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Romans #50
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What Does Christian Love Look Like?

Romans 12:9-16

On the eve of his crucifixion, sometime during the observance of that last Passover meal with his disciples, our Lord said something of profound significance, something the implications of which not even his disciples fully understood at the time. “By this,” Jesus said, “all people will know that you are my disciples, if . . .” (John 13:35).

I think you know where I’m going with this, but before I fill in the blank, think about what Jesus is saying. He is going to tell us what the single most visible, most distinguishing, most persuasive characteristic of a Christian ought to be. That quality or virtue, that truth which above all others serves to set you apart from the world and declares to that world that you are a disciple of Jesus Christ is . . . Well, hold on for just a moment longer.

If you were to ask, “What is the most distinguishing feature of a Muslim,” most would point to the fact that they pray three times a day, bowing in the direction of Mecca, no matter where they or what they are doing at the time. Although we don’t see many Hare Krishna anymore, when they were more visible in our society you knew them instantly by the long, flowing robes they wore, as well as the tambourines that they loudly played. You know an orthodox Rabbi because of their robes, beards, and earlocks.

But what about Christians? The Bible never tells us what to wear or how to cut our hair or what instruments we should play in public. So, how will people know that we are followers of Jesus? That is precisely what Jesus was preparing to explain to his disciples in the first century, and it is the same thing he would say to us today. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if . . .

“If you perform great miracles of healing and prophesy to others.”

“If you display unparalleled charismatic zeal.”

“If you always vote in public elections for a particular political party.”

“If you know all theology and all the mysteries of the faith and can defend them.”

“If you build massive, megachurches that have annual budgets of \$20 million and more.”

Well, no. That isn’t to say that miracles of healing and prophecy and zeal and knowledge of theological truths and megachurches are in any way bad. They can all be good and have their rightful place. But the distinctive badge of the Christian that sets him or her apart from the non-Christian world, that in the

presence of which the world cannot help but know that you are a disciple of Jesus, is, ***“if you have love for one another”*** (John 13:35).

I suspect that some of you who have never before heard the words of Jesus in John 13:35 may feel let down. After all, such a huge, dramatic buildup deserves a huge and dramatic conclusion. And yet, Jesus mentions something as simple as love. Yes, it is simple, but not for that reason any less crucial or important.

Tertullian was one of the greatest of the early church fathers. In fact, he is the first theologian ever to make use of the word “Trinity” (*trinitas*) to describe the Godhead. He once spoke about the impact of the Christian community on the world at large and the reason for it. Here is what he said: “But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. ‘See,’ they say, ‘how they love one another’” (*Apology*, 39).

Chrysostom, another famous early church father, complained that in his day Christians showed such little love for each other that the world turned its back on the gospel: “Even now, there is nothing else that causes the heathen to stumble, except that there is no love. . . Their own doctrines they have long condemned, and in like manner they admire ours, but they are hindered by our mode of life” (LXXII.5).

As you know all too well, the word “love” has undergone a massive transformation in recent years. It has become something of a buzzword to justify just about everything anyone can possibly imagine. To “love” a pregnant woman, you have to endorse her right to kill her baby. To “love” a person with same-sex attraction, you have to approve of their homosexual lifestyle. To “love” any individual, regardless of their sexual behavior or beliefs about ultimate truth and reality, you must affirm them and never suggest that they are in error or that their beliefs and behavior may well put their souls in jeopardy of eternal damnation.

I can assure you that such is not how Jesus Christ or the apostle Paul defined love. Love is not some indefinable and purely emotional passion that prompts people to jump into bed with whomever they wish, regardless of the age or gender of the other individual. ***The NT clearly defines love as whatever serves most effectively to enhance and encourage another person’s flourishing, both now and in eternity future.*** And this “love” can be seen in terms of active, voluntary sacrifice and service on behalf of the beloved. A love that is invisible, that stays closed off and guarded within the soul of any person is not what Jesus had in mind in John 13 and is not what Paul has in mind here in Romans 12.

The kind of “love” that Jesus spoke of not only feels but gives, not only senses inwardly but serves outwardly. It is this kind of love that Jesus said would be the distinguishing mark of the Christian. And Paul unpacks for us here in Romans 12 many of the objective and undeniable expressions of this quality and kind of love.

The sheer magnitude of the frequency of the terminology of love in the NT alone bears witness to this. The verb *agapaō*, “to love,” appears 130 times. The noun, *agapētos*, “beloved,” is found 62 times. The noun *agapē*, “love,” appears 116 times. That comes to more than 300 instances in which true, biblical love in some form or other is mentioned in the NT. 132 of those occurrences are in the letters of Paul.

And I should also point out that one of the disciples who sat near Jesus in the upper room when he made this statement was John, who, in his first epistle, repeatedly says that love of the brethren in the body of Christ is a test of the reality and authenticity of our faith:

“Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling” (1 John 2:9-10).

“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).

“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14).

“Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).

“If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:20-21).

When you hear this, you almost get the impression that John was actually paying attention that night when Jesus spoke the words of John 13:35!

But what, specifically and concretely, does this love look like? It’s one thing to insist on the urgent necessity of love. It’s quite another to give substance to it in practical terms. So we turn now to one instance in which Paul describes for us how Christians are to love one another. Along the way, he includes numerous other Christian duties that we should embrace because of the mercy shown to us in Jesus (12:1). In other words, loving one another, together with godly, Christ-exalting living in general, are all expressions of what it means to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Holiness of life, therefore, and not just singing and dancing, is “spiritual worship” (12:1). He mentions no fewer than 20 expressions of true love and true godly living.

20 Examples of How Christians are to Love One Another

There is no outline for us to follow here. There is no discernible reason why Paul lists these in the order that he does. So we will simply take them one at a time as we find them in the text. There is one massive downside to treating all 20 of these in one message. Each is deserving of its own sermon. Each should be slowly read, seriously considered, and prayerfully pursued. So, don't let the speed with which I move through these 20 diminish their individual importance for every Christian.

(1) “Let love be genuine” (v. 9a). There is no verb in the Greek text. It simply reads: “genuine love.” The word “genuine” is the Greek word *hypocritos*, from which we get our word “hypocrisy,” but with an alpha privative. We make use of the alpha privative in such words as “amoral” or “apolitical” or “asexual.” It literally means, lacking or devoid of hypocrisy. The noun form of this word was used of an actor who played a part on the stage. Since actors in the ancient world often wore masks, the word came to suggest someone who wears a mask to hide his/her true feelings and thoughts, all the while putting on an outward show. Thus “hypocrisy” referred to someone who acts like or pretends to be something or someone which in reality he/she is not.

Paul's point, therefore, is that we must be diligent to make certain that when we say we love someone or actually display love for them, we really mean it. Our declaration of love must be true to what is in our hearts. We must be careful lest we strive to make our outside look better than our inside. Hypocrisy is all about deceit and concealment and misrepresentation. Don't let your love be like that, says Paul.

(2) “Abhor what is evil” (v. 9b). Although you may think it odd that Paul follows his command concerning “love” with an exhortation to “hate,” the two actually go hand in hand. Yes, it is ok to “hate” or to “abhor” certain things, namely anything that is evil. Sadly, our world has reached the point where the very notion of objective evil is rejected. What is evil for you may be good to another. And who are you to judge? It is evident that if we don't have an objective moral standard by which to judge what is good and evil, anything goes. That objective moral standard is God and the revelation of his will in Scripture. So, “evil” is not what you abhor, and “good” is not what you like. Evil is not what you or I want to be evil and good is not what you and I like to be good. Liking something does not make it good and hating something does not make it bad. What makes anything either evil or good is God and his will.

(3) “Hold fast to what is good” (v. 9c). If we are to abhor what is evil, we are also expected to “hold fast” or “cling” to what is good. Be wedded to good! Love must be discerning. ***Love, by definition, discriminates.*** It discriminates between what is evil and what is good. Today, you will be told that to hate abortion or sexual immorality is itself hateful. You will be told that to love life and purity is intolerant and snobbish. But love never entails the toleration of evil. Love must fasten itself on the things worth loving.

It is instructive that Paul felt no hesitation in speaking of “love” and “hatred” in the same verse, in the same breath. Indifference toward sin, toleration of sin, is not loving. “The true measure of a man's love for God is the intensity with which he hates evil” (Wm. G. T. Shedd, 367). You can't be devoted to God if you coddle or turn a blind eye to evil. And it's not enough merely to refuse evil and to choose what is good. Paul calls for an inner passion. We must ***loathe*** evil and be disgusted with it, just as we must passionately ***love*** and ***cleave*** to what is good.

(4) “Love one another with brotherly affection” (v. 10a). The words “brotherly affection” are the translation of a single word: *philadelphia*. This word referred to family affection, the passion one has for one's own kin, one's own flesh and blood. Paul's point is that our love for other Christians in the body of

Christ is to be more passionate and sacrificial than even the love we have for our own unbelieving, physical family members.

(5) “Outdo one another in showing honor” (v. 10b). If there is to be a competitive spirit in the local church, let it be seen in the race to show honor to others more than they show it to you. Display to them by your words and deeds that they are worthy of your service, devotion, and praise. Be sure that you don’t reserve your honor only for those who treat you well, or look like you, or always agree with you. Although others, like you, are sinful and flawed, they are loved by God and must be loved by us. Look for the evidence of grace in their lives. Point out how the Spirit is obviously at work in them. Rejoice in who they are and what God has done for them. Beat everyone else to the punch in giving praise!

(6) “Do not be slothful in zeal” (v. 11a). Of course, Paul has in mind those things worthy of our zeal. When you identify something or someone that is good and glorifying to God, don’t be slow or lazy or half-hearted in your pursuit of it. Jonathan Edwards wrote his Resolutions for life when he was only nineteen years old. In the sixth resolution he wrote: “Resolved: To live with all my might while I live.”

(7) “Be fervent in spirit” (v. 11b). The verb translated “fervent” literally means to “boil” or “seethe” (cf. Acts 18:25)! After all, how can one possibly be cool and slack in view of the “mercies” of God? Some believe that this is a reference to our human “spirit” and that the point is that it isn’t enough merely to discharge your duty without feeling passionately for the things God approves. Obedience is more than mere doing. It is also feeling, loving, enjoying, celebrating.

In one sense, this is certainly true. When Jesus gave us the first and greatest commandment, what did he say? He said to “love the Lord your God with **all** your heart and with **all** your soul and with **all** your strength and with **all** your mind” (Luke 10:27). God himself made us a promise: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13). Zeal matters. Fervency of spirit matters. Half-heartedness does nothing but lead to burnout. Of course, mere energetic and passionate activity in itself accomplishes nothing. It must be guided by God’s word and directed to God’s glory.

But I’m inclined to believe that the word “spirit” here is a reference to the Holy Spirit. Paul’s point is that we must be diligent and fervent to allow the Holy Spirit to set us on fire. We must remove all obstacles that keep the Spirit in check, and we must avail ourselves of every means possible so that he might work powerfully in and through us. Labor and pray and strive so that the Spirit might burn constantly in your heart and life.

(8) “Serve the Lord” (v. 11c). We are to serve God, but not because we think he needs something from us, as if he is deficient in some way and we come along and supply him with what he lacks. Remember what Paul said in his speech on Mars Hill:

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:24-25).

Peter put it best when he said that “whoever serves,” let it be “by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11; see also Rom. 15:18; Col. 1:28-29). Serving the Lord must always flow out of and in complete dependence upon God and his grace and strength and the power of the Holy Spirit.

(9) “Rejoice in hope” (v. 12a). Biblical hope is not simply crossing your fingers and wishing that things will turn out ok. It is a *robust confidence* in the certainty of God’s promises. It is a lively and vigorous knowing that God will never fail to do what he has promised. Back in Romans 5:2 Paul said that “we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” The focus of our hope, the aim of our hearts is that when the end comes, we will see and enjoy and be enthralled forever in the glory of God!

We’ve all seen a lot of really bad things in recent years. For some, their hope has been destroyed. But for those whose hope is in God and his glory and whose confidence is in his power to do what he has said he will do, there should be joy even when things are rotten and falling apart all around us.

(10) “Be patient in tribulation” (v. 12b). Tribulation and trial are as much a part of daily Christian living as are loving one another and serving the Lord. Don’t bristle or become bitter when hardships come. Be patient, because you know that God is working all things together for your good (Rom. 8:28). And we can find patience and joy in times of tribulation because, as Paul already told us back in chapter five, we “rejoice in our suffering,” not because we are masochists who enjoy pain, but because we know that “suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character” (Rom. 5:3-4).

(11) “Be constant in prayer” (v. 12c). The word “constant” is the opposite of random, occasional, sporadic, intermittent. In other words, “Paul is calling all Christians to make prayer a regular, habitual, recurring, disciplined part of your life. Treat prayer the way you treat eating and sleeping and doing your job. Don’t be hit and miss about it. Don’t assume it will fill in the cracks of other things. Dealing with God in prayer deserves more than a dial-up on the fly” (John Piper).

There is a reason why the call to prayer follows immediately after his exhortation to be patient in tribulation. Prayerful dependence on God is perhaps the only way to survive tribulation and hardship. Paul isn’t saying do nothing but pray. He is saying don’t do anything without praying. Be sleepless and diligent in prayer. Joseph Alleine (1634-68) would rise at 5:00 a.m. every day to pray. He once heard non-Christians already at their work and said: “How this noise shames me. Does not my Master deserve more than theirs.”

(12) “Contribute to the needs of the saints” (v. 13a). The word translated “contribute” is the verbal form of the word typically rendered “fellowship” or “communion.” There is more to being a generous giver

than merely putting money in a box or writing a check. We are to be intimately joined to them in their need. In other words, “be fellowshippers with” or “be communers with” those in need. Enter into the depth of their poverty and identify with them in such a way that your giving is joyful and generous. As Randy Alcorn says so well, “God prospers me not to raise my standard of living, but to raise my standard of giving” (*The Treasure Principle*, 71).

(13) “Seek to show hospitality” (v. 13b). Literally, “pursue” hospitality. Go hard after it. Make whatever sacrifices are needed to make it happen. In the first century there were few places where travelers might lodge overnight, and the ones that did exist were dangerous and dirty. I suspect, then, that this exhortation made far more sense to people in Paul’s day than it does to us in the 21st century. In any case, we are not merely to show hospitality when circumstances make it unavoidable. Grudging or reluctant hospitality is a contradiction in terms. Search out opportunities. And this applies not simply to opening your home to people in need, but to standing at the door of Bridgeway and warmly receiving people into our fellowship. I’ve heard some Christians complain that when they first came to a particular church no one greeted them. I asked: “And how many did *you* greet? How fast were *you* to pursue them?” The response is most often one of a blank stare.

(14) “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (v. 14a). If all that God’s Word was asking me was not to “curse” those who persecute me, I could easily handle that. But “bless” them? It isn’t enough to restrain yourself and hold your tongue. We are called to shower them with good. And not only those who do us good and bless us, but specifically those who persecute and oppose us! Don’t ever think that to “bless” someone simply means you refrain from doing them harm. It also implies a deep and sincere desire that they would flourish and find joy. It means to seek their highest good and to pray to that end. See Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:27-28.

(15) “Rejoice with those who rejoice” (v. 15a). I should probably deal with this one at the same time as the next. Strangely enough, it is actually easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice. The reason isn’t hard to see. When we witness others flourish and grow and increase and succeed our response is too often one of resentment or envy. “Why should they get all the praise? Why should they be promoted? Why should she get a salary increase and not me?” And on and on it goes. We struggle to rejoice with those who rejoice because we are greedy and prideful.

(16) “Weep with those who weep” (v.15b). But to weep with those who weep is actually quite easy. Most times people who are hurting or have suffered loss don’t want explanations. Resist the temptation to theologize or find some profound justification for what they’ve experienced. Just be present. Sit with them and pray for them.

There are any number of reasons why we struggle both to rejoice and to weep. We are so wrapped up in ourselves and either in our personal pain or our personal triumphs that we are oblivious to what is happening in the lives of others. Sometimes we think it is beneath our dignity either to laugh or cry. We are determined to project an image to others of a person who is entirely in control and not affected by the emotional roller-coaster on which so many regularly ride. As already mentioned, when we see others doing well and being blessed, we feel gyped and defrauded. Why them and not me, we ask rather resentfully? Others of you struggle to rejoice or weep with others because you’re almost dead inside. Your emotions are lifeless. Or you are frightened of them. Some people are simply too depressed to feel anything approaching joy or sadness.

But both of these exhortations can be misunderstood and misapplied. We are not supposed to rejoice with those whose victories came as a result of sin. And some people weep for the wrong reason. Both need to have good, biblical reasons for rejoicing and weeping. I refused to rejoice with the LGBTQ community when so-called same-sex marriage was legalized by the Supreme Court. I refuse to rejoice with the woman who feels liberated and unburdened following an abortion. ***Not every reason for rejoicing is good and godly. Not every reason for weeping is biblically justified.*** As Kevin DeYoung has said, “The point of the verse is not to train our emotions to match every emotion we encounter, but rather to be a thoughtful, considerate person who doesn’t sing a dirge at a wedding or bring a kazoo to a funeral.”

If you need additional justification for this interpretation, look no farther than Jesus himself. He was always brokenhearted with those who were brokenhearted over their sin. But he refused to join the Pharisees in their joy at being praised for being self-righteous. Again, as DeYoung put it, “The one who laughs the loudest is not always laughing for good reason. Likewise, the one who shares most conspicuously his pain is not always lamenting for good cause.”

(17) “Live in harmony with one another” (v. 16a). This exhortation, like the previous two, is not unconditional or universal in its application. I can’t live in harmony with someone who denies the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I can’t live in harmony with an unrepentant thief or a chronic adulterer. But when it comes to those who by God’s grace strive to live godly lives and embrace the truth of Scripture, we must make every effort to be unified and supportive and mutually encouraging.

(18) “Do not be haughty” (v. 16b). Arrogance has no place in the life of the Christian or in the church corporately. In fact, pride is the greatest enemy and obstacle to obeying all of these commands. And what is the antidote to haughtiness or pride? Paul gave us the answer in 1 Corinthians 4 when he asked the people in that local church, “For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7).

(19) “Associate with the lowly” (v. 16c). Some prefer to translate this, “lowly things,” and insist that it refers to tasks or chores or jobs or certain responsibilities in the church that don’t typically bring recognition and praise. If so, it is a call to all of us never to think that a job is beneath our dignity, that we are too important to stoop down and pick up trash or clean off the counter in the Café or shovel snow in the parking lot.

On the other hand, if “the lowly” is a reference to people, he is telling us that we must reach out to and identify with those who are less successful, perhaps not as well educated, as we are. Hang out with the downcast, the disheartened, the person who is socially awkward and treated by others as of no significance. I love the way John Murray put it:

“There is to be no aristocracy in the church, no cliques of the wealthy as over against the poor, no pedestals of unapproachable dignity for those on the higher social and economic strata or for those who are in office in the church’ (137).

(20) “Never be wise in your own sight” (v. 16d). This is a perfect way to conclude, for nothing is so contrary to the previous 19 exhortations as a self-inflated opinion of oneself. If there are to be no social aristocrats in the church, neither are there to be intellectual snobs.

Conclusion

Everything Paul says here is based on the assumption that you and I have been set free from obsession with our selves. Only those who by God’s grace are set free from self-preoccupation and self-infatuation can heed Paul’s commands. ***Only those who are preoccupied and enthralled with Christ will find the strength to turn from concern for self to love and serve others.***