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Is the Fruit of Love in you? Here is how you can find out. Take a careful look at this character and fruit of love from God's most precious Word by examining the passages below. Now ask yourself:

1. How do I exhibit Love in my daily life?
2. What can I do to develop a more loving attitude?
3. What blocks love from being expressed in me?
4. How can I make love function better, stronger, and faster, even in times of uncertainty and stress?

**The General idea of Love** is seeing and understanding God's love for us by how He gives of Himself to others, so we model it to those around us. Love is unconditional as it looks to God because we are responding to what Christ did for us, His sacrifice with our trust and obedience that produces our self-denial and self-giving. As a result, we are being charitable, selfless and altruistic for the benefit of others in our life. Jesus modeled this in all that He did: If He were me He would be more loving. Love will enable us to appreciate our brothers and sisters in the Lord and, of course, our family and others around us. Love is taking the initiative to build up and meet the needs of others without expecting anything in return. Love desires to seek and apply what God has to say. It also runs the full spectrum from romanticism and the quest for personal satisfaction, to God, and the meaning of life. And, when you have the wrong idea and definition of love, it will adversely impose on all those areas in your life. That is why it's Biblical authority is crucial. What love is not is as important as what love is!

(John 13:1; 15:13; 1 Corinthians 13:3; Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 5:2; Colossians 1:9-10; 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 5:8-13; 1 John 4:16; 5:2-3; 2 John 1:6)

**The opposite of love is Hate, Lust, and Disgust.** It covers the areas from disliking people who are different to deliberately seeking malice and destruction of what the Lord has for us! Not having real love will leave you empty and alone. Lust is not just the opposite it is the counterfeit!

Most people assume that love is the most important thing in a marriage, or the most important reason to get married. You will frequently hear people on TV, in the movies, out on the streets of life and even in the church saying, *I do not need to work on love and relationships, it will just happen. And, if not, it was not meant to be, and I can get out of it if it does not work out.* How sad that philosophy is! But, when you carefully examine love from the Bible, you will find that it is a choice over and against any feeling or aspiration of what we may want it to be or mean (Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10; 5:8-13).

Love is a choice that also happens in a seemingly magical and metaphysical way, as poets have tried to explain it throughout the millennia's. But, is that it? The Bible tells us that love is more than a feeling; it has segments and characters in it. Love is also a choice, a decision that must be perused and worked on. In our human mind, we may see it as magical, as if it "just happened," but, without pursuing its true meaning and character, it will dispel and waste away. So, when we do receive that spark of love that we cannot explain, to keep that magic, that romance, that spark going requires us to do something about it. If we do not work on it, the spark that was once there will vanish as quickly and as suddenly as it came. It will fade into the night, leaving us in the darkness of the maze of relationships, lost and confused. The way we keep that flame from blowing out is our understanding and modeling the character of love. So, as it becomes contagious and spreads, it flames and excites, burns and grows, so the winds of the ups and downs of a relationship will not blow it out!

We do not necessarily *fall in love* as the love songs and movies proclaim, because, you may well fall *out* of it, faster than you fell *in* it! If you never choose to make it a commitment, with love, you will never have it, or, if you do, you will not keep it! Love is a verb; it requires action that is implied in being a verb, an action to do something with it. What are you doing with it? Are the precepts of 1 Corinthians 13 being put into action with your friends, family, workplace, school, acquaintances, and your spouse? If not, what is in the way of that verb action?

If you ask most couples who are thinking about marriage, or who are already engaged, why they are getting married, they usually will say: "Why, we're in love." It has been through studying the Word, plus, over twenty years of pastoral counseling experience, that has prompted me to question the validity of this motive. Yes, love is essential and powerful! However, if that is all you have, you will end up with nothing! Because what you have is just the emotion of love and not the reality of Love. You must also have respect that is mutual. You have the smoke, but not the fire, you have the tires but not the car, you are missing the vital essential component of what love is. The number one mistake people make when they date is to look just for love. The number one mistake, married couples make is thinking that their love is all they need. This puts their brains "on hold" from everything else. Yes, love is putting the precepts of 1 Corinthians 13 into action, but most people, including Christians, do not even know what real love is! Because that we are not looking at 1 Corinthians; rather purely to their feelings. Choosing a life partner should never be based on love alone. A marriage cannot last on love alone. This may sound like crazy talk, but think it through. Have you ever seen a relationship work with just love? No, not for movie or TV stars who have everything going for them, not for the singers who sing about it, and not even for the Beatles! Because, they do not know what love is, nor do they really put it into practice.

Have you ever known some to get married to someone they did not love? Most, if not all, people who get married do it for love, yet, according to most statistical evidence, fifty percent will divorce in less than five years, and for Christians it is near 30%. So, what happened to the love? If love is all we need, should not it have worked? Why did it not work? Because, there never was real love, they misunderstood what love is, or, they had nothing but love. Perhaps they let that spark of love flame out in neglect, so that there was a huge vacuum in their relationship! Love should not be the horse in front of the cart. Love alone cannot influence a relationship. Love needs to be a result, not a cause, for getting married. Love is the result of a good marriage, not the fuel to make it. Love is an attitude that is followed by action; when this does not happen, love will sit and go nowhere.

### **Love produces maturity.**

Love, is a spiritual fruit that is built from real, godly character and commitment. It is the fiber of our moral center that stretches throughout our being, embracing and holding together our relationships when it is sealed as a choice and commitment, and not just a feeling.

A fruit is made up of more than one substance; it has juice, pulp, segments, and seeds, all held together by a skin or rind, and attached to the tree by a stem where its nutrients flow in. If you just eat of the pulp or juice and throw out the rest, how can you use the seeds to grow more? If you take the fruit off the vine, it will wither and rot; if the vine is not cared for, the tree will die. So it is with love. It requires our tending, and it is more than just one substance; all of its substances combined are greater than the sum of its parts.

One of the clearest evidences of being a mature Christian is an increased awareness and knowledge of the need to be in Christ, and not to be to ourselves. When we have an increased need that goes beyond ourselves, an increasing need that goes beyond our self-confidence when we are focused not on ourselves but Christ; then we are maturing. When we are dependent on our Lord and

the Holy Spirit; then our self-confidence becomes rooted and dependent on Christ working through us. So we are not self-driven, but Christ driven. Thus resulting in our will to be in total surrender to God's will as the driving force for our existence. This is maturity! Too many people feel they are too busy to contemplate their existence, just ask anyone and you will be surprised at the answers. Yet God created us for a purpose, but most give little to no credence to it, even Christians. We cannot venture into maturity unless we realize the need and the purpose of who we are.

As mature Christians, we will recognize our need for Christ will bring us beyond our failures so we can grow increasingly effective for our Lord and grow in sanctification. We are focused on the goal of holiness to be the person God created. He created us to be images of Himself, and as images, we are to reflect His character that goes beyond ourselves to the purpose He has. It is not about our needs, but His need. It is not our purpose, but His purpose. This is maturity!

As we grow in Christ, we will become aware of our futility and inadequacy as human beings, that we are products of our sinful nature that only Christ can regain and redeem. And this frailty will become a strong building with the foundation of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit who gives us extreme provision and realization to be our best for God's glory. We become complete human beings who walk away from our fallen nature into a renewed nature in Christ. As we grow in the progress of our walk with Christ, we become more able to stay on the path of what he has for us. Then the other paths at our side will not be even considered so that the many temptations and adventure into new and different paths, away from His presence, will no longer consume our desires. Instead, we are to become convicted to spiritual fulfillment that Christ has for us. Thus, when we walk on the path of God and are confronted with the enormous assortment of doors, all leading to temptations and desires, we will know what to do. All these distractions and sins leading away from His best for us will not be a temptation, but rather repulsive and ugly as they truly are.

With the power of the Holy Spirit and the conviction of faith in Christ, when we are modeling His image with love, we are maturing. The desires and aspirations that once hindered us will be of no bother. We will be able to walk away from them like a racehorse. A racehorse has its blinders on the side of its eyes, so it is always pointing straight ahead, so it is not distracted from leaving the course. We too must keep our eyes focused ahead so we are not distracted away from our Lord. For when we are overcome by our desires and distracted from our purpose, then the diseases will infect us like cancer and consume the body of Christ which end up serving only our whims and the devil's purpose. When we stop and open those doors of temptations, even the small doggie doors, we will be consumed, and our growth in Christ will stop and the infection of diseases will replace their growth.

There are too many Christians who flat out and deliberately refuse to surrender themselves to the lordship of Christ. Christianity is merely a fire insurance from Hell, some means of social influence or personal desires that do not grow beyond the sinner's prayer: such as the parable of the sower. Our Christian growth in maturity is not self-realization, but rather Christ realization. As we grow, we become totally aware of one great fact: there is one God and we are not it. Our confidence in who we are is because of the work Christ has done on our behalf. As we grow, our utter dependence is upon our Lord and our confidence is in Him and not ourselves. People will always disappoint us. We will even disappoint ourselves. Christ, however, will not disappoint us, but gives us the care, love, and His grace that we do not deserve. We in turn model to others who we think, do not deserve it, this is our mandate and call.

There is no substitute for time spent in the face of our Lord with a surrendered heart and a learning will. We must be willing to be humble no matter who we are or our experience. I had to learn this lesson a few years back. I went from being on staff at a large, influential church to a small church in a small town. At first, before accepting the call, I thought that I was too good for the position. God, however, wanted me there to teach me to walk closer to Him and not walk in the position that I held.

So I did, and I experienced humbleness. Nobody knew me as the conference speaker, author, or having a big position in a big church, but just a youth pastor in a small church. This is where Christ wanted me and I learned a lot there. It prepared me for the road He had for me. And I am glad I went there, I learned things in a broader context that I could not have in a mega-church.

Spiritual maturity will lead to emotional maturity most of the time, unless there is some physiological or psychological problem, or deep stress that has never been resolved. It is imperative for the leader to be in control of their emotional health. If not, they need to step down and seek help, both spiritually and psychologically. If the leader is given to fits of rage or is just overly emotional, they cannot set the example that Christ has in our character. We are not to be Vulcan's exhibiting pure logic and no emotion, absolutely not. God created us as emotional beings, but as with anything else, we must have control of the excess emotions and the potential for rampage.

## Reflection

God's love must be our model for life. It must flow into us from Christ, and in return flow out from us to those around us. God's love is the ultimate power for the Christian. We are to be fueled and empowered by love in all situations. Christian love is the turning of our backs to self-concerns, and facing our neighbors. It is the surrender of our will to His. Because, if love does not take us beyond our self-interests, then what we have is lust, not love! As the passage of 1 Corinthians 13:3 would say, we become just a noise that has no reason or purpose. Out of true love, God the Father gave us His Son, and the Son gave His life in replacement for ours. The Son sent the Spirit to save us, and we should be literally overwhelmed—consumed—with extreme joy and gratitude for what God has done for us.

Remember; "*Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant.*" (NAS) What love is **not** is as important as what love **is**! Be aware that we will be held accountable and even judged on what we do **not** do or refuse to see when sin and pride are in the way (Matt. 23:27; Luke 19:42)!

- Here are positive examples from Scripture (1 Sam. 20:17; Matt. 13:35; 1 John 4)
- Here are negative examples from Scripture (Matt. 6:5; 23:6; 1 John 4:19; Rev. 2:4)

## Further Questions

1. How would you define Love?
2. Would you rather love, or be loved?
3. Look at 1 Corinthians 13:3. How does your practice of love compare to this passage?
4. What issue is in your life that would improve with more love?
5. Think through the steps you need to take to put love into action in a specific instance or to improve it. Consider examples such as a person who is mean to you at work, or a distant relative, or a neighbor with whom you may not get along. Write a love letter to your spouse, or, if you are not married, to a pretend spouse, with the points you have learned so far.

What love is **not** is as important as what love **is** (Matthew 23:27; Luke 19:42)!