

Embodying Grace & Peace | How to Be the Church “Whole-Hearted”

Romans 12.1-2, 9-13

7.3.22

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

⁹ Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹ not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

We're back to *Embodying Grace and Peace: How to BE the Church* (BTW, my first week as a 60-year-old was marked by fever, fatigue, sickness and soreness – so I'm pretty sure it's all down-hill from here!)

We've seen how the gospel – the Good News of what Jesus Christ achieved by His beautiful life of perfect love, His representing all His people in His life, death and resurrection, how it leaves everyone who receives it by faith – it leaves us with “no condemnation”.

And that truth (unfolded in Romans CH 8)... the reality that God has acquitted us and in fact declared us innocent and righteous and that NO ONE and NO THING can undo what God has done – no created thing can separate us from the love of God in Christ – THAT not only determines our future but has a tremendous bearing on our past and our present.

Our future Judge has become our Advocate/Attorney and our God and Master has become our Father. And that removes our fear of future evaluation and punishment. Our regrets (as we saw last week are now the dark threads in a tapestry of God's weaving!) all working together for our ultimate good.

And our NOW...is become a daily quest to know and do the will of our Father (v2b). His love that we receive as a gift and NOT a transaction immediately starts to liberate us from this transactional approach to life – God did NOT say to us, “I'll scratch YOUR back if you scratch MINE” and we can stop saying that to others. We can love – IN THE PRESENT – we can love those who give us nothing in return. It's the way God has loved us!

Today, we want to look at love. What does it mean to love other people – really love, without expectations of getting a return on our investment. Let’s look at:

1) The Mechanics of True LOVE

2) The Power to Love Truly.

Love is, of course, an overused word used and misused in advertising and in pop-songs. It’s often misused as a synonym for nice or niceness. There were a number of Greek words to describe different kinds of love – romantic love and friendship-love and familial-love and “agape” which may be a higher-kind of love. All the Greek words but “eros” are used in this short passage.

When you really set out to love... we soon find that it’s not the fields of gold and sunflowers and happily ever after we imagined... It feels like work. It calls for self-sacrifice... AND... we ARE capable of forcing ourselves to DO loving things. But that begs the question: is forced love really love at all? Can love be obligatory?

This passage on being the church addresses our obligations to love with a hard word (v. 9) “Let love be without hypocrisy?” It’s as if the writer is saying, “The great danger of being in a boat is sinking... and the great danger in practicing love is fakeness/hypocrisy.”

The greatest betrayal in all of human history was set in motion by a loving gesture, *“But Jesus said, ‘Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?’”* (Lk. 22:48 NLT) Judas did an apparently loving thing as an act of treachery.

Maybe, this is why, when people say they love Jesus but not the church and when they’re asked, “Why?” They often say, “The church is full of hypocrites.” (not gamblers or thieves or blasphemers – always hypocrites!) Maybe it’s because we’re trying to love... BUT when love goes wrong, it’s most often in the direction of fakeness and pretense – “let love be without hypocrisy.”

Apparently, love is easily faked. I’m only being nice but someone says, “He’s such a loving person.” It may even be an act of cowardice where I don’t want to say the truth because it could get me in trouble, “Honey, does this dress make me look fat.” (The answer is always, “No!” but that’s not necessarily love – just wanna have a pleasant night!)

AND we are very capable of convincing ourselves that we’re truly loving when in fact we are only being nice or trying NOT to rock the boat or doing the “loving” thing in an attempt to GET something for ourselves.

Real love, true and pure love, is only interested in the welfare of the one loved. Even the anticipation that “if I do the loving thing right now...it may hurt...but I will feel good about it later” – you can even see the selfish or self-seeking motive lurking in the shadows of that.

Am I trying to get recognized or appreciated or trying to avoid criticism or controversy? Am I doing this act (I'm calling love) solely for the betterment of the object of my "love" or am I doing it for myself (people-pleasing)?

The Apostle Paul and all his fellow apostles and the writers of the New Testament are unflinching in their call for LOVE. The Christian life is a life of love for God and love toward other people. Love is the summary of the whole Law; love is the evidence of God's presence in someone's life. "The fruit of the Spirit is LOVE" (Gal 5.22)

BUT... "little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1John 5.21) – i.e. "Beware of false imitations – what looks like a kiss... could, in fact, be raw evil."

The next saying, "Let love be without hypocrisy, HATE WHAT IS EVIL...cling to (i.e. be glued to) what is good" – love and hate in closest proximity.

Then "be devoted to one another in brotherly love" – in the original language, St Paul wrote: *"to brotherly love for one another friendship-familial-love (devoted) showing preference to one another."* If that sounds awkward, IT IS. The point is, Paul, being led and inspired by God Himself, is packing all the love he can into this short sentence. The New Living Translation renders it: *"Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other."*

Paul is NOT saying, "Hey! Love is really hard and most of the time you THINK you're loving each other, you're really doing it for selfish reasons so... you know...just try to be nice!"

No!

He doubles-down! He turns up the love and gets insistent and expansive and intense, "Not lazy but diligent, fervent in spirit (a cooking term – like simmer or boil) serving the Lord, persevering in difficulties, rejoicing in hope, devoted/strong in prayer, sharing the needs of other Christians (as if those needs were your own!), pursuing hospitality."

Now, what do we DO with all this? If you came in from a long week... and you're NOT really looking forward to next week and more of the same... if you felt tired when you came in – we just added a lot to your spiritual "to-do-list" ... and we started by saying that none of us is very good at this. We can do "nice" (most of us) but love, True Love, is often...maybe usually just a shiny veneer over the usual transactional self-seeking, niceness needed for success in this society.

The mechanics of true love are demanding! To be a Christian is to join a Body, a community made up of organs and parts and appendages necessary to the thriving of the Body. That Body becomes a family. That family is called to True Love.

The word for hospitality (13) is φιλοξενία– literally “love of strangers” (e.g., xenophobia) – people in this sanctuary whom you’ve never met, strangers who are actually family-members whom you should invite for dinner...take them to lunch...

The mechanics of love, True Love, are not only demanding but ... let’s face it... in our day and age, when everyone is knock-down-drag-out busy and also suspicious and a little anxious (maybe a LOT anxious) this seems pretty much impossible! Invite strangers into my home?

But the Good News is – if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you have also been introduced into this new and living way. The mercies of God have come after you like the hounds of heaven.

When you stop and think of all that’s ours IN CHRIST, all those outrageous benefits from CH 8 – no condemnation, adoption into the Father’s house, Jesus Christ as your substitute, your Savior, the Lover of your soul, the infinite, eternal and unchangeable Spirit of God somehow lives and resides IN YOU... “I urge you by THESE mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice...”

The Power to True Love is given to you. Even if you are a new Christian – if you are a recipient of the “life of God in the soul of humans” (as all believers ARE!) then God wants the astounding love He shows to you to compel you to join in the Family Business, which is LOVE.

God loves you – do you know what that means? I feel silly asking the question because we all say, “Aw, shucks! Well thanks but ... you know...yeah...I mean He loves me...and everyone...that’s really great!”

But we have to let that Train hit us full-force. I have provoked Him to His face. I have vandalized His shalom and been prayerless and self-centered and I’m not even sure I am recipient of grace and a new creation in Christ...

And your first inclination may be to run up to someone after the service and say, “Hi! We’ve never met but could I take you out to lunch?” (Which would be great!)

But the power to truly love... doesn’t come by the doing but by the trusting. It comes by absorbing the creative, forgiving, saving, burning-hot love of the God who has NO NEED OF YOU AND ME... has nothing to gain from us...but freely loved me.

In Jesus Christ, He absorbed my crimes – my lack of love, my hypocritical niceness, my betrayals and fakeness – He absorbed the justice and judgment I deserved...so that I could absorb His love and BY IT MIGHT BECOME AN INSTRUMENT of His love to others.

We are, in Baptism, initiated into a community unlike any other – a Body, a Family not based on transactional love – where we reciprocate only after I see that it will benefit ME! We are instead,

possessed of the Spirit of LOVE Himself (Gal 5.22). We are indwelt by God in order that we might love one another in a new and living way.

Listen how God put this through the Apostle John:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the sacrifice for our sins. (1 John. 4.7-10)

Do you have trouble loving other people? OF COURSE YOU DO!

So come... once again (and again and again) and BE loved by God in Jesus Christ. And as you receive God's love anew... ask Him to empower you to love the Body ("Just the Body, the church? I thought Christians were supposed to love everyone!" – well, more on that next week) but for now, just step out in faith and love the ones your with.

If you are feeling the love and assurance of God's love, maybe you should show hospitality to someone in this family you don't know (a stranger who happens to be your sister or brother) and as you do – you'll fail.

Their upbringing taught them to do things at the table you were taught were rude... You may feel resentment... so bring that to Jesus because He know what it means to be offended by the ones He loves – you offend Him all the time.

But keep coming. Keep believing. Repent as you seek to love... make your efforts at loving an exercise of faith and fellowship with Him... and organically and little-by-little... you'll get little glimpses that you are loving others even as God in Christ has loved YOU!