

It's good to be with you this afternoon. And if you would please turn with me in your copy of the Word of God to Galatians 5 again. I'm glad we have the right versions before us. We're in Galatians 5. We'll be in 1 Corinthians later as God helps us. Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you for your word and its power to warm and to convict and to convert and to challenge and transform our hearts into your own image. We pray this afternoon, oh Lord, that you would speak through your servant and exalt the name of your son, the Lord Jesus Christ, that we might grow in his grace and in his knowledge and be transformed to His likeness as we behold His glory in the mirror of the Word. And we offer these prayers in Jesus' name. Amen. And again, as always, if you are here and actually work for a living, by all means, feel free to leave if it gets near your time to get back to work. I would hate to keep you back from your day job, but we're glad you're here to hear the Word of God. Let's listen to the Scriptures then. But I say, walk by the Spirit. and you'll not gratify the desires of the flesh. You remember, there are two contrary forces at work in the Christian heart. There's the Holy Spirit of God, and there's the unruly desires of our flesh. our human nature. If you're not yet a Christian here this afternoon, as yet you only have the flesh at work in your heart, and you must trust in Jesus for the Holy Spirit to come and take residence in your heart that you might feel his influence. For the desires of the flesh are against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other. to keep you from doing the things you want to do. Remember Paul saying, the Christian never does anything with all of their heart. The best part of him, the spirit, is pulling him towards God. And as it does, the flesh is pulling him away. And then in those dark moments when we follow the flesh, the Holy Spirit is pulling us back to God. So there's this war going on, Paul says. But if you're led by the Spirit, you're not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you as I warned you before that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. We said that last week, that the flesh likes to feel good and to fight with anyone who gets in its way. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law, and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep step with the Spirit. Remember we've been saying that these lists of spiritual virtues are not a to-do list, Paul's been unpacking in Galatians, you remember, the two habits of a healthy soul. We keep in step with the gospel. We remember that we're saved by Christ alone, by faith alone, because of the grace of God alone, and not by our works. But when a person is saved by faith alone, that faith is never alone. We're impelled then to keep also in step with the spirit, keep in step with the gospel, keep in step with the spirit. And the spirit works in us to transform us into the image of God. And this list of virtues is fruit, singular, not fruits, but fruit. If you have one, you have them all because you have him, the Holy Spirit. And this list of fruit is more of an architectural plan showing you what Christ has won for you at the cross and what the Holy Spirit is and shall continue to do in you until these fruits come to full, this fruit comes to full perfection. And this morning we come to the, or this afternoon, we come to the foundational virtue of love, the fruit of the Spirit is love. And the Bible, of course, says that God is love. And in one sense, that's not surprising. And it's not saying anything particularly amazing because God is all

of his attributes, right? The attributes of God, His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth, they all describe the way God is in His being, not just the way God acts. They aren't describing a part of God, they're describing all of God. We could say God is righteous and God is just and God is wrath, wholly wrath. Yet the Bible doesn't say those things. The Bible doesn't say that God is being, He is wisdom, He is power, He is wrath. But it does say that He is love. That God is love. Now, the reverse is not true. Love is not God. We can't deify love, but God is love. And it's perhaps the greatest, the most beautiful, and the most moving phrase in all the Bible. God is love. It describes his very essence. While there is more to God than love, love describes the beating heart behind all of his other attributes. He is love to the core of his being. He is love all the way down to the bottom. There's not one unloving molecule in all of God's being. He's never had one unloving thought. He's never said one unloving word. He's never done one unloving thing. He's altogether lovely, our God is. Donald MacLeod says, love is God's innermost nature. Winslow, and there's a wonderful little book by Winslow, Octavius Winslow, he preached for Spurgeon many times in the tabernacle in London. But his book, Our God, put out by Reformation Heritage Books, is a wonderful little book, and I'm indebted to Winslow for inspiring me to say much of what I'm saying today. But Winslow says, love is the central perfection in God around which all of the other perfections revolve as satellites. and it's from which they derive their position and glory. For example, omnipotence, what is it? It's the power of God's love. What is omniscience? It is the eye of his love, his mind. What is omnipresence? It's the atmosphere of his love. Holiness is the purity of his love. Justice is the fire of his love. Thus might we travel the circle of the divine perfections and find each one to be simply another form of the essential perfection of God, that God is love. That's such because God is love, he loves himself. Now God is no navel-gazing narcissist. The triune nature of God's personality delivers God from any suspicion of selfishness or self-centeredness. He's God-centered but he's not self-centered in an egotistical way. Go into the heart of God and what do you find? You find a father loving his son. And you find a son loving his father. And you find the Holy Spirit, the person of love proceeding from the father and the son, a community, a communion of love. God loves himself. The most shocking, if God is love is the most beautiful phrase in the Bible, the most shocking phrase of the Bible is that God loves the world. We think of the world as a big place, but the Bible thinks of the world as a bad place. Benjamin B. Warfield says, the world is a synonym for all that is evil, noisome, and disgusting. And yet, God's love is so expansive and so good, it doesn't stay to itself. It overflows in every direction, and in particular, it overflows to the world. It condescends to reach and embrace the very depth of our degradation as human beings. Even to the darkness of Golgotha, where human hatred against God, human animosity against God is seen in its purest and most spiteful expression when the nature of man with hands and feet finally got their hands on God and showed us what we thought of him when we did. We took nails and sledgehammers and immolated the son of God's love to the cross. That's what we think about God. That's what we feel about God. And yet on the cross, not only did God's love survive that hatred, the cross becomes the supreme manifestation of the love of God for this world. He so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son. McLeod again says, God sends, he displaces love not by sending another to bear the cost of our redemption, but by sending himself. He demands a ransom for man's redemption. And he provides the ransom by becoming the ransom price for your

redemption and mine. Winslow again says, love is the moving, controlling attribute in God's great expedient of saving sinners. Justice may have demanded it. God just can't be merciful. He must be justly merciful. Justice may have demanded redemption. Holiness may have required it. Wisdom may have planned it. And power may have executed it. Oh, but love. was the origination of the whole and the moving heart that sent the son of his love out into a dark world. Had not God's love resolved to save man, all his other perfections, Winslow says, must have been employed and displayed in destroying man. So we see God's love in his relationship with himself. We see God's love in his posture towards the world. But this afternoon, I want you to see that God doesn't just love the world. God loves you. Each of you. With all of his being. Why are you saved this afternoon, Christian? Well, because Christ died in your place four years since. Why did Christ die in your place for your sins? Well, because before the foundation of the world, God chose you to be saved. Why did God choose you? He chose you because he loved you. Why did God love you? There's no reason back behind that. He loved you because he loved you. He determined to place you in Christ and to never look at you or think of you without also thinking of Jesus. We talk about people looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. They're Pollyannas. They see the world in an unnaturally positive light. Things look better than they really are. Well, God doesn't look at you through rose-colored glasses. God looks at you through Christ-colored glasses. He never looks at you without thinking of Jesus. And the heart of that resolution is the heart of God's love. When did God begin to love you? In eternity. He never began to love you. And so he shall never stop loving you. Winslow again, he's the God of love and he cannot change. He who smiles today frowns tomorrow. He who kisses now may smite us later, but he's the same tender, faithful father whose love knows no change and whose faithfulness never fails. when the sorrow is past and the storm subsides, and in the camera moments we review all of the way that he has led us, to what conclusion can we come but that through it all, true to his nature and faithful to all his promises, he was ever the God of love. Now we see that love planted that thorn hedge We see that love crush that fond hope. We might see that love blight that sweet flower. And love alone permitted you to take that step which brought you into such perplexity and such grief. Thus out of the ravenous eater comes food and from the fiery furnace silver, so pure and gold so refined. As the hymn writer says, my soul, your gold is true but full of dross. Your Savior's breath refines you with some loss. His gentle fairness makes you pure as true. You must be melted before your cast anew. But the pains you feel, the burdens you carry, the problems you face, the agonies you feel are part of the refining fire of God's love. But his heart is not to destroy you. His heart's to purify you and make you like his son. And so when you come to God, you come to a being of boundless and expansive affection. How great is God's love? It's as great as his being. You find one whose love can cover all of your sin, all of your unworthiness, all of your miseries, all of your mistakes, When you come to God, you'll never diminish the store of his love. A river may run dry. The oceans may boil and evaporate when the sun turns supernova. The sun itself will one day burn itself out. Every second, the sun loses four million tons of hydrogen. And yet, it's so massive, it still has enough fuel to last another 5,000 million years. But one day, it'll all be gone. But God's love remains ever the same, yesterday, today, and forever. His love will never fail you. You can never exhaust his love or escape its grasp once it lays hold of you in Christ. God is love. And Christ is also love. And you see Christ's love, I'm indebted to Jonathan And my brain's

crashing, I know him well, he's a friend of mine. He spoke at our summer lectures. Oh, it's gone, crashed. But he's written a wonderful book about the fruit of the spirit reflected in the life of Christ. We see all of the fruit of the spirit are manifested in their fullness in Jesus. Look with me if you have a copy of the word of God in John 13 a second. It's one of my favorite events in the life of Christ leading up to the cross. In these verses, we see Jesus standing on the verge of hell. He's on the precipice of outer darkness. And he knows it. Tomorrow, he will bear the sins of the world. And not just bear them, you remember, he will become them in his being. They'll steer him all the way down to the depths of his soul as he becomes sin in the presence of God and feels the full antagonism of God against sin. What was his mental state that night? Think about how easily you are preoccupied. Something's bothering you at work, there's a difficulty maybe in your home with your children, with your marriage, you've got some big tests coming up, and it stresses you out, and it makes you grumpy, you're kind of, you don't want people to bother you, it's always on your mind, and you want to be by yourself and think about it. How easily we become preoccupied. What was Jesus preoccupied with on the night before outer darkness? Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God, and was going back to God. Rose from the supper, he laid aside his outer garments and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured into a basin water and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. What's Christ thinking? Oh, my disciples' feet are dirty. And they're too proud to wash each other's feet. So I, the master, will do it for them. Isn't he lovely? Listen to MacLeod again in his wonderful little book, From Glory to Golgotha. It's a fantastic book. Sermons he preached around Easter and Christmas. Yet these men weren't easy people to love. They were so unteachable, so uncompromising. Their vision was so earthbound. They were so self-centered. And as the crisis deepened, things only got worse. They denied him. They fled, they lost all faith in him. Yet he loved them through all the disappointments. His love was not blind. Imaging forth the love of the eternal himself, it knew the worst about them and us. Oh, but it survived every discovery and in full knowledge of our obduracy, our hardness and fickleness, he mounted the cross to save us. That's Jesus. Isn't he lovely? And this lunchtime, I would tell you, Christian, Jesus loved you. He didn't just love us and all of the numerous, innumerable number of us. He didn't just love the herd. He loved you in all of the particularity of your individuality. He loved you. and he gave himself up for you as if there was nobody else for whom he had to die in all the world. He loved me, Paul says, the chief of sinners, and he gave himself up for me. And you think, well, what's that mean? That sounds so pie in the sky. Well, you could take the words of Paul, and you have them in the back of your bulletin there, I'm reminded of Karl Barth, he was not a good theologian. But he did say one or two good things, and one of them was this. He was asked at a press conference once, and Karl Barth was acknowledged to be one of the greatest theologians in the 20th century, at least by the world, at least. And he's written tomes and tomes of church dogmatics that go on as far as the shelf goes. It's amazing, the words you wrote. But he was asked, what is the most profound thought you ever had? And he thought and said, the most profound thought I ever had? Jesus loves me. This I know because

the Bible tells me so. What's that mean? Well, if God is love and Jesus is therefore love, what's it mean? Well, you could take the word love out of 1 Corinthians 13 and put Jesus in. What's Jesus like? Jesus is patient and kind. Jesus does not envy or boast. He is not arrogant or rude. He does not insist on his own way, not my will, but thy will be done, Father. He's not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing. Oh, but he rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus and his love never ends. As for the prophecies, they will pass away. As for tongues, they will cease. As for knowledge, it will pass away. Christ's love endures forever like the sun. And that's, I begin there with God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Because I could easily preach a sermon to try and guilt you to be a more loving husband, take out the trash, help with the dishes, and be kinder about the house to your wife. Ladies, I could encourage you to be kinder and more respectful to your husband. Those are important applications. But you don't have the capacity to love inside you. We're much better at hating than loving, at hurting than healing, at focusing upon ourselves rather than giving ourselves away to others. And the only place you'll get this love of God is not inside you, it's from the Holy Spirit and from the Son and from the Father. And it's as we behold him, Paul says, that we are transformed into the likeness of his glory. As we believe in Him, as we trust in Him, our sin nature withers. And so these words that Paul says here, they're essential for the Christian. Paul says, it doesn't matter how well you speak. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I'm a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Like someone standing up on that pastoral movement of Beethoven's sixth symphony when the strings are doing their beautiful thing with cymbals and he's going, bish, bish, bish. Doesn't matter how well you speak, my best sermons are as nothing, a waste of time if I have not love. And doesn't matter either how much you know, if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, without love it's nothing. It doesn't even matter how much you believe or think you believe. If I have all faith so as to remove mountains but have not love, I am nothing, Paul says, nothing. And even without love, it doesn't matter how much you sacrifice. Of all known people, they sacrifice and feel bitter about it and remind you of how much they've sacrificed. If I give away all that I have, if I deliver my body up to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. So this list then that Paul goes through, and we'll just read it together, you've got to realize these adjectives, patient, kind, not envying, not arrogant, they're not adjectives in the Greek, they're actually verbs. Because love is a doing thing. Love is a giving thing. God so loved the world that he didn't have a great emotion in his heart. He made a great sacrifice. He so loved that he gave. You measure the extent of his love by the gift that he gave. And our love has got to be a doing thing, an active thing. And it's something you need constantly. All these verbs are in the present continual tense. Love isn't just patient on our best days, but also on our worst. And the thing about love is that's when you measure, isn't it? It's not measured when you're relaxing at the cabin in the mountains or in the condo by the beach with your feet up and a tall, cool glass of your favorite beverage in your hand and a book in your left and the kids in one of those rare moments of delight when they're playing on the beach and making no noise and having no fighting or squabbling and you're just, everything is right with the world. And then you think, oh, I'm a very loving person. No, Paul says you measure your capacity to love On your worst days, when you face the most frustrating and irritating people

who get right and royally on your nerves, it's then that love jumps up and gets to work. Because love is patient and kind. Love does not envy or boast. Love is not arrogant. Love is not rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. Love never comes to the end of the road and says, I've loved you long enough. I'll love you no more. You're too hard a woman to love, too hard a man to love. I can't take it anymore. That's what the flesh says. But love says in the spirit, no. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how much you frustrate me, annoy me, irritate me. By the grace of God in the spirit, as I look to Jesus and the way he loved me, because I am not an easy person to love. If he can love me, and by his grace, I'm also gonna love you. And I'm gonna keep on loving you. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter how you treat me. I'm gonna treat you in love. And that's an initiative. Early in our marriage, we were married probably about five years or so, and we were, I was at RTS, and it was a hard, at RTS we lived in this tiny little dwelling. And in the summers we went home and for half the summer I lived with my parents and they didn't share our faith and they weren't entirely supportive of me going into the ministry, to put it mildly, and it was difficult. And... My mama, I think, was a little frustrated with Catherine because she didn't stop me going into the ministry. The most basic law of marriage is when mama ain't happy, ain't no one happy, and you could have stopped him. She never said that, but there was always that undertow. And then the other half of the summer, we went to live with Norma, who's Catherine's mother, who's an earnest Christian, but she was divorced then and living in a small house by herself. So we lived there with Hannah and the brothers, and it was very cramped. There was zero privacy, and it really took its toll on our marriage. And it was a difficult year, and Catherine and I were walking along the beach one evening, and there was little love lost between us. Do you have that phrase in America? We had no affection for one another. I remember hearing a pastor say once at a conference, he was saying, how many of you have thought fondly and hoped that maybe if your spouse died, you could marry somebody else? And he said it was amazing all the heads went down. There was a sea of heads went down as the spirit convicted people. And Catherine said to me, where do we go from here? And by God's grace, it was the Lord alone convicted me as the man. I've always got to be the one taking the initiative. When the church locked the door and led a seer to Christ, and he's standing, behold, I stand at the door and knock. The church had locked him out and shut the door in his face. Oh, but Christ, he wasn't pouting in the corner, he was at the door knocking. And I said, by God's grace, I'm gonna love you. I promise to love you. And by God's grace, I'm gonna keep loving you. Not because I feel it, but because God has loved me, I am going to love you. And I'm gonna keep on, it doesn't matter how you treat me. And many of her aggravation with me were quite just. But I'm going to keep loving you. And I believe your heart will change. But if it doesn't, I'm going to keep loving you. And by God's grace, that was one of those lines in the sand in our marriage. We've had our ups and our downs since. And I'm sure we'll have them still and again. But it's that commitment to love Not because it's in here, but because I know the God of heaven who's a God of love. And all of his attributes move out on my side because of his love, his being, his wisdom, his power, his holiness, his justice, and his goodness, and his truth. They're all on my side, working for my good, holding on to me, though I often lose hold of him. And that's why I spent so much time this morning, or this

afternoon, beginning with God, because that's where we must all begin, is we're transformed from one degree of glory into another as we behold his glory, as we see him and become like him when we do. And so as you look at this list this morning, I'm sure this afternoon, I'm sure you look at it and your conscience is alarming, like the service engine soon, or maybe the oil light in your car, which doesn't mean put oil in your car. When the oil light comes on, it means buy a new engine, right? But there's probably one or two of them that really, really poke you. Take those and say, Lord, I need to be better, I need to do better here and more, I need to be better here and I can only be better and do better if you help me. If you send your spirit to strengthen my heart that Christ may dwell there by faith and that I, being rooted and grounded in your love for me, may grow up with all of the saints to know what is the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of the love of Christ that passes knowledge. Those four dimensions, the length lasts from one end of eternity to another, the breadth reaching out to a lost and dying world. The depth reaches down to the pit of hell, the most degraded felon on the planet and offers Christ to them. And the height that takes us from sin to salvation and even more to the glory when we shall see Christ and be like him and we see him as he is. The four dimensions of God's love and it's as you dwell on that and ruminate on that that the fire will begin to burn in your soul and you'll be changed slowly but surely as you expose yourself to preaching that helps you feel the weight of the love of God and his glory. as you read books that inspire you, most of them written by men long dead, to help you see and feel that most amazing of all truths, not just that God is love, but that God loves me. This I know, for the Bible tells me so. Let's pray together. Oh Lord, our God and our Father, we have such a long way to go to love as you have loved. It's not in us, oh God. We have an awful quid pro quo mindset and we need your grace that gives to a world that hates. Help us to love at home. Help us to love in this church and help us to love out in the world where there are many people who are increasingly hostile and hateful and spiteful to you and to us. Yet help us, O God, to bring the aroma of Christ with us, arms open and a heart open, to love those who give us nothing but hatred in return. For Jesus' sake, amen.