**Romans 12:9-21** August 4, 2019

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*Romans 12:9Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

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

*17Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. 20On 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.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Show Me What Love Is**

**I. Defining Love**

“Sit – Set,” “Lay – Lie,” “Like – Love.” It was third grade, about 40 years ago. The student nailed sit/set. Lay/lie was trickier but he eventually got it. But the like/love thing—he had issues with his teacher. Miss Wilkes insisted that he couldn’t possibly “love” his dog. “That’s not what the word means…” she said. He was pretty sure that he did “love” his dog.

You see what was happening: language was changing. When Miss Wilkes grew up, “love” was a word reserved for interpersonal relationships, between human individuals. It was a tender word. Grown men were known to go decades without uttering that word to their own beloved children or spouses. There was a lot of reality in the old one-liner, “I told you I loved you when we got married. If it ever changes I’ll let you know.”

But then we were told that fathers needed to tell their kids that they are loved. Maybe so. Maybe so. And then we got to loving ice cream and living room décor and even our dogs. Now the word “love” is everywhere. Yet I am not convinced that parents love their children any more than when the word was too tender to speak.

There was a preacher who once said something I can’t get out of my mind: “Some things that are true when whispered, become untrue when shouted.”[[1]](#footnote-1) I think the word “love” is one of those casualties.

How the word “love” is used has changed! That creates a problem. The Bible, which speaks of love often, is a whole lot older than living memory or those changes. Does what it says about love still stand?

There is perhaps no more meaningful word in the Christian vocabulary than the word love. Think about some of your most familiar Bible passages: *“God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son…”* (John 3:16). *“These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”* (1 Corinthians 13:13). What is happening in Jesus’ arguably most famous parable, the one we heard a few minutes ago about the good Samaritan? Jesus is explaining the command, *“Love your neighbor.”* Love defines God’s relation with us. It defines our relations to each other.

Here’s a question for you: If love is so important, why isn’t this reading about how we are supposed to love other people up front in the first chapter of Romans? Why tucked away in a corner two-thirds of the way through the 16 chapter book? It is because the Christian faith teaches that we cannot love—not really truly love the way that God has in mind—until we know how much God has loved us.

Oh sure, anybody can be nice to nice people. But the love God desires isn’t that sort of love. That sort of love is gold-tone plastic, a cheap imitation. What God wants is real 24K gold love. Love strong enough to pray for the salvation of people who would damn you if they could—in fact they have said as much. Love strong enough to forgive people who have left long scars on your heart, your body. Love that blesses people who persecute and discriminate against you and take you to court. How can you have a love that strong?

That’s what the first eleven chapters of Romans are about. Those chapters describe our moral lostness, and a Savior who empathized and then sympathized with a world full of lost people. He humbled himself in a life lived for everyone else and a shameful, painful death on the cross. The first eleven chapters are about the great treasure that Christ has gently put in our hands, the forgiveness of all our sins, and now he tells us, “Live like forgiven people.” Those eleven chapters need to be heard, or at least remembered, before we get to today’s reading in chapter 12 which begins, ***“Love must be sincere.”***

As I mentioned with that student and teacher, the definition of love is changing. In our 21st century use of the word “love”, what we usually actually mean is “I really really like it, …or him, …or her.” It is just taking the word “like” and adding, “a lot.” “I don’t *like* ice cream. I *Love* ice cream.” That’s well and good. That’s how people talk. But that’s not what “love” means in the Bible.

In some ways, the Bible meaning of love is almost the opposite of the world’s meaning. Bible defined love can say, without contradiction, “I don’t like him, but I do love him.” In world-defined love that is non-sense. You cannot like something a lot that you don’t even like a little bit. Nonsense! But in God’s definition of love, it can happen because like and love are very different.

Not so long ago a woman asked me about Jesus’ words, *“Love your enemies”* (Matthew 5:44). She said, “I don’t understand that. How can I love people who have done terrible things to me and don’t look the least bit sorry about it and we have nothing in common? Does Jesus want me to like him?” You see, she was right. She had the world’s definition of “love” in her mind. She could not imagine liking that enemy. That’s not what Jesus told her to do. He didn’t say, “You have to like them.” He said, “I want you to love them” Love them with Bible-defined love: commitment and concern for their good. Pray for them. Ask God to help them.

And now we begin to understand how important it is for Christians to act according to God’s definition of love, and not the world’s. In our short reading there are nearly 30 different commands and directions. Thirty! Every one of them a shining facet of what Christians brimming over with love look like. Each line could serve as a sermon of its own. Sitting at my computer trying to think of how to corral all these different descriptions, I got frustrated. There is, too much! And so I picked three that stood out to me--others might have stood out to you—three that speak of our relationship to other people. 1)Humility; 2) Sympathy; 3) Responding to Evil.

**II. Describing Love**

A – Humility (10, 16)

First, consider humility. A hallmark of our Savior was his humility. Descended from heaven, the Son of God had a humble birth, a humble life. Never did he complain, and he resisted the temptations to ditch it for fame, wealth and the easy way out. In the end he willingly suffered a shameful, painful death on behalf of others.

Christ’s humility is the model for our humility.

One thing: humility is not thinking of oneself as useless or worthless. No. We are greatly loved of God, and counted of great value. But Christian humility is thinking of oneself as no more valuable than any other. Our world has all sorts of ways of assigning value to people. Society judges people more or less valuable based on looks, intelligence, achievements, wealth, charisma, age. We soon learn where we fit, how high we rank on those different totem poles, and how highly other people rank on those totem poles. We avoid those too low, aspire to those up higher, and rub elbows with those on the same level. But it should not be that way among Christians.

In verses 10 and 16 it says, ***“Honor one another above yourselves… Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”*** A church where people are graded according to what society thinks of them is an ugly thing. And few things are more beautiful and uplifting than seeing people of all statuses considering one another brothers and sisters in Christ. This is Christian love.

B – Sympathy (15)

Another Christ-like attitude is sympathy. Verse 15 says, ***“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”*** I need to ask you, which one is easier: To mourn with the mourners or to rejoice with the rejoicers? I have a thought, and maybe it doesn’t reflect well on me, but here it is:

When bad things happen, what do we say? “I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy.” And if it did happen, we would mourn with those who mourn. I know most of you pretty well, and I really believe you would. Even with people who have caused you problems.

But let’s say I drive an old beater of a car that I… appreciate… mostly. One day my neighbor comes home and parks a big new pickup truck so tall his wife is going to need a stepstool, so much chrome I need sunglasses, so big that the fuel efficiency is measured not in miles to the gallon but in gallons to the mile. He opens the door and almost has to parachute out, spots me on my porch with my old lawn chairs, run-away hedges and beater in the driveway and he smiles and waves. Not like he’s bragging, he’s just happy. Who wouldn’t be? But here’s my problem: I work harder than him. I have a better manners than him. I give more to church than him—but he’s got the new truck.

Am I rejoicing with those who rejoice? Do you realize how few people we do not get jealous over in their moments of success? It can be hard to rejoice with those who rejoice!

Yet when a Christian genuinely loves his neighbor, his neighbor’s successes are reasons for joy. We take that sinful human nature and its envy and we throttle them, even if the world seems a little unfair at that moment. Christians who’ve known God’s goodness rejoice in his goodness to others.

Bible defined love sympathizes in both good times and bad.

C – Responding to Evil 19-20 (14)

The largest part of our reading, about one-half of it, deals with the final point: the distinctly unlovable people in our lives. They have chosen to be our enemies, who make us miserable.

The Christian love response to these people is ***“Bless those who persecute you.”*** It has to be repeated, ***“bless and do not curse.”*** The most natural impulse that we have as human beings is to retaliate. What are shouting matches but retaliation? What is road-rage? How does a twitter feud escalate? All are distinctly un-Christian ways to respond to people *even though they have wronged us!*

***“Do not repay anyone evil for evil… Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’ says the Lord. 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.”***

Don’t get revenge. But wait, did you hear verse 20? ***“‘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*.”*** That’s pretty clever, right? God approved revenge. So I can’t do mean things to them, but I can utterly shame them in front of other people, right? No, no, no. Whether it is physical harm or public shaming, that is still revenge. The goal is not to shame. The goal is that the one who wronged you is brought over to Christ. Not to punish, but to bring them into a relationship with the Lord where they are just as blessed as you are. In doing this, you will, ***“not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”***

God-defined love. Did you hear it today? It is almost nothing like “loving” ice cream or “loving” this week’s repeat #1 pop song. It’s not about how I feel. It’s about a concern and care and commitment to other people. It’s simply what Christ has done for me. Amen.

1. As I remember it from somewhere in Fred Craddock, uncertain of page or volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)