

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Inside Out

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Galatians 5: 22-23

About a year ago Harvard University revoked their acceptance of ten incoming students because of inappropriate content they posted on Facebook. A description of the Harvard College Class official Facebook group states, “Harvard College reserves the right to withdraw an offer of admission...if an admitted student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her honesty, maturity, or moral character.”

A recent study showed that over 40 percent of colleges and universities look at the Facebook pages and other social media accounts of prospective students.

The lesson: You really can't hide who you are. Eventually, who you are will be revealed.

A pastor once used simple prop to make this point. During the sermon he invited a man in the congregation to join him up on the platform. Then he handed the man a glass of water filled to the top. As the pastor continued to preach, he bumped the man's arm and water spilled on the pastor. The pastor turned to the man and asked, “Why did you spill water on me?” The man replied, “Because you bumped me.” The pastor said, “I know I bumped you but why did you spill water on me?” The man replied, “Uh, I spilled water on you because you bumped my arm.” “Let me put it this way: Why did you spill water on me? Why didn't you spill coffee? Lemonade or tomato juice?” The man concluded, “Because that's what was in the glass—just water.”

The pastor then turned to his congregation and said every day we fill ourselves with good character choices and bad character choices. Inevitably, life is going to bump us around and provoke what's inside of us to spill out. What will spill out of you? Fear or confidence? Generosity or greed? Humility or pride? What do you want to reveal to others?

That pastor was right. Life has a way of revealing what's on the inside of us. Sooner or later in life something will bump you around and reveal what you are made of. Life has a way of revealing the sum of all your choices. So, the next time you hit a bump in the road, what will spill out of you?

The Bible is clear about what should spill out of us. It is called the fruit of the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. –Galatians 5:22-23

The Apostle Paul is clear that as followers of Christ these are the qualities or virtues that should spill out of us? Of course if we make bad choices or dwell on bad thoughts something else might spill out.

How many of you watched Sesame Street growing up? How many of you still watch it? If so, you know about Oscar the Grouch. Oscar is probably the world's most famous grouch. He manages to insult everyone he meets. Of course, if we lived in a trash can, we might not have a great attitude either. As they say, “Garbage in, garbage out.”

It's interesting how Oscar the Grouch got his name. King Duncan writes, “In the early days of Sesame Street, Jim Henson and Jon Stone, Sesame Street's director would meet to work on the upcoming show at a Manhattan restaurant. The name of the restaurant was Oscar's Cavern. Each time they ate there they were waited on by a man who was consistently rude and grouchy. The result was that the waiter's attitude was forever immortalized on Sesame Street in the character of Oscar the Grouch” (“Positive Living”).

Do any of you know a grouch? Maybe you're sitting next to one (don't look at them!). They are not fun to be around, are they? They can suck the life and joy right out of you.

Fortune magazine published an article with a list of some actual lines that people had written in resumes and cover letters.

For example, one applicant wrote, “It's best for employers that I not work with people.” Would you want to hire that applicant?

Another wrote, “I have become completely paranoid, trusting completely no one and absolutely nothing.”

And what about this next one? “Note: Please don't misconstrue my [previous] 14 jobs as ‘job-hopping.’ I have never quit a job.” Does this mean he was fired from 14 jobs?

And finally this one, “The company made me a scapegoat, just like my three previous employers” (Duncan, “Positive Living”).

I don’t know about you, but I would put those letters and resumes in the trash and start looking for someone who embodies the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Ever been around someone who exudes the fruits of the spirit? They make your day, don’t they? Sometimes they can make your week!

Duncan observes that “none of these characteristics that Paul lists as fruit of the Spirit depends on external circumstance. No matter what happens to you from the outside, you can still possess love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

“The Irish tenor, Ronan Tynan, had both legs amputated below the knee after a motor bike accident many years ago. How would you react to such misfortune? I’ll tell you how Tynan responded. He went on to become a medical doctor, a well-known Irish tenor, and an excellent athlete. In the 1984 and 1988 Paralympics, he won four Gold Medals in the discus, shot put and the long jump. He even rode show horses. A tall man, he had a special set of artificial legs made for riding. He became an equestrian master. A reporter once asked Tynan, ‘How tall are you, really?’ Tynan replied, ‘I’m adjustable’” (Duncan, “Positive Living”).

I love it! What a great attitude! Most of us would become grouches if we lost our legs. Tynan certainly had every excuse to become one. Instead, he is adjustable. He knows he has a choice of the kind of person he becomes and the attitude he will embrace.

Are you adjustable to life? When something bad happens do you play the victim or do you stay faithful, knowing God will redeem your suffering? When someone is mean to you, do you get even, or do you choose to be kind instead? When the world is full of hate, do you show the world a better way and love instead?

There is a reason why Paul puts love at the top of the list. Love is what makes the rest of the fruit possible. But it is not just any kind of love. The word love Paul uses here is seen about 540 times in the Bible. In the Old Testament it is the word, “hesed.” In the New Testament it is “agape.” Agape is self-giving love, a sacrificial love, an unconditional love – a love that works in the best interest of others regardless of how we may feel about them – a love that sacrifices for others regardless of what they have done to us. It is the word used to describe the unconditional love of God.

Agape is love in action. It is an action word. That’s why Paul chooses to define this love through

action words. What does this love look like? It is patient. It is kind. It is selfless. Faithful. Gentle. Kind. It is humble. It is forgiving. It rejoices in the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. In other words, true Christian love is not something you talk about or think about; it is something you do! “Love does.”

Agape love is also a decision. It is not based on feelings. Although right feelings often come after we express this love, agape love is choosing to love regardless of how you may feel. When that guy cuts you off, you choose to be patient and not give him a particular kind of wave. When the waitress gets your order wrong, you choose to be kind, loving, and tip them well, regardless. When you see the homeless man, you choose not to be judgmental or critical but see him with the eyes of Christ and recognize his worth. When you see the old couple walking slowly down the cereal aisle you choose to be patient and kind. Perhaps they just came from the doctor and received a bad pathology report. These are the few precious moments they have together. When five o’clock rolls around and you are tired and ready to go home, you stay a little longer to listen to a co- worker who is upset. When people betray you, you choose not to retaliate but forgive because you know that is what Christ did for you.

AGAPE love will change the world – not politics, not education, not money, not technology. Agape love, Christian love, the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ is what will heal this world. This love is the acid test of being a follower of Jesus. The central thrust of Jesus’ teaching and ministry was that sacrificial love wins and forgiving enemies overthrows evil. This is the power of the cross. If we don’t believe this we are just another charity organization.

Let’s face it. Every other group in society can do everything else Christians do. Christians have programs. So does every other group. We recite creeds. So do many other groups like Rotary and Kiwanis. Christians sing songs. So does every other group from the National Anthem to 99 bottles of beer on the wall! Christians raise money. So does every other group.

So what makes us different? What makes us unique? What do we as Christ followers do that is different from a non-profit organization? We love unconditionally! We forgive our enemies? We love sacrificially! We do not return evil for evil but choose to do good when evil is done to us. We do what is best for another regardless of who they are or what they have done. We see others not as the world sees them but as children of God who have sacred worth.

Harold Warlick once said, “The greatness of our faith is our expansive loving spirit that overthrows

resentments, takes in enemies, embraces rivals, and seeks the best for everyone.”

Let’s bring this down to a personal level. On a general level agape love is fairly easy to take, but what about our personal relationships?

Reverend James Moore recalls visiting a woman who was dying in a local hospital. She was in her mid 80’s. Her son flew in to be with her. Moore was there when he arrived and entered the room. He walked over to the bedside of his dying mother, leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. He was so moved by her weak and vulnerable condition that he said to her: “Mom, you have been such a good mother to me. And, I want you to know I love you.”

The mother started to cry and through her tears she said: “Son, that’s the first time you’ve ever told me. Last Friday was your 63rd birthday and that’s the first time you ever told me.” Moore comments by saying, “Isn’t that something? It took him 63 years to say ‘I love you’ to his mother” (“A Mother’s Love”).

Is there someone you need to express your love to today? Don’t wait! Do it now! If your parents are still living, when was the last time you told them you love and appreciate them? When was the last time you told your spouse, family and friends that you love them? When was the last time you told your children how proud you are of them? When was the last time you loved someone by spending time with them.

Are you estranged from a loved one? Forgive them as Christ has forgiven you. Life is too short and Christ calls us to take the first step because that is what he did for all of us. Your forgiving love will bring healing to you and perhaps healing to the one you are forgiving. Agape love is powerful and transforming.

Leo Buscalgia is a writer and speaker who goes around the world and talks about one important subject: love. He says that when he finishes speaking there is usually a long line of people waiting to see him. Buscalgia says that most of them are not waiting in line to talk to him, but to receive a hug. He says he comes across so many people who tell him that they have not been hugged or touched in years. They walk away from this encounter new people!

When we know we are loved, we can do anything, conquer anything, overcome anything! The Apostle Paul said it best in Romans 8: “We are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us.” Love wins!

The love of God always wins. This is the essence of our faith and what the gospels teach us over and over again. Jesus sums it up by telling us that the world will know we are Christians by our love – not by the way we worship—not by our knowledge of the

Bible—not by our sophisticated theology—not by our judgments—not by our denomination—but by our love for each other!

In John 15 Jesus underscores the fruit of the spirit by telling us that his purpose for us is that we bear much fruit. And what is that fruit supposed to be? It’s the one that’s listed first in Galatians:

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” –John 15:12-13

Now most of us are not going to be called to die for another but all of us are called to love sacrificially. And this doesn’t mean just opening a door for someone. For most us it means sacrificing time – helping someone with a flat tire, baking cookies for a new neighbor, listening to someone when you would be rather be home watching television, throwing the ball with your kid when you would rather take a nap. In the end, those are the moments that count.

Oh how we need to learn this lesson. I can’t tell you how many people I have visited and how many people who have crossed the threshold of my office door who wished they had lived their lives motivated by love. They talk about the times spent arguing about trivial matters. They talk of the energy spent resenting. They talk about the money wasted on needless things and the time wasted on a ridiculous pursuit. They wish they had learned the importance of love earlier.

I have done many funerals in my ministry. You know what I have never heard at a funeral? I have never heard anyone mention how much money the deceased person had in their bank account when they died. No one has ever mentioned how many houses or boats they owned, or their golf handicap. You know what has been mentioned? The love they shared with others – the laughter and joy they shared with family and friends – the transforming moments.

When I or some other pastor brings a legal pad into the office to discuss your funeral with your family what will they say about you? What will really matter to them? Have you ever thought about that? What will matter to them will be how well you loved. Our lives will be measured by how well we loved.

Love never fails! Everything else will cease. Everything else will pass away. These three remain: faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

What is on the inside of you can be seen on the outside. Is your life revealing the fruit of the spirit?

Some of you may feel discouraged when you review the fruit of the Spirit because you feel like it is impossible to reflect all of these qualities. You are right! It is impossible without God’s help. That’s why they are

called the fruit of the Spirit. If we want to bear fruit, we must first have the Spirit of God living within us. Jesus said, “Apart from me, you can do nothing.”

Duncan provides these wise insights when it comes to living by the power of the Holy Spirit: “Somehow people even within the church family miss this message. They grow up in the faith, they may even come to church regularly, but they’re still seeking for the key to happiness. They’re still walking around with a God-shaped void in their life. Listen, here is the key to life. Pray right now, ‘Lord Jesus, send your Spirit into my heart.’ That’s it. That’s the key. It may not happen at once, but it will happen. Pray for Christ’s Spirit to dwell in your heart and focus on the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (“Positive Living”).

“Evangelist Alan Walker once told about a girl who had a rich and lovely voice. She was singing in the choir of a church in East London. She had this wonderful voice, but she had also been well-trained in vocal technique. Her fame as a soloist spread until one Christmas she was invited to sing one of the lead parts in “Messiah” at the Queen’s Hall.

“One of her closest friends went to her teacher, asking whether he thought she was equal to it. His response was this: “If she focuses on what I have tried to teach her and merely follows the rules of correct breathing and voice production, she will break down. But if she can forget everything and think only of the wonder of the message she is singing, she will be all right.”

“The night came. This lovely young woman stepped forward and began singing, ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth.’ The music flowed in great beauty from her lips. And the best hopes of her teacher were fulfilled. She forgot the audience and the occasion, and sang as one who knew the meaning of it all. She sang in the strength of the living Christ whom she knew intimately and who was in power within her own life. As she sang, the audience was strangely moved. That night was one to be remembered. Why? Because she was not trying merely to follow directions or obey a set of external rules; she had found a Spirit of power, within.” (Duncan, “Positive Living”). She sang the message, not the notes.

I teach the same principle to my preaching students. Many of them will get concerned about proper

delivery or memorizing material. I tell them that the key to great preaching is conviction. If your message is coming from the bottom of your heart, your delivery will take care of itself and you will not have to worry about remembering anything because you will be preaching from the heart.

The same principle applies to our faith. Is the Spirit inside of you? When it is you will not be concerned about doing everything right but doing everything by heart. You will not be following rules but following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When we do that we will reflect the fruit of the Spirit and make a difference in this world for Christ.



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