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Romans 12:10

7th Message

Bill Vinnicombe

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BROTHERLY LOVE – TRUE FORGIVENESS

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

Good morning. I am Bill Vinnicombe. I am blessed and privileged to be one of the Elders at PBC Cupertino. A few months ago John and Brian approached me about preaching on Forgiveness today. To be honest with you preaching was not one of those things that was on my personal “to do” list, but after much prayer and consideration I realized that the Lord was asking me to move outside of my comfort zone and let the Holy Spirit speak through me today. So I come to you as a brother in Christ—recognizing I may be an object lesson in forgiveness, your forgiveness of me, today.

For those who do not know me, let me briefly share a bit of my background and spiritual story. I was raised in the Bay Area in a Catholic family. My parents taught me right from wrong and the value of hard work. During the summer of my junior year in high school a friend encouraged me to read the Bible with him—something I had never done before, although I regularly attended Mass and had been active at church.

During that summer, over 40 years ago, my life was transformed. That summer I asked Jesus Christ into my life as Lord and Savior, and my real spiritual walk with the Lord started. More specifically, the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes touched me deeply, since they expressed ideas about wisdom, foolishness and sin which I had felt, in part, but never had read before. Proverbs provided me with God’s detailed instructions for His people on how to deal with the practical affairs of everyday life. And Ecclesiastes taught me the futile emptiness of trying to be happy and find true satisfaction apart from God.

The first few verses of Proverbs really spoke to me. They are:

The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel: To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth... The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck. My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent (Prov. 1:1-4,7-10 ESV).

The final verses of Ecclesiastes are:

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil (Ecc. 12:13-14).

Within these two books I found a personal roadmap to navigate life in a meaningful way. Why not learn from the wisest man who ever lived instead of going down a path of sure destruction?

Brenda and I met our freshmen year in college, we were married 33 years ago, and have been blessed with three children. Some of you might be familiar with some of the struggles within our immediate

family. Brenda and I have often commented to each other that we do not know how we could have come through these trials without the Lord. He has been faithful, gracious and consistent as our Abba Father.

Often we have leaned on this verse:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:13).

Overcoming Evil with Good

Now let’s transition into Romans 12. Over the past couple of months we have been going through Romans 12 with the Series titled “Overcoming Evil With Good.” This chapter marked a change in Romans from theology to love and ethics. The first 8 verses of chapter 12 focus on the changes and transformation which come to the believer through the Holy Spirit—more specifically, that we are to present our bodies, hearts and minds to God as living and holy sacrifices. Through this we will be led to live transformed lives, being in the world, but not of the world. We are called to not only be part of one body, but also individually to use our gifts in service to one another within the body. As John Hanneman stated so well last week: your life is not about you!

Four types of Love

As you likely recall, Ancient Greek has multiple words for love, describing four primary types: Affection (storge), which is familial love between a parent and child; Friendship (philia), the love of a close friend, typically of the same sex but not in a sexual manner; Passionate love (eros), self explanatory; and Agape love, which the New Testament defines in a manner quite different from the first three loves. Agape love is divine love, love which God has for us. It is unconditional love.

As Bernard shared a few weeks ago, agape love must be placed in each believer, since it does not occur naturally as the other three loves do. This love begins with the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who were a community of love in the very beginning. The Father loves us in his Son, and puts his love in us through his Spirit. And now he invites us to pass this love along to others.

Verse 9 marks a key aspect of the transformation of self with the admonition, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” The love in this verse is agape love, unconditional, God-initiated love. But we also hear the echo of other places where agape love is used in the New Testament, and of God’s commands to seek good and avoid evil throughout the Bible.

As I prepared for teaching today, three themes emerged which have been very powerful and transformative for me. The first has to do with God’s love and forgiveness for the sins of all men through His

Son, Jesus Christ. The second has to do with our love and forgiveness of our neighbors. Brian's June 30th sermon on the Good Samaritan challenged me to think about who is my neighbor and how to love them, particularly when we may come from opposite perspectives and have radically different value systems. And the third, which we will cover today, deals with brotherly love among believers, and what this looks like with respect to forgiveness. We will review the first two themes before exploring brotherly love and forgiveness.

First, let me share an illustration with you. In our world many counterfeits exist. In healthcare it is well established that positive relationships between health care providers and patients can enhance the healing process. Consider this true situation: a prisoner was dying in a prison hospital. As he was thrashing around, a health care provider whom he knew was called in to calm him down. In the course of doing this she asked the prisoner what did he want, given that the end of his life was near? He looked at her and said, "I want to be loved and I want to be forgiven." What a profound answer. So, what did the health care provider do? She held the man, looked into his eyes, and said, "I love you and I forgive you!" Was this true love and true forgiveness? Did this gesture provide true hope, redemption and eternal salvation? Given the circumstances, it likely was not. Though well-intentioned, the health care provider's love and forgiveness were counterfeit.

God's Love and Forgiveness

Let us go to Calvary to learn how we may be forgiven. And let us linger there to learn how to forgive. – C.H. Spurgeon¹

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17).

As Christians, until we have a "right" relationship (vertically) with our Heavenly Father, and accept His *unconditional* love and forgiveness for our sins, we cannot have balanced relationships (horizontally) with our neighbors or fellow believers, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Man's need for God's love and forgiveness goes back to the Garden of Eden. In the creation of man, God gave us the gift of free will. The less desirable parts of free will can be the consequences which result from our sin nature. For Adam and Eve this meant they were banished from the Garden and their lives went in a different direction than if they had obeyed God's commands.

But Adam and Eve's disobedience did not mean that God abandoned mankind. Throughout history God has provided parts of an "Owner's Manual," as John Stackhouse recently put it, which became the Bible for mankind to follow as His created beings. It was intended to help us navigate the evil in the world resulting from our damaged relationship with Him. The Ten Commandments and Proverbs are two prominent examples within the "Owner's Manual." These commandments and proverbs were not provided to punish, but rather to guide mankind away from the adverse consequences of making wrong choices.

The Christian author Miroslav Volf made a very compelling statement about God and sin in his book, *Free of Charge*. Volf states, "The world is sinful. That's why God doesn't affirm it indiscriminately. God loves the world. That's why God doesn't punish it in justice. What does God do with this double bind? He forgives."²

Now Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) provides a powerful illustration of God the Father sadly accepting our choice to leave His love and care. Unfortunately, some sons or daughters choose never come back to the Father. For those of us who do come back to God, fully shamed and repentant, He runs towards us, draws us into His forgiving embrace and fully restores us to His household through His Son Jesus Christ. God's agape love for us is unconditional, but we have to choose His grace and forgiveness by accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Of course, the earthly consequences of our choices may remain, but we are eternally in God's love and care. Some may actually feel unworthy or unlovable to God after doing sinful things, but this is not the case.

In the book, *Embracing the Love of God*, James Bryan Smith makes a very compelling statement:

God invented forgiveness because He knew that we were capable of harming one another, and He knew that forgiveness was the only way to heal our broken hearts.³

There is another aspect of the Prodigal Son parable which also speaks to our human nature, and that is from the perspective of the older son. Bitterness and resentment keep the older son from forgiving his younger brother. His frustration blinds him to the treasure he freely enjoys through constant relationship with the father. This bitterness and resentment is left unresolved in the parable. If one cannot identify personally as a Prodigal son or daughter, honestly examine whether you might be the other brother.

Have you ever experienced deep bitterness and resentment? I am referring to that type of bitterness and resentment which can become so consuming that it damages relationships and can be carried to the grave, impacting others well into the future. Unfortunately, I have experienced this in my own family, where recklessness in relationships has passed from parents to children. I know that unresolved bitterness and resentment decays the heart and clouds judgment. It can become a consuming focus, or a constant pain which needs to be dulled. One can become hypersensitive and defensive, which damages other relationships. True forgiveness is about releasing a debt which the offender has not paid and may never pay.

The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) illustrates how the Lord forgives our trespasses and how we are called to forgive the trespasses of those against us. The two verses following the Lord's Prayer have a strong admonition against not balancing forgiveness from the Father with forgiveness of others, which is amplified by Jesus in the parable of the master who forgives the debt of the servant, who in turn does not forgive the lesser debt owed to him.

This parable closes with Jesus stating,

Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart (Matt. 18:21-35).

You see, forgiveness is a heart matter. As agape love is not natural to man, neither is unconditional forgiveness natural to man. Author Robert Mulholland makes an interesting observation about human forgiveness in his book *The Deeper Journey*. Mulholland states that

Our false self requires 'justice' (spelled r-e-v-e-n-g-e, revenge) before forgiveness can be granted. The offender must be repentant,

apologetic (often publicly), provide restitution for loss or injury, perhaps even make a commitment not to repeat the behavior; then, *perhaps* our false self might consider forgiveness.⁴

Does this ring true for you?

James Bryan Smith has identified four general misconceptions about forgiveness:

- 1) To forgive is to condone the behavior.
- 2) Forgiving someone is only necessary when it changes the one who harmed us.
- 3) “Time heals all wounds”—while this may be true for physical wounds, time does not heal spiritual wounds by itself.
- 4) “To forgive is to forget” —not only impossible, but dangerous.⁵

Here’s the Lord’s model for forgiveness from today’s Scripture Reading:

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him” (Psalm 103:8-13).

Neighborly Love and Forgiveness

In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus pushes the boundary of love for our neighbor. He dismantles the comfortable definition of neighbor, such as people who are like us or live near us, and expands it to include to every human being.

The Pharisees met with Jesus, trying to trick and silence him and asked,

‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets’ (Matt. 22:36-40).

In Greek, the love referred to in the second commandment is agape love—God’s unconditional love.

A few weeks ago Bernard commented that our Western culture is leaving its Judeo-Christian heritage behind and has been moving towards a post-Christian age, one where there is a growing chasm between Christianity and contemporary culture. Bernard captured the essence of contemporary culture within his description of “The New Atheists,” Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

For me, this change towards a post-Christian age was well described by theologian R.R. Reno in the April 2013 edition of *Imprimis*, which is a Hillsdale College publication. Reno describes what many Christians are experiencing, that “Religious liberty is being redefined in America, or at least many would like it to be.”⁶

This often lands in the “soft” censorship and intolerance of “political correctness,” and the “Rise of the Nones” as a political and social force in the US, particularly in the 2012 election cycle. What Reno calls the “Nones” are those who would describe their religious affiliation as “none.” Reno asserts that this group is highly

ideological and uses its influence, academic and otherwise, to discredit Christianity and the Judeo-Christian foundations of our culture.

This has led to a culture of increasing moral ambiguity, moral relativism, and confusion for many—particularly those who are still forming their beliefs and opinions in the teenage and early adult years. Politicians who claim that destructive activities in their personal lives have no bearing on their fitness to be public leaders are being elected. Random acts of violence and murder, such as that of Chris Lane this past week, are worn as “badges of honor” by assailants. Choices made by individuals, leaders, and countries have consequences.

By contrast, consider the following from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, which states that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” And the final sentence, “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

These words and concepts would never be allowed in the public forum today. We certainly have progressed quite foolishly over the years.

Yet, what should Christians do in this increasingly hostile environment? Develop relationships and through this love their neighbor. With the Nones and the New Atheists it is very difficult to directly share God’s truth without the development of relationships, since many of our perspectives involve different world views which can be barriers to forming those relationships at all, but it is our duty to overcome such barriers.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. (Eph. 4:25).

Brotherly Love and Forgiveness

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Rom. 12:10).

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on *love*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Col. 3:12-14; emphasis added).

So how does all of this land in today’s Bible verse? After being called in Rom 12:9 to have genuine (agape) love, and brotherly/familial love in verse 10, we come back to agape love towards each other in Col. 3:14. Further, we are called to resolve complaints with one another, as God’s chosen ones, through forgiveness.

For you see, family has been redefined by Jesus Christ, and it is a radical redefinition. In Matthew 12:50 Jesus states, “For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” The brotherly (sisterly) love we are to show to each other is defined in Greek as *phila/storge* love, a combination of both brotherly and family love.

Well, both brotherly and family love denote a closeness which allows one to work through the messiness of family life. Our love should be resilient, and it should apply to all brothers and sisters

in Christ. At times believers can get trapped into a narrow-minded perspective of the church they attend. Through Christ, all believers are related as brothers and sisters in God's family no matter the language we speak, the country we live in, or our religious affiliation.

In more intense situations, believers ought to be able to settle arguments and disputes with each other without going to a secular court. As Col. 3:12 states, we are called to live in humility and meekness with each other. Since secular courts have a different value system, we are called to resolve any legal disputes among fellow believers while maintaining a positive witness through submission to godly leadership, under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Paul teaches this in 1 Cor. 6:1-7.

Well, we have covered a lot of ground in our time together this morning. I would like to bring this together with the following applications/comments:

- 1) Become grounded in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes—have confidence in the foundation which God has provided for each of us—and share this with others.
- 2) Do not be careless about the existence of sin and evil in today's world.
- 3) Embrace the redefinition of neighbors and family in Christ; your biological family may actually be a neighbor.
- 4) Pray for a transformed relationship with God, accepting His unconditional love and forgiveness so that we can love and forgive our neighbors and fellow brother/sisters in Jesus Christ.
- 5) Love and serve others, both neighbors and fellow believers; your life is not about you
- 6) Consider your place in the Prodigal Son/Daughter parable.

In lieu of a final song today, please reflect on the following Prodigal Son YouTube video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxfdChYCKYA>

1. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (Englewood, CO; Renovaré), 92
2. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2005), 140
3. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (Englewood, CO; Renovaré), 94
4. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey* (Downer Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press), 127
5. James Bryan Smith, *Embracing the Love of God* (Englewood, CO; Renovaré), 96
6. R.R. Reno, *Religion and Public Life in America – Imprimis April 2013* (Hillsdale, MI; Hillsdale College) 1

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