

When I was asked to do this introduction back at the beginning of April, I was quite enthusiastic, but as the weeks have gone by that initial enthusiasm has given way to sheer panic. What will I say? So I am sitting down at 11.30, the night before I go with Charles to a conference in Coventry, to write this article, and I'm still panicking!

In Galatians 5 the Apostle Paul contrasts the sins of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit, and he points out that the sins of the flesh lead to death, while the fruits of the Spirit are evidence of God's life. It makes sense because if we have not got God's Spirit within us, then our fallenness becomes evident in the way we live in community, in relation to others. Equally, if God's Holy Spirit dwells within us, then we will show something of what He is like in the way we live and treat others. Now, the overriding principle that should govern the Christian life is agape love. Agape love is God's divine love and when we allow it to be at the centre of our lives we reflect God, and when it is missing we reflect sinful man. In other words, agape love is essential if we are to be witnesses for Christ.

Agape love is not a feeling, it is an act of the will, and once you get a hold of this it can transform your life. You see, if there is someone in your life you don't like, someone who treats you badly, or someone who's rude to you or ignores you, then you have the power to treat them the way God treats you, and if you do that then you are showing them agape love. For those people we find it hard to get on with, we can say, 'God by your grace I'm going to love them. When they tell lies, I'm going to tell the truth. When they do something nasty and cruel, I'm going to do something kind. I'm going to treat them the way you Lord treat me.' That is what agape love is, an act of the will whereby we treat others the way God treats us. As we are forgiven by God, so we must forgive others; as God listens to us, so we listen to others. Now, an amazing thing happens when you start treating people this way - you start to like them. Some little miracle starts to take place in your heart, you start to grow, and you reach a new perspective on that person. You find out that what you thought were blemishes were really scars. These people have been through some battles. You know beneath the rugged, hard exterior of mean people, is a broken heart just waiting for someone to show some love. This is the way Jesus treated people, even those who crucified Him. Can you imagine, while He was being crucified, He repeatedly prayed, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.'

So I'm going to make a suggestion to you. That person in your life that irritates and aggravates you, it might even be someone living in your own home, by the grace of God commit that person to the Lord. And then say, 'Father help me to share sacrificial Christian love with this person. When this person is unkind, help me to show kindness. When this person is irritating, help me to be gentle.' Just do that, and depend upon the Holy Spirit to produce this fruit, the living, beautiful, fragrant fruit of the Spirit, which is love.

You see, when hatred comes up against love, it doesn't know what to do. When selfishness comes up against love it feels threatened. There may be conflict but there will be victory. You will grow spiritually, and that other person will eventually be changed. So let me encourage you (and myself) to go out and witness for Christ as you just love people the way that Christ loves you.

*May God bless you, Ricky*