

Romans: A Call to Love and Other-centeredness

Romans 12:9-10

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 12. As we go back to the book of Romans, remember where we have been. This is Paul's great declaration about the first principles of Christians living. You can't get more practical than Paul is here. You can't get more theological than Paul is here. He mixes those things together. All his theology is practical and all his practice is based on good theology. For much of the rest of the book, beginning here in Romans 12:1, Paul is going to be showing and telling us what grace produces in the Christian life. You remember all the way back in Romans chapter 5, he told us that grace reigns in righteousness. Well, beginning in Romans 12:1 he is going to show us what the reign of grace produces in the way of righteousness in the Christian life. It wouldn't be inappropriate to call this section of Romans 'The Christian Way Life,' because Paul is wanting to show us what God's righteousness looks like in everyday life.

Let's look back at verses 1 through 8. In verses 1 and 2, Paul made a tremendous statement. It's a statement in which there are six distinct parts about the nature of the Christian life, and he lays out six truths that make all the difference in the Christian life in verses 1 and 2. He reminds us of the basis of God's call to holiness, and the basis of our holiness in the Christian life is God's mercy. Without God's mercy we wouldn't be able to be holy. Without God's grace we wouldn't be able to live the Christian life, and he reminds us of that in Romans 12:1.

He also tells us the call of holiness is a whole life call. It's a call to a life of sacrifice in which we give the whole of ourselves to the Lord. He tells us that the call of holiness is the call of whole life worship. We worship not just on Sunday mornings, but throughout the whole of our lives. We glorify God. He tells us that the call of holiness is to a godly nonconformity. We just don't go along with the general fads and trends of the age and assume that however our culture and society are doing it now, that must be fine. We try and think 'Christianly' and we strive not to simply conform ourselves to the ways and the behavior and the habit and the attitudes of the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

He reminds us in this passage that the call of holiness is to an inside-out transformation. It's by the renewing of the heart. God, from the inside, out transforms all of us. Finally, he reminds us that the call of holiness is to knowing and doing the truth of God. Romans 12:1 and 2 give us a grand manifesto for the Christian life.

Then in verses 3 through 8, Paul begins talking about how we ought to relate to other believers. He's spoken in verses 1 and 2 about what God has made us to be and how we are to live in light of what God has made us to be. In verses 3 through 8 he starts to talk about how we are to relate to other believers. He is addressing the Spirit's gifts to the church in these verses. As he does so, he tells us several things. He gives us three platforms for our service in the church. He tells us, first of all, we are to serve one another out of humility, and secondly he tells us we are to serve one another because we are united and because we are different. So both our unity and our diversity supply a reason to serve one another. He tells us that we are to serve one another because the spiritual gifts God has given us are for the purpose of ministering to one another. The principle of reciprocity works in the Christians life. What God has given to you, he has not simply given to you for your enjoyment or for your well being, but he has given it to you for your Christian brother and sisters help and well being and encouragement and fullness and completeness in times of need there comfort and their aid in the Christian life.

At this point, when you get to the end of Romans 12 verse 8, Paul moves from discussing the Spirit's charismatic gifting of the church and he turns his focus on the virtues that he expects to see in believers. He's talked about how the Spirit has gifted us in order to minister to one another in verses 3 through 8.

And beginning in verse 9, he speaks to us about what kind of virtues ought to be present in the Christian life as we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As he does typically, he starts with love, it's the very first virtue that he wants to talk about in this passage. This is not the only place that Paul does this. I say he typically does this. If you were to turn, for instance, to Galatians 5:22 and were to begin to look at the fruits that Paul says result from the Spirit's grace work in us, the very first one you would see is love. If you were to turn to I Corinthians 13, where Paul is addressing this fairly cantankerous charismatic church in Corinth, where the people are fairly proud of the fact that they speak in tongues and have words of knowledge and are able to prophesy, he says to them that love is a greater gift than those extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. And he goes on to say in I Corinthians 13, that "if you have faith to move mountains and you give all your money to feed the poor and if you do not have love you are nothing," which is his way of saying you are not even a believer. So the apostle in both of those passages wants to start off with an emphasis on love. That's where we are right here. In fact, Paul's argument in I Corinthians 13, following on his discussion of the spiritual gifts is exactly identical in its order here in Romans 12 because he has just discussed

what? The spiritual gifting of the church in verses 3 through 8 and now in verses 9 and 10 he is going to talk about love. Like a good teacher Paul repeats himself. So let's hear God's word here in Romans 12 verses 9 and 10.

"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor."

Amen. This is God's word, may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God we thank You for Your word and we ask now that You not only enable us by Your spirit to understand it clearly, but that by Your spirit You would work it's reality into our hearts. We confess right now that we have not loved You as we ought, nor have we loved our neighbor as ourselves, nor have we loved our Christian brothers and sisters as we should have. So we pray that by Your Spirit You would change us, transform us, amend us by Your grace. In Jesus name. Amen.

Many, many years ago the Beatles sang, "All You Need is Love." Now, actually I'm not quite sure what they meant by that. I'm not even sure what they meant by love in that song. You have to ask them. I don't even remember if it was John or Paul that wrote that particular lyric. Whatever the case is, I have this sneaking suspicion that what they meant by love there was not what the Apostle Paul meant by love here. The Apostle Paul doesn't leave you guessing here. In fact, this little two-verse section could be very aptly designated as Paul's description of what Christian love is and what it isn't. What it does and what it doesn't, because through this four part description, Paul is interested in showing you what Christian love looks like in order to move you to display that kind of Christian love. Not simply to stand back and admire, "Oh, that's what love looks like," and not only simple to aspire to it, "I'd like to be like that some day," but actually to act that way, especially in the context of the church, the communion of the saints. Paul teaches us here that because Christian love is sincere, and godly, and affectionate, and self-denying, we must love really and discerningly, and fervently, and selflessly. Let's look at the four parts of this great passage together.

First in verse 9, the first part of the verse you see Paul describing love as sincere. Christian love, Paul says, first and foremost is sincere, it is un-feigned. That is the nature of Christian love. In 9 "b", he explains to us that Christian love is not to be confused with some sort of an sentimentality. Christian love isn't love that is totally blind. Sometimes we say love is blind in a good way, and by that we mean that love is so loving that it overlooks some rather obvious flaws in the one we are loving. In that sense, love is blind for me. I am very thankful for that. I am very thankful that my wife loves blindly sometimes, but if we mean love is blind in the sense that love makes no distinctions, then Paul doesn't want to have anything to do with that kind of definition of love. He talks about that in the

second part of verse 9.

Then if you look at verse 10, the first part of that verse, he emphasizes the brotherly aspect of love. He emphasizes the family aspect of love. That love is loyal and fervent. And then in the second half of verse 10, he emphasizes the selflessness of love. How love is interested in giving honor and preference to the other first. Let's look at each part of love as Paul describes it here.

I. Love is sincere.

Beginning in verse 9 with the phrase, let love be without hypocrisy. Paul is telling us there that love is sincere. That Christian love is unfeigned. He is telling us that Christians must love really, not superficially. Paul has emphasized in Romans 8, and now again in Romans 12, that the believer in Christ is set free not to do as he pleases, not to do nothing at all, not simply to be, but the Christian to set free in order to love. To love, Someone once said, is to fulfill the law. So Paul's words in the New Testament about 'freedom' are not to be set over against 'responsibility.' Christian freedom is for the purpose of responsibility and Christian freedom actually cultivates and enables and prompts and encourages Christian responsibility. So, we need to be careful when we use the word Christian freedom because our culture hears 'freedom' and hears 'no responsibility.' That is the very last thing that would have entered into Paul or the early Christian mind when it talked about Christian freedom. This underlying theme of Christian freedom being unto the purposes of love is evident from Romans 8:2 on and it pervades and explains this section.

Given that we are to love as Christians, what does it mean to love? What is love like? Everybody, or almost everybody in our day and time in our culture, says that they believe in love, but very few agree on what that means. What is love? Paul begins to answer that question in this four-part description. He does it again in I Corinthians 13:2 and it's a little bit longer there, but here you are seeing a four part description of love.

His first statement about love is that love is genuine. It's not merely apparent, it's not merely superficial, it's not merely spoken or claimed. It's actual, it's real, it's genuine, it's tangible, it's not just in words, it's in deed. It's not just in our outward perceptions that love exist, but it is the product of a whole heart. Paul tells us here that real Christian love is sincere and genuine and therefore must do more than merely talk about love and more than merely mentally assent to the call of love. Christian love is wholehearted love that is, as in word, so also in deed.

One commentator on this passage says, "as our new relationship as believers to God can be summed up in one word-faith, so also our relationship to men, because of this new relationship with God can be summed up in one word-love." Since through faith the door become unlocked to God, the one towards men is

also open. This whole section could actually be entitled, "What Genuine Love Does And Does Not Do." Paul starts off by saying love is genuine, now he shows you in the next three points what genuine love does and doesn't do. So there is the first thing. Christian love is sincere, it 's real, it's tangible, it's not merely superficial, but it's real.

That's so important my friends especially in the South. We are good at superficial niceties. You know inviting people to drop by any time, then being absolutely horrified if they do, or beauty pageant niceties. Ever been behind the stage at a beauty pageant when the girls are smiling at one another, and then behind their backs they are stabbing one another? Those kinds of niceties, those kinds of superficialities are not what Paul is calling us to. He is calling us to real genuine love.

II. Abhor what is evil.

Secondly, in verse 9, the second half of the passage, he says abhor what is evil and cling to what is good. What's he doing there? He's telling you, let me put this as provocatively as I can, he's telling you that love discriminates. Paul is telling you that love, Christians love is not some sort of sentimentality that feels strongly toward someone, but passes no judgment on the behavior or the absolute qualities of good or evil. In other words, Paul is saying that Christians must love with a holy and a goodly love. You see, some would say that to love, to truly love, means that you do not hate; but not Paul. In fact, Paul says that you cannot love if you do not hate.

Now that I have your attention, let me explain what I mean by that. Love does not mean ignoring right and wrong. Love always makes that distinction. Love may chose to love in the face of wrong, and often does. It does not call wrong, right, and it does not ignore the distinction between wrong and right. Love distinguishes. In fact, love is not able to manifest itself to the fullness without making the distinction between wrong and right because the greatest display of love in the history of the world was when God loved what? His enemies. And had His love confused enemies and friends and said, after all, there is really no distinction, then we would never have known the greatness of the depths of His love. For Paul says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ dies for the ungodly." When people tell you that to truly love you must treat everyone the same, they lie. Because to treat everyone the same would not be to acknowledge the distinctions that exist in humanity. True love has its eyes wide open as to right and wrong, enemies and friends, and love manifests itself in such a way that those distinctions are not evaporated.

Furthermore, Paul says, true love hates certain kinds of behaviors. Look at what he says in verse 9, "Abhor what is evil." This is in the context of a passage in which he is talking about love. Abhor what is evil. Notice what he goes on to say,

"Cling to what is good." He doesn't tell us to just sort of assent. Stick to it like glue. Stick to what is good like glue, cling to it. Love doesn't blur distinctions. The contrast between love and hate is graphic, but when the meaning of love is understood, that contrast is inevitable for love has the nature of an absolute. It is sensitive to evil, it holds fast to what is good. Love is not anemic, it is dynamic, therefore it recognizes the difference between good and evil, right and wrong.

I have heard a minister say, not to long ago, that when you really understand love, you'll not make a distinction between gay and straight. Well, I'm sorry friends, there is nothing in the Bible that remotely comes close to that claim. That may be an idea that is popular in the culture today, but it's absolutely alien to the Bible. Now, does that mean that one hates those who have chosen to flaunt God's word and go against His will, and ways, and commands, in the way they are living? No, that's not what I'm saying at all. I am saying that to say, love means that you pay no mind to the distinction, is an ideal totally alien to Paul and, I might also add, totally alien to the Lord Jesus. Paul says that true love discriminates. It's not mere sentimentality; it knows the difference between right and wrong and it clings to the good rather than the evil.

III. Love is affectionately devoted.

Thirdly in verse 10, Paul says that love is affectionately devoted. Look at this beautiful phrase, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." Paul is talking about the loyalty and the fervency of Christian love. I am told by scholars of the New Testament and the early Church and of the late Jewish period, that in no other religion does the idea of 'brotherly love' exist amongst those who are not related to one another. That the idea of brotherly love between a Christian community which is not drawn together by ethnic or racial or bloodline ties, but rather by a mutual relationship to Jesus Christ and the resulting communion with one another because of our membership in His body, that idea is entirely unique in the ancient world. We may take it for granted. It shows up in city names like Philadelphia. This call to brotherly love is graphic isn't it.

Paul is describing love as affectionately devoted. Perhaps from time to time you parents and grandparents have seen sibling when they are not at war and they have truly manifest love towards one another it is a beautiful thing to see. Whether they are very young or older, it is a beautiful thing to see. Siblings loving one another. The Apostle is saying that kind of love, when it is right, ought to be the way it should be in the Christian Church. There ought to be Davids and Jonathans. You know, the Bible does say that there is "a friend that sticks closer than a brother." Paul is saying, that's what the Church ought to be like. There ought to be those kinds of love relationships in the church. Jim Phillip puts this in a phrase that is almost impossibly hopeful, but listen to it, "The Christian Church is the one place on earth where it should be possible to trust one another's love and loyally without being hurt."

Now I want to say two things about that phrase. First, I want to exhort you to strive for the church to be like, and start, with you. Strive for the church to be like that. A place where the love and the loyalty is so strong and so manifest that it's safe for people. Now I want to turn to the flip side. If you have found the opposite in the Christian Church, and you have been wounded in the Christian Church, and you have been shown disloyalty and dismissal in the context of relationships in the Christian Church, don't be cynical. That reality shouldn't surprise you. After all, we're sinners and "the Church is a hospital where sick sinners get well," Augustine once said. It shouldn't surprise you that sinners don't live up to this vision, but you yourself strive to make sure it's a place where at least with you, love and loyalty can be experienced in such a way that people are safe. Paul is calling on us to show family love to one another.

It's beautiful isn't it when you see two friends utterly devoted to one another, I get to see this in this church maybe more than any of you. When someone is facing a serious problem here, I often get to see other people in this church who love and care for those people that you don't know about. One of the very first visits I made to the funeral home when a wife of a congregation member died, I remember being surprised by one of our elders who was quietly sitting and waiting outside of the room where a husband who was now a widower was meeting with the funeral home help to plan his wife's funeral. That elder was just quietly sitting there biding his time. He could not wait to minister. I had no idea that those two had any type of a relationship at all. It was very interesting. Not long ago the man that I saw being ministered to in that situation, I met outside of the door of Baptist Hospital ministering to the wife of a former deacon of this congregation, whose husband was dying. He hadn't known her husband that long, but he had known him long enough to want to show him Christian love. Let me tell you, that pleases me no end when we see those kinds of tangible expressions of love. No blood relationship whatsoever there. The only thing pulling those people together is the common bond that they have in the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet treating one another like family when the chips are down. That ought to be a goal for us here at First Presbyterian Church. We shouldn't use the excuse, "Well, you know there are 3500 people on the role" as an excuse not to be a family. We ought to say, "Ok, if there are that many people on the role, let's find the family first, then when we find them, let's love them." That should be our goal, friends. That kind of family love.

IV. Christian love is selfless and self-giving and honors the beloved.

One last thing. At the end of verse 10 he says Christian love is selfless and self-giving and honors first the beloved. Love honors the One who loved first. Give preference to one another in honor Paul says. Christians are to be other-centered in other words. Now other-centered is different than other-directed you understand. One sociologist has characterized this day and age as an other-

directed age. We look to others, desiring their approval so much, that we allow their choices and their lives and their ways and their patterns to dictate to us what we ought to be doing. Being other-centered is not being other-directed. It's not having no guts to our own choices and priorities and no sense of anchoring in the word of God, as opposed to the ways of the world in the way we behave. Being other-centered is not being directed by others, it's being concerned with for the well being of others. It's being driven by a desire to look out for the best interest of someone else other than yourself. That's the kind of other-centeredness that Paul is calling us to hear.

In this passage he speaks of it in giving preference to one another in honor. You know, another encouraging thing a minister gets to see is people who minister in the church not because they want a title, not because they want status, not because they want to be recognized, not because they want a plaque on the wall somewhere, but because they genuinely love. Paul is basically saying here, if you genuinely love, if you love like God wants you to love, you will find yourself giving yourself selflessly and preferring others over yourself.

I want to say, as I looked through this description of love during the last couple of weeks, and especially yesterday and the day before as I was meditating on this about myself, I began to wonder if I had ever loved. So often love is associated with a profound feeling. It may be the love of a husband and a wife. It may be a love of two engaged to be married. It may be the love of a friend and a friend, and in those loves there is locked up so much of a mutual satisfaction that you wonder sometimes how much altruism there is in that love. It may be that there is so much gratification in those love relationships, where you are full and completed and complimented and helped, that the other directives of that love are minimal. Paul is calling us to other-centeredness and love. To give ourselves away in love. If you've been hurt in love, that can be very hard to do. If you have been hurt and disappointed in the church, that can be very hard to do. Paul doesn't tell you to do this because of the hope that the people that you are loving and caring for, because of the hope that they are going to get it right all the time or that they are not going to let you down, or that your love is going to be reciprocated or responded to in the way that you hope it will be. He tells you to do this because of what God has done in you, Romans 12:1 and 2, because of the Spirit He has given you, Romans 12:3 through 8, and because of what God has done for you, Romans 1 through 11. That makes all the difference. Let's pray.

Lord and God, help us to love and help us to know what it looks like and then grant us, O Lord, the grace to do it in the face of disappointment because of what You've done for us. In Jesus name. Amen.

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