'm going to have to decide to put your needs ahead of my own. And, I think the only thing that can empower us to make such a decision is a profound gratitude for what He has done for us. With eyes of faith, we realize that He has already given us the most important gift of all: eternal life. So we don't need to defend our rights or scramble to get our fair share. We're able to take our focus off ourselves and place it on those He's asked us to love. Maintaining that perspective is what allows us to love for a long time.

Loving God's people

Teaching us how to love God's people was the primary intent of Jesus' words that evening. Everything He said can be applied to loving anyone, but that evening He was preparing His disciples for His departure. He was deeply concerned that they would love one another because their fruitfulness depended on it. They would change the world together, not alone. When people listened to them and came to faith they must be drawn into a loving community where they could be discipled. When one of them suffered the others needed to surround that person and comfort them. They needed to pray and worship together. They needed to serve together. Each of them had been created differently, and had a different part to play in the ministry Jesus would perform through His church. But if division, bitterness or selfishness were allowed to arise, His plans for them would be ruined. They must decide to love. They must refuse to let love die. They must reconcile as often as needed. They must repent and forgive when necessary. Above all, they must maintain the love in their hearts by drawing close to Him, by submitting to His commandments, and by deciding over and over again to lay down their lives for one another... and so do we!

Questions

- 1) What are some of the signs that tell you that you've become "dry" and need to spend time with God? What are some of the ways you draw close to Him?
- 2) Describe a time when you wanted to do something, and one of Jesus' commands stopped you from doing it. Are you glad you obeyed?
- 3) When did you lay down something you highly valued because you loved someone else? If it's not too personal, please tell us what caused you to make that decision.