

Genuine Love

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[0 : 00] So, there are a few things that we agree on these days as a society. There's a lot of division and disagreement, as we would probably all attest to. And yet, I would say that if we were to go out on the street right now and go to the farmer's market that's happening and start asking around, what do you think the highest ideal in society is or should be?

What's the principle that should govern our lives? What's the highest principle that should shape how we live and how we do life together?

I would guess that the highest principle in most people's minds, the thing that should govern everything else, would probably be love.

That's probably the thing that most people would say. Maybe not everybody, but probably the majority of people would say, you know, the world would be a better place if our highest governing principle was the principle of love.

Right? We all agree that love matters a great deal. The question that we want to ask this morning is, what does love actually mean? Because that word is used in lots of different ways.

[1 : 18] I talk about loving God. I talk about the way I love my wife, love my kids. But I also talk about loving basketball team.

And I talk about loving steak and cheeseburgers. I talk about loving bourbon. And in all of those cases, love means something slightly different.

And if I were to use love in one context and then apply it to a different context, talk about loving bourbon the way I talk about loving my wife, I would have serious problems.

Right? And so, what do we mean when we talk about love? What does love mean? We're looking at the New Testament reading primarily Romans chapter 12. And in Romans chapter 12, Paul has just laid out for 12 chapters straight this beautiful description of the gospel of Jesus Christ and how it renews and transforms people.

And then beginning in chapter 12, he begins to answer the question, so what? What does this mean for us in the world? And here is where he says that the clearest evidence that human beings have been renewed by the gospel is that they have genuine love.

[2 : 36] Genuine love. And the word that he uses for genuine is on hypokritos. Love that is not hypocritical.

Hypokritos, that word is a Greek word and it originally meant an actor. Right? So on a Greek stage, you would have actors come out and they would hold masks up in front of their faces that would have different expressions on them or represent different characters.

And that was a hypokritos. And so, a hypocrite is someone who wears a mask, conceals the truth of who they really are. And so, what Paul is saying is that there are, by implication, there are versions of love out there that aren't genuine love.

They look like love, but that appearance of love is a mask. And it's masking other motives. It's masking other intentions.

And so, our goal, what we're going to talk about this morning is how can we tell if love is genuine or if it's a mask that is concealing something else?

[3 : 43] And this section of Romans chapter 12, verses 9 to 21, it's a collection of things that Paul says. And this is a form of Greek writing where he's packing a lot of ideas in here.

So, it doesn't necessarily flow in a linear way. We understand it better if we look at it thematically. So, we're going to pull out three themes from this text in Romans 12.

Three themes, three ways that we can tell if love is genuine. Three marks of genuine love. Let's pray, and then we'll open God's Word together. Lord, we thank You for Your Word.

And every week, Lord, if it were just left up to us to open this text and to try to derive anything from it, Lord, it would be a hopeless task.

You've not just given us Your Word, but You've given us Your Holy Spirit. And You promised that when we seek to understand Your Word, You will make it known to us. And that You will do more than that, Lord. You will nourish us, not just intellectually, but spiritually.

[4 : 46] Lord, we're here to open Your written Word, but ultimately, we're here to encounter Your living Word, Jesus Christ. May we do that by Your grace and the power of Your Spirit. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. So, three marks of genuine love. The first theme that emerges from this text is this. Genuine love has within it or is characterized by a desire to seek the highest good.

A desire to seek the highest good in the life of the one we love. He says in verse 9, let love be genuine, not hypocritical.

And then the very next thing He says is this, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Genuine love abhors what is evil and holds fast to what is good.

In other words, genuine love is defined by a passionate hatred of evil and a tenacious attachment to goodness. And you say, well, what do we mean by goodness? And in this context, goodness means aligning with God's character and purposes.

[5 : 54] Goodness is that which aligns with God's character and purposes. And the word here for hold fast, by the way, is a word that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 6, but there he's talking about sexual intimacy.

Hold fast. Right? So, in other words, genuine love is intimately intertwined with God's goodness. Intimately intertwined.

So, we might say that genuine love has a moral aim to it. It has a moral aim to it. Back in verses 1 and 2, Paul talks about people who have been renewed in their minds by the gospel.

And he says that if that happens in your life, then you're able to test and discern what is good. He says that in verses 1 and 2. And here we see why it matters. Why does it matter that people who have been renewed are able to discern what is good?

Well, in order to genuinely love another person, we have to be able to discern good from evil so that we can seek the highest good in that person's life.

[7 : 02] It's necessary to be able to tell the difference between good and evil if we are to genuinely love other people. Now, I think it's worth pointing out that this is the opposite of what many people probably think of, including Christians, when we think of love.

Because if you ask most people, including most Christians, what real love is, most people would probably say, well, it's unconditional love. The highest form of love, the truest form of love, is unconditional love.

Now, by unconditional love, what most people mean is love that is completely separate from any sense of right and wrong.

Love that doesn't, by definition, have any kind of moral shape to it. Love means affirming no matter what. It means encouraging people to do what makes them happy according to what they believe is right no matter what.

And the most unloving thing that one can do is to question or challenge someone else's choices in that regard. And, you know, many Christians operate this way because we have come to believe that we are called to love unconditionally.

[8 : 15] I was actually talking to a Christian woman, not a part of our church, but a Christian woman a couple of weeks ago who said that very thing. She said, well, isn't that what Christianity is ultimately about?

Unconditional love. The phrase unconditional love actually never shows up in Scripture, and it was never used by the early church fathers.

It was actually coined in the 1950s by Eric Fromm, who was a psychoanalyst who was also an avowed atheist. But since he coined it in his book, it has captured the Western imagination, and it has devolved even from what he meant it to mean.

It has kind of devolved into a kind of vapid sentimentalism. So we have all of these scenarios that arise as a result of that. We have a man who wants to leave his wife and three kids because he met someone and he fell in love.

And he says, I've never felt this way about anyone. Finally, I'm with someone who gets me and understands me. I've never been happier. And all of his friends around him say, go for it because you deserve a shot at happiness.

[9 : 33] They're well-meaning friends, and they're saying that because they believe that being a good friend means loving unconditionally. We have a 10-year-old girl who tells her parents one day that she, along with several other girls in her friend group at school, have all realized that they are actually boys trapped in girls' bodies.

And she wants to start puberty blockers immediately. And her parents reach out for counsel and advice, and they're told, you should love and support your child unconditionally in this transition because that's what good parents do.

They love unconditionally. You have a woman who's been in an abusive relationship with an alcoholic husband for years and years and years. And she goes to her church for help, and the well-meaning pastor encourages her to stay in the home and to endure the abuse because that's what unconditional love demands.

Now, in all of these cases, you have very well-meaning people giving what they believe is the best advice they can give. Because in their minds, unconditional love is the highest form of love that should govern everything else.

But as we consider these examples, it becomes increasingly clear that unconditional love, as it is popularly understood, can actually be profoundly unloving.

[11 : 01] In fact, I would say it's not genuine love. It's counterfeit. It can lead to a lot of chaos, confusion, harm.

The good news for us this morning is that God does not love unconditionally. And God does not call us to love unconditionally as it is popularly understood.

Right? The word for God's love is the word *hesed*, which means steadfast love or unfailing love. It's love that pursues you no matter what.

It's love that will never leave you no matter what. It is love that flows out of God's very nature because God is love and it is always there. It is always true. It is always with you.

That's the word for God's love. But God's love and God's goodness go together. Within God's nature, there is love.

[12 : 02] But along with that love, there is goodness. There is justice. There is righteousness. There is truth. They're all part of God's nature. They're not in competition with one another.

They're facets of the same jewel. So when God sees us and he sees the reality of our lives and he sees a person like me being enslaved to sin, being enslaved to idols, that is giving my life to things that aren't God and expecting them to be God for me.

When he sees me living in rebellion against him, when he sees me, as the Bible says, dark and in my thinking, spiritually inert and dead, alienated from the one who made me, God doesn't look at me and say, well, do whatever makes you happy.

If God responded that way to us, he would not only be unloving, he would be evil. That would be an evil response. God responds by entering into history, by giving his life on the cross, by atoning for sin and then calling us to repent and to come and to follow him.

And he invites us to begin to learn what it means to be fully human, to be fully alive, to live for the purposes for which we were created.

[13 : 26] That's what genuine love looks like. So genuine love, first of all, if we want to understand what genuine love is, genuine love is giving of yourself in order to seek the highest good for the one that you love.

And that highest good is found in God. Now, this does not mean judgmentalism. This could be an idea that we take and we go and we begin to pronounce judgment on the way everyone is living. This does not mean judgmentalism. See, judgmentalism means looking at a person or talking about them with an attitude of condescension that ultimately seeks to tear them down. But genuine love does the opposite.

Genuine love means looking at a person, looking at their actions, with an attitude of compassion and seeking to lift them up often at your own expense.

Seeking to see them grow in the likeness of Christ often at our own expense. Sometimes that does mean being willing to have hard conversations.

[14 : 33] Or it means being willing to hear things that we don't want to hear from other people. Our gospel reading, Matthew chapter 18, Jesus addresses this very thing. But his assumption is in a loving church where there is genuine love, conversations like this are going to be happening regularly.

So the first point challenges us to ask this question of our own lives. What kind of friends do you want in your life? What kind of people do you want to surround yourself with?

Do you want people who just pat you on the back, who just affirm you? No matter what you do, they say, I just want you to be happy. Do you want those kinds of friends? Or do you want people who are committed to seeking the highest good in your life?

And then think, ask yourself, what kind of friend do you want to be? What kind of friend do you want to be? You find yourself in those moments sitting across the table, and you know the thing that you should say, but you know it's going to be hard.

And you know that that person might get angry and defensive. And you know that it might put the friendship in jeopardy. And it's so easy to just say, well, I just want you to be happy. But what kind of friend do you want to be?

[15 : 55] And do you want to genuinely love people, or do you want to just wear a mask? So the first mark, I would say, of genuine love is that it seeks the highest good, often at one's own expense.

The second mark of genuine love that we see in this passage is this. It's marked by a posture of what we might call humble self-forgetfulness.

Genuine love comes out of a posture of humble self-forgetfulness. The Apostle Paul says in verse 10, love one another with a brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor.

Verse 13, contribute to the needs of the saints, seek to show hospitality. Verses 15 and 16, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony with one another, do not be haughty but associate with the lowly, never be wise in your own sight.

All of these convey the same idea, a profoundly other-oriented posture, a willingness to prioritize the well-being of others at your own expense.

[17 : 08] I love how Eugene Peterson translates verse 10 in the message. He translates verse 10 as this, be good friends who love deeply, practice playing second fiddle.

I love that, practice playing second fiddle. Pride is one of the greatest threats to any community, and pride is an enemy of love. Humility, on the other hand, is the key to building a genuinely loving community.

It's the key to building genuinely loving relationships in our lives. You know, C.S. Lewis famously says that humility is not thinking less of yourself. We're not talking about a community full of people with very low self-esteem.

It's not thinking less of yourself, it's thinking of yourself less. You're self-forgetful. You're just not thinking about yourself a whole lot. Now, that doesn't mean that we don't love ourselves.

That doesn't mean that we don't take care of ourselves. It just means that we don't spend a whole lot of time and energy, excess time and energy, thinking about ourselves. And what that does is it opens us up to see and to recognize and respond to the needs around us.

[18 : 23] And again, this is the opposite of what we hear and see and are encouraged to think in our culture. Playing second fiddle is a bad thing. When people say, I was tired of playing second fiddle to him and so I left, we see that as a mark of growth.

You're ready to play in the first chair. You're ready to be the star. You're taking your name and your reputation and your brand seriously. You're getting out there and making it happen for yourself.

And I think we all want to be well-known. We all want to be well-liked and respected and admired.

And in a way, we're all out there trying to get that, trying to build a name for ourselves. The problem is, altruism, you know, doing good in the world, can actually be a way of earning praise and admiration for other people.

In other words, when we commit acts of generosity, we like to be seen doing so. And so, love in a society like that, altruistic acts that look loving can actually be a mask.

Instead of self-denial, love actually becomes just another vehicle for self-promotion. Right? This is what has come to be known as virtue signaling.

[19 : 43] Right? Traditionally, and maybe other cultures, people might boast about how wealthy they are. They'd show off their car. They'd show off their house. They'd show off their really

important fancy position.

Or they might boast how beautiful they are. But now, we have a much more subtle, and I would say much more cynical form of boasting that is on the rise. You have people who would never boast about their wealth.

They would never boast about their beauty. How tacky. I would never do that. But they will boast about the extent to which they contribute to the common good. They will boast about the causes they support.

They will boast about their concern for the developing world. They'll boast about the people that they stand with and the people that they stand for. And the problem is, it's really hard to tell the difference between genuine love and virtue signaling if you're looking at it from the outside. Because genuinely loving action and support for those in need can look very much the same as virtue signaling on the outside.

[20 : 49] On the inside, at a heart level, they're actually driven by opposite motives. The same action, but driven by opposite motives. Virtue signaling is actually a way to exalt ourselves.

It's a way to highlight the flaws of other people who don't care as much as we do, who don't give as much as we do. And it's a way to flaunt our own superiority.

It's a political performance designed to put my excellence on display. Whereas genuine love, as Paul describes it, flows out of a very different place.

It flows out of humility. It flows out of an honest recognition of my own faults, of my own sin.

Genuine love flows out of the profound realization that Jesus Christ, as Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, was willing to empty himself.

He was willing to forsake all of the glory and honor that he deserves. He was willing to become a servant. He was willing to become a slave to serve humanity.

[22 : 01] He was willing to endure humiliation, torture, and even death because of his love.

Genuine love flows out of that realization.

So here's what this means, and this can be very counterintuitive, so I want to be clear on the implications of this. Here's what this means for us as a community. A community that minimizes sin and that just focuses on doing good in the world can seem very loving on the outside.

But that kind of community can very easily become a culture filled with self-righteousness, filled with judgmentalism, and filled with virtue signaling.

Because there are no built-in checks and balances against sin. Or against pride. And so in a culture that doesn't take sin seriously, where there's no opportunity to confess, there's no call to repent, there's just a focus on doing good in the world, it looks loving, but in reality, pride runs unchecked in a community like that.

And so a community like that can actually become very unloving, very self-righteous, filled with virtue. By contrast, a community that does take sin seriously, where there is a regular opportunity to confess, where there is a call on a daily basis to repent, a community like that may look unloving on the outside.

[23 : 36] And yet, we actually see that that kind of culture paves the way for genuine love, because it fosters humility, and it fosters self-forgetfulness.

Now, obviously, that can be done in a way that just becomes another form of virtue signaling, but if it's something that is actually genuinely taken seriously, and if the focus is not necessarily on other people's sin, and it's on my sin, and I'm the one going to my knees, and I'm the one confessing, and I'm the one repenting, then it can keep us over time in that place of humble self-forgetfulness, and it can lay the kind of groundwork that we need for genuine love to flourish.

In a community like that, you're going to have a greater capacity for true empathy, because people are going to be attentive to the experiences and needs of others, because they're not as wrapped up in their own issues.

In a community like that, you're going to have a greater capacity to live in harmony together, as Paul talks about. Because in a community where I'm repenting on a daily basis, where I'm confessing on a daily basis, people are going to be much quicker to admit when they're wrong, they're going to be much quicker to forgive one another, because their pride isn't as likely to get in the way.

So genuine love is marked by these two things so far, a commitment to seeking the highest good, and a posture of humble self-forgetfulness. Finally, with the few minutes that we have left, the third

mark of genuine love is, genuine love is marked by a commitment to overcome evil with good. [25 : 23] A commitment to overcome evil with good. Verses 17 to 21 talk about this. Repay no one evil for evil. Never avenge yourselves. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If thirsty, give him something to drink.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Paul is saying that a genuinely loving community of people who have been renewed by the gospel is marked not only by their love for one another, not only by their love for people outside the church, but they're actually marked by love for their enemies.

They're marked by love for their enemies. Now this is not, as some people say, I believe this is not a verse that you can point to as a general call to pacifism.

He's being much more specific here. Nor does it mean that we are called to forsake justice. It's just saying that we're not the judges.

What Paul is saying is that genuine love means a willingness to give up our right to retribution. To give up our right to retribution. And again, I would say this is profoundly countercultural.

[26 : 33] Because in our culture, this sounds like a recipe for living like a doormat. It's human nature that when someone wrongs you, you want to assert the boundary.

And you want to do that by getting them back. You want to make them pay so they'll never do it again. You want to teach them a lesson. You want to show them that they messed with the wrong person.

A lot of people have this sense that that's what it means to be a strong person, is that you teach everybody around you that nobody messes with me. Because I will revisit upon you sevenfold what you've done to me.

And that's why it's so breathtaking when we see extraordinary acts of forgiveness happen. Think of the Amish at Nickel Mines when a shooter entered a school and killed five little girls.

Think of the shooting at the Charleston AME Church where a shooter killed nine people, including the senior pastor, and injured one. In both cases, we look at this horrific act of unprovoked violence.

[27 : 35] And in both cases, the survivors and the families of the victims forgave the shooter and even surrounded and supported the families of the shooters in their grief.

And so interviewers, you know, ask these communities how they could forgive such atrocities. And in both cases, these communities were deeply rooted in the truth of the gospel.

They were communities that had been formed and shaped over time by the truth of the gospel. Specifically, two things. Number one, the gospel tells us, it actually assures us, of God's judgment.

As Paul says in verse 19, beloved, never avenge yourselves. Why? Because we should just let bygones be bygones? No. Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.

For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. It is because we believe in God's judgment that we are able to forgive. I used to meet with, I used to meet and work when I was a therapist with adult survivors, in some cases of abuse, of abuse, sexual abuse.

[28 : 54] And I remember sitting with somebody and she was wrestling, this is many years ago, wrestling with how this kind of thing could happen. And somehow the conversation turned to the cross.

And she said, the only, there is no amount of earthly justice, there is no, nothing that we could do to this person who hurt me that would ever make up for what was done to me.

But she took great comfort in the idea that there is a God who, because He is infinite, is able to bring justice, even in situations where it seems as though infinite harm has been done.

That one day God will bring judgment and He will either bring it on that person or He already brought it in the form of the cross. And she took tremendous comfort in the idea that there is a right and wrong, that there is an ultimate God out there who believes that what happened to her was wrong and who intends to do something about it.

It's because we believe in God's judgment that we're able to forgive, which is simply us saying, not what you did to me doesn't matter, but I'm not ultimately the judge here. God is.

[30 : 05] And on the other hand, so the gospel not only assures us of God's judgment, it also gives us a way through that judgment. Because the hard truth of the gospel is this, whatever crimes may have been committed against us, we have all committed far worse against God.

And God, in this case, has every right to demand retribution. And yet, God chooses instead to forgive. He actually chooses to do what all forgiveness requires, to absorb the debt.

And we see this on the cross, the ultimate consequences of human rebellion are poured out on Jesus instead of us. And here we see what sets Christianity apart.

Many religions talk about the importance of forgiveness. You should forgive because it's good for you. You should forgive because there are psychological and emotional benefits to forgiveness. All true.

But only Christianity says that God was willing to bear that cost of forgiveness himself. So when he calls us to forgive, he's not calling us to do anything that he has not done himself, but on an infinitely greater scale.

[31 : 18] But what this does is that it sets us free as a community from the cycle of retribution. It sets us free to love our enemies. Because while we were God's enemies, this is how he chose to love us.

Right? So to bring all of this together, genuine love means at least these three things, according to Paul. A desire to seek the highest good. A posture of humble self-forgetfulness.

And then a commitment to overcome evil with good. And I would say if our love, if you think about the way you love the people in your life, if our love lacks these characteristics, or when we encounter anyone claiming to be loving who lacks any of these characteristics, chances are that love is at least partially a mask that may be hiding other motives.

It could be pride. It could be a desire for affirmation or approval. It could be a fear of conflict. It could be a political agenda. But it's worth asking questions.

Not all love is the same. And if we want to become more capable of loving like this in our community, in our own lives, we need to see that this kind of love is not just the function of willpower.

[32 : 42] All that will do is put on another mask. This kind of love flows directly out of the truth and the power of the gospel. Only when we see Jesus sacrificing to seek our highest good will we be willing to do that for other people.

Only when we see Jesus' posture of humility will we be humbled as we realize that's what he did for us.

Only when we see Jesus overcoming evil with good as he does on the cross will we gain the strength to do the same as we face the extraordinarily hard challenges of living in a broken world.

Only when we look at the cross will we gain the strength that we need to do the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation. It's by immersing ourselves in the genuine love of Christ that we become more genuinely loving ourselves.

Let's pray. Lord, we need more than mere words. We need to feel and to know your love.

[33 : 47] We ask that now as we've opened your word together, as we've meditated on its meaning for us, that your Holy Spirit would do what we cannot do, that you would press into our hearts these truths.

We pray that as we come to you in prayer and in song, as we gather around your table, that you would give us the gift of your presence and your love in ways that will nurture and sustain all that is good and true and beautiful in us.

We pray that that we might become a more genuinely loving people who bring glory to your name in our families, in our communities, in this city. And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.