

**There's an App for That:  
Reflections on the Most Important Christian Qualities**

*Love*

*Proverbs 18:24; John 13:31-35*

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Without looking, do you know how many apps you have on your phone? Everyone I've asked so far has underestimated, as did I. Before counting, I estimated that I might have twenty-five apps. Fifty-eight! Most of them are free. I've got apps for news, sports, navigation, weather and all kinds of things. The one I use the most is probably CNN. I'm a bit of a news junkie. I also have The New York Times, USA Today, and a few others. I've got an app for the Bible (any translation), Pandora (which is a great music app), a weather radar, and of course SEC sports. That's my favorite during the Fall!

An app, technically a web application, is a portable source of information and entertainment. I don't have any games on my phone, but I know they're quite popular. Here's the great thing about apps. If you get lost, well there's an app for that. If you're looking for a new recipe, there's an app for that. Want to make a hotel reservation? There's an app for that. Need the yellow pages, anywhere in the country? Guess what, there's an app for that too. In fact, it seems like there is an app for just about everything.

I've been thinking about the function of apps and have decided that the Bible was the first app. Got a question about life? Want to know the teachings of Jesus? Want to learn how to pray? There's an app for that, and it's called the Bible, our source of information on just about everything. So this summer I want us to look at what our app, the Bible, says about some very important qualities. The Apostle Paul identifies these qualities in the book of Galatians and calls them "the fruit of the Spirit." Paul first describes the qualities of "the flesh," which are not part of the kingdom of God. Then in contrast to those he lists these nine fruits of the Spirit. He was saying that this is what our lives should look like. If we are living through the Spirit of God, we should be cultivating these nine fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul says that those who belong to Christ should cultivate those nine qualities. So we're going to spend the summer doing just that.

The first one is a no-brainer: love. Why is love so important? Guess what? There's an app for that. It is John 13. "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is one of the great teachings of Jesus, and it helps to know the setting. This occurred on Thursday night in the last week of Jesus' life. The next day he would be crucified. On the night of this teaching, Jesus was with his disciples in an upper room. There he shared his last supper with them and gave some of his most important teachings. The first thing he did, though—before the supper, before the teachings—was to take off his robe and tie a towel around himself. Then he took a basin of water and washed his disciples' feet. He began this important evening by setting an example for them and encouraging them to serve each other the way he had just served them. After he modeled it, he then put it into words: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is a no-brainer, isn't it? This first fruit of the Spirit is the most basic theme of the Bible—love. Notice, though, that this teaching is not about loving the world in general. It's not about loving those outside the church. It's not about loving one's enemies. Those are covered elsewhere. This app is directed internally. It's about loving one another within the fold. Everyone else will know that we belong to Christ because of the love we have for one another. That's what this app teaches.

Well, that's not so hard, is it? Us loving each other. We do that pretty well, don't we? But what about *all* Baptists loving each other? Now that's a little harder. We haven't been so good at that. And then what about all Christians loving each other? Pentecostals and high-church folks, social justice types and the personal evangelism types. Not only is that harder; we really have done a poor job. The new Dean at Wake Forest Divinity School, Dr. Gail O'Day, says that this is hard. In fact, loving one another, she says, may be harder than loving our enemies. At least we don't have to sit on the same pew with our enemies every week. (*The New Interpreter's Bible*, "John," p. 734)

In the early years of the church, loving each other wasn't as hard. One writer says that love within the church is what attracted converts to the early church. There was such love in the churches that people could smell "the scent of love" rising from them (Keith Miller). But then the church reached a point where it had to define what it was and what it wasn't. It was no longer just a matter of loving each other. Your beliefs had to be correct. You couldn't believe just anything and belong to the church, so they had to define orthodoxy. Some got so carried away with this that they just about defined themselves to death.

Some of you have heard the terminology of "closed communion" and "alien baptism." These go back to a movement among Baptists called Landmarkism, where they believed that the Kingdom of God was made up of the sum total of Landmark Baptist Churches. In other words, only their churches were true churches. This did not include all Baptist churches, just the Landmark Baptist churches. The rest of the Baptists, the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians and all the rest might as well forget it. And the Catholics, why they didn't stand a chance! There was only one true Church, they claimed, and it was made up of all the Landmark Baptist churches. So if a Methodist was visiting one of these Landmark Baptist churches on Communion Sunday, that Methodist was not invited to join them in Communion. Communion was closed to Methodists and anyone else who wasn't a member of a Landmark Baptist church. Same with baptism. They wouldn't accept baptism from another church. It could have been administered in the Jordan River by an ordained, 80 year old Southern Baptist pastor, but if it wasn't administered by a Landmark Baptist Church it was considered alien baptism. Some of you remember the old Landmark Baptist churches. It wasn't that long ago, and that spirit still is not dead.

I always wonder what Jesus would say about this kind of thing. Here's what I think. I think Jesus would say that the Landmark movement and many others like it made their narrow orthodoxy the first fruit of the Spirit rather than love.

The first fruit of the Spirit is love within the family of faith. If we make love the first priority within the church, that has some serious implications for us. Allow me to name a few. I'm sure you can think of others. When love is the first priority in the church...

- We can disagree with each other over orthodoxy. As I listen to your religious autobiographies, they remind me of the diversity of belief we have in our church. Some of you take the critical issues of our day, apply your understanding of the Bible and faith to them, and you honestly come out on the liberal end of the spectrum. Some of you take the same issues, apply your understanding of the Bible and faith to them, and you honestly come out on the conservative end of the spectrum. And then you say to each other, “That’s okay.” If orthodoxy was the first priority of our church, we would be filled with conflict and turmoil, as many churches are today. But when love is the first priority, we can disagree with each other over orthodoxy.
- Everyone will be welcome. I know that sounds simple, but it’s not quite so simple. Have you ever heard of a Sidewalk Committee? These church committees were not necessarily nominated by the Nominating Committee and voted on by the church. They existed unofficially in churches in the South during the 1950s and 60s. Their job was to stand out front, i.e., on the sidewalk, and make sure only the right people came in to worship. When love is the first priority of the church, everyone is welcome.
- No one will be alone. At every stage of life, we need community. About sixty of our adults spent this past week here, some taking vacation, some dressed up like John the Baptist or an astronaut, to make sure our youngest are not alone. Some of you will go with our youth on trips this summer to make sure they are not alone. Some of you have been in hospitals and nursing homes this week to make sure someone was not alone. And when the end comes for you and me, the church is there for us. When love is the first priority of the church, no one will be alone.
- This last one may be the most important one. When love is the first priority in here, we’re more likely to make a difference out there. When a church is embroiled in conflict, that conflict dominates the church. It consumes tremendous energy. Not much is left to love the world. At Vacation Bible School this past week, we had at least four children with special needs. I was told that one child wanted to go to other churches but was not welcome. I’m sure they had their reasons. We had reasons too for welcoming her here. When this fruit of the Spirit is the first priority, it can be shared.

So Jesus waited until the night before his crucifixion. With the light of history shining on him, he took a towel and a basin of water and washed his disciples' feet. He modeled it first and then gave words to it: "Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This Summer let's cultivate love within this family of faith.

#### Closing Prayer

Lord, you modeled the way for us. Help us now to be good followers of your way. Amen.