

ROMANS 12:9-21

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

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

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 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. 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." 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."

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (ESV)

- Love In Action
- Love that Changes You
- Love that Changes The World, and...
- Loving Rightly, When Wronged

- So first, Love In Action

This word "genuine" in v. 9 – "Let love be genuine" – is the word *anypokritos*, which means (you can hear it in the way the word ends), "without hypocrisy."

What is hypocrisy? Hypocrisy is living in such a way that you violate your own beliefs. So a genuine love is a love that is to be authentic. And yet, I think if we were to all split up, and go down to Palmer Square in Princeton and interview people on what single word most comes to mind when you think of Christians... the word "hypocrite" would be very high on the list.

Why is that? I think there **are two reasons**. **The first is**, we're labeled this way because we forget where we came from. We forget that at the moment we were saved, we weren't flawed. We weren't stuck with simply a deficient level of self-esteem. We were *dead*. Dead in our transgression and sin. That when we were in *that* state, that is the moment when we were saved.

And when you know that, when the knowledge of that miraculous, life-giving love and mercy pervades your soul and your character, no one will call you a hypocrite. Why? Because the hypocrite lives in ways that violate what they say they believe. But if the Christian says that he is a sinner, if the Christian *believes* that he is a sinner, and then someone calls us "sinful"... well the charge of hypocrite just won't stick because "sinner" IS who we are.

We may *be* bad. We may be ugly and sinful and selfish. We may lack integrity because we don't behave the way we say we ought to behave. But we are not *hypocrites*.

See, one of the things we Christians have to be consistent to dispel is the notion that the church is for "good people." That's a false belief about Christians and Christianity.

Don't get me wrong. Holiness, for the Christian, *is* a big deal. We are called to be holy as he is holy. But we are simultaneously sinner *and* saint. We are sinners "on the way," but sinners *nevertheless*. If we convince people that the church is *only* for saints, but not sinners, well then we ARE hypocrites, and hypocrites with bad theology because we *are* sinners.

One of the best ways to change minds and hearts about Christians and the church is to ask for forgiveness when we hurt someone. To acknowledge your sin. When was – serious question here – when was the last time you let someone down, messed up, or were caught in a lie, and you said, "Forgive me – I AM a sinner"? When was the last time you told someone that you wronged them AND your Lord?

You see, an unbeliever who accuses the Christian of being a hypocrite simply does not understand what a Christian is.

But there is a second reason that Christians are labeled hypocrites. And that is that our beliefs SHOULD impact our behavior. People hear Christians profess faith in Christ, the reality of God, and claim to know the love of God... and yet, Christians often appear to be as anxious, worried and selfish as everyone else.

Now that belief in the sovereign and almighty God SHOULD make a difference. A BIG difference. The Christian – because of their belief in who God is – should be more secure, joyful, hopeful and humble than other people.

But the implication of what Paul says here in Romans 12 is that beliefs – knowing the indicatives, as we've said; knowing what God has already accomplished on your behalf – don't automatically turn into changed thoughts and changed behavior. Beliefs have to be nurtured. Meditated on. Beliefs have to be *turned into* changed behavior. Beliefs must be acted upon to become real, and not merely theory.

So let's get real. Paul says it's love that must be genuine. Love must not be hypocritical. Why does he say this?

Well, if you think about it, isn't love just about the most hypocritical thing in the world? People lie about love almost more than anything else. Why? Because when people talk about love, they aren't talking about an action, they're talking about a feeling. A guy will say, "I love you, baby." But what he's really saying is, "I love how you make me feel in this moment." She hears, "I *promise to* love you," – she hears something that goes beyond that moment – but he means, "I like how I feel right now." Do you see the difference?

Real love – *biblical* love – is very different. Love out in the world is a noun. A thing. A feeling. An *emotion*. Biblical love is a verb. An action. Biblical love is an action *from which* emotions come. That's why biblical love is never merely sentimental; because it's not merely a feeling or sentiment. Biblical love is a *completely* different way to look at love. Biblical love is acting upon the belief you have in how *you have* been loved. And when you do that – when you meditate on, and then *act* on that love, you make that love concrete. You make it real. And when that happens, love itself becomes what love should be.

This is why Paul never even bothers to define love. He passes immediately to how love functions. What it does.

And this takes us to our second point. First, biblical love is an action. A verb. It has power. It does something. Second, we want to look at how love changes you.

- Love Changes you

The first thing you should notice about Christian love is how it changes God's people

And here is how: Paul does something here that no modern person, certainly no one who was concerned with modern day political correctness, would ever try. He says to the believer. Love... AND hate. "Let love be genuine. **Abhor** what is evil..."

The premise is this: When you begin to love what is good, you also begin to hate what is evil. That is, when you take in the love of God for you in the gospel, your tastes change. Your passions and emotions change.

I remember when my kids were small; my mother came over to give Awilda a break. With twins, in those early months, we were just hanging on. We were simply trying to maintain a system for working, eating and sleeping. And once we did get a system, we *never* wanted it to change. Our kids would *still* be eating whatever comes in those little jars of blended, bland cereal and fruit if we had our way – that's how committed we were to the system.

But one day my mother came over, committed to taking us to the next level. Or at least taking the children to the next level: Applesauce.

And boy did that change things. The first time applesauce went into Olivia's mouth, her eyes got as wide as saucers, and there was no way that tasteless, highly pureed, cereal stuff was ever going to go in her mouth again. They both developed a taste – a flavor – for something that they knew was good, and anything that wasn't applesauce was evil.

The Christian life means that love – love as a verb – is actively loving what is good, developing a holy *taste* for what is good, and abhorring what is evil. It is amazing to look back at your life and see that you hate what you used to love, and you love things you used to hate.

And you need to develop that taste.

The second thing you need to remember is that developing that new taste isn't as easy as applesauce: it's a battle. Because we bring a taste for other things, quite often, into the Christian life.

In fact, Paul uses military language here, down in v. 21. He says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." That word "overcome" is a military word that means "to overpower" and "to defeat."

Now look what Paul is saying: When someone hurts you, insults you, makes fun of you, dismisses you... and you hurt them back... you've been defeated. You've lost. You've been defeated by evil. It FEELS like the most natural thing in the world to hurt someone who's hurt you, but that's nothing more than maintaining a taste for the old way of doing things. Evil has overpowered you. More than that, you've become the problem. When you overcome evil with evil, you've been overcome *by* evil.

Why? How can I say that? What about an eye for an eye? What about divine retribution?

Paul is saying something that is EXTREMELY important. And it's something that Jesus emphasized at critical points in his ministry: That during this time period – the time period you and I live in between the two comings of Christ – this is not an age of judgment where the church is judging the world, but this is the period in redemptive history when the church is reaching out, as the body of Christ, with the hand of Christ. We reach out not with a sword but an olive branch. We *do* speak about God's wrath that will come to finally judge evil in the end, but right now the weeds and the wheat grow up together. We are not to go out and pull "weeds" in the church, except when it's absolutely obvious – when we're called to church discipline.

Notice that Paul says to hate what is evil, but he never says hate the evildoer.

Why? When the Old Testament talks about an eye for an eye, it is a deliberate reflection of *God's* relation to fallen mankind. They are verses that tell us that sinful humanity must be disciplined, and told of a God whose punishment will fit the crime. He would never exact a greater vengeance.

But Jesus comes along and says do not retaliate. Look at the back of your bulletin, page 12, last quote:

But I say... *love* your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who *abuse* you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

How can Jesus say this? When you become a Christian, the moment you know grace – that is the moment you realize that God did *not* retaliate against you. The moment you were convicted that you were a sinner, that is *exactly* the same moment (was it not?) when you knew that God had forgiven you by pouring out his wrath not on you, but on Jesus *for* you. HE had the victory over your sin.

That's the gospel. And the gospel is a recognition that what is really wrong with the world is self-centeredness, and self-righteousness. And self-righteousness says, "I'm better than other people." It says. "Me first. Because in this moment, my feelings are more important than yours." So that when someone hurts you, it feels like the most natural thing in the world to respond with retaliation.

But the gospel is that God didn't think so much about how you hurt him with your sin. Jesus didn't put himself first when he went to the cross. He was sinless – he had nothing for which to be punished. No, he kept his mouth silent before Herod because he put YOU first. He laid his righteousness down, and gave it to you as a gift.

Do you see that the gospel is about destroying your self-righteousness? The gospel tells you that you're a sinner, not saved by your own righteousness (how could someone dead in sin save themselves?), but by grace.

When that sinks in, when you participate in that battle with the Spirit and let the gospel reshape you, remake you, then you can love what is good, and abhor what is evil. Then you are free from taking retribution. You may even be able to do what Jesus says, and which the culture would say was foolish, which is to pray even for those who abuse you.

- This takes us to point 3, Love Changes the Church.

When our love inside the church – inside our homes – looks like that, truly the kingdom is breaking in. When you not only decide to forget an offense, but *will the good* of that person, then the love of Christ is made manifest. When Jesus, with his last words on the cross, said to the Father, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," he was forgiving those who put him to death, and at the same time willing their good. He says Father, they just have no idea of the magnitude of what they are doing. He speaks WELL of his executioners! If he is willing to speak that way to his murderers, how dare you and I be cold and withdrawn from people. Dismissive. How dare we be sarcastic and cynical about others!

What's radically different about this view of love is that most love today is really idolatry. (repeat) We worship *ourselves* in what we love. So that our children, our spouse, our work and our employers are good and lovable or worthy of love... *to the extent* that they satisfy and fulfill *our* dreams. Paul turns this completely on its head.

Paul says that we are not to love one another because we make each other feel good – though he does say that we are to outdo one another in showing honor – but that we are to love one another because... "Wow, you are a baptized Christian, too. YOU have been snatched from death and have been brought to life just like me! And if God hasn't condemned you, I certainly can't. Isn't this amazing! Isn't he an amazing God, and isn't it an amazing grace?!"

When Paul says, love one another with *brotherly* affection, he means to love your fellow believer because you are brothers and sisters in Christ – not because you agree on everything.

We don't need to believe exactly the same thing about everything, but what we *do* have to do is love Jesus – together develop a taste for him – and everybody who loves Jesus ought to love everybody who loves Jesus because he first loved them.

So do you? Do you hate what is evil? Have we together developed a taste? Paul doesn't think that the Christian can be all that loving if the Christian cannot hate what is evil. I want you to think about that.

Now hatred can be destructive. It's one of the most powerful emotions that can take up residence in the human heart. Hate *can* be, *ultimately*, a *killer*. But hate is not evil when it's directed at evil.

Today is the day that is often acknowledged across the American church as Sanctity of Human life Sunday. It is okay – no it is commanded – to hate, abhor, despise what is evil. I know you are tired of hearing about it, but I would say that abortion is still the best kept secret in American life because no one really wants to look at it. If there WAS a window on the womb and CNN could place a camera there, and we could see what happened when a child's life was "terminated" (that's the nice word for it), I think the practice would end very quickly. Yes, as Paul says, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer," when you think about this. But hate what is evil.

Look, there is so much about God, even after years of study, that I simply don't know. Stuff I will never know until glory, and even then, who knows. But one thing I do know about God is, God abhors this! And yet many of us as Christians tolerate it when it's hard to even debate it. Don't be silent – you're *called* to hate it.

- Loving Rightly, When Wronged

Sigmund Freud once wrote:

I have a peaceable disposition. My wishes are: a humble cottage, a good bed, good food, the freshest milk and butter, flowers before my window, and a few fine trees before my door; and if God wants to make my happiness complete, he will grant me the joy of seeing six or seven of my enemies hanging from those trees. Before their death I shall, moved in my heart, forgive them all the wrong they did to me in their lifetime. One must, it is true, forgive one's enemies – but not before they have been hanged.”¹

That is, I think, how many of us think about forgiveness. I can forgive that person as long as they know that I've won. And they don't know I've won until they've been destroyed.

Once again, Paul flips this over. You see, you don't notice this distinction, but in verses 9-13, Paul is talking about loving your brothers and sisters in Christ – "Love one another with brotherly affection." But in v. 14, he begins to talk about loving the unbeliever. Even the enemy. The one who persecutes you. Look at v. 16:

¹ Freud *Future of an Illusion* (1927). In *CW 21*. London: Hogarth, 2001. P. 110

"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable *in the sight of all*."

Paul tell us, exactly as Jesus did, to love our enemies. Enemies outside the church.

And what do we do with our enemies? We either destroy them, like Freud, or we avoid them all together. That is what think will make us able to forgive – if we never have to see them again, or if they're vanquished.

But Paul says in v. 18, Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Live with those who persecute you! And in case we think that this simply means, "live and let live," Paul says, quoting Proverbs 25, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink."

How close would you have to be to give someone a drink? *Thisclose*. How close do you have to be to show hospitality? In the same room.

In other words, with the unbeliever, try to maintain a relationship. You can't love your enemy – not biblically, not as a verb – if you're never in the same room, or if you avoid all contact.

Now look, it says, as far as it depends on you. They may want to keep away and avoid you. That's okay. That's out of your hands. Sometimes restoration of the friendship is beyond your control. But if you end the friendship, you're still punishing the person by another means. By withholding love. If they're willing to be in your presence, don't walk away from them.

Okay, but what about the burning coals? Hmm? That IS what I want to do to my enemies!

Here is what it can't mean – after all of what Paul has said, it can't mean take revenge. Paul has already said, "Get off of God's throne!" "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." In other words, you have no idea what person deserves.

This verse has been a proof text over the years for a kind of polite revenge. But how is this instruction in line with verse 14 which says "bless and do not curse?"

The key is to remember the gospel. The gospel *is* about enemies. That is, it's about us! We Christians are the ones who have been overcome through God's powerful, pursuing love until we laid down our weapons.

We are, in turn, to look for opportunities to overcome our enemies using similar strategies. When possible, we engage in guerilla warfare that takes enemies by surprise, as *we* were taken by surprise by God's tender mercies. We overcome them with good in such a way that it doesn't make it easy for them to sin.

Here's how it works. My son was recently watching the last of the *Lord of the Rings* films where there is the tremendous battle of Mordor. And in the film, they act out the ancient practice of putting burning pitch or tar or coals on the end of your arrow, and shooting it over the wall.

The point wasn't so much immolation as it was neutralization. It is really hard to hold a sword in your hand as you protect the castle wall if your hair is on fire. It causes you to put your weapon down and pat madly on your head until the fire goes out. The idea is to shock your opponent so that he does the very thing he doesn't want to do – put his weapon down. And if everyone puts their weapon down, battle over, killing over, and the war is over.

That is what we are to do – arouse, perhaps, a dormant conscience to take a step toward repentance and faith. There is nothing shocking about retaliation and revenge. Everyone does that. It's expected. But to come toward someone without a weapon and to have surprised them enough that they put down their own... well that's the unexpected.

Friends, imagine what it would be like to sit around and scheme about ways to love. The first few ideas might be lackluster and ordinary, but love is creative. Where there is one idea there are probably dozens more. Lord, give us power.

We are quick to say that we can't change other people, and in some sense that is true, but Paul adds that Spiritual love is quite powerful and, when wielded in surprising ways, we should expect it to make a difference for friends and for enemies alike.

Let's pray.