

**Sermon for Sunday, November 14, 2010**  
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**How Do You Love**  
**Romans 12:9-16**

No passage in Romans is quite like 12:9-16, which has a series of twenty to twenty-one commands. Paul states no reason, no motive to obey, no mention of grace. At first, it's hard to see what unifies these virtues and rules. As a teacher I think, "How can people remember this list? I can't." So there is a temptation to reduce these twenty commands to a few key ideas, and place it in a simpler package.

But we must resist the urge to tame or rearrange Scripture. The Bible has long stories, cryptic sayings, fierce denunciations of sin, dense descriptions of the character and deeds of God, songs of mourning and lament, and commandments like these. We may not like all of them, but we need them. Take commandments. Some love laws. They want to know what to do, how to live, and they find God's law so helpful. Others cringe when they read the law. It makes them feel guilty and it seems to lead away from God's grace.

The Lord knows our spiritual tastes differ. In his wisdom, he has given us some bursts of law, like Romans 12. So let's take it as his gift and hear it. We see that love is the theme. Paul commands us to love in 12:9, 12:10 and hospitality is literally "love of stranger."

Although it's not immediately obvious, there is a context and motive for these commands. Until this point, when we hear about love in Romans, it is *God's love*.

- "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Rom. 5:5).
- "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8).
- Nothing can "separate us from the love of Christ" (8:35, 39).

Paul is turning us from the love of God we receive to the love of God we show. We love because of God's prior love. And our love should resemble God's love. The twenty-one commands keep love from becoming a vague notion. The commands give concrete direction as we love.

The commands have two patterns. 1) We notice that the commands keep getting harder. First, we love our family and friends, second, strangers, third, those who persecute us. 2) We notice the similarities between the love commanded and the love God shows, for he loves his family and strangers and even those who persecute his Son, our Lord.

We show love individually, to the people near us, and we love corporately, as a church. Romans 12 says the church is one body. We belong to each other, we recognize and respect each other's gifts and use them to strengthen each other (12:1-5). In a moment, Paul shifts to life in society. But first he describes the love one believer owes another.

**The marks of real love (12:9-10).**

"Love must be sincere" 12.9, literally, without hypocrisy, without play-acting. "The church must not turn itself into a stage. For love is not theatre." Yet it is easy to make love into a show and it's easy to pretend to love. How? There is full blown hypocrisy – pretending to love someone when you hate them. Judas pretended to love Jesus and betrayed him with a kiss. But most of the time insincere love is more shallowness than full-blown hypocrisy.

For example, we ask someone, "How are you doing" only to find that the answer is complicated. We don't want the details, so we're looking for an interruption when we realize "When I asked, I was trying to sound genuine." So politeness can supplant love. We give smiles and hugs when we want to project love rather than giving love. Or we can do something that seems generous and think, "I hope they see that they are in my debt."

Even in flawed marriages, husbands and wives love each other. Yet a married man and woman often want to manage the spouse, the relationship, rather than loving them. We want our marriage to function well, to be peaceful, but we lack higher goals. Sometimes we simply want to change or "fix" our husband or wife so they do what we want.

Suppose your kitchen is downstairs and around the corner from your bedroom or study. Music is on, ear buds are in so deep, the cerebrum vibrates. The simple act of calling people to dinner can be hard. The cook has to call three times. When the rest of the family finally hears, the cook is frustrated; the fourth call sounds loud, irritated. At that moment, our aim is to manage behavior so this doesn't happen again. We say, "You know I can't hear you call from the kitchen; come upstairs" or "You can't hear a thing with those ear buds. Take them out when it's almost supper time." That isn't love, it's getting the behavior you want.

Love is sincere when we seek more than behavior management – getting along and "being happy." Jesus said, "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" Again, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy..." (Eph: 5:2, 25-26). Jesus' love is spiritual. He wants to bless us, and blessing brings happiness, but aims for more than mere happiness. He wants us to know him. He wants to make us holy.

Ask: "Do I love others as Jesus loves me? Or am I managing people, calculating to get them to do what I want? Am I seeking their good, their holiness?"

If we supervise people at work, it's easy to manage them, so they stop doing things that bother us. We may want them to ask fewer questions. We may want them to speed up and produce more or to slow down and produce better. Management is good, but we should look beyond management, which can pursue the common good, or can be very selfish, especially if the focus is techniques for avoiding problems rather than caring for people. You know what people say:

Compliment people freely. Then other people will be glad to see you. Smile and the whole world will smile with you. Tell the truth. The truth emerges anyway, so make life easier – and present it your way. Find a service project; you'll make some friends and improve morale. That is mere management. We should want our people to grow. Then love is sincere.

### **Love is informed.**

The command "Love sincerely, hate what is evil" seems like a non sequitur, so we ask: Does hatred of evil help us to love? Yes, it does. Paul's call to hate evil shows that love is not blind sentimentality. It's discerning. We "test all things; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess. 5:22).

God tests all things, and he hates/abhors some of them. Proverbs 6:16-19 says "There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that... rush into evil, a false witness... and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers." It is right to hate such things.

More, if we truly love someone, we hate evils that could harm them. So parents "hate" bad playmates, cruel teachers, and suspicious love-interests. A loving husband may "hate" his wife's cruel boss or co-worker. No, he doesn't actually hate the person, but he hates what that person does to his beloved. Thus true love loathes what is evil and holds fast (literally is glued) to what is good.

## **Love is devoted and affectionate.**

Love is devoted and affectionate. Greek has four words for love: three of them appear in Romans 12. He commanded divine love first, in 12:9. It is pure love, love that goes to strangers, gives even to enemies. It is not based on feeling for the beloved or any beauty or virtue in them. Because we're united to Christ, we can show that pure, unchanging love.

Divine love is greater than human, brotherly affection. Agape is indiscriminate and inclusive, it goes to every neighbor or stranger who cross its path. God himself is the source and model of agape.

Brotherly love is exclusive, it discriminates, it goes to those whom it favors, it goes to a few, who make sure their paths cross. It's rooted in human attraction for someone who has virtue, skill, or a shared interest. Philia is a human love based on affection for the desirable. Yet Paul blesses, commands brotherly love.

The words "be devoted" translate another word for love. It means "the tender and intimate affection... between members of the same family." People sometimes say the highest love is dispassionate, like God's love for sinners and rebels. They probably mean that love for enemies is noble and amazing, which it is. But God wants, expects us to feel affection for each other. The affection we feel in a long, warm hug with just a few friends or family members (church hugs are good, but there are too many people around).

So love is not essentially dispassionate. It *can be dispassionate* and at times it must be – when we need to love someone who is not acting lovable. But God created us with emotions, so we love emotionally. Why do we love infants and babies? Why prefer dogs over iguanas? Because we connect emotionally.

The point: the church is beautiful and powerful when people love each other. Open yourself to love, give yourself to love, sit next to people you can love.

## **Love shows honor**

Besides mutual affection, we show mutual honor. We should be quick to recognize and give credit and respect to fellow believers. Our translation says, "Honor one another above yourselves." Literally, "Go before one another in [showing] honor." That is, we should try to outdo or surpass each other in showing honor. So we try to bestow honor, recognition and praise on each other, rather than gathering them for ourselves. We don't need to flatter people, but we do recognize and praise God for the skills and virtues they have, but we do observe and label all that is there. Think of Lance Hudgens and others who excel at spotting excellence. They tell you and thank God at the same time.

Stop thinking about yourself, stop asking, "Why doesn't anyone appreciate me? Drop the resentment, the poison of jealousy. Some people are more gifted and recognized. Don't wait around for people to recognize your contribution and praise you. Instead, be alert to what *they* are contributing and recognize them – and praise God for what he has given them.

So we love and honor others when we work internally to give up ambition, conceit, pride, and give up our exaggerated emotional tenderness. But honor and love can go together at a large, public scale too. That's where we can honor and love strangers as well as neighbors. Here is a story from industry

Most cell phones contain either tantalum or niobium, elements 73 and 41. Both are rare metals, found together in nature in the mineral tantalite. In 1998, when the cell phone industry was exploding, manufacturers were seeking sources of tantalum and niobium. The Congo had most of the world's supply. Much of it lay in mud-like deposits in creek beds near the border with Rwanda. When demand soared, farmers could earn a year's wages in a day by shoveling out the tantalite. The Hutu/Tutsi conflict was near its height, and people suddenly had lots of money, money they used to buy weapons, so the conflict grew

far worse. Cell phone makers soon realized their purchase of tantalite was funding anarchy. They all decided to buy tantalite from Australia, although it cost more. By defunding the conflict, they saved lives. So they loved and honored these strangers ahead of themselves and their wealth.

The perseverance of real love 12:11

Love is fervent in spirit and service. Some folk despise religious enthusiasm. Confidence, zeal, passion, and joy *bother* them. But Paul is forbidding spiritual sloth. It's true that some people wield "spiritual superiority," and enthusiasm for God like a weapon and make every else feel like spiritual mud-puppies. But zeal and fervor are good, not evil, when they lead us to serve the Lord. The Lord is forbidding sloth – sloth in our work, in our families, in our devotion to God.

There is no place for boasting about our religious devotion, our experiences. But the right zeal and fervor moves us to get up early, to stay up late, to sit on the edge of our seats, doing things that matter, that serve God and mankind.

Love is "joyful in hope, patient in affliction; faithful in prayer" (12:12). All three signify that love perseveres; true believers persevere. Affliction may shake us temporarily, we may stumble, but we do not fall (Psa. 37:24, Rom. 11:11). When problems loom large, we keep on praying, whether we like it or not.

I hear people say, "I can't help myself." They mean "I can't resist this temptation, these dark thoughts. I'm carried along by forces I can't resist, to do things I never planned, things I may even hate." Sometimes this is a wrenching reality, sometimes it's an excuse to give up, to capitulate to sin. But consider: If you really can't help yourself, if you have no resources of your own, then pray. Ask God to enable or empower you to live as you should. And as we retain hope, it is easier to persevere to the end.

### **The realism of love in a chaotic world 12:13-16**

Love shares with the needy

Paul says, "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality" (12:13). So love is generous; it shares. To *share*, is to have things in common. We can share our resources, money, with the saints in material need. And we can share our lives; we can share each other's emotional burdens.

Hospitality is excellent, because when we open our homes we can share both materially and emotionally – food and friendship. But let's notice that Paul's word and concept for hospitality are different from ours. We use "entertainment" and "hospitality" almost interchangeably, to describe times when we bring friends and acquaintances into our home. It is certainly good to invite friends over, but its important to invite strangers.

Paul word for hospitality is love of stranger. Context: The empire's inns were dirty and expensive and traded in immorality as much as food and lodging. Christians extended love to fellow Christians, whether they traveled for business or to share the gospel. We should practice this – literally, we should pursue it. We should search for people to invite to our home. It should be our custom. Our children should grow up with it, so they notice people who have nowhere to go, so that they regularly bring them into our home.

I knew Debbie had mastered this art when a young man who is a friend of our children stayed at our house one night. Debbie was telling him where to find towels and whatnot, and he gave her a quizzical look, "Don't you know how many times I've stayed at your house?" No she didn't; there are too many people to keep track, and that is a beautiful thing.

Just as we should be excited not reluctant to give money to God's work, so we should be excited, not reluctant, to bring someone into our home. We don't entertain, we love strangers.

## **Love blesses enemies and those who persecute**

Disciples don't "repay evil for evil" (1 Pet: 3:9). We love when it's hard to love. When anger rises within, we return good for evil. We bless those who persecute. Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44).

Mean-spirited justice is the opposite: the cycle of insult and counter-insult, giving offense and acting offended when someone returns the favor. That's life between Serbs and Bosnians, Israelis and Palestinians, Shiites and Sunnis. It breaks out here too, in politics, at work, in our homes. Romans 12:14 says, "Bless those who persecute you." 1 Pet. 3:9 says, "Do not repay insult with insult, but with blessing."

Why this command? Why does Paul tell us to fight the instinct of self-defense? Because Christ himself called us to this, by his word and example. Because it is a great, God-like thing to win someone with kindness. Because it brings blessing to your former enemy and to you, for it demonstrates that you are a child of God. I missed a mission trip to Brazil in 2008 because diplomats irritated each other and kept punishing each other by punishing travelers.

## **Love sympathizes**

Sympathy and compassion are expressions of love, too. Sympathy is the ability to feel what another feels. We "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12.15). If one suffers, all suffer. If one is honored, all rejoice (1 Cor 12.26)! We must enter the experiences of others and act on what we feel, if we can. (Example: David and Jonathan wept when they parted (2 Sam. 20). Ephesian elders wept at good-bye to Paul (Acts 20).

This is one reason why we love Jesus so much. He sympathizes with us in our weakness because he "has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Yet he is strong! He doesn't merely sympathize, he defeats Satan. He is sympathetic and heroic. He feels with us and acts for us.

## **Love is harmonious and humble – it associates with everyone**

To paraphrase – don't be a snob. Spend time with and get to know all sorts of people. Don't stratify into higher and lower, my tribe, your tribe. Love is open, not snobbish. Let me ask you this gently: Do you often say, "It's a small world?" You mean, "In this large city, I keep bumping into my people." And why might that be? The world is not small, it's large. This city is large too. If you constantly bump into your friends, it's because you have chosen to restrict your circle. Open it up to people unlike you.

Conclusion: you see the progression in the last phases of Paul's exhortation. He begins with what is easiest. First, love your brothers. Feel affection for them and honor them, for they are honorable. Second, he says we should keep it up, even when it's hard, and everyone is hard to love at times. Third, he says we should share with the needy and love strangers – people who are farther from us. Fourth, he says we should love those who persecute us – those who want to harm us. In all, he calls us ever more to Christ-like love.

Even the last thoughts call us to Christ, for he mourns with us when this broken world makes us sorrowful, and he rejoices with us when we let ourselves feel his blessings. Finally, he associates with us. In truth, he is too good for us, but he never acts that way. Lowly as we are, he comes to us, He calls us his brothers, his friends, his beloved.

He did this supremely in his Incarnation, his daily life, and his death. He proved himself to be our strong friend, our personal hero and deliverer, when he rose from death and brought us to life with him. This life is eternal and present; we enjoy it when we are present with Him and He with us, as in the sacrament.