

Genuine Love is Self-Sacrificing for Others

Romans 12:12

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Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario

“Delighting in God to the glory of God”

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This is Gay Pride Week in Toronto. There are many features to this week, but most of them boil down to men and women dressing up or undressing in order to arouse themselves. In our study of Romans 1 we saw that homosexuality (love of a man for other men in the way that he ought to love a woman) was the result of unrestrained self-admiration, as God gives a heart over to the idol it most lusts after: SELF. Perhaps what strikes me more than anything else in this whole “celebration” is the absolute invisibility of LOVE. It is all so very sad. I have been challenged to see what kind of love the Lord expects from me.

Let’s review what we have been studying over the last few weeks from Romans 12:

“*Genuine Versus Counterfeit Love,*” Romans 12:9-10 - Let love be genuine.

- I. The Attitude of Genuine Love (:9)
 - A. Genuine love hates evil.
“Abhor what is evil;”
 - B. Genuine love is glued to good
“hold fast to what is good.”
- II. The Action of Genuine Love (:10)
 - A. Have a family-level commitment to everyone in church
“Love one another with brotherly affection”
 - B. Be the first to find good in everyone in church
“Outdo one another in showing honor.”

“*Genuine Love Is Intense!*” Romans 12:11

- I. Be Tirelessly Diligent!
“Do not be slothful in zeal,”
- II. Be Empowered by the Holy Spirit!
“be fervent in spirit,”
- III. Serve Your Master! The ultimate “recipient” of our love is God.
“serve the Lord.”

“Genuine Love Is Fixed on God!” Romans 12:12

- I. The man who loves shouts, “Upwards and Onwards!”
“Rejoice in hope,”
- II. The man who loves stays true under pressure
“be patient in tribulation,”
- III. The man who loves sticks to his prayers
“be constant in prayer.”

You will notice that all of these descriptions look at the Christian in relationship to other Christians. Certainly there is an overflow into other relationships with those who are outside of the faith – but the emphasis is on the how the Believer relates to other Believers. You will also notice that all of these descriptions look at the Christian as he initiates in relationships. In the next section (Romans 12:14-21), Paul will consider what genuine love looks like as it responds or reacts to others (both in and out of the church) as they act upon us. So, this first paragraph of Romans 12:9-13 is a kind of broad summary of the Christian’s stance or posture – especially as he relates to his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The reason I stress this now, is that the verse we are going to unpack this morning has been abused in many ways in both past and recent history. There is something called the “social gospel” and it is receiving much attention today, especially by believers who find themselves disillusioned with the mainstream church. Although it has many forms, the social gospel tends to suggest that feeding the poor, or saving the environment, or befriending the outcast is on par with or supersedes the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ. In its worst form, it suggests we get out of our churches and spend all of our time with the poor, downcast and starving.

Now, is it wrong to show mercy to the needy? Clearly not! But this is not the heart of the Gospel! Nor is it the essence or defining characteristic of Christian authentic love! Those who promote the social gospel (and there are many of them!) say things like this, “Your love is fake because you spend all your time with Christians. If you really loved people, you would plant trees and work in a soup kitchen.” That is what is called a false dichotomy!

Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones speaks on this very point:

“...the appeal the apostle makes to us here is not just a general social appeal of the kind that is made very often at the present time. He is not asking us to be part of some vague secular philanthropy. There is starvation and need in certain countries, and a general appeal is made to relieve this suffering, to which the churches respond. But that is not what we have here.

Now let us be clear about this. The primary call on the Christian is to his fellow Christians. ‘Let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith’ [Gal. 6: 10]. They come first. Of course, if you are in a position to help others beyond that, do that also. But churches receive requests from various secular societies which are doing a lot of good — Red Cross, Famine Relief and various others. Now I would argue that we are not involved in those general appeals. It is our business to seek out the Christians, the saints, in these needy countries, and to do what we can to help them. They have priority, and they are often the people who are most neglected. Paul is not referring here to indiscriminate giving, and I think the church should be more jealous

of her prerogatives in this respect, and not submit meekly and at times unintelligently to a general appeal.

People in the world say, ‘You Christians, of course, of all people, should be giving to this appeal.’ We say, ‘Now wait a minute, do you know what a Christian is? Christians are separated men and women. They are saints and we are bound to certain people in needy countries more than we are to the generality of people in those countries. Anything else we can do we will do readily and gladly as an act of charity and compassion, but our first call is always the call that comes from the saints, our fellow believers in Christ.’” (Romans, Volume 12, 419)

All of this is to say that the two commands Paul gives here to finish out this section are commands for Christians to exercise toward other Christians.

I. The Man Who Authentically Loves Immerses Himself in His Brother’s Needs

13 “Contribute to the needs of the saints...”

The first thing we need to do is correct some of the translation work here. Unfortunately, the ESV has followed the RSV quite closely here and in so doing missed much of what Paul was getting at in his description of genuine love.

“contribute”- This first word Paul uses comes from the Greek word for fellowship – *koinonia*. It of course carries the idea of partnership, communion with, to take part in or go shares in something with someone. The idea here is that we are to join in with something. Just like our mutual fellowship implies a family kind of relationship and familiarity, so we are to be familiar with, a part of the “needs of the saints.” We can see more of the sense of this in other places the same word is used:

(Galatians 6: 6) “One who is taught the word *must share* all good things with the one who teaches.”

(Philippians 4: 14-16) “Yet it was kind of you *to share* my trouble. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church *entered into partnership* with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

“needs”- What do we take part in? “Needs.” The necessities: what a person needs to live. So, we might think of food, water and shelter. This is what a man needs – these are necessities in order for him to continue living. A 36” flat screen plasma television, no matter how you sell it, is NOT a need. Kids, it may surprise you to know that you do not NEED that new movie or those new tennis shoes! Those are desires... and there is an ocean of difference between the two!

“saints”- So, the Christian is to consider himself as in partnership with the needs of others. Which others? Paul is quite clear: “the saints.” We have looked at this many times in the past, so I will just briefly mention that “saints” is a nickname for “Christian.” Every Christian! The Roman Church has stolen this word and perverted it into the opposite of what it truly means. Rome says that some certain good-living people are canonized and declared saints for what they did in this life. But being a saint is not a result of something you do, it is the result of something

God does to you. All Christians are saints and that is why you so often see the letter writers use this word as a term of address:

(Romans 1:7) “To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...”

Christians, if they are going to authentically love, are to take part in the necessities of other Christians. They are to enter into a familiarity with the needs of the saints, and they are to share in that need, fellowship with it, to the point that they contribute something to its relief. The stance of the Christian to fellow Christians is this: *I am willing to part with whatever is mine in order to meet whatever need is yours.* And isn't this exactly what we have modeled for us in Acts 2?

(Acts 2:42-47) “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, *as any had need.* And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Now please notice, this is NOT *communism* – but *platoonism!* Communism suggests that I lose all right to ownership of anything, that there is a *carte blanche* equality between everyone. It is legislated and enforced and of course never works (because of greedy sinful hearts!).

Platoonism is different! When the Bible speaks of having “all things in common” it is describing the grip with which we hold on to what is ours. It is looking at my possessions as items to give away, sell or give up should any need arise in the life of a brother. Like soldiers in a platoon – I've got your back and you've got mine. There is trust and care and seeking after the common good. That is why in Acts 4 and 5 you have the dual stories of Ananias and Saphira as compared to Barnabas. Neither gave away all they owned, but both sold off excess in order to meet the needs of others. But the first couple did so in pretense and pride – and was justly rewarded for their sin.

So what of you? How tight is your grip on your stuff? Would you be willing to part with it if I could prove to you my need? I am not asking if you are a communist – but a platoonist. It is a little hard to tell when we live in such prosperity. There is very little need in Canada. But this raises a couple of points.

1. We need to learn to be winsomely discerning where there is no true need.

Recall that it is *the needs of saints* that we are to meet. Our primary calling is to help fellow Christians, so the first thing to determine is whether or not someone is a Christian! I have met lots of people that call themselves Christians that I don't think are Christians. There is such a thing as a professional beggar – men and women that try to scam and con the church.

Once a man came to a church I pastored and said he needed a few dollars to catch a cab to his parent's house. The house was not far away, but the poor fellow had badly twisted his ankle. He stood there with shoe in hand and said he knew a fellow Christian would help him out. I started to ask a few questions and quickly got the sense there was little of God in this man's life. So, I offered to drive him to his house. He refused. I insisted. He refused and demanded I give him \$5.00. I told him no money, but I would drive him wherever he needed to go. He swore at me,

turned around, put on his shoe and marched off! I have heard many such stories! In this case it did not take long to discern this man was no true Christian. There was no evidence of grace in his actions or words!

2. We need to correctly identify real need.

Real Christians will be a part of a church. You have no right to expect help if you are not demonstrating your commitment to a local church. You demonstrate commitment by being at the meetings, serving in some capacity, and joining in membership. You know and are known by others. Then when need comes, it is the most natural thing for the local body to join in it and meet it. The whole thing is really quite simple.

You do not have to be very discerning to realize there is real need in places like Mozambique!

- 19.6 million people (only 500,000 over 65 years old, average lifespan 39 years, average age in country today is 18)
- 70% live below poverty line
- 47% literacy rate
- 16 telephones per 1000 people
- Only 5000KM of paved roads (compare to similarly sized Pakistan - 152,646)
- White flight, civil war (ended in 1989), drought...

There are many ways in which we can fellowship with this need. We can provide support for the Woodrow's, who then minister to Mozambicans. We can fund the purchase of the Bookstore/Library so pastors can be trained. To do this we need to raise \$35,000, of which we already have \$10,000!! This will require self-sacrifice on our part!

But, you say, what if someone is new to Canada? In other words, there is a need *that comes to us*? How do we respond to this? This takes us to our second point:

II. The Man Who Authentically Loves Hunts for Strangers to House.

“and seek to show hospitality.”

Again, let's begin this section by considering the words Paul uses.

“seek” - this translation is much too soft! Look at how it is translated in Philippians 3:

(Philippians 3:6-14) “as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith — that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

The word translated “seek” here means “to eagerly seek after,” “to pursue” “to run after.” Thus, Paul writes that Christians who love are the ones who are eagerly looking for or seeking after hospitality.

“hospitality”- What is hospitality? Is it the having folks in after church for lunch? That is great! Fantastic! Especially if it is me! But that is *not* hospitality. Hospitality is the love of *strangers*. It is the taking into your home those Christians you do not know. The Bible commands us to do this:

(Hebrews 13:1-3) “Let brotherly love continue. *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.”

(1 Peter 4:7-11) “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:* whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Now this all makes much more sense when plugged into the day in which it was written. For most of the history of the church, Christians have been persecuted. We live in a land where overt, physical persecution is rarely seen. But at the time the Bible was written, and still in most places of the world today, Christianity is a persecuted religion. This means many displaced peoples, like in Acts 8:

(Acts 8: 1) “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

Where were these people to go? Where were they to live? There were no *Holiday Inns* or government-funded immigration programs. And then, what of those missionaries sent out by one church to travel to far-flung places with the Good News of Christ. Most often, they would make their way there through cities where the Gospel had already been proclaimed. Remember, no phone, email, fax, pager, news, world wide web, telegram – the only form of written communication was hand-written letters on hand-made paper which were hand-delivered to their recipient.

So, churches would send out members with letters. These letters would verify to the other churches that the bearer was a true Christian and in the process of doing the Lord’s work.

(Romans 16:1-2) “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.”

Here is just one example. Phoebe was a well-known servant of the Corinthian church, but unknown to the Romans. She is probably the carrier of this letter to them and so she is commended to them and they are to care for her, “welcome her” – to show her hospitality.

Paul says that genuine love will evidence itself by a spirit of eagerness, of a going out of one’s way in order to be hospitable – to welcome into your home and to meet the needs of the Christian that you have never met before now. True love means being the first to offer room and board for free! You can see that the same kind of careful assessment and appraisal would be necessary, as we talked about earlier.

Now you may say, well, this is all dated and passé. People are not in dire need here. We do not have Christians showing up unannounced. These things do not apply to us! And in one sense I think you are right! In another sense, you are wrong...

Not long ago we had a family emigrate to our country and they were preceded by letters from their home church. This family came and lived with us for a month as they found their footing in a new country. Others gave money and time and furniture and the like in order to be of assistance. This is exactly what Paul had in mind as a demonstration of the authenticity of our love.

Plus, things change. Nobody expected the rapid demise of Communism. Nobody thought Russia and America would be friends. Things change! And life may change for you. So it seems to me that we ought to be careful to practice these things now, so that we are ready for any changes our Sovereign decides to make in the future. How can we begin?

First, look for strangers now. We have visitors to our church – invite them home for lunch. You can prepare more food than you need and then invite a friend if there are no strangers to pick from!

Second, take a walk through your home and bank account and give it all to the Lord.

It is not that we are to spend every minute of every day involved in these activities of meeting needs and housing strangers. The idea, it seems to me, is that we are to have our hearts ready to do just that the moment the Lord calls on us. It is all about posture, or stance, or willingness. The Golden Glove is the one who is ready when the need arises. Are you ready? Is this your posture? Are you in a mindset that looks for needs to meet?

When I read this passage in Romans 12, two things are clear to me:

- I need to be a man that fellowships with your needs.
- I need to be a man that is scouting for opportunities to be hospitable.

Go home and watch the Toronto news tonight and you will see what the opposite of love gets you. You will see how incredibly different Christian love is in comparison to the world! And, of course, you will want to love... and be able to humbly say “I, by the mercies of God present my body as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God, which is my spiritual worship.” And I am seeking to be “not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of my mind, that by testing I may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

May God give us grace to give up self and serve the Saviour.

Amen.

By Pastor Paul W. Martin © Grace Fellowship Church

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