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Romans 12:9

4th Message

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## TRUE LOVE

*SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD*

Are Christians good for society? Until recently this question was not asked: Western societies were Christian societies. But as the West leaves its Judeo-Christian heritage behind and moves into a post-Christian age, there is a growing chasm between Christianity and contemporary culture. Critics denounce religion in general and Christianity in particular as the cause of much that is wrong in the world. *Goodness* and *love* are not words associated with the Church. Instead Christians are viewed as intolerant, bigoted, judgmental and hateful, whether it concerns science, or other religions, or sexual behavior, or a host of other issues. Is Christianity outdated in this multicultural age? Does it have any place in modern society?

Among the most outspoken and aggressive critics of religion have been the New Atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins is a retired Oxford professor. As an evolutionary biologist he was perhaps most famous for his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), but then he ventured into the realm of religion with *The God Delusion* (2006), whose title is self-explanatory. Hitchens, who described himself not as an atheist but as an antitheist, wrote *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). These two books generated considerable attention at the time: Dawkins' book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly a year and has sold two million copies.

So, does Christianity have anything good to contribute to modern society, or is it implicated in all that is bad in contemporary culture? Christians have adopted a number of different ways to respond to the surrounding culture. One approach is to view the world as a dangerous threat, and so retreat into a safe Christian environment, a sort of walled community of like-minded people. Another approach is to seek power, to try to get Christians elected to political office so as to enact Christian legislation to control the behavior of non-Christians. But history has shown that Christianity and power don't mix very well. A third approach is to adapt one's beliefs to shifting cultural trends. We see this in the liberal wing of the church, especially concerning sexual conduct, where there is no difference between how Christians behave and how the world behaves. A fourth approach is to try to engage with the culture, to view the culture not as a threat but as an opportunity. But how can we engage with the culture on these difficult issues? How should we think and what should we say about divisive issues such as other religions, science, and sexual conduct? Can we be loving and good without compromise? Can we act in such a way that *love* and *goodness* are words that can actually be used of us Christians when non-Christians see our behavior?

To help us think through these issues we have invited a guest speaker to address us in two weeks' time: John Stackhouse, Professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College, Vancouver BC. He is a prominent scholar of religion and contemporary culture, and a frequent commentator on this topic, not only to Christian groups, but also on secular TV and to non-Christian professional bodies. In three evening talks he'll address the issues of other religions, science

and sexual morals. What's the difference between Jesus and Buddha or Krishna or Laozi? Is it permissible to see a difference in this multicultural, pluralistic age? What about science: is Christianity anti-scientific? Yet modern science arose within a Christian framework. What about our sexual standards: are they really outdated? Why don't we embrace sexual freedom? These are issues that most of you face in talking with your neighbors, or work colleagues, or fellow-students. Before these evening sessions, on Sunday morning he'll address the question of whether Christians even belong in a sophisticated modern society: "Is Dawkins Right? Are Believers Dumb, Delusional, or Dangerous?"

So, are Christians dumb, deluded or dangerous? Or are they good for society? Our summer series, "Overcoming with Good," based on Romans 12, begs to differ with the view that Christians are bad for the world.

In Romans, after eleven chapters of theology, Paul transitions with the word "therefore" to ethical instructions predicated on that theology, appealing to the Roman Christians to live transformed lives. The basis of this appeal is "the mercies of God": it is because of what God has done, as portrayed in chapters 1-11, that we should live differently. The theology is not an end in itself, a resource merely for doctrinal discussion, though there has been plenty of that over the centuries. Theology leads to praxis, to behavior. This transformation is to affect all our relationships: with God, with ourselves, with one another, and with the non-Christian world.

Our relationship with God is transformed: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice...Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (12:1-2). As J. B. Phillips memorably rendered verse 2, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within." Our relationship with ourselves is transformed (12:3-8): part of this renewed thinking is to realize our place in the body of Christ: "we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (12:5). Each of us has different gifts to be used for the common good. I am no longer free to behave however I want: I am to live as part of a body. Our relationship with others is transformed, first with our fellow-Christians (12:9-13), and beyond that with non-Christians (12:14-21). Today we begin to explore this call to transformed behavior with other people; this will occupy us for the next two months.

Verses 9-21 contain a long list of instructions, presented staccato-fashion as if in a long list of bullet items. There are many parallels with the teachings of Jesus. Indeed it was our studies in Luke's gospel that prompted the idea for this series on Romans 12. Paul commences with two general principles that govern the whole list:

**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (Rom 10:9 ESV)**

## I. Love

### Let love be genuine.

What is true love? This is what Westley and Buttercup were looking for and thought that they had found. Our society is besotted with love, but people fall out of love just as easily as they fall into love, suggesting they didn't find true love in the first place. So what is true love?

Ancient Greek had multiple words for love, describing four primary types of love. Perhaps some of you have read C.S. Lewis's little book, *The Four Loves* (1960) in which he reflects on these four: affection, friendship, eros and charity.

Affection (*storgē*) described family love, such as between a parent and child, the love in which a child was raised.

Friendship (*philia*) was love between two people, usually of the same sex, who found they had common interests. Friendship was highly valued in the ancient world. But today it is devalued: we have hundreds of friends on Facebook, people we know only casually, people we can friend and unfriend with the click of a button. Because ancient friendship was usually same-sex it is often viewed with suspicion today as really being homosexual love. For example, Jonathan's love for David (1 Sam 18:1) is frequently so misinterpreted.

Passionate love (*eros*) was between a man and a woman. Eros was the Greek God of desire, as was the Roman equivalent Cupid. Passionate love is notoriously fickle. People fall out of love as quickly as they fall into love. King David's son Amnon was tormented to the point of sickness by his passionate love for his half-sister Tamar. But after raping her his passions turned 180 degrees: "Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her" (1 Kgs 13:15). One of the tasks in premarital counseling is to prepare the starry-eyed couple for the day when their passionate *eros* love comes to an end and a more robust love must take its place. One of the problems with self-written vows in a wedding service is that they are often not vows at all, but an expression of the wonders of *eros* love. The point of pledging one's troth is that the vows be there when the feelings are gone.

Love based on family bonds, on friendship and on passion are all natural loves. They happen to us somewhat automatically: we are born into a family, we discover friends, and we fall in love. Ideally these loves are reciprocal: the family members, friends and lovers love one another. Lack of reciprocity strains the relationship. These loves are valuable and an important part of being human beings in relationship to one another. But are these true love?

None of these loves is the love in which Scripture is interested. The New Testament describes a fourth love, a love rather different from these three. This is *agapē* love. *Agapē* love does not begin in ourselves. It is not a natural love. We don't find it in our family bonds, or in our shared interests, or in our passions and chemistry. It begins in God.

Hitherto in Romans, Paul has used *agapē* to designate divine love, God's love for us. God's love for us is unconditional: he doesn't love us because we are worthy of his love, or can reciprocate his love. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). He loves the unlovely. He loved us when we had no intention of loving him back. In love he has placed us into Christ, his beloved Son. In love, he now numbers us among the beloved. In love, he puts his Spirit in us: "God's love has been poured

into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Because our own loves are opposed to him, the one who truly loves us, he has filled us up with his own love, his true love. Such love doesn't automatically happen to us, as do the other loves. It must be placed into us by God. 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.

Paul exhorts, "Let love be genuine." The adjective is literally "non-hypocritical" (so "without hypocrisy," NASB, HCSB, NET). We might turn this around and ask what hypocritical love would be. Hypocritical love would be to fail to pass on to others the love which we have ourselves received from God, to fail to love others the way we ourselves have been loved. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus told of a king who forgave the astronomical debt of one of his servants, but that same servant refused to forgive the very much smaller debt of one of his fellow servants. The king summoned the first servant and said, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33). That is hypocritical love, or rather a hypocritical lack of love. Non-hypocritical love is to love as we have been loved, to be merciful as we have received mercy, to show grace as we have been shown grace, to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is not a reciprocal love. We are not merciful to God as he has been merciful to us. God has no need of our mercy, or our grace, or our forgiveness. But when we love another this way we do it as unto the Lord. There is a triangle: God loves us so we can love others. When we love them we do it in the name of Jesus and are as Christ to them.

So true love, love without hypocrisy, begins with us realizing that we are the recipients of divine love. Luke records how Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, but offered him none of the tokens of hospitality when he arrived. Simon's omission was covered by the sinful woman with the alabaster flask. When Simon grumbled, Jesus said to him, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). The woman did not earn her forgiveness by lavishing love on Jesus. Rather, the love she lavished on him showed that she understood that she had already been forgiven much. She lavished such love on Jesus because she had already received lavish love from him.

George Herbert wrote several poems about divine Love, including this one, "Love (3)":

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
 If I lacked any thing.

Subsequent stanzas tell how Love answered the protestations of unworthiness:

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply...

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
 So I did sit and eat.<sup>1</sup>

Having dined at Love's table we are then able to bid others welcome in Love's name. We take our place in a chain of love. Our Scripture reading (John 15:5-13) was drawn from the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus' farewell address to his disciples:

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:9-12)

We see this chain of love: the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the disciples, the disciples are to love one another. We are now part of that chain: recipients of the Father’s love in the Son, enabled by the Spirit to pass that love along.

## 2. Good and Evil

Paul’s call to true love forms the basis for all the subsequent exhortations, of which there are many. Before the individual imperatives, he gives another general principle:

**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**

This is followed by ten imperatives (12:10-13), concerning how to show true love and do good within the Christian community, followed by a section on how to show true love and do good beyond the Christian community, even to our enemies.

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Evil is anything opposed to divine purposes. Good is that which is in conformity to divine purposes. Evil is opposed to divine love; good is in accordance with divine love. So true love and goodness belong together. We can only hold fast to the good when we are filled with divine love, with true love.

### 2.1 Abhor the Evil

Paul uses a pair of strong verbs. We are to abhor evil, consider it loathsome. It is easy for us to abhor evil in another person, when we read of it in the papers or see it on the news. It is easy for us to commit ourselves to doing no evil. The aphorism *primum non nocere*, “first, do no harm” is common in medical ethics. Physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, swearing “to abstain from doing harm.” Google’s long-time motto, spelled out in a letter to potential investors prior to going public, was “Don’t be evil.” The three wise monkeys are part of popular culture: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

But it is another matter when we find that evil arises within us. Further on, Paul says, “Repay no one evil for evil” (12:17). He has to say that because our natural tendency is to respond to evil with evil. The behavior of others so easily arouses negative responses within us. So the abhorrence of evil must begin with our own hearts. In our relationships with both Christians and non-Christians, self keeps rearing its ugly head. Part of spiritual maturity is recognizing the ongoing evil of our own heart. Spiritual theology has long valued the double knowledge: knowledge of God and knowledge of self. The two go hand in hand: we grow in our understanding of the magnitude of God’s love, grace and mercy, and in our understanding of our own depravity. Unfortunately the modern tendency has been to view knowledge of self as the knowledge of how good we are, as a boost to our self-esteem, of how much we are the objects of the Father’s affections. Yes, we are the objects of the Father’s affections, but not because we are lovable. He loved us while we were yet sinners, when we were scoundrels, and he loves us despite the awful stuff that keeps welling up in our hearts. He has placed us into Christ, and has put his Spirit into us, pouring his love into us, and is transforming us into the image of his beloved Son. We are his beloved children, but we have a long way yet to go. Our abhorrence of evil must contain a healthy measure of abhorrence of what we are capable of. This

is why we have to be commanded to forbear one another, forgive one another, strive to live at peace with one another; such behavior doesn’t come naturally.

### 2.2 Cling to the Good

The converse is that we are to hold fast to what is good. We are to cling to the good, as if held by glue. In the Old Testament this is a covenantal term. The man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife (Gen 2:24); he breaks an old relationship, however painful it may be, and makes a new, inseparable one. God called Israel to forsake all other gods and cling to him. Israel was to break her old connections, whatever security they may have offered, and establish a new, inseparable one with God. So now we are to sever our old relationship with evil; we are to leave it behind, forsaking it, viewing it now with abhorrence not delight. Instead we are to form a new, inseparable relationship with the good. This is another way of saying that we put off the old self and put on the new self, that we die to self and rise to new life in Christ.

Yet there is a large measure of discomfort here. Christians are surprisingly uncomfortable about the idea of doing good. I see a number of reasons for this discomfort.

A frequent concern is that it is doctrine that matters the most. Clinging to the good is not about right doctrine but about right practice. Yet so much more attention is given in most churches to ensuring that people have the right doctrine than that they have the right practice. Theology is important, because without a right understanding of God’s love toward us in Christ and in us through his Spirit we will be unable to live lives of love. But the goal of right theology is right living as God’s renewed people. The church in Ephesus was impressive in exposing false teaching, but along the way it lost its first love; it ceased to be a community of love (Rev 2:4).

A second concern is that doing good is of secondary importance behind evangelism. What matters is to preach the gospel and get people saved. Doing good is a distraction from the most important thing. This attitude is common on the mission field where activity not directly connected with preaching the gospel is viewed as secondary and not worthy of support—though medical work is often exempted from this suspicion. Great good has been done by missionaries who have established not only hospitals and clinics, but also schools, orphanages, relief operations and many other endeavors.

Connected to this is the belief that the only soul that really matters to God is a saved soul. But we are to love our neighbor first because he is a fellow human being made in the image of God. We certainly hope that he or she will find the love of God and become not just a fellow human but a fellow in Christ. Love your neighbor as a human being, not as a potential scalp. You don’t have to have an evangelistic purpose as justification to love your neighbor. Simply love your neighbor.

Another common belief is that the world is headed to destruction, so trying to better the world is counterproductive. We should just allow the world to go its merry way, falling apart, till Christ return.

Another concern is that by doing good we are trying to earn salvation. But this cannot be the case if our doing good is motivated by true love, for true love recognizes that we are first the recipients of love before ever we can give love.

Finally, many Christians are wary of social justice, fearing that this is some liberal, socialist agenda.

Is Christianity the source of the world's problems? It is undeniable that much evil has been done in the name of Christ. Many wars have been fought under the banner of the cross. There has been much hatred and lack of love. But much good has also been done by the church and by individual Christians. As just one example, William Wilberforce sought to make goodness fashionable. He and the other evangelical Christians of the Clapham Sect did much for the betterment of British society 200 years ago.

The ancient world understood different types of love: the family affection of *storgē*, the friendship of *philia*, the passionate love of *eros*. But it had no understanding of true love, of *agapē* love. Indeed, it viewed such love as weakness:

[C]lassical philosophy regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice... This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe to 'all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.<sup>2</sup>

These words were written by a prominent sociologist of religion, who at the time described himself as an agnostic, but has since come to faith. In studying the early church he encountered the problem of goodness. The world talks much of the problem of evil, and wants to blame God and the church for the evil in the world. But the greater problem is the problem of good. True love shows goodness. It is easy for us to understand affection, friendship, and passionate love. They naturally arise within us. But what can motivate people to love the unlovely, to do good when there is no reward in it for themselves? The ancient world couldn't understand such behavior. But Christians can love and behave this way because that's how God has treated us. He has loved us and invites us to love others, clinging to the good. This was radically new in the ancient world. It is a great gift we have to offer the world today: the gift of true love and the gift of goodness. May God so fill our hearts with his love that we are able to pass on these gifts to our neighbors, our work colleagues, and others whom we meet.

1. "Love (3)," *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (ed. John Tobin; London: Penguin, 1991), 178.

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 212.

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