

Sermon Reading: Romans 12:9-21

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Sermon Theme: Christians Love as Christ Loves

We have a little problem when it comes to love. Part of that is because we know there are different types of love. For instance: my love for cheeseburgers and pizza is drastically different from my love for my wife. Then there's the issue of how to love because we understand that different people respond to different loving actions. To top it all off, we wonder then with whom we want to share this love. To help us with our understanding we turn to Paul's words the he writes in Romans 12.

Paul begins: **Love must be sincere.** It's without pretense and it's not fake; there is no fine print or terms and conditions. It's love that will **Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.** Because the love that he is speaking about comes from God, we are going to love what God loves and hate what he hates. And this love is first shown to a specific group of people. He writes, **Be devoted to one another in love.** What is lost in translation is that this is the special love and bond between brothers and sisters in Christ. We are devoted to and have a special place in our hearts for our fellow believers; we unapologetically have this love for our family in Christ. And then Paul moves outside of this group and describes that this love **Honors one another above yourselves.** This isn't about seeing yourself worse than others. Instead, it's seeing each other with the eyes of God that this other individual is of infinite worth. This person is someone who Jesus loved so much he died for them. So out of love for them, this love will desire to put their wants and needs before my own—it is unselfish love.

Paul then continues that this love will **Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.** Don't hold back or be ashamed that you are a Christian. Keep your spiritual fervor; be excited and keep growing in that fire of the Holy Spirit and the New Man created in you that desires and loves to follow the Lord's will. And when we do this we are able to **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** This hope is the hope of eternal of life that is yours in Jesus. This hope fills us with joy because we know that our time here is short and what awaits us is greater than we can imagine. And so we are patient in afflictions knowing there is an end-date and that the struggles are not forever. And as we endure, be faithful in prayer, go to your God trusting and relying on him, calling on him to carry out his will and purpose in your life.

This hope pulls on our eyes away from ourselves and fixes them on Christ so our love desires to **Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.** This love that comes from the hope of Jesus opens our hearts for the joys and sorrows of others. We want to take an interest in and share in the needs of others. We are there to support, encourage, and to build one another up; to celebrate with and to share in their suffering. This sincere love **Lives in harmony with one another and is not proud, but willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.** This love practices saying, "You first," when serving God's will and your neighbor.

Sounds great! But one may look at this as a list of instructions to restrict us. And that's understandable because I know my heart and you know your own. I know how my love is not always sincere but just going through the motions because I know what is expected of me. Even when I doing something out love, too often I do it because I know certain people are watching or I'm expecting something in return—so selfish.

Instead of hating evil, I'm drawn to it, succumbing to temptation, while letting go of what is good and what I know is right in God's sight.

Instead of being devoted to the brothers and sisters in Christ at times it's easy to take them for granted, to take advantage of them and their love thinking, "I can get by with this; they have to understand."

Am I really honoring someone above myself when I at times think that my work is harder, my time is more precious, that someone else should do the work? Am I honoring someone above myself when I quickly judge the type of person that someone is by how their kids are acting in the store, the clothes the individual wears, the job they work or their lack of one?

I'm ashamed of how often I'm not motivated and hesitate to show love to others. Too easily the spirit is quenched so serving the Lord seems like a burden rather than a joy. That hope doesn't seem so joy-filled when I'm struggling right now, there's little to no patience when life doesn't go my way, and to top it off my prayer life suffers.

Instead of blessing someone who wrongs me, I take it as the highest personal offense that deserves the most severe of punishments...and I hold onto that wrong too refusing to let it go. Don't get me started on my pride and how conceited I can be.

Maybe you can relate in some way. Maybe your struggles with loving look a little different. The thing is we have our reasons and most of the time people will be admit that they are fair and warranted. But the fact is that here in Romans 12 is the type of love we should show but we fail. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And he does. This love isn't just what we want to show, it's the love that God already has shown to you. For selfish and pride-filled sinners, God gives perfect, sincere, and free love. Because God is just he hates what is evil and loves what is good. And so he punishes Jesus who became sin for us, takes your sin from you, so that you would be given Jesus' goodness in its place. Jesus came to be your brother and devoted to you; he chooses to be born into this world so that you would be welcomed into God's family as His own child. Jesus puts you above himself becoming lower than the lowliest slave so that he might give up his life as the payment for you. Jesus would not let anything get in his way or quench his spirit or desire to serve God's will so that he would be your perfect substitute. For the joy of winning salvation for you, Jesus goes to the cross, endures the suffering and pain, knowing that his Father's will is being carried out and your salvation is being won. Jesus selflessly gives up his life and freely gives you his love.

That selfless love is what we want to show. And it's only from this love of Jesus that we are able to share it. It doesn't come from you trying to better or more loving. It's through faith that God works in you to will and to act, to love according to his good purpose. We love, because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

But then I was betrayed; or so I felt. The love I felt should have been for me was being shown to someone else. Someone else had come in behind my back without saying a thing, and it hurt. The love that I was pouring out was not being returned. All that time and energy I had put in seems like it wasn't worth it. And it hurts. I was ready to burn bridges and be done with it all. I convinced myself I wasn't repaying evil with evil; no, this was right. Someone had to pay for it. I thought I was looking out for others. I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. It was up to me to do something, to get back, to get even, because otherwise he got away with it.

Ever feel like that too?

But what does God say? **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.** ¹⁸ **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** ¹⁹ **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (vv.17-19).**

This Christian love, love that flows from a heart of faith, not only puts others before yourself, it trusts God's never-ending love for you. It trusts God's goodness that he will not let the guilty go unpunished but will repay the wrongs that have been done. I don't know what that will look like and maybe I won't be able to see it. But it's not my place. It's not your place. It's not the church's place. On the contrary, verse 20 states: **If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.**"

Those burning coals might be that because of your kindness your enemy feels bad, feels shame because of how they treated you and then they will change their actions. But there's a good chance that is not going to happen. But God assures you, it's not like they are getting by with any wrongs they have done. It's not like they snuck something passed him and he didn't notice. Leave room for God's wrath. Leave it to him to heap burning coals on someone's head in judgment.

But as for you, **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** There's a warning there that in seeking revenge you put your own soul at risk to be overcome with evil. Instead, overcome evil with good. Love even your enemies. Jesus reminds you, "Trust that God will do as he promises he will do. Think about what he has done for you. Remember who you were. You were God's enemy. But I didn't let that stop me. You want to know what love is? While you were still his enemy, I died for you. And with my death I've already defeated your greatest enemies. The devil has no power over you; I crushed him. Sin does not control you; I freed you. Even death's power has been removed; I rose from the dead. You have no need to concern yourself. I am still Lord who rules over all things for your good. I am protecting you and I will avenge you in my own time and my own way. But right now, I promise my grace is sufficient for you. I know it's hard; I know it's not easy to love like this. I also know how you have failed. But you still have and will always have my love—nothing can separate you from it. I forgive you. I'm asking for nothing in return. I want no payment. It's yours. It's free. I sealed this love to you and guaranteed it your own when you were made God's child in Baptism. I keep giving it to you when you receive my body and blood for the forgiveness of sins in the Lord's Supper. I reassure you of it putting it on your heart and pour it into your ears when you hear my voice speaking in the Word."

Jesus shows you the type of love that we want to share and he shows us how to share it. In the peace of forgiveness that Jesus gives as we continue to grow in our knowledge of Jesus' love, as we continue to be filled up with it, we desire to love as Jesus loves. Amen.