

Genuine Love
Romans 12:9-21

How realistic is all of this? Can we really bless those who persecute us? Can we really meet the needs of our enemies with kindness? Sure, we Southern folks know how to grit our teeth and mind our manners. But can love for our enemies ever be genuine?

For make no mistake – at the very beginning of this passage Paul says we can't just put on a show. He says in verse 9 that we should let love be without dissimulation – that means without hypocrisy. We can't just do the Southern thing and put on a false front. We can't be nice to someone's face and then talk about them behind their back.

But who is it that we are called to love? Well, all thorough this book Paul has been telling us about the amazing grace of God, about how God has freely chosen to save even the worst of sinners who place their trust in Christ alone. Last week, we studied the first part of this chapter, in which Paul said that the most reasonable way we could respond to God's saving grace is with obedient service. Because God has given us all the gifts and abilities we have, it just makes sense that we should devote them completely to Him, giving all that we are and all that we have for His glory.

But now Paul goes a step further. He says our service to God shouldn't spring only from a sense of duty, but from genuine love. As he says in verse 9, we shouldn't just do what is right because we know that's what God wants us to do. No, our love for God should be genuine, and that love should move us to abhor, to hate what is evil, to hate whatever God hates. In the same way, where it comes to what is good, we should cleave to it, we should cling to it, we should stick to it like glue because of our love for God. Because God loves us and we love Him, we should love whatever it is that He loves.

And it is this same sort of wholehearted commitment to God that is the motivation for verse 11. For how should we serve God? Our service for Him and for others should spring forth from a passionate zeal – that's the real meaning of the word the King James translates as "business." It carries the idea of eagerness, of diligence, of genuine commitment, all of which of course naturally flow out of a heart that is full of love and gratitude for the God Who has loved us enough to die for us.

It is only this kind of heart that will be able to maintain a genuine love and commitment for God through all the ups and downs of life. It is only this kind of heart that can keep hope alive even in the most difficult of circumstances, the sorts of reality that lie behind verse 12. For no matter how certain the facts of the gospel may be in our minds, it is so easy for us to lose sight of God when our attention turns to this evil world, a world where mass murderers prey on concert goers and church members alike, a world where powerful men prey on young girls and where over a million American babies are sacrificed every year on the altar of sexual freedom, a world where Islamo-fascists kill in the name of God.

But even though as verse 12 says we might have to go through times of great tribulation, of great trouble, it is only a genuine love for God that will allow us to go on living in hope, rejoicing even in the midst of our worst suffering and grief. For it is our love for God and His love for us that convinces us down to the core of our being that somehow, some way, God will work in and through everything for our good and for His glory.

Yes, all that makes sense. We can understand why we should love God, even if our love for Him is not always as warm, as wholehearted as it should be. After all, God is perfectly holy, perfectly lovely, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God's love is as great as the heavens are high above the earth. God has removed the sins from all His people as far as the east is from the west. If you can't love God, especially if you remember the tremendous price He has paid to save sinners like us, I don't suppose you can love anyone.

But given what else Paul is telling us, the genuine love he mentions in verse 9 should also be for other Christians. After all, from the very beginning of this letter, Paul has told us that if our faith unites us to Christ, it also joins us to everyone else who shares that faith. Last week, we saw that it is because we are joined with all believers into one Body of Christ that we should seek to serve one another, using whatever gifts God has given us for the good of the whole Body, all the others for whom Christ has died. We should serve and teach, we should exhort and encourage, we should lead and show mercy for the sake of our fellow believers.

Verse 13 goes on to mention two other ways in which we can express our genuine love for one another. If one of the saints, a Christian brother or sister is in need, we can do whatever we can to help him. We can be given to hospitality, actively seeking out opportunities to welcome others into our homes, into our lives. And verse 15 adds a way we can serve others' emotional needs – we can rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, sharing not just our possessions and our time with others, but our deepest feelings as well.

And, again, I think all this makes sense to us at least where it comes to our closest friends. But are we really willing to lower our defenses, to give of ourselves so completely to all our fellow believers? Do we really see ourselves as truly joined, truly one with all those who are trusting Christ as their Savior and bowing the knee to Him as Lord? Do we really love all the saints, all our brothers and sisters in Christ as much as we love our physical family?

And to raise the bar even higher, Paul makes it clear that this kind of heartfelt, genuine love between believers must know no boundaries. It must make no distinctions. Look at verse 16 – we are not to mind high things, which means we are not to be haughty or proud. We are not to remain aloof from those whom the world considers to be of low estate. We are to spread our love equally across all those lines of race and class that this world insists are so important. Whether our fellow believers are in a Turkish prison or sweltering in a drought in Northeast Brazil, whether they have been chased from their homes by radical Islam or whether they are victims of the cultural chaos in this country, our hearts and our hands must be open to all those for whom Christ has died.

But however hard it may be to extend this sort of unconditional love to other Christians in practice, we can still understand it, at least in theory. After all, we know it makes no sense to remain aloof from, to be indifferent to the condition of any of the parts of our own body. Just so, we know that if we are joined to Christ by faith, that means that we are in fact joined to everyone else who shares that same faith. Where it comes to other Christians we know we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, however inconsistently we may act on that knowledge.

But now we come back to the hardest part of all, the part that seems downright impossible. Verse 14 clearly says we are to bless those who persecute us, instead of extending the curses that are far more natural to us. Verse 17 says we are not to repay evil for evil, but to be honest, which means to

do what is good and right in the sight of everyone. Verse 19 says we are not to avenge ourselves – instead verse 18 makes it clear that we should live peaceably with everyone.

And to make matters worse, in verse 20 Paul gives us a subtle reminder that he didn't just dream up this stuff. After all, the command to feed our enemies and give them something to drink is a quote from the Book of Proverbs. And although there's been a lot of ink spilled about just what "coals of fire on their heads" means, it's obvious from the context that it can't be something meanspirited. Instead, it most likely indicates how treating our enemies with kindness can make them blush when they become ashamed of their wicked actions toward us. It most likely calls us to be generous to our enemies so that they might come to repentance.

No, the Greek text says what it means and means what it says. In fact, it says pretty much the same thing that Jesus Himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, in what is probably the most ignored passage in the entire Bible:

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
(Matt. 5:43-48 ESV)

Now, how in the world can we do this? How can we move beyond saying nice things through gritted teeth and really love our enemies? Yes, knowing that we have sinned against God helps us put the wrongs that others have done to us into proper perspective. Yes, knowing that God has shown grace to us can help us be gracious to others. But is it really possible to love those who have hurt us, to love them with genuine love? Sure, Jesus could love like this – after all, He gave His life not for those who loved and trusted Him – for at the time He died, they had all abandoned Him. No, Paul makes it clear back in chapter 5 that it was while we were all still sinners that Christ died for us. So sure, Jesus could love like this. But how can we?

We can, if we remember what Paul has been telling us all throughout this passage. Remember, he's told us that we are joined to our fellow believers by our common faith in Christ. That connection, that union is both the reason for our service to them as well as the motivation for our love for them. Well, it is that same sort of connection to Christ that makes love for our enemies possible. For you see, what is impossible for us is possible for Christ – because we are one with Him by faith, He can do through us what we cannot do in our own strength.

And Paul makes that same point in today's passage, albeit in a rather subtle way. Look again at verse 11, where he tells to be fervent in spirit. The word fervent means welling up, bubbling, or boiling. In other words if we want to love the way Jesus loves, we have to have the Spirit of Christ welling up, bubbling, and boiling within us. It is His Spirit that will love through us. For it is only His Spirit Who can unconditionally love, unreservedly love, truly love even those who have hurt us most deeply.

So as we do our best to put Paul's words, to put Jesus' words into action, as we do our best to serve God, to serve other Christians, and even to serve our enemies because of our love for them, let us pray that the Holy Spirit would work in our hearts to make this love deeper, more real, more genuine.