

How we are to love fellow believers

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church,
10th March 2019

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. (Romans 12.10)

Introduction

An amazing thing about true Christianity according to the Bible is that when you become a Christian you become a child of God. In our natural state we are not children of God but children of the devil. But when God saves us, God adopts us as his dearly loved children.

If those of us who are true Christians are the children of God, then this makes us related to each other spiritually. We are brothers and sisters. We belong to each other. We are part of the same family.

Being related spiritually to each other brings with it a responsibility: we are to love each other as brothers and sisters. This is what the apostle is talking about here in this verse. He says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves."

This verse builds on what the apostle said in the previous verse, which we were considering last week. In that verse we saw that the apostle called upon his readers to show love that is genuine, and without hypocrisy. He also said to his readers that they are to hate what is sinful and to cling to what is right.

In that verse he was speaking about the love that we are to have to all people. We should be genuinely loving to all, with a pure and holy love. Having spoken about the general love for all people that we are to have, the apostle now specifically focuses on the love that we are to have for other true believers. What he says divides naturally into two halves:

1. We are to have brotherly affection for each other
2. We should honour each other.

Let us think about these things now.

1. We are to have brotherly affection for each other

The apostle says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”

There are three key words in the original Greek that the apostle uses in this part of the verse.

The first is the word which is translated in our translation as “be devoted”. It means “to love with natural affection.” Other translations translate the word “Be kindly affectioned” (King James Version); “Be kindly affectionate” (New King James Version).

The second word means brotherly love. I will give you the word, because it has a modern city named after it. It is “Philadelphia”, which is derived from two Greek words, “philos” which means “love”, and “adelphos” which means “brother”. The city of Philadelphia was set up by William Penn, who belonged to the group known as the Quakers. He wanted to found a city in what was at the time New England where everyone would love each other with a brotherly love. The apostle says that we who are believers are to have this brotherly love for each other.

The third key word in this part of the verse is the word which is translated “one another”. This word tells us that we have mutual responsibilities. I should love you, and you should love me. This word speaks to us about how we who are believers are all part of the same family, and we have a responsibility one to the other.

So then, putting these three words together, let me attempt a paraphrase of what the apostle is saying: “Have the sort of loving affection and care for each other that comes naturally to those who are related to each other as brothers and sisters.”

Let me make some observations about what the apostle is saying:

1. We should have a special love for other believers, which is over and above the love that we are to have for all people. In the Old Testament God said, “Love your neighbour as yourself.” That commandment stands. But on top of this now, with the coming of Christ and the birth of the church, there is a new commandment, to love other believers as brothers and sisters. Jesus said, as recorded in John’s Gospel chapter 13, verses 34 and 35, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The love that we are to have for other believers is a special love, the sort of love that you have for your own family members. There is a saying that we have in

English to describe the special loyalty that family members have towards each other: “Blood is thicker than water.” There is a sense in which the loyalty, love and affection that believers have for each other should be even stronger than the bond between natural family members.

2. This love is to be a love which does not change. Your natural brother is your brother. He remains your brother, whatever he does. He may do things that annoy you or offend you, but he still remains your brother. There may be a distance that comes between you over some matter, but you still love him, because he is your own flesh and blood. So it is with the love that we have for our fellow believers in Christ. We are to love them with a permanent love, whatever happens, because the relationship fundamentally never changes. All true believers are our brothers and sisters in Christ, and will be for ever.
3. God commands us to have *feelings* of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is very clear from the words that the apostle uses here. God is calling us, through his apostle, to have affection for our spiritual brothers and sisters. It is sometimes said that love is not a matter of feeling but of action. But that is not true. You can do noble actions, without having any love in your heart. This is clear from 1 Corinthians chapter 13 verses 1 to 3,

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,
I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the
gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love,
I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my
body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

The apostle describes in those verses a person who is doing things that look very noble and good, but does not have love in his heart. He says that this sort of activity, without love, is useless. This shows us that real love is more than just doing the right thing outwardly. True love is an inclination of the heart, whereby you really want the best for the other person. You long for blessings for him or her, and from your heart you do all you can to do him or her good.

4. Our love should show in the way that we speak and act. I have said that love is not merely a matter of what we do. It is fundamentally an attitude of the heart. But, having said that, it is also true that if we have real love it will show in the way that we speak and in the

way that we act. Real love means that if you hear of a brother or sister in need, as you are able, you will step in to do what you can to meet that need. John said in his first letter, chapter 3, verses 17 and 18, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth." Brotherly love will also mean that you will speak in a loving way to your fellow believer. You might need to rebuke him, but you will do it in a gentle and kind way.

5. Love must be two way. The obligation to love is mutual. You have a responsibility to love, and your brothers and sisters have a responsibility to love you. Sometimes, very occasionally, I get a complaint from someone who says, "I do not feel loved by the members of the church." If you feel that way, I would say to you, "Do not focus on what you think is the failure of others to love you. You get on with loving others." I would encourage you to come to meetings of the church, not waiting for someone to love you, but looking for others to show love to. And when you are at home, do not just sit there thinking, "No-one is looking out for me." Instead, think how you might be able to do good to others. Is there someone you could visit? Could someone do with a telephone call? Is there someone for whom you could pray?

So here is the first thing. We are to have brotherly affection for each other.

2. We are to honour one another

The second thing that the apostle says is that we are to "Honour one another above yourselves."

The literal translation is that we are to go ahead of each other in showing honour to the other.

Showing honour and respect to each other is the natural result of the love that we are to show to each other, and also of the humility that we are to have, that the apostle spoke about in verse 3.

We should treat one another with respect. Your brother or your sister is a very important person. He or she is a child of the living God. There is an infinite price on his or her head. He or she has been bought with the blood of Christ. Moreover, in Christ he or she is a priest and a king. Peter says, in his first letter chapter 2 verse 9, addressing believers,

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Revelation chapter 1 verses 5 and 6 says, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father — to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.” In Christ, your fellow believer is more significant than the President of the United States of America. Therefore treat him or her with respect and as someone very important.

Let’s think about how this would work out in practice.

Let me say what this part of the verse is not telling us to do. It is not telling us to flatter others with excessive praise. Such speech is often dishonest, and sometimes gives glory to men that should only go to God.

What it is talking about: showing proper respect to other believers, as those made in the image of God, and as fellow believers in Christ. Here are some things that we will do if we show proper respect to others:

1. We will greet our brothers and sisters when we meet them. The apostle says in chapter 16 of this letter, verse 16, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.” If you do not greet your brother or sister when you see him, you are treating him or her with contempt.
2. We will speak with other believers when you see them. All of them. If there are certain brothers or sisters that you just will not speak with, then you are effectively looking down your nose at them.
3. We will answer other believers when they speak to us, and answer emails or texts when they communicate with us by another means. If you do not answer someone, what are you saying, effectively? “You are not a fit person to have my response.”
4. When in a conversation with someone we will give him or her our full attention. If you do not listen to someone when he is talking to you what are you saying? “You are not that important. I do not need to take any notice of what you are saying.”
5. We will not interrupt others when speaking with them. When we interrupt others, what are we saying, effectively? “What I have to say is more important than what you have to say.”
6. Do not put others down when having a discussion with them. There will of course be times when we have disagreements. If we show

respect for others, we will keep to the issue under discussion, and will not descend to making a personal attack on the person.

7. We will not be rude or insulting in our speech to others. Being insulting is effectively saying, "You are inferior to me."
8. We will say "good bye" when we part company from someone. Just walking away from others is plain rude, and shows that you do not consider them to be important.
9. If we have to challenge behaviour of another, we will do so in a gentle and respectful manner. Paul says in 2 Timothy chapter 2 verses 22 to 25, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth."
10. We will not "Lord it over" others and throw our weight around, even if we are in positions of leadership. Peter says to pastors, in his first letter, chapter 5 verses 2 and 3,

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

To do anything other than this is to treat others with contempt.

11. We will be gracious to all. Paul says in his first letter to Timothy, chapter 5 verses 1 and 2, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity."
12. We will treat children, especially believing children, with courtesy. Jesus is recorded in Luke chapter 9 verse 48 as saying, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all — he is the greatest." If you are a parent you may need to rebuke your child, and to discipline him or her in love, but remember that this child may well be your brother or sister in Christ, a King and a priest. Treat him or her with respect even as you do rebuke him or her.

Conclusion

We have seen from this verse that God calls us to have true love, from the heart, for our brothers and sisters, and to treat other believers with respect.

What we have been talking about today is not peripheral to the Christian life, a sort of “optional extra”. This is absolutely fundamental to what it means to be a Christian. If we do not love our brothers and sisters in Christ, then there is a real question mark over whether or not we are truly born again. John is quite clear about this in his first letter, chapter 3 verses 10 to 15, “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.” Are you a child of the devil or a child of God? The way to answer that question, says John, is to look at your attitude towards other believers. If you do not love other believers at all, then there is only one conclusion: you are not born again. You are still a child of the devil. You are a murderer, and no murderer has eternal life in him.

In Matthew chapter 25 verses 25 to 31, it is recorded that Jesus told us about the coming judgement. This passage is often called the parable of the sheep and the goats. But it is not a parable. It is prophecy, foretelling what will happen on Judgement Day. Jesus tells us that he, the Son of Man will come in his glory, and all the angels with him, and he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he, Jesus, will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then Jesus will say to those on his right, the sheep, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Then the righteous, the sheep, will answer Jesus, “Lord, when did we

see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" Then the King, Jesus, will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these *brothers of mine*, you did for me." Who are the brothers of Jesus? Jesus's sheep, his people. So Jesus is saying that whether or not we enter the Kingdom of heaven will be decided by whether or not we have had love for Jesus. And whether or not we have had love for Jesus will be determined by the attitude that we have shown to Jesus's people.

This is borne out by what Jesus goes on to say. He says that he will say to those on his left, the goats, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me." The goats will then answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" Jesus said that he will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, [that is, the sheep] you did not do for me." Jesus then said what will happen. The goats will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous, the sheep, to eternal life.

So we see that we are not today talking about some trifling matter, some "nice to have" addition to the Christian life, which is nice to have if possible, but does not really matter if it is not possible. We are talking about something upon which your whole eternal destiny is staked.

What should you do if you realise that you have no love for the Lord's people? Should you now start trying hard to love them, and hope that by doing so you can make yourself fit for heaven? No. The problem is more fundamental than that. If you have no love for the Lord's people you need to be born again. You need to be saved. Repent of your sin. Come to God. Ask him to save you through Jesus Christ. Ask him to give you the Holy Spirit and to make you born again.

Some of us, I trust most of us, who are here today, believe that we are born again. We can see that God has given us love for himself and love for other believers, and we can see other changes in our lives. But, if you are anything like me, I expect you might be saying, in the light of this verse, "By God's grace I do have love for other believers, but my love is so weak and so inadequate. I do not have nearly enough of this

brotherly love that the apostle speaks about. I often fail to treat other believers with respect.” If this is the case with you, what can you and I do to increase your love for other believers? It comes back again to what the apostle said in verses 1 and 2 of this chapter. The love that we have for others springs from an appreciation of the love that God has had for us. If we stop to consider the astonishing kindness that God has shown us, in giving his only Son to die in our place on the Cross, how can we do anything other than have love for other believers? If you are aware of a lack of love in your heart, do not say to yourself, “Well that’s just the way I am, I am just cold-hearted”. Go to God. Repent of lack of love and of having a cold heart. Ask God to increase your appreciation of his love. Ask him to enlarge your heart for others. Be at every meeting you can get to in order to increase your understanding of Scripture. Read your Bible on your own. Listen to sermons on your mobile device if you have one. Read good Christian books. Meditate on Scriptural truth, and particularly on the love that God has for you. Let your mind be transformed by the Word of God. As you do these things you will find your love for the Lord’s people increasing, and you will start to obey this Scripture more fully.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

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