



WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 12:9-21

25th Message

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*Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,
There is no greater thing.
You're my all, you're the best,
You're my joy and righteousness.*

(Graham Kendrick, *Knowing You*)

Several of the hymns that we sang this morning speak of knowing God: knowing his love, dwelling in his presence and seeing him. What a wonderful way to begin a new millennium — giving voice to our desire to know God and to be known by him. That is what we were created for: to know God and to be deeply and profoundly loved by him. Nothing else will fulfill us. We all have had someone in our past that didn't love us enough, a father or mother, perhaps. This is why the holidays are difficult for some. Our expectations for love and intimacy are at their highest at times like these. But we are often disappointed. Our love tank is so big that only an infinitely loving God can fill it.

The Book of Romans teaches us this. We return this morning to this marvelous book that is, in essence, the story of God's love. We were lost in our sin, lonely and desperate in our longing, and he became one of us. He died for us to bring us to himself so that he could fellowship with us. Romans, then, is the story of God's love. The writer, the apostle Paul, says at the beginning of chapter 12 that the only proper response to that love is to love God in return. The way we do that is by giving him our bodies so that he can fill them and flood them with his love.

In chapter 12 we come to a change in Paul's argument. Up to this point all of his references to genuine love, *agape* love, have been to God's love. From here on the apostle's emphasis is that we allow that love to transform us and to shape all of our relationships, both in the church and in the world. In verses 9 through 21 of chapter 12, Paul sets out a detailed description of what God's love will look like when it is manifested by his disciples. Remember, Jesus said on the night before he was crucified, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That love is now described in detail.

The definition of genuine love is given not in terms of abstract theology but of concrete ideas. It is very similar to 1 Corinthians 13, and is spelled out in terms of what genuine love looks like and how it behaves. These are operative definitions. Verses 9-16 picture love in the family of God, the church. This is clear from the use of the words "one another" (used three times in the section), and the word "saints," in verse 13. Then, verses 17-21 describe what genuine love looks like when it is practiced out in the world. This outline will be our guide as we look at this passage together. First, love in the church is described, in verses 9-13:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. (Rom 12:9, NASB)

"Hypocrisy" is actually the Anglicized form of the Greek word that Paul uses here. Literally, it means, "under a mask." In classical Greek, the *hypokrites* was an actor who held up a mask to his face to portray either a comic or a tragic character. A hypocrite, therefore, was one who spoke from behind a mask. He was a play-actor. Later, the word would take on a negative connotation to describe one who who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is a phony. He is no longer himself. He is impersonating someone else.

Paul says that our love ought to be genuine. It ought to be real and sincere. It ought to ring true.

When I joined the staff of PBC in January 1977, Ray Stedman was preaching through Romans. I well remember his sermon on this passage. He called it, "How to Hug." Ray told the story of a man who was walking by a used bookstore and he noticed in the window a book called, *How To Hug*. He was taken by the title and, being of a romantic nature, went in to inquire about the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was a volume of an encyclopedia that covered the subjects "How" to "Hug." I think that is what happens in church at times. Everyone knows that love ought to be evident in church, and many come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to be confronted with an encyclopedia on theology. But our love should not be like that. The love that we have for each other ought to be genuine.

How do we love like that? Everyone wants love. It is a much longed-for commodity. We get no help from our culture, which says that image is everything. How do we love genuinely, with a love that is authentic? The second phrase helps us here. Paul says that we must "*abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.*" It isn't enough that we are commanded to love, because we are so fallen that we don't know what love is. We have to be told how to love. That is what Paul does in this passage in which he spells out the implications of this statement.

Love is doing what is best for another person — and we need truth to determine that. Love is not blind sentiment. Tolerance isn't the highest virtue. Love is discerning. It is so passionately devoted to others that it hates anything that isn't compatible with their highest welfare. Perhaps a better translation of verse 9 might be, "*Let love be without hypocrisy, by abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good.*" These last two verbs are participles, not commands. God is the only one who can teach us how to love. He and he alone is able show us what is good and what is evil.

In verses 10-13, Paul describes what genuine, un hypocritical love in the family of God looks like. His argument

revolves around a series of prepositional phrases: “in brotherly love, in honor, in diligence, in spirit, in hope, in tribulation, in prayer, in the needs of the saints, in hospitality.”

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; (12:10a)

Here Paul brings together two words that are used to describe family relationships. The word “devoted” translates an adjective that describes our natural affection for relatives, typically, the love of a parent for a child. The word translated “brotherly love” is the word *philadelphia*, which is the love between brothers and sisters. Paul takes these two words which were originally applied to blood relationships in the human family and reapplies them to describe the kind of warmth, affection and tenderness that should characterize our relationships in the family of God. Genuine love is warm. It is not cold, aloof, distant and austere. One can feel the warmth radiating from a person who loves like this. Brotherly love is affectionate.

Secondly, Paul says,

give preference to one another in honor; (12:10b)

This phrase can either mean that we ought to esteem others more highly than ourselves (as the apostle commands in Philippians 2), or that we ought to try and outdo each other in showing honor. Either way, this goes against our natural inclination, which is to try to attain glory and honor for ourselves. We are gluttonous for glory! We love to be the ones on whom glory is bestowed. We would like to walk down the center-aisle and have everyone give us a standing ovation! But what we ought to do is seek honor for others and be delighted when they are so honored. Have you ever been in a meeting where someone else said something that you had been saying for a long time and suddenly, everyone thought it was a great idea and began praising that person? That really gets to us, doesn't it? “That was my idea,” we say. Paul corrects that attitude. Not only is it proper for someone else to get credit, we ought to be looking out for ways to give honor to them. Phillips translates this verse: “Be willing to let other men have the credit.” Ray Stedman had a plaque in his office that said: “There is no end to the good that you can do if you don't care who gets the credit.” *The Message* translates it this way: “Practice playing second fiddle.” But that is contrary to our human nature. We want to be on center-stage. But love honors others rather than seeking honor for itself.

not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; (12:11)

The NIV translates this verse: “*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.*” In other words, love labors, it works hard. Love persists, it endures. It keeps its enthusiasm despite setbacks and lack of response. That is precisely what God did for us: “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Even though we were unresponsive he kept loving us and pursuing us. The only way we can love like this, “fervent in spirit,” is to keep our eyes on the Lord, knowing that we are following and serving him. It is for his sake and his name that were doing all of this.

rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, (12:12)

At the heart of this verse is this reference to hope. This is

similar to 1 Corinthians 13:7, which says that love “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” In other words, we are confident that God can change others. You can never have a significant ministry in the lives of others without an incurable confidence in God's ability to change them. Love remains optimistic about the growth of others. We realize that God will finish the good work that he began, so we don't give up on them. Our expectations of others are critically important. If we have negative feelings and thoughts, that will be communicated whether we want it or not. Love perseveres with others through the hard times. And finally, we are to be devoted to prayer, because no one can change apart from prayer. As I am always reminded by my friend, Dave Roper, growth in the Christian life is not merely a cognitive process. It is prayer that gets truth from our head to our heart and to our actions. So one of the greatest acts of love that we can be involved in is to pray for people.

The next quality has to do with love's generosity.

contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. (12:13)

Love is generous with its money and possessions. One way to determine what someone loves is to look at how he spends his money. Jesus put it this way, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” A renewed mind loves people and uses things. But oftentimes it is the other way around: we love things and use people. Remember the generosity of the early church: “And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Secondly, says Paul, we should practice *hospitality*. If generosity is shown to the needy, then hospitality should be shown to visitors. *Philadelphia* (lover of sisters and brothers) must be balanced by *philoxenia* (lover of strangers). That is what hospitality literally means. It is not having our friends over to dinner. In Paul's day, when someone opened up his home to a visitor the visit might extend for a month or more. Many Christians who had been released from prison had no place to live; someone had to feed them and house them. Traveling evangelists and teachers couldn't stay in local inns, which were few and far between, and those that did exist were unsafe and unpleasant places. It was essential for Christians to open up their homes. In fact, Paul doesn't urge Christians to practice hospitality. This would be better translated “pursue hospitality.” The idea is not that we wait for strangers to show up at our doorstep, but that we seek them out.

Origen wrote:

How finely does he [Paul] sum up the generosity of the man who pursues hospitality in word! For by saying that hospitality is to be pursued, he shows that we are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to inquire after, and look carefully for strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere lest perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads.¹

We will look at verse 14 in a moment, because it really anticipates the next section. In verse 15, Paul says that genuine love is not only sympathetic, it is empathetic.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. (12:15)

Love is never indifferent to other people's joys or pains; it identifies with them. It feels what others feel. It is sensitive to their moods. Some of you who are childless find it painful to watch a child being dedicated, but we are called to rejoice over that. If you are single, how do you respond when you hear of someone's engagement? That is what Paul is talking about. There are times when words are inadequate and all we can do is weep with people. We don't need to have the right thing to say on every occasion. Do we have a heart of understanding and sensitivity that demonstrates itself with empathy that can sing or suffer with others? Love enters deeply into their experiences and emotions, their laughter and tears, and feels solidarity with them whatever their mood.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. (12:16)

In other words, don't be a snob. Snobbishness is the worst kind of pride. Snobs are obsessed with issues of status and class and keeping everyone in their place. They are very concerned with the company they keep. Are we willing to associate with the down and out or do we gravitate toward the rich and famous? Jesus fraternized with all classes. He freely and naturally made friends with social rejects, and he calls on his followers to do the same. He warned about going to a party and sitting at the head table. "Don't do that," he said. "Sit at the end of the table. If the head master comes and invites you to a better place, that's fine. But don't seek that place." The Jerusalem Bible translates part of this verse this way: "Never be condescending, but make real friends with the poor." Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*: "Don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody."

What a picture of genuine Christian love! It is sincere, discerning, affectionate, and respectful. It is patient, generous, and hospitable toward others. It is sympathetic and empathetic, and marked by both harmony and humility.

In verses 17-21, the apostle switches his focus from our relationships with one another to our relationships in the world. How is our love exhibited to the non-Christian world? Tomorrow morning you will be back at work or in school and you are to manifest Christian love in those places just as you do here in church.

Paul gives us some very practical help here. The focus in these verses is on how love reacts. So far we have looked at how we are to extend love. Now we will look at how we should respond when we are offended. We will read verses 17-21, and we will include verse 14:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the LORD. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:14, 17-21)

Paul is not dealing with the legal, moral or political rights of nations to protect their citizens against evil. There is a place for law and order and for punishment of evil-doers. (Paul will deal with these matters in the next chapter.) But that is not his focus here. He is speaking about our personal conduct and how we should interact with evil people.

The passage has four reverberating negative imperatives:

1. Verse 14: Do not curse.
2. Verse 17: Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.
3. Verse 19: Never take your own vengeance.
4. Verse 21: Do not be overcome by evil.

John Stott comments: "All four prohibitions say the same thing in different words. Retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden to followers of Jesus. He himself never hit back in either word or deed. And in spite of our in-born retributive tendency, ranging from the child's tit for tit to the adult's more sophisticated determination to get even with an opponent, Jesus calls on us to imitate him."²

"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men." Martin Luther King said that violence sets in motion a chain reaction that can go on for generations. Look all around the world: the Middle East, Yugoslavia, South Africa, Ireland, our own country. Feuds are going on for so long that no one can remember what they were about in the first place. Retaliation is the name of the game. Jesus put it this way on the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not resist him who is evil." People know that refusing to retaliate is the proper way to behave. That is what Paul means when he adds, "*respecting* [a participle] *what is right in the sight of all men.*" Even the world recognizes that there is honor and dignity in non-defensiveness.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. (12:18)

Jesus said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the sons of God." In other words, one mark of a follower of Christ is that he makes peace wherever he goes. He doesn't pick fights and create controversies. There is a story told about a man who saw a fight break out. He asked, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?" Some people are like that. They are always looking for a fight. I must confess that this is hard for me. I grew up in a very difficult environment. I have been a fighter all my life. Some days I wake up and feel that it is me against the world. My wife told me early in our marriage, "You just love to fight. You are aren't happy unless there is conflict." I had to confess she was right. But that is not how a son of God ought to behave. We should be peacemakers. Paul recognizes that this isn't always possible, however. Sometimes people aren't willing to live at peace with us or they lay down conditions for reconciliation that are morally unacceptable. But we ought not let it start with us or allow the peace-making process to be held up by our attitudes or actions.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. (12:19)

Retaliation is forbidden to us not because it is inherently wrong, but because, as John Stott puts it, "it is God's prerogative, not ours." We are to trust God to work in the life

of the one who wronged us. God is the only one who can do it right. His wrath is redemptive. One day it may come in ultimate judgment to those who abuse us, but it may also bring our enemies to repentance in this life. Though our desire may be to punish those who hurt us, God wants to redeem them. And one of the lessons that God is slowly teaching me is that I don't have to fight for myself. God will do it. But that means we have to stop fighting and get out of his way.

Does that mean that we just take things lying down? No! There is a lot we can do. We can react positively. We can love those who have wronged us. That is what Paul means in verse 20:

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (12:20)

If we react non-defensively, we get out of the way and turn God loose to do his work. When we do that, often-times it has the effect of turning our enemy into a friend. It is hard to know exactly what is meant by “you will heap burning coals upon his head.” I think what Paul is hinting is that our loving, gracious response to evil will make our enemy embarrassed. He will become red in the face because he feels the heat of that kind of love.

Paul concludes with a summary statement that is the climax of his argument.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:21)

If someone speaks harshly to us and we respond in kind, cursing and repaying evil for evil, then we have been overcome by evil. But when we return a soft word, when we respond positively, as peacemakers, when we love and serve our enemies, then we are overcoming evil with good. If you want to have an impact upon your workplace, your campus or your home, this is the way to do it.

If we act like this our lives will have tremendous impact. In the beatitudes, Jesus spells out the characteristics of a son of God. He says that people who are humble and meek are the salt of the earth. Back then, salt was a preservative used to arrest the spread of corruption in meat. Jesus is saying that when people act like this they actually arrest the spread of evil. Whenever we respond in an evil way, we merely contribute to the spread of evil in the world. But whenever we respond in a gracious way, we arrest its spread.

There is only one way to produce this kind of love, and that is to know the love of God. We can't love people in this way unless we know how much God loves us despite our failings and lack of love. Knowing that God loves us sets us free to love others with the kind of love that Paul describes here in this chapter.

1. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 640.

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 334.

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