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Rom 12:10

6th Message

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PATIENT LOVE

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

We return this morning to Romans 12 and our summer series that focuses on “overcoming evil with good.” There is plenty of good in our world and in human beings, but there is also plenty of evil. Evil arises as people reject the ways of God, live autonomous from God, and seek to fulfill their own plans for personal happiness, often at the expense of others. This applies to us as well as people outside of the church. As Christians we are learning to live and relate to others in the ways of God because that is the way we were intended to live as human beings. We are seeking to overcome evil with good because that is what God has done in Christ.

As Paul turns from theology to ethics in Romans 12, we have seen that promoting goodness involves several things. For example, we are to present our bodies to God for priestly service, i.e. God wants *all* of us, our hands, our legs, our eyes not just our heart. We are to resist conforming to the world, i.e. we are to live counter-culturally based on the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of the world.

We are to be transformed into the image of Christ, a human fully alive. Transformation happens through the work of the Spirit as we renew our mind and think rightly about both self and God. We begin to recognize and put off our old nature, our false self and begin to live as our true self, the life that is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). We learn to abhor evil, to hate what God hates, and learn to cling to good, to love what God loves.

At the heart of seeking a goodness that overcomes evil is love. Love is the foundation. This is what Paul says in his summary phrase at the beginning of verse 9 which governs the rest of this chapter as well as chapters 13-15: “Let love be genuine,” meaning sincere and without hypocrisy. The goal of transformation is to live a life of love—to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Agape love, sacrificial love, a love not based on feelings, is at the heart of how we are to live and is to shape all of our relationships. John Stott writes: “Love ... is the crown and sum of all virtues. Since to love is constructively to seek the welfare of others and the good of the community.”¹

Now there is a principle that underlies everything that we are talking about. The principle is this: your life is not about you. You are not the center of the universe. Richard Rohr writes:

Life is not about you, but you are about life. You are not your own. You are an instance of a universal and even eternal pattern. Life is living itself in you. You have been substituting the part for the whole...Instead of indulging

in self-preoccupied attempts to get it right or in gazing at one’s always disappointing navel...all the gazing is now at the goodness...My life is not about me. It is about God. It is about a willing participation in a larger mystery.²

Unless we accept the idea that life is not about “me,” we will never get very far in being transformed into a life of love and goodness. We must accept the premise that life is about something much bigger and grander than “me.”

Now Paul expands on the idea of genuine love in verse 10, but as Bernard pointed out two weeks ago, verses 10-13 hold together by their grammatical construction so I will read all four verses.

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Romans 12:10–13 ESV)

Bernard addressed the six guidelines in verses 11 and 12 two weeks ago. We will take up verse 13 on future Sundays. But for the next two weeks our focus will be on verse 10 and specifically two virtues that are not directly mentioned but are critical to living a life of love and overcoming evil with good, namely forbearance and forgiveness.

Clearly verse 10 is addressed to the community of believers highlighted by the phrase “one another,” which is repeated twice. In fact, verses 9-16 are all focused on the Christian community, for the phrase “one another” is repeated in verse 16.

The first imperative, “love one another with brotherly affection” contains two words for familial affection; these are two of the four loves that Bernard talked about three weeks ago. The word translated “love” is “our natural affection for relatives, typically, love of parent for child.”³ The word brotherly affection is *philadelphia*, the love between brothers and sisters. These two affectionate terms for blood relationships are now applied to the church, the family of God.

The second imperative, “outdo one another in showing honor,” indicates that love includes honor as well as affection. To honor someone is to give them weight. To dishonor someone is to treat them as insignificant, of no value. This phrase might mean what Paul says in Philippians, to “count others more significant than yourselves,” (Philippians 2:3 ESV) or, as translated here in the ESV, to “outdo one another,” implying a sense of competition in how we treat others with respect. Thus, love in the family of God is to be marked by affection and honor.

The type of family love that Paul describes requires both forbearance and forgiveness or else the family, the community of faith, will deteriorate into a dysfunctional family marked by distrust, gossip, exclusivity, cliques, envy, etc. Many of us come from such human families or have experienced these characteristics in a church family, so you know what I am talking about. With the rest of our time I want to talk about forbearance because for most of us this is a significant challenge.

I learned this early in my life around the age of 11 or 12 when another boy challenged me to a fight. I had no idea as to the source of his disagreement with me and didn't really take him seriously. But one day down at the park I found myself squared off with fists raised. Since I didn't take him seriously I was relaxed and unprepared. The next thing I knew he hauled off and struck me in the nose. His punch didn't hurt but when I touched my nose, I saw blood on my fingers. As a result, my blood inside started to boil. The young boy saw the rage on my face and took off running. I chased him for an hour in vain. However, the next winter I took my revenge by tackling him and putting his face in a pile of snow. I showed no forbearance whatsoever.

What does forbearance mean? When I checked out Webster's dictionary, the word comes from the idea of doing without; to hold oneself back from an effort; to leave alone; abstain. Thus, to forbear means to control oneself when provoked, to be patient and tolerant. The opposites of forbearance are impatience and intolerance, which lead us to humiliating people, putting people down, being rude and harsh, not restraining our emotional responses, returning insult with insult, and putting people's faces in piles of snow. Intolerance is the total opposite of brotherly affection and honoring others as Paul mandates in verse 10. In other words, intolerance is the evil we are to abhor and forbearance is the good to which we are to cling.

The need for forbearance is obvious. People can be frustrating, irritating, aggravating, difficult, and insulting. This is the result of sin entering the world and relationships becoming damaged. We see in Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve hid themselves from one another due to being self-conscious, insecure, and afraid. Therefore we see a great deal of intolerance on a multitude of levels, personally and corporately. We see it in our families, our marriages, our places of business, on our freeways, and in our church. We see intolerance between Democrats and Republicans in Congress who can't seem to agree on anything. We see intolerance between Apple and Samsung, cyclists and motorists. We see intolerance between people groups and between nations. Right now we are seeing great intolerance in the nations of Syria and Egypt. And we see intolerance in our own hearts. It does not take much for us to get upset at someone.

Why is intolerance so widespread in our lives, communities, and the world? All of us have our own personal plans for happiness. We have an agenda or idea about how the world should be arranged and how it should operate. And when our plans are thwarted or our purposes are blocked, rather than holding back our emotions we become impatient and intolerant

and we take our frustrations out on others, often on those people who are closest to us.

Let's do a little more digging into Scripture and fill out our understanding of forbearance. The verb "forbear" occurs fifteen times in the New Testament, the noun "forbearance" twice. Several passages are quite notable. We see in Ephesians 4 that forbearance is a quality of a worthy walk:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Here we see bearing with one another is paired with patience and is necessary to maintain unity and peace in the body of Christ, the household of God. In the church, people will not always see eye to eye or have the same likes and dislikes. Forbearance is required to avoid divisions and rifts and making mountains out of molehills. Many of you have been in churches where the lack of forbearance led to the fracturing of the community.

We see forbearance in Colossians 3 as a sign of the new nature in Christ we are to put on:

"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" (Colossians 3:12-13).

This is a very insightful passage. Forbearing and forgiving are not just two more items in the list of things to put on. The grammar makes it clear that bearing one another and forgiving each other modify the verb put on and implies that forbearance and forgiveness must undergird the putting on of compassion, kindness, etc. We can't put love and compassion on over intolerance and unforgiveness. We can't sincerely love our brothers and sisters or anyone else for that matter when we harbor intolerance and lack of forgiveness in our hearts. Intolerance and unforgiveness are obstacles to transformation and cruciform love.

I am someone who usually takes showers in the evening because I can't go to sleep when my skin feels sticky after the activities of the day. Even when I used to go to the Yucatan I would take a bucket shower at night and try to get to sleep before I started sweating again. I can't experience rest while my body isn't clean. Similarly we can't live transformed lives when our hearts are "sticky" and unclean. This leads to insincere, hypocritical love. We first need to take a shower, so to speak, and then clothe ourselves with Christ.

Now let's fill out the idea of forbearance further. In two passages, the word for "forbearance" is used in the context of persecution, affliction, and suffering and is translated "endure."

"To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working

with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat” (1 Corinthians 4:11–13).

“Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring” (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

What might this mean? While we might not suffer like some, it seems to imply that to forbear with people might involve a suffering, an enduring, a dying to self. One of the reasons we are intolerant with others is because they are causing us some sort of pain or discomfort. To endure is to be able to accept the pain, while at the same time withholding our natural, emotional reactions. I am not saying that we tolerate sin or abuse. But I would say we err on the side of being less intolerant rather than more tolerant because we have such an aversion to pain of any kind. We do not endure well when we feel uncomfortable.

Somewhere we got the idea that it is our right not to suffer, but that is not reality. Life is hard and relationships will cause us pain because we are sinful people. We may actually be in the right and might feel justified in not forbearing, but if we are called to love one another then forbearance, the willingness even to suffer and be disadvantaged, is a critical element of brotherly love and honoring others. What we need to realize is that God is sovereign and he puts people in our life, even difficult people, in order to transform us in the image of Christ. And I would say that this not only applies to people in the church but also to those in the world.

Robert Mulholland writes:

Perhaps the best understanding of forbearing is letting others be who they are. Our false self rarely relates to others as they are. Our false self relates to others from what we perceive them to be from our own self-referenced perspective it (our false self) contains others in boxes as well. The boxes in which we try to imprison others are designed to assure that the other will be what we want them to be in our carefully constructed world.⁴

The reason we want to contain people is to keep them safe, to get others to accommodate our agendas, to ward off threats that people might pose.

Mulholland goes on to say:

To be forbearing is to entrust ourselves to God in love to such an extent that we can be available to God for the other, willing to be one in whom God can be present for the other in whatever way God chooses.⁵

As I have reflected on this idea of forbearance over the past few weeks it seems to me that forbearance doesn't mean to just put up with someone or tolerate the things we don't like or that irritate us, but to see people in the best possible light, to find something in another that we can embrace, to see them through the eyes of God's love. Forbearance is not being passive and it is not accepting or tolerating darkness or evil but it is actively rearranging the way we look and respond to others.

Think for a minute on how much impact forbearance might have just on your marriage. Rather than waiting for your spouse to change or get it together, rather than trying to get your spouse to fulfill your plans for happiness, rather than trying to get your spouse to fit into some nice, tidy and safe box, you begin to delight in the person they are, see them in the best possible light, and willingly endure the things that might be frustrating or difficult. I wish someone had told me these things 40 years ago. It might have saved me a lot of unnecessary pain.

Why should we show forbearance to others? Well, here we refer to Paul's use of the word in two passages in Romans:

“Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (Romans 3:23–25).

We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. We have turned our backs on God and we have tried to control our lives with our own plans for happiness. God has every right not to restrain his wrath on us. God has every right to judge us and blow us off the face of the earth. But that is not what God does. God in his mercy has shown forbearance to us. When we have provoked him he has restrained himself, hoping that his kindness might lead to repentance. Forbearance is a characteristic of God and a gift that we have received. Therefore, if we are his sons and daughters and are destined to share his likeness, then forbearance is to be a quality and virtue of our life as well. What God has done for us, we now do for one another.

As the team sang for us earlier:

A debtor to mercy alone
Of covenant mercy I sing
I come with Your righteousness on
My humble offering to bring
The judgments of Your holy law
With me can have nothing to do
My Savior's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions
From view

As debtors to mercy we are indebted to show forbearance to others. We love people in a way that does not expose their sins and weaknesses but covers a multitude of sins with love, delights in people's strengths, and finds joy in people's differences.

This last week John Stackhouse talked about how far the world is now removed from God and the church. Instead of making the move towards God in one stage people need several stages in order to come to faith in Christ. But one of the most important factors in helping people see God is for them to come into a community where they see grace, mercy, love, and forbearance, a place that lets people be who they are without

feeling the pressure to fit into a box in order to meet a religious agenda.

So we ask, how can we progress on being more forbearing towards others? Thomas Keating gives us a great word:

There is no commandment that says we have to be upset by the way other people treat us. The reason we are upset is because we have an emotional program that says, 'If someone is nasty to me, I cannot be happy or feel good about myself.' ... instead of reacting compulsively and retaliating, we could enjoy our freedom as human beings and refuse to be upset.⁶

What can help us is to think through our own personal plans for happiness, our own agendas, our efforts to shape the world the way we want, the boxes into which we are trying to fit other people, the ways we are trying to control people for our identity, value, meaning, and purpose. What this involves is renewing our minds in order to be transformed by the Spirit. We let go of our plans and agendas and allow God to give us a bigger vision of life.

As we are renewing our minds, our thinking, Keating says that,

We begin to perceive that our emotional programs for happiness prevent us from reacting to other people and their needs. When locked into our private worlds of narcissistic desires, we are not present to the needs of others when they seek help. The clarity with which we see other people's needs and respond to them is in direct proportion to our interior freedom.⁷

In other words, the lack of forbearance keeps us from loving others.

So, we end where we began: life is not about you. Life is about God. The more our life is about God the greater our freedom and our ability to love and forbear. Forbearance becomes an act of blessing, an act of overcoming evil with good.

I would encourage you to take some time today and think about the relationships in your life. Perhaps there is someone you can begin to see in the best possible light. Ask God to help you. Think about your personal plans for happiness. Let go of your plans and replace them with God's plans. Ask God to help you.

1. John Stott, *God's New Society*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1979, 149.
2. Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return*, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 2004, 60, 65-66.
3. John Stott, *Romans, God's Good News for the World*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1994, 331.
4. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, IVP Books, Downers Grove, 2006, 124.
5. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, 125.
6. Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*, Continuum International Publishing, London, 2010, 25.
7. Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love*, 25.

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