**Series: An Excellent Harvest**

**Sermon: The First Big Rock**

Perhaps you’ve heard the story of a college professor who, having been assigned to teach an introductory course about time management for incoming freshmen. On the first day he stood before the assembled class and lifted a one gallon wide-mouthed glass jug from beneath the lectern. He then produced about a dozen tennis ball sized rocks and put them gently in the jug and asked, “*Is the jug full?*”

Most of the students replied, “*Yes*”.

He smiled and picked up a small bucket filled with gravel and poured the gravel into the jug. He jiggled the jug to settle the small stones and then added more until they reached the top of the jug. Again he asked, “*Is the jug full?*” “*Probably not*” was the response.

“*Good*” he said as he picked up a pail of sand and began pouring it into the jug. The sand soon filled in the spaces between the rocks and gravel. A third time he asked, “*Is it full*.” This time the class shouted “*No!*”

“*Very good*” he said as he picked up a jar of water and pour it into the jug until is leveled at the brim. This time he asked, “*What is the point of this illustration?*”

One student quickly answered, “*The point is that no matter how full your schedule, if you try really hard, you can always fit more into it*,” and sat back with a satisfied grin.

“No” the professor said, “*The point of the illustration is this: if you don’t put the biggest rocks in first you’ll never get them in there at all*.”

Today we begin a new series about the Fruit of the Spirit. If you’ve been around Christianity very long you’ve probably heard of the Fruit of the Spirit, nine characteristics of a Christian life.

These are like big rocks. If we don’t put them into our lives first, we might never get them in there at all. It’s possible to so fill ourselves with peripheral church stuff that we don’t have room for the big rocks.

They’re called the Fruit of the Spirit not the Rocks of the Spirit, so we’ll use the agricultural metaphor as we consider the crop we harvest.

Imagine Orion Samuelson talking about Christians. In case you don’t know Orion Samuelson, for years he broadcast the daily U.S. Farm Report on WGN superstation. He would report things like the progress of farmers planting, the condition of crops through the seasons, the current market prices, and of course the status of the harvest rated from poor to good to excellent. My father-in-law would listen to that every day.

Now, imagine Orion Samuelson giving a report on us, how we’re doing actually growing the fruit God wants to see and produce in us through His Holy Spirit. As the farmer expects to harvest a crop after the growing season, God expects to harvest this crop in His people. So for nine weeks we’re going to talk about *An Excellent Harvest*.

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Galatians 5:22f*

It would be nice if it was automatic that we would effortlessly grow this crop without even thinking about it. The truth is that we’re born with a sin nature that fights against the Spirit nature we received when we accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. So like the farmer working the soil in his field to produce a good crop, we have to work the soil of our lives to effectively produce this crop.

We’re not going to tell you what to do. This series is about the crop itself. What God intends and we desire to grow in ourselves. We’re going to define and describe each of different kinds of fruit listed. It’ll be up to you what you do with it. Will you grow this crop or will you ignore it?

Unlike the crops being harvested in the fields around La Porte right now wherein each field grows a separate fruit, the Fruit of the Spirit is one crop. Notice that “fruit” is singular. It’s not “fruits” of the Spirit.

This is important. A farmer may choose to grow and harvest beans or corn or tomatoes. The Fruit of the Spirit is all of these, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We don’t select the ones we like and disregard the others.

*I prefer love and kindness, but I’m not too big on patience and gentleness. I like joy and peace, but I’ll take a pass on self-control.* It doesn’t work that way. All nine are the fruit the Holy Spirit seeks to grow in us.

This morning we’re going to look at the first part of the crop mentioned, **love**. Before we get into it I want to remind you that this is one of the big rocks. I’ve seen many times that a Christian works hard at doing the stuff he believes a Christian ought to do, but he fails to really become a Christ-like man.

The problem is he tried to fill himself with the small less vital things before engaging the large more important issues. That’s why looking at this *Excellent Harvest* is a worthy exercise. The Fruit of the Spirit are the big rocks we need first, then we fill in with the lesser things.

This morning I plan to share several “not so random” thoughts about love, beginning with **What is love?**

At first that sounds like a silly question. Everybody knows what love is even if we can’t define it. I wish that were true, but it’s not. People have wildly differing concepts of what love means.

        According to greeting cards love is:

o   a warm puppy

o   an itch you cannot scratch

o   never having to say you’re sorry

        A heart-tugging series of commercials on TV from Shriners Children’s Hospital features a succession of children with physical maladies each saying what love is. They are effective ads but they don’t capture all that love is.

        Love is what makes a Subaru a Subaru.

Sometimes in weddings I’ll talk about this and say something like: *I love my wife. I love playing basketball. I love prime rib. I love deer hunting. I love my kids. Now you know I feel the same way about deer hunting as I do my wife. I feel the same about my kids as I do prime rib*.

That’s foolishness of course but it helps us see that we could be more precise in what we mean by “love”.

In the New Testament three words are used for love. One is ερος. We get our English word erotic from this. Ερος is a powerful form of love, so powerful that God found it necessary to put restrictions and limitations on it.

People do some crazy things in the pursuit of ερος: they take risks, they commit crimes, they destroy families, and too often ruin their own lives.

Ερος is basically selfish. It’s a love primarily concerned with satisfying personal feelings. Erotic love is perfectly OK within the confines of God’s design. In the context of a man and a woman in marriage ερος is great. Outside of God’s plan it always results in distress.

Ερος is not the fruit of the Spirit. Neither is φιλεω, a second word translated “love” in the New Testament. Φιλεω is friendship; like brotherly love, as in the name Philadelphia, a combination of two words φιλεω love and αδελφος brother.

Φιλεω is not egotistic like ερος. It is however transactional or mutualistic meaning that it has to be returned. Friendship depends on both parties exchanging the same love. Whatever degree of friendship exists must go both ways or it’s not “love”. Φιλεω is concerned with giving and receiving equally.

Φιλεω is valid “love” and I encourage you to pursue friendship, but it’s does have limits. If not returned it will suspend or terminate.

The “love” that is Fruit of the Spirit is αγαπη. We’re very familiar with this. We named our church after it. Αγαπη is unconditional and totally unselfish. This is the “love” modeled by God who loved the world recklessly irrespective of condition or reaction.

His love is concerned with what is best for us. He loved us before we loved Him. He loves us even while we sin against Him.

An interesting aspect of αγαπη is that it’s not based on “like”. It’s not necessary for you to like someone in order to love him.

God doesn’t like our sinfulness and our disrespect for His will, and I believe there are times He doesn’t like us, still He loves us and gave His Son for us.

If I have αγαπη I’m concerned with the wellbeing of the one I love without regard to what I get in return. That’s why αγαπη is the love commanded of husbands for their wives. According to Ephesians 5:25 husbands are commanded to love our wives *as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her*. Jesus loves the church and sacrificed everything for us.

Αγαπη is the word for love used in great statements like:

        *A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.* John 13:34f

        *If you love me, you will obey what I command.* John 14:15

        *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.* John 15:12f

The fruit the Holy Spirit seeks to grow in us is αγαπη, love that cares for others more than we care for ourselves, regardless of our feelings toward them. It benefits and serves others whether or not our love is returned.

**Why is love listed first?**

Why is love the first one mentioned? I think the reason love is the first on the list of fruit is because love controls the other kinds of fruit. I read this somewhere, unfortunately I can’t remember where or who:

*Joy is love rejoicing; patience is love enduring; peace is love trusting; kindness is love serving; goodness is love extending; faithfulness is love proving; gentleness is love touching; and self-control is love restraining*.

All of the other kinds of fruit begin with love. They’re all expressions of love.

In the famous “love chapter”, 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul wrote (and this is a paraphrase),

*If I could talk to anyone in any language but do not love, I am like a toddler banging pan lids together. If I can understand the most complex things; if I proudly claim Christian faith but do not love, it won’t impress anyone. If I give generously to worthy causes; if I make great sacrifices for my church but I do not love, even God is not impressed*.

Love is one of the really big rocks that we have to put into our lives first before we fill in with the smaller things. Maybe it’s the biggest. Without love all of the religious stuff we do is diminished. Love gives value to our religious expressions.

If you’re not experiencing the joy of a close relationship with God even though you’re doing lots of church stuff, it may be that you’re doing it apart from love.

**How does love show itself?**

What is your favorite drink? Coffee? Coke? Iced tea? Suppose I gave you a large cup of your favorite. You take a sip and holding the cup you revel in the satisfying goodness. About that time someone bumps you spilling your drink. Whatever was in that cup is now all over your church clothes.

What spilled on you is what was in the cup. That’s a simple enough concept. What comes out of the cup is what was put into the cup. That’s true of us. In any given circumstance, what will come out of us is what we’ve put in.

Just before I started wrapping up this sermon Friday morning I read a post from Sheryl Baker in which she quoted Proverbs 4:23, *Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it*.

How we respond to troubles; how we react to and treat people is determined by what’s on our inside. If we’ve grown a crop of love it’ll show. If we have not, it’ll show. This is what Jesus meant when He said, *whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart…*Matthew 15:17f

When things don’t go our way; when someone hurts or upsets us; when someone angers or disrespects us: what is on our inside will come out. God wants us to be filled with love so that what comes out is Jesus. Love or the lack of it will affect how well we present Christ to the people in our lives.

Too often people get bumped and something other than Jesus spills all over the people around. Then they go to damage control or cover up mode. It’s too late. The damage is done. Someone has been burned or hurt or insulted. What was spilled leaves a stain, sometimes never to be cleaned.

On the other hand, people who have cultivated love, when they get bumped respond in a loving forgiving way. They become a blessing to other people even in the worst of circumstances.

Love enables us to welcome outcasts into our lives so that they see Jesus. They see that they’re important in God’s eyes, that He loves them and wants a relationship with them.

When we love we open the door to heaven to people who otherwise might miss the gift of eternal life.

I’m not going to propose a list of specific things you should or shouldn’t do or say. That’s for you to decide but understand, our natural tendency is to be self-protective, looking out for our own interests first, relegating the interests of others to subordinate status. In other words, we take care of ourselves first and others second. Jesus did it the other way, He cared about other first.

The point is that if we have this fruit, love, it will show as we will seek to be a blessing and try not to injure anyone.

**A misconception about love.**

That said, I will clear up a common misconception. To love another does not mean that we ignore sin. The mantra of post-modern man is “*Do not judge*,” I presume taken from Matthew 7:1, *Do not judge, or you too will be judged.*

There’s great wisdom in that, but it doesn’t mean that we should not discern evil. He illustrated His point with,

*Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.* Matthew 7:3-5

Then the very next thing He said was, *Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.* Verse 6

“Do not give” and “do not throw” are both subjunctive verbs. That’s like saying, “*You might not want to give your pearls to dogs or pigs. They won’t appreciate it and may still turn on you*.” Jesus told us to discern evil.

Given the right relationship, rather than ignore sin, love calls the sinner out. That’s what Jesus did in Matthew 23, challenging the self-centered and self-protective behaviors of the religious leaders of His day.

Seven times He uttered “Ουαι υμιν” translated “*Woe to you*”. Then He specified who He was calling out with words like hypocrites, blind guides, fools, whitewashed tombs, a brood of vipers.

That’s not very friendly and it’s certainly not what people today would call tolerant, but it was loving because He wanted them to repent and draw near to God. Sometimes love is tough, but it’s also the best thing for the one loved.

**What does love look like?**

If you’re not sure what love looks like, read 1 Corinthians 13:4-8. Most of us here have read this or heard it read more times than we can count.

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.*

Sixteen elements of love, eight positive, eight negative. If these elements describe the things you say and do, you have love. If they don’t, I’d say, *love is lacking*.

If you still don’t have an idea of what love looks like, get and read the book *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan. If that doesn’t get through to you I doubt that anything I say will either.

One time Jesus was having dinner at the home of one of the religious leaders when a woman who was presumably a prostitute came in and knelt at Jesus’ feet, crying, tears running down her cheeks and onto is feet. She wiped his fee with her hair and the poured perfume on them.

It really bothered the host that Jesus would allow this sinner to touch Him so intimately. Jesus said to the man,

*Simon, I have something to tell you. Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”* Luke 7:40-42

*Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.”* Verse 43

*Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”* Verse 48

*“Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”* Verse 50

Now I have a question: How do you think that woman responded to Jesus’ love? She owed an insurmountable debt to God that Jesus cancelled setting her free to live life once again.

        Do you think she became legalistic, “*Now I have to live Jesus’ way*”?

        Do you think she lived in fear that He would change His mind if she failed?

        Do you think she grudgingly gave up all the fun stuff in life?

I don’t think so. I think Jesus’ love awakened something deep inside her. I think she found something that connected with the very heart of God.

I think love became the first big rock, the first fruit of an *Excellent Harvest* in a life changed to be a true follower of Jesus.