

Romans 12:9-21 “Love One Another”
Amos 5
Psalm 131

December 14, 2008

There is a lot of emphasis on "authenticity" these days.

What is “authentic” Christianity?

Francis Schaeffer wrote that the mark of the Christian was love.

Now there is such a thing as “counterfeit” love –

hypocritical love –

“love” that is expressed purely as a preference for people like me.

That sort of love can exist in any group of people.

There is nothing particularly Christian about that.

Pagans and tax collectors, Jesus said, do good to people they like.

But a Spirit-empowered, Christ-centered, gospel-driven love
must characterize the church.

And Paul says that this love is without hypocrisy.

The word for “genuine” in verse one is the word “anupokritos”

-- unhypocritical.

There is no place for insincere "love" in the Christian church.

A fake love, an insincere fellowship, a half-hearted community –

these are things that have no place in the church of Jesus Christ.

We might, if we ignored the rest of the passage,

walk away today thinking that we are doing pretty well.

After all, if you think in the abstract,

“do I sincerely love others?”

you might come away thinking, “yes, I do!”

But Paul will not let you escape so easily.

That is why he quotes Amos 5:15

“Hate evil and love good.”

The connection between Amos 5 and Romans 12 is striking.

Amos 5 is a classic example of the remnant theology

that Paul used repeatedly in Romans 9-11.

In Amos 5 God says that he will send Israel into exile for their transgressions –

in other words, that he will break off the branches (to use Romans 11 language).

And Amos says to the remnant:

“Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
and so that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,
as you have said.
Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.” (Amos 5:14-15)

And in view of Paul’s usage of the “living sacrifice” image at the beginning of Romans 12,
we should also take note of verses 21-24:

*I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Paul had said in Romans 11 that we Gentiles should not get cocky,
but we should remember that if God cut off the natural branches to graft us in,
he can just as easily cut us off, if we rebel like they did!

Present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.
Remember, Jesus is the sin offering.
He is the atoning sacrifice.

We are a peace offering –
a sacrifice that expresses the communion that now exists
between God and man *because* of Jesus.

Love is without hypocrisy.

In verses 3-8 Paul addressed how particular gifts should be exercised in the church:
Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and mercy.

Now Paul turns to the inward disposition of the one who loves.

1. The Inward Disposition of the One Who Loves (12:9-13)

The first part of Paul’s exhortation focuses on your disposition.

In verses 9-13 the focus is on what you should do *in general*.

He will later deal with how to handle particular situations,
but these the things that should characterize the Christian
in all situations and contexts.

9 *Let love be genuine.*

What is genuine love?

Verses 9-13 are all one sentence.

Each verb in your English translation is actually a participle or adjective modifying love.

I understand why all translations render these in a series of imperatives.

That is what Paul is saying.

But you lose something by turning verses 9-13 into seven sentences.

Let me give it to you in a somewhat woodenly literal form:

- 9 Love [is] without hypocrisy,
detesting the evil,
clinging to the good,
10 loving each other affectionately with brotherly love,
leading the way in honoring one another,
11 not hesitating in eagerness,
seething [or boiling] in the Spirit,
serving the Lord,
12 rejoicing in hope,
enduring in tribulation
persevering in prayer
13 sharing [koinonia] in the needs of the saints
pursuing hospitality.

Paul could have written this as a string of commands in the imperative mood.

But he didn't.

He chose to use participles that all explain what *love* is.

At the same time, Paul is not being purely descriptive here.

He is using the participle as an imperative.

He is not saying that this is an ideal description of what love *should* be.

He is commanding *you* to be this way.

So as we go through verses 9-13,

remember that these are not a series of discrete commands;

this is a package – this is what unhypocritical love is –

this is what genuine, sincere, authentic love is.

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

Genuine love hates what is evil and clings to what is good.

Does it sound strange that you must hate in order to love?

Well, you must.

You must hate evil.

You must hate sin.

“For unless a person hates evil he cannot love.” (Origen)

If you love God, then you must hate all that is opposed to the one that you love.

10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

Genuine love shows honor to others.

If our love for one another is truly the familial, brotherly love
that Christ (our elder brother) commands,
then we will show honor to one another –
preferring them to ourselves.

11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Given that Paul has just used a different word to refer to the inward “spiritual” part of us,

I am very much inclined to say that “be fervent in Spirit”

is a reference to the Holy Spirit,

especially given the pairing with the Lord (usually a reference to Jesus).

Literally, it reads: boiling in the Spirit, serving in the Lord.

The point in this triad is the energy that drives our love.

Do not be slothful.

But be boiling over with the Spirit.

Paul has told us in chapter 8 that God has given us the Spirit of adoption,
the Spirit of his Son.

And so Paul says, don’t be timid – don’t be tardy.

But as the fire of the Spirit heats your life,

boil and bubble over in your service to Christ.

12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

You might say the theme of verses 11-12 is

“Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.” (MacBeth)

Though I doubt this is where Shakespeare got it!

But the context for our boiling over in the Spirit,
the context for our loving service to Christ,
is in fact tribulation.

Paul tells us that genuine love
rejoices in hope,
is patient in tribulation
and is constant in prayer.

As Paul has already told us, ‘who hopes for what he sees?’ (8:24)

Because of the hope laid up for us in heaven (Jesus Christ),
we therefore rejoice – even in the midst of tribulation.
Indeed, that joy is what enables us to be patient in the midst of trouble.
It is not that we like trouble!
But rather, in the midst of trouble, we are to rejoice in hope.

And in the midst of trouble, we are to be constant in prayer.
Genuine love continues in prayer.
Authentic Christian love is a love that prays.

Why?

Because prayer is rooted in that same hope in which rejoice.
We worship and serve a living God
who has brought the end of the ages in Jesus Christ.
We are fellow heirs with Jesus (Romans 8:17).
The Spirit that we have received is the firstfruits (the downpayment)
of the inheritance that *he* has received.

And so therefore be constant in prayer.
The king sits on the throne.
He rules at the right hand of his Father.

And as we pray every week, “thy kingdom come,
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”
we are asking that God would turn us away from our petty kingdoms
to his glorious kingdom!

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Again, the context is trouble.

Paul’s assumption is that there are needs in the body.
And the honor that we show to one another
should include the communion in each other’s needs.

Genuine love – unhypocritical love –
takes care of the saints who are in need.

Diodore of Tarsus says,

“We should honor the saints and take care of their needs until they no longer have them.”

This is why we have a diaconal offering –
so that we can all share (have fellowship) in the needs of the saints.

But like we saw last Sunday night,

writing a check cannot exhaust the meaning of “koinonia” in the needs of the saints.

Our financial contribution to those in need

should be matched by our giving our time, our energy, our lives.
Authentic, genuine love
shares (has fellowship) in the needs of the saints.

And Paul adds to this the idea of pursuing love of strangers (seeking to show hospitality).
Showing hospitality is not something that happens to you.
You have to pursue it.
In fact, the word for “pursue” is the exact word used in the very next verse
for the one who persecutes you!

Now hopefully people do not think of themselves as persecuted by your hospitality!
But the way Paul juxtaposes this word in two such different contexts
in back-to-back verses,
suggests that he is saying that you should pursue showing hospitality
with the same zeal that is shown by those who persecute Christians.

What is this going to mean in the coming weeks and months?
Are you prepared to show hospitality – sharing in the needs of the saints –
welcoming them into your home when they are unemployed and in need?
We may be facing a catastrophic economic collapse.

When 20% of the population (and congregation) is unemployed,
and you are feeling strapped yourself –
how will you respond?

Hospitality *does not mean* having your friends over for dinner.
Hospitality means “love of strangers” – *philoxenia* –
and the basic concept in Greek has to do with caring for “travelers.”
The classic biblical stories of hospitality are the stories of Lot in Genesis 19,
where he welcomes the strangers (the angels),
but the men of Sodom attack them.
And in Judges 19 when the men of Gibeah imitate the men of Sodom,
and only the Ephraimite – himself an outsider –
will show hospitality to the traveling Levite and his concubine.

Hospitality is not entirely dead in modern America.
You can still find it in the Mennonite travel books that list the names and addresses
of Christian families (of all denominations – though mostly Mennonite)
that offer their homes to those traveling through.
And I’ve said before,
if you are traveling, and you would like to find a place to stay,
let me know, and I *may* be able to connect you with someone.

The Christian church *ought* to be a place that practice hospitality – love of strangers.

The first place that starts is when you look around the room today –
if you don't know someone's name,
then that is an opportunity to practice hospitality

Even as you come forward for the Lord's Supper –
if you don't know the person who is walking beside you,
introduce yourself!

You will not offend the Lord of the Feast
if you take time to show his love to the stranger who walks beside you!

In verses 14-21 Paul then turns from the inward disposition
to our outwards actions.

In other words, now we start the section on practical application!

2. The Outward Actions of the One Who Loves (12:14-21)

I tried to make this a three point sermon,
but Paul's text has two points,
and so we need to see the last two points of this sermon as part of one point for Paul.
Verses 15-18 (and possibly 19) are all one sentence,
and you really cannot divorce verses 20-21 from verses 17-19,
and all of this section is rooted in verse 14,
which is the heart of the passage.

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

We cannot escape our opening command:

“Let love be genuine.”

Or, “Love is without hypocrisy.”

If Jesus said from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,”
then we cannot do other than he did.

We may not curse those who persecute us.

We may not damn them to hell.

We must bless them.

And indeed, we must:

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Origen points out that “Here we must make a clear and appropriate distinction.

For the joys of Christians are not to be linked with every sort of joy...

For if I see people rejoicing because they have made a lot of money,
or acquired a lot of property, or gained worldly honor,

I ought not to rejoice with them,
because I know that sorrow and tears follow joys of that kind...
[But] if we see people turn from error, leave the darkness of ignorance behind
and come to the light of the truth and the forgiveness of sins,
we ought to rejoice with them....
Likewise....we should weep for someone who is weeping for his sins,
who after doing wrong is converted to repentance
and who is washing his error in tears.” (Origen)

*16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.
Never be wise in your own sight.*

While you would never guess it from the English,
we are back to our “thinking” words in verse 16.
“Live in harmony” would be literally translated
“thinking the same unto one another”
“Do not be haughty” is actually
“not thinking the high things”
And “never be wise in your own sight” is
“not becoming thoughtful in yourselves.”

As we saw last time,
how you *think* is important.
How do you think of yourself?
Because what you think – what you *really* think –
is what will guide your action.

“Living in harmony” is only possible if we have the same mind in us that was also in Christ Jesus
(Philippians 2 uses the same root – phronew)

Living in harmony only works if we are thinking together.
And this won’t work if we are all thinking “high things” and not humbling ourselves.
Always “be ready to accept the advice of others.” (Theodoret)
Do not be thoughtful in yourselves – do not be wise in your own sight,
but think together.

3. But What About When Things Go Wrong? (12:17-21)

But what about when things go wrong?
What about when others wrong you?
When someone pushes your buttons...
“He made me so angry!”

Wait.
He made me angry?

Remember Jesus' words:

“Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

Whatever is in *your* heart will come out when you are bumped.

That is why Paul says:

17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Other will sin against you.

It is impossible to make someone else change.

I cannot make you live at peace with me.

But I can live peaceably with you.

I can love you, regardless of whether you love me.

This helps us understand what Paul said earlier about “hating evil.”

You hate evil,

but you do not repay evil for evil.

After all, if you *hate* evil,

why would you endorse evil by practicing it?

Rather, give thought – think ahead –

to how you can do what is good in the sight of all.

Paul has already made it clear that you do *not* compromise on doing good.

But you are to think ahead for how you can make peace.

In Jesus' words, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

*19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God,
for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

The code of vengeance in the ancient world was very strong.

The Desert Fathers tell of a monk who visited Abba Sisoes

and explained that he had been wronged

and could not rest until he had vengeance.

So Sisoes said to him, “My brother, let us pray.”

Raising up his hands, Sisoes prayed,

“God, we don't need you. We can avenge ourselves.”

At this the brother fell on his face and begged forgiveness,

realizing that “vengeance presupposes a godless world.” (Harmless, 236)

The only reason why you would need to take vengeance

is if you don't believe that God is in charge.
If God is in charge, then you can endure unjust suffering,
because you *know* that in the end all things will be made right.

I want you to think about this for a minute.
"Vengeance is mine, says the Lord."
We have developed a strange idea in the modern world
that vengeance is wrong.
But God does *not* say,
"Vengeance is wrong."

What he says is "Trust me to make things right."
You are called to imitate Christ.
As he suffered unjustly, so also will you.

But unjust suffering will not last forever.
"Vengeance is mine, *I will repay*, says the Lord."

If we take vengeance, we will not accomplish the righteousness of God.
"But if we reserve these things to the vengeance of God,
he will without doubt punish them far more severely than we ever could." (Origen)

As Paul says in verse 20:
*20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink;
for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."*

"Heaping burning coals" – the image is that of shaming him into repentance,
or else judgment will come upon him.
Certainly as you bless the one who persecutes you,
you pray for his conversion.
But as you bless him – as you feed him – as you show love to him,
you are heaping burning coals on his head.
He will have no excuse on the day of judgment.
Because he witness a love that was authentic,
a love that was without hypocrisy.
Is our love without hypocrisy?
Are we a place where Christian love is authentic?

Paul concludes by using the language of "conquering":

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
Do not be conquered by evil.

But conquer evil with good.

This morning we are singing the songs of Hannah and of Mary.
These are songs of triumph – of victory – of celebration,
and yet they are songs for sons whose victories were rather unusual.

Hannah was singing of the birth of her son, Samuel.
In the days of Samuel the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines.
Evil had overcome.
And the ark of God was taken into the temple of Dagon
To all outward appearance, Yahweh had been humbled by Dagon.

But in the morning Dagon lay on his face before the ark of God,
with his head and his hands cut off.

Yahweh overthrew Dagon,
not by sending a mighty army to smash the temple,
but by coming himself, alone and unaided,
and forcing the god of the Philistines to bow before him!

As Hannah had sung,
“He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.
The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the power of his anointed.” (1 Sam 2:9-10)

And of course, Mary was singing of the coming of her son as well.
Perhaps remembering Hannah, she sang,
“He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble degree.” (Luke 1:51-52)

And her son humbled himself more than anyone ever has.
For though he was in the form of God,
he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.
But he humbled himself,
taking the form of a servant.
And when he saw that “doing good” would require him to lay down his life for us,

when he saw that conquering evil would require him be run over by evil,
he did not swerve from the path,
but he went forth in to battle as the conquering hero, the Divine Warrior,
the Mighty One,

who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.

“The person who appears to be overcome by evil for a time
in fact may be overcoming evil, just as the Savior overcame evil by not resisting it.
Evil works against itself, and when it is overcome it thinks that it has won!” (Ambrosiaster)