

EXPRESSIONS OF LOVE



Catalog No. 655
Romans 1:8-17
Second Message
Brian Morgan
October 11, 1987

The most crying need of the human spirit everywhere is to be loved. In counseling, I discover that many have difficulty either in expressing or receiving love because of their low self-esteem. A poor self-image, therefore, is often the cause of one's being unable to give or receive love. Society has identified this as a major problem and has sought a remedy.

But the cure we have come up with is one that says we must turn inward, that we must look to ourselves. The result is the Human Potential movement. Possibility thinking and a positive mental attitude, we are told, is what we must stress. "Be yourself! Trust yourself! Fulfill yourself!" we are urged. The goal is laudable: they desire to build self-esteem. The means that they advocate, however--that by looking inward to your own heart you will find unlimited potential for love, are in error. A recent advertisement in *Psychology Today* said, "I love me. I am not conceited. I'm just a good friend to myself. And I like to do whatever makes me feel good..." This is not a new philosophy, as this limerick on Narcissus illustrates:

There once was a youth named Narcissus,
Who thought himself very delicious;
so he stared like a fool
at his face in a pool,
And his folly today is still with us.

Worship of self is certainly the mark of our age. But the gospel gives a very different answer to the problems of lack of love and low self-esteem. The answer is not found in modern Eastern approaches of self-help, but in the ancient remedy of the gospel. At the foot of the cross, through the blood of the Savior, one can find an ocean of love deep enough to swim in. But at the cross, where we find this love, we must die to self. When we fully understand what happened upon the cross, our life becomes transformed. Instead of being characterized by a hardened heart and selfishness, we become liberated and selfless. We learn to live in freedom and grace like never before.

And this does not take place merely on the human level. In the gospel we learn that when Christ died and was resurrected, he poured forth the gift of the Holy Spirit, giving birth to a new community built on love. And he gave spiritual gifts--graces--which act as channels of the love of Christ. When the Spirit's composition is performed and everyone uses his gifts, the result is a symphony of love.

In the introductory chapter of Romans, Paul speaks of this theme. Addressing the Romans about his upcoming visit to them, he first tells them about his great love for them. We need to hear this message, for our generation is blind and impotent in this regard. In Paul's love, we will see a description of the expressions of love.

We begin with verse 8 of chapter 1.

I. LOVE EXPRESSED IN THANKSGIVING 1:8

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all,
because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the

whole world.

News about their renowned faith had reached the ears of the apostle. When he heard of their spiritual health, he fell down prostrate before the living God to give thanks for his grace in their lives. Remember Paul did not start this church; he could not take credit for their spiritual growth. But when he saw it, he thanked God. These Christians were not passive. Their bold evangelism was evidence of their spiritual health.

At the end of the book, Paul mentions a number of these Christians by name. Historians have discovered some intriguing facts about these people. For example, in 16:11, Paul greets "those in the Lord who belong to the household of Narcissus." "Tiberius Claudius Narcissus was a wealthy freedman of the Emperor Tiberius who had great influence under Claudius. But soon after Nero took the throne in A.D. 54, Nero's wife Agrippina insisted that he be executed. His goods were confiscated and his slaves passed into the imperial household." (F.F. Bruce). These slaves lost their master, but they did not lose their faith. They continued to cultivate it with their new masters.

Paul also refers to a wonderful Christian named Patrobus. The Roman historian Tacitus records that Nero had an influential but very unpopular freedman by that name. I will tell you why he was unpopular: he was a Christian exercising his faith.

Paul also mentions Nereus. The Roman church tradition of the fourth century gives this name to "a Christian of the last decade of the first century who, with his companion Achilleus, was associated with Flavia Domitilla, niece of the Emperor Domitian, after whom the Cemetery of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina is named." (F.F. Bruce).

These details reveal that, though these Christians were in the minority and many were slaves with no legal rights, they were penetrating the community of Rome with the gospel at great cost to their own lives. They were so passionate about the gospel their reputation even reached Paul in Corinth.

This is the first mark of love: gratitude. Love begins with *vision*, not imposition. Before he made any attempt to contribute to their lives, Paul first listened and observed the grace of God already working in their lives. All he could do in response was to fall down and give thanks to God. At times, we Christians impose ourselves upon others before we listen. We feel we are so indispensable that we must immediately impose our vision upon them.

In a scene from *Fiddler on the Roof* the wife Golda returns from the matchmaker having made a match for her daughter. When her husband Tevya comes home after a hard day, Golda greets him by saying, "Tevya, I want to speak with you." He responds, "Why should today be different?" We sometimes approach our brothers and sisters as Golda approached Tevya. When they see us coming, they run!

The first mark of love is thanksgiving. It is not imposing our vision upon others. Rather it is looking for the grace of God in their lives and giving thanks to the Father.

Then Paul tells us about the second aspect of love.

II. LOVE EXPRESSED IN A DESIRE TO SERVE 1:9-12

For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine.

Love is first expressed in thanksgiving, but it is not content to stay there. Paul wanted a face-to-face encounter with these believers in order to participate in what God was doing. This is love. When we see the grace of God at work in people's lives, we should want to be a part of it. Paul said to them, "The intensity of how much I want to see you is evidenced in my unceasing request toward God. God is my witness as to how many times I have prayed that I might see you face to face." Love is not passive. It has a strong desire to be part of what God is doing in the lives of others.

Paul's purpose behind this desire was to enjoy a time of mutual fellowship. He said, "...that I may impart some spiritual gift to you and that I might be encouraged together with you." Paul recognized that love demanded that he share the gift that he had been given. He knew that his gift was a gift of grace; he had not earned it. And he knew he had the responsibility as an apostle to make a contribution wherever he went.

This is how we should view our own lives. When we received Christ, he imparted to each of us spiritual gifts which are to be a channel through which his love flows to others. Therefore, if we love people, we will have a passion to use our gifts. We do not need to be commissioned or to ask the elders' permission to use our gifts. As we follow the response of the Lord and see needs, our gifts become a channel of Christ's love.

But notice Paul not only had a passion to serve, he also had the humility to receive. He recognized that these Christians were gifted like himself even though he was an apostle. He had a personal experience with the resurrected Christ and was privately tutored by him. He understood the keys to the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven and applied them like no other apostle. Yet he knew that even these inexperienced Christians had a gift for him. He had the humility to receive from them.

John Calvin, the great Swiss theologian from the fifteenth century, was deeply impressed by this verse. He said:

Note how modestly he expressed what he feels by not refusing to seek strengthening from inexperienced believers. He means what he says, too, for there is none so void of gifts in the church of Christ who cannot in some measure contribute to our spiritual progress. Ill will and pride, however, prevent our deriving such benefit from one another.

When we love people, we must have a passion to serve them, for we know we have a contribution to make by the grace of God. But we must also have the humility to receive and listen. It is difficult for us to hold these two sides of love in balance. Some are so humble they think they do not have anything to offer anyone else. As a result, they become passive. But in not sharing our gifts, we rob others of the love of Christ. Others, like myself, are so passionate to serve they are like a barrage of Sherman tanks. Often they are not quiet enough to receive from others.

The love of the gospel does both. When it happens, a heaven-

ly symphony rings out. When Christians gather for mutual fellowship and the different gifts start to interplay, the symphony begins. It is a wonderful thing to observe.

The highlight of my summer was an occasion such as this. I had the opportunity to spend one day with an old friend whom I had not seen in seventeen years. I met Yap Oosterhuis when I was nineteen and lost in the streets of Amsterdam. I was trying to find a youth hostel when I strayed into the red-light district. All the women were sitting in their windows beckoning to me. I came through that unscathed but grieving for these women who were selling their lives. I prayed, "Lord, you must have people in this city. Where are they?" As I made my way back to the center of town, I heard a man preaching in Dutch. There was Yap, preaching the gospel to all the degenerates of that area. He embraced me, took me into his home, and treated me like a king and a son. I had a blessed time of fellowship with him and his family.

This summer he wrote to say that he was going to be in California and wanted to see me. Yap is now 70 years old. When I embraced him, he almost squeezed the life out of me! I took him over to Half Moon Bay for breakfast, and we drove down the coast. For me, it was a day when time stood still. I shared my spiritual pilgrimage and ministry with him, and he told me what he had been doing in the intervening years.

After retiring from forty years of teaching school and having raised his seven children, all of whom knew the Lord, Yap told his wife, "We are going to Africa." To the Zulu kingdom in South Africa to be exact! There he started a school for Jesus Christ with a multi-racial, international staff of Christians who display the love of Christ to the local children. When he discovered other schools without money, he would approach the wealthy business men of Johannesburg to raise funds. As he showed us pictures of his students, he had tears in his eyes. He knew the circumstances and spiritual status of each one. Like a shepherd, he had a passion for them. I thought I have done nothing for Jesus Christ like Yap Oosterhuis! That one day was the highlight of my summer--one day of fellowship in Christ with an old friend.

Love expresses itself in thanksgiving for the grace of God at work in the lives of others. Then it hungers for face-to-face encounters in which we can enjoy a mutual time of fellowship and encouragement.

Now a question might have surfaced among the Romans. If Paul loved them and longed to see them, why had he not paid them a visit? How often our love is tested because we have not met the expectations of others! Has that ever happened to you? This is what happened to Paul. There are times in our lives when we verbally express our desire to love someone, yet our actions remain silenced. Into that dark corridor of silence creeps doubt, questioning the sincerity of our commitments.

Lest there be any doubt that Paul's love was genuine, he clearly spelled out why he had not yet come. What follows is a wonderful explanation of the limits or parameters of human love in relationships. Look at verses 13 through 17.

III. LOVE EXPRESSED IN HUMBLE SUBMISSION TO THE WILL OF GOD 1:13-17

And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gen-

tiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith."

Why had Paul not visited them? First he said it was not due to *lack of will*, for he had often planned to see them. It is one thing to have desires, it is another to make plans. Paul said he made plans to come to Rome.

Second, he said it was not due to *lack of eagerness*. It is one thing to make plans, it is another thing to be eager about them. Have you ever noticed how quickly a child can detect when you as a parent are doing something without your heart in it? Paul said this was not the case with him. Rather, he said, "Thus is my eagerness toward you. My heart is there. I am set aside for this calling and I am eager to do it."

Third, he said his delay was not due to *lack of boldness*. He might have been accused of being ashamed of the gospel. Perhaps they thought he was neglecting his apostolic office in Rome because he was timid and ashamed. Paul proclaimed, "I am not ashamed of the gospel."

It is at this juncture he makes one of the greatest asides ever written in Scripture. He gives two reasons for not being ashamed of the gospel. First, he said, "For it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." The cross may appear as weakness or a stumbling block to many. The King of kings was left hanging on a cross--bloody, weak, and forsaken of God. The Jews were baffled when Christians claimed Jesus as Messiah for he could not be the Messiah because anyone who hung on a tree was cursed of God! But Paul knew that the power of God was unleashed in that weakness to free the human soul from the grip of sin.

Einstein did not discover this in his theory of relativity. The scientists did not discover it when they split the atom. Stanford University has not discovered it with all the money they have raised for their educational facilities. There is no program or degree that can harness this power apart from the gospel. Sin's grip on the soul is too great. Only the gospel can release that power to set a man free, and it is available to anyone who will believe. Thus, Paul asked, "Would I be ashamed of that?"

Second, he said the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel. This phrase, "the righteousness of God," shook Martin Luther. He understood that righteousness had a legal context. The idea of right and wrong among the Hebrews always carried a courtroom context. Righteousness was not necessarily an intrinsic moral quality. It could be better translated as being "in the right or wrong" in respect to the judge, God, and his law.

So how does God declare us "right?" How can we have a right relationship with the judge? Because Martin Luther knew his own life so well, he could not understand this term applied to himself. He wrote this as he studied:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but one expression, 'the justice of God,' because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore, I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against

Him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

In a sense, Luther was correct. He understood that the gospel had to address a twofold problem. This same problem faces all of us if we are honest with ourselves. The first part of the problem is that man is a sinner. It does not take a long life to realize this. If you do not believe it, have children. The greater insight is knowing that we not only commit acts of sin but we are enslaved to its rule in our lives. Even our best works are tainted with selfish motives.

The second half of the problem is that God is holy and just. How can man as a sinner be declared "in the right" with this just, holy God? Man longs for the forgiveness that can cleanse his soul, but how can he attain it without compromising God's cosmic justice? Even in his most wicked state, man knows that punishment has to be exacted or justice is compromised.

Have you ever wondered why there is so much wife and child abuse? Part of the reason is found in this issue. People know they cannot be forgiven cheaply, and they are deeply aware of their sin. Therefore, to meet the demands of his own sentence, the person wants to punish himself. One way he can do this is by hurting the ones he loves. Thus, some abuse is related to the need for justice to be satisfied.

But the answer, the good news, is what Luther discovered in the gospel. He said:

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the *justice of God* and the statement that '*the just shall live by his faith*.' Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before, 'the justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven...

I hope this is true for you. In fact, Luther went on to say that we Christians ought to memorize this book.

This is the good news! The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel in this twofold manner. First, it tells us how men and women who are sinners can be declared right before God. Second, it tells us how God's personal righteousness is vindicated in the very act of declaring us right. Thus, Paul tells us how the justice of God is vindicated on a cosmic level even though we as sinners are forgiven.

Every religion laying claim to truth has to deal with both of these issues. But all of them, except Christianity, only deal with one or the other. Muslims have forgiveness but no atonement. Their justice as a result is compromised. Others have justice but no love. The gospel alone brings them both together.

What brings the two issues together is the word "faith." In verse 17, Paul quotes Habakkuk: "For the just shall live by faith." In the seventh century B.C., Habakkuk cried out over the same issue Luther faced. He struggled with the justice of God when he saw injustice and unrighteousness prevailing. "How can this be?" he cried. The word of God came to Habakkuk and said, "Wickedness will not prevail indefinitely, nor will it be vindicated. The day is coming when all the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the ocean covers the sea."

Yet centuries passed between the word to Habakkuk and its fulfillment. This is why the prophet wrote, "The righteous one will live by faith." In Hebrew, "faith" means "faithfulness or loyalty." The idea is that God has made a promise, and the right-

teous man must put his loyalty in the word of God to carry out that promise even when everything else in life seems contrary. The righteous man clings to the promise of God to bring about what he said he will do. In that statement, Paul saw the heart of his gospel, and Romans is an exposition of that verse.

When Jesus came, he fulfilled both of these issues. On the cross, he took our condemnation. The holy wrath of God was poured out reluctantly on the Son. Through Jesus Christ experiencing hell for us, justice was satisfied. At the same time, we could be declared right, for God was vindicated. Thus, we could enter into a right relationship with God. But all of this comes about through our faith in the work of another, Jesus Christ.

Friends, if you love people, you must be like Paul. You must be bold about the gospel. Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God and it reveals the righteousness of God." If you love people, you will eagerly share with them the gift of the gospel to meet the greatest need of the human soul. What kind of love would be so ashamed of the gospel that it would rather watch people slip into the chasm of hell without saying a word? That is not love!

One of my favorite saints expresses this quality well. Marion Recine, though petite in stature, is bold about Jesus Christ. She is one of the founders of our Crisis Pregnancy Center, and she always gets involved in amazing opportunities to preach Christ in hostile settings. Just last week she called me asking for help with a new opportunity. At Foothill College, there is a class of fifteen students who are studying to be peer counselors on campus. The teachers have taught them all kinds of counseling methods and secular views on abortion, premarital sex, and drugs. Evidently, some of them protested, "Isn't there another point of view?" For some reason, the teacher called Marion and asked her to provide a speaker. She said to me, "I won't let go of this. We can't miss this opportunity!" That is love. It wants to go through every open door to share the gospel.

Paul defended himself to the Romans: "My lack of coming to you, Romans, was not due to any lack of will, desire or boldness." It was due to another reason, the key to Paul's love. He said, "I did not come because of a humble submission to the divine will." Remember how he prayed: "I made mention of you in my prayers if perhaps *by the will of God* I may succeed in coming to you...but have been *prevented* thus far..."

The point of the matter is this: human love has limits. You do not respond to someone just because you have the desire or because there is a human need. All of love is to be a response to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is true in all relationships--

parent/child, marriage, work or the dying world. You respond as the Lord prompts you.

When love is given, it is a gift of grace. Nothing destroys love more quickly than trying to meet people's needs simply because they have expectations. Love must be free in order to be love. When people receive love on that basis, they know it is coming from Jesus Christ. As a result, they will give him the honor and the glory.

This principle is evident in the life of Jesus. At one point in the gospel of Mark, Jesus was preaching in Galilee and had healed many people among the crowds. The next day when he went off to pray, the crowds gathered again to be healed, and Peter went looking for Jesus in a panic. When Peter finally found him, he rebuked him for keeping the crowds waiting. Jesus responded by saying, "I am not going back. I have just checked in with the Father, and we are moving on." Can you imagine a pastor saying that? The revelation was that Jesus' purpose was to preach not to heal, and he had to reach to other cities. Healing was an aspect of his ministry, but preaching was the mark. I am sure he had compassion for those people and wanted to love them, but the Father said no.

We love others not because they demand it or because we have the desire, but because we are responding to the Lord Jesus Christ. In summary, we see that Paul's delay in visiting the Romans was in no sense due to laziness, lack of concern or failure to fulfill his apostolic role. Rather, it was solely due to his humble spirit which made all his desires, no matter how noble, subservient to Christ.

How are we to love people? Love expresses itself in a thankful heart and a passion to serve--both coupled with a humility which does not overstep the bounds of the Lord. In contrast to our society which has turned inward for love, Paul takes us outward. He exalts us into the Trinity in order to find love. Now that we are placed in Christ, we have become part of the divine interworking of the Trinity. Paul says that thanksgiving is addressed to the *Father* for the working of his grace. The gifts that we use to serve one another are from the *Holy Spirit*. And we check in with the *Lord Jesus Christ* as to how and when to love. We have as our resource an ocean of love involving all members of the Trinity.

My encouragement to you differs drastically from that offered by our age. Our world is craving love, and we have it as a gift within the community of the body. Therefore, let us wholeheartedly express our love to one another.

Copyright 1987 All rights reserved.