

Welcome

I want to begin this morning with a totally uncontroversial fact: *The Last Jedi* is the very best Star Wars movie.

Whoa okay everyone take a deep breath. Nathan almost quit just now.

Okay all jokes aside, I have been *fascinated* by the conversation around this film. *The Last Jedi* is episode 8 of the 9-film Star Wars saga. It is the second film of the final trilogy, released in 2017 as a follow-up to the *very* successful *The Force Awakens*.

The film was divisive. Some, like me, loved it, hailing the film as among the best of the whole series. Others, like Nathan, had some serious problems with it.

And then there were some, the so-called ‘fanboys’, who *hated* the film. As in, made petitions to get it remade with a different director and harassing the cast and crew.

You may remember actress Kelly Marie Tran. Long before she voiced Raya in Disney’s latest animated feature *Raya and the Last Dragon*, Tran played Rose Tico in the film. A new character, Rose was paired up with Finn, the former storm trooper. People were so angry about the movie that they harassed Tran until she left social media.

Can you imagine that? First, imagine you’re a young actor - Tran was in her late 20s when she shot *Last Jedi*. And you get cast in a *Star Wars* movie. Could there *be* a bigger break in Hollywood? And then you make a film that you’re really proud of. You do the premier. The film crushes the box office.

And then the hate mail starts. You can’t post anything - not even a food pic - without a swarm of trolls descending on you to tell you that you’re a garbage person who ruined their favorite franchise.

It’s monstrous.

And here’s what *really* bothers me. Those fanboys? I’m pretty sure they would say they do stuff like that because they love Star Wars. In their minds, they’re the true fans. Something about *Last Jedi* was so bad that they feel compelled to act out in these ways.

Now, obviously what they’re doing is horrible and they need a lot of therapy. But I guarantee you that, for a lot of these guys, this started with genuine love.

They really *do* love Star Wars. Or at least they did at one point. But somewhere along the way, something happened and their love was poisoned until it twisted into this other thing.

We're still near the beginning of our journey to love today, so I want to hang out here. Because we live in a world that's not sure what love is. A world where 'love' can somehow look like bullying a young woman until she leaves public spaces.

It's easy to look at what fanboys did to Kelly Marie Tran and say, "That's not love. Whatever you think you mean, you're wrong."

But it's a lot harder to point at love and say, "Yes, this is love!"

Or is it? Today, we're going to explore the fruit of love, the things that grow from Love's presence in our lives. Because when we can spot the fruit, we can find the root.

Let's begin this morning by worshipping the one who created us, our source of love!

Message

Welcome to Journey to Love. Last week, we began a 40-day experience that lies at the very core of our human existence. For the next couple of months, we're gathering here in this group and also in our small groups to answer together some of the most basic questions we ask as humans:

How do we love well?

And How do we *receive* love well?

We began last week with our friend Matt Mikalatos, the author of the book we're using as a guide in our journey. Matt invited us to prepare to set out. He invited us simply to 'show up', to agree to participate in this journey.

Today, I want to ask the question, "How do we find love?"

This can be tricky because our culture loves to love. We love food - thanks to cooking shows and Instagram, foodie culture has become a whole thing. We love fandoms (like Star Wars and Marvel, but everything has a fandom now, from Twilight and Gossip Girl to KPop). We love our friends and our families and our church.

Of course, I think we're pretty good at distinguishing between "I love BBQ," and "I love my spouse."

But the truth is that relationships can be messy. And what counts as 'love' can be hard to parse. Some of us grew up with parents who told us explicitly and implicitly that we were never good enough. So we learned that 'love' could look like 'disapproval' and 'disappointment'.

Some of us have been in - or are in - relationships that are abusive. And we've come to believe the lie that the reason the other person hits us or cuts us down or manipulates us is because of how much they love us.

A lot of us are familiar with a faith that says God wants to love us but can't because we're sinners, so he's going to send us to hell until Jesus steps in and helps God love us.

Friends, none of these is love. And we could spend all day listing all the ways we've learned to love badly. Because there are endless ways we get love wrong.

As Matt writes,

Even the most loving person has moments when they act in ways that don't seem loving. And sometimes someone who doesn't truly love us has a moment when they do something that appears loving, either by accident or to manipulate us. So how can we know if someone loves us or doesn't? And, maybe harder... how can we know when we truly love someone else? Because there are times when convenience, or habit, or expectation, or guilt causes us to act as if we love someone when maybe we don't.

The best we can do in moments of uncertainty is to be reminded of what love truly is, and what love isn't.

-- Matt Mikalatos, *Journey to Love*

Turn with us to [1 John 4](#).

In our theological tradition here at Catalyst, we believe that love is the most basic truth of God's nature. Loving is what God is, how God makes Godself known to us. And we have a very specific definition of love (that comes from Jesus): self-sacrifice. Jesus told us that the greatest expression of love is giving my self up for the good of someone else.

1 John is a letter written late in the first century. It's a meditation on who God is, and what that means for all of us who are trying to live well in the world. Here's how the letter's author describes us and our relationship to God and each other:

Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

You can hear the self-sacrificial language there. How do we know God is love? Because we know God most fully in Jesus' sacrificial death.

Now, to embrace this picture of love requires us to make some hard choices. When we confess that God is love, then we reject the possibility that God hates any of us. For any reason. Ever.

When we confess that we know God most fully when we meet God at the cross of Jesus, that means we reject any pictures of God that *don't* look like Jesus as false or at best incomplete.

This is a *really* big deal for John because God is our source of love. Being connected to God, receiving love from God is what enables us to love well. Think of a hose - when it's connected to the source of water, it can provide water for the whole garden. But when it's not... it's pretty useless.

God loves us and when we learn to receive God's love well, God helps us love others well:

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

And God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. -- 1 John 4:7–13 (NLT)

According to the author of 1 John, God actually HELPS us to love well. I know that's pretty abstract but

Turn with us to [Galatians 5](#).

In his letter to the churches he planted in the Roman province of Galatia, the Apostle Paul explores a life that's grounded in God's love for us - and therefore filled by the Holy Spirit - and one that's mired in legalism, judgment and effort - what he calls 'the flesh'. Let's listen in:

When you follow the desires of your flesh, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! -- [Galatians 5:19–23](#) (NLT)

Sexual immorality isn't love. Hostility and quarreling aren't love. Jealousy *isn't* love. A hot temper isn't an expression of love. Envy and drunkenness aren't loving.

Paul goes on to make a list of virtues he calls the fruit of the Spirit. It's a list you're likely familiar with, especially if you've been around Catalyst.

Christians throughout the ages have understood this list as a set of virtues whose root is Love. That is, love isn't just the first virtue - it's the virtue out of which all the other virtues grow.

I'm not very good with plants. And weirdly, when people from out of state come to visit, they're all obsessed with the trees down here. I'll give a tour of the house and we'll step out to see the backyard and they'll point and ask, "What kind of tree is that?"

I don't know man. I'm pretty sure it's not an apple tree or a peach tree, though. You know why?

I've never seen it grow an apple or a peach.

The fruit tells you what sort of tree you're dealing with.

You have anger, jealousy, unfaithfulness or manipulation? Guess what: you're not dealing with a love tree. Because those aren't the fruit of the Spirit of Love.

But you encounter someone who is genuinely kind? Someone who is gentle or generous? Someone who just exudes patience and peace? This is someone who is growing in love, whose life is being shaped by God's Holy Spirit.

Learning to receive God's love is something that's so simple - we don't actually have to *do* anything. It's already a fact. God already loves us. Infinitely and completely.

But we've accumulated so much toxic theology and awful representations of love that it's really hard for us to accept and live into so simple a truth.

That's why we're doing this as a journey. Because a lot of us need to learn just to sit in God's love for us and know it's true before anything else. It's not something we earn or achieve or deserve. It is the fundamental truth of reality: God is love and we *are loved*.

This book is designed to help us with that by simply sitting for a few minutes in a day with that simple truth: we are loved. And we can love.

What happens this week if your life is deeply rooted in love? How does your home change if you are a source of these fruit of the Spirit? How does your job change if you are generous and kind and gentle?

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to share in this great picture of his love.

Where have I encountered fruit of the Spirit this week?

Where have I encountered fruit of the flesh?

When might I produce fruit of the flesh this week?

How can I create space to receive God's love this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Ask a friend to tell you a story of someone they know beyond a shadow of a doubt genuinely loves them. How do they know? How does this help you see love in your own life?