

A Place Where I Am Loved

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[0 : 00] I have been thinking with the coronavirus in the headlines now, what constitutes not only an epidemic, but how contagious is it?

I reminisced and I thought back about America when years ago the AIDS epidemic was new and we felt like it was a national health crisis.

And as a pastor of a congregation, we had a young man who regularly attended our church who announced that he had AIDS.

And we didn't know if you could get AIDS by contact, if you could get it from shared facilities or a water fountain, but he became quite ill.

He was at home and we communicated with him that our women's group would like to bring food. And he said, well, I've got a box set outside of my flat.

[1 : 13] When they bring food, if they just open the wooden box and put the food in, then I will be grateful. Well, I came to discover that my women who regularly took food to him not only went to his home, but they refused to put food in the box.

They insisted on going inside, warming the mill up, doing laundry, and visiting with him for quite a while.

Later, he would make this boast about our church as he came to join the fellowship. He said, this is a place that I'm loved.

I'm loved here. He didn't say anything about the preacher. He didn't say anything about the worship team, but the fellowship, the community that he found in that place.

He found a place where he was loved. Charles Spurgeon says this about the church. Imperfect as it is, it is the dearest place on earth to us.

[2 : 29] The church is faulty, but that is no excuse for your not joining it if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults keep you back, for the church is not an institution for perfect people, but a sanctuary of sinners saved by grace, who, though they are saved, are still sinners, and need all the help that they can derive from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow believers.

He would go on and say that it's a nursery in which the weakest to the strongest are mutually nurtured in our faith because of Christ in our midst.

The dearest place on earth. The big idea out of Romans 12 that I want you to see tonight is that the church is a visual display of experiencing the love of God with others.

We experience the love of God in this place. We experience Christ in one another, ministering to one another, loving one another, despite our differences, because of Christ.

But we're also observed. It's visible to a watching world. And in that, we have a very attractive winsome, attractive faith.

[4 : 11] Because there's no place else like it on earth. Spurgeon was right. Glasgow City Free Church is the dearest place on earth.

And I think, do you have the expression preaching to the choir? I think tonight is preaching to the choir in the sense that you know these things. I'm not here to school you.

Though I might convict you to grow in one of the ten aspects or characteristics of the dearest place on earth that I'll share with you in just a moment.

As those ten, as I walk through them, and I'm only going to have like a minute to a minute and a half on each one. I want you to consider one area, one characteristic of the dearest place on earth where you individually might grow in love for one another.

Where you individually could grow in your love as you would nurture by your love others in this congregation.

[5 : 24] But first, we've got to visit Rome. I want to visit this church in Rome personally with these ten characteristics of love.

But first, I want you to visit Rome itself. Paul has written the first 11 chapters, 1 through 11. And in that, he addresses two problems.

In chapters 1 through 8, he addresses the problem of righteousness. How do we get right with God? And he puts forward in the first eight chapters that we don't get right with God because of things that we do, but because of what has been done for us.

Jesus Christ. By his death, we are pardoned and we're forgiven. But there's something else that takes place. It's the word, the theological term, imputation.

Where Christ and his righteousness, his record, his life is now placed in us.

[6 : 34] We have a union with Christ. We are made right with God. God looks at us and he not only sees Christ in us, covering us and all of our sins, but he sees and desires Christ at work, not only in us to transform us individually, but Christ in us out to others.

We're all a priesthood or we're all ministers one to another. We're made for community. And then this was going to create a problem.

In chapter 9 until chapter 12 that we're looking at tonight, there's the problem of the Jews. The problems of the Jews were this, that they would say, we are Abraham's racial, biological offspring. We're his children. We're his special people. And indeed they are. But Paul would say, you can look across to the Gentiles in Rome.

You can look across to the Gentile master. You can look across to the Gentile shopkeeper. You can look across to your Gentile neighbor. And if they are in Christ, Christ is in them and they are your brother.

[8 : 03] They're your sister. You're my brother and sister, aunts and uncles and grandfathers and grandmothers.

We're a family. And that was what Paul was getting across in the first 12 chapters. Chapter 12 forward is now the ethics.

It is what we do in response and gratitude to being God's chosen people through Christ and placed in community with one another.

What does that look like in the flesh? And he says, well, what it looks like is love. Love and community. It looks and it is visible, a visible display of God's love for us and God's love for one another through us in Christ.

I want to focus in the time that remains on 10 characteristics. Well, first of all, I've got a, let me give you verse 1 of Romans 12.

[9 : 15] It's foundational. It's hard to go to my focus verses of 9 through 16 and give you 10 characteristics of the dearest place on earth without one more note of foundation.

And that's found in verse 1 of chapter 12 here. Therefore, therefore, he's hearkening back all 11 chapters previously.

I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and should be pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. He's saying, as you view the gospel, the good news of the forgiveness of your sin and Christ, you being in union with Christ, as you view the mercies of God, then you are now led to offer your body, your physical body, like a sacrifice.

You say all of me, all of my life in service to you. But not only service, all of life, not just Sunday morning or Sunday evening, becomes an act of worship.

[10 : 37] In response to his mercies, I offer myself in service to him and all of my actions become true worship. In celebration of Robert Burns, I found a quote.

The fear of O'Hell, and I translated this because I simply could not understand him, but I get the gist. The fear of O'Hell is a hangman's whip.

Think about being driven to the gallows to keep the wretch in order. But where you feel your lover's grip, let that be your border.

So these things that Paul is talking about here that we are going to do to demonstrate that we are experiencing God's love in our midst by loving one another in the dearest place on earth is prompted not by the hangman's whip, but by our lover's hand.

Christ himself, it is Christ himself who is leading us as we would love one another. We are doing, our love for one another is not earning God's love, it's flowing, it's fueled from his love.

[12 : 05] If you're having a difficult time in loving one another, go back and revisit again the very mercies and love of God for you.

And be mindful. This is not sentimentalism that we're talking about. This is not mere natural affection. This is a love that is fueled by God's Holy Spirit himself.

Now, the dearest place on earth, and we've got 10 characteristics, and I'm going to just scoot right through these. First of all, love is sincere.

Love is sincere. Verse 9, the word for sincere is the word, in the Vulgate, is non-ficta. It's non-fiction. You might have a version of the Bible, I'm preaching out of the New International Version tonight, that says love is not hypocritical, because the word is not a counterfeit.

[13 : 07] It's not fiction. It's not a counterfeit. It's not hypocritical. It's not two-faced. It's not pretentious or pretend. It's real.

Love is not fake. He's saying this congregation, and our congregation, loves with a love that is real. And if it's real, at times, it's going to be confrontational.

At times, it's going to be gritty. Think about tough love that we might demonstrate to those that we really love when we see things that are troubling them or destroying them.

John Calvin said about sincerity, he said, we're most apt to deceive ourselves in loving one another. We persuade ourselves that we have a true love for others, but then we treat them with a neglect, maybe even rejection.

And he says, worse is the man who does not really love others but pretends than the man who naively thinks, I really am loving one another.

[14 : 30] Real love is able to discern and actually hate what is evil or threatening to a person. And yet, it's not just truth without love.

It's not just, well, I speak my mind. It's so loving that it clings to even the smallest good that it sees in one another. It's always looking to build up and encourage.

Again, I'm not schooling you. These are all characteristics. Let's see, on the slide, if you can go to the dearest place on earth. If you go, if you look at Glasgow City, I see all of these characteristics. Well, it would be that one. Sorry. Technical difficulty. The very last slide. Do you have it? Yes. Click again. There we go. We'll click right through.

Click to the next one. Thank you. Okay. Verse 10. This love is brotherly. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourself.

[15 : 35] Think about this congregation that Paul is talking to in Rome. Walter said earlier, four continents. Well, we've got a diverse congregation at Glasgow City.

The look of love in this place should be that that is familial. It's a family. Brothers and sisters. In Rome, they would have had a master sitting with a slave and not to attend to him and his needs. In fact, there might be a point in the service where the master would wash the slave's feet. They really were able to get beyond seeing status or power or what they didn't simply minister to those that were in their family or their friends.

They saw everyone in Christ as a brother or as a sister. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book called Life Together.

And he, I think it, it would have been a most unusual congregation, but it would have been a dear place on earth. He said, you know that you're getting there in your fellowship, in your church, when you see Christ in the weakest member and know that Christ will minister to you from the weakest.

[17 : 08] Think about that. Many times, we always see ourselves as the ones ministering strength, we're strong, we're ministering to the weak. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, the weak, they're a link in the chain.

And if we don't have fellowship, if we're not even looking as to how they can minister to us and love us and we can receive love from them like a two-way street, then we'll fail to grow.

Christ will not be able to do his work in us. Third, spiritual. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor.

And this is where it comes from. The imagery here is a boiling pot, but it's kindled by the Holy Spirit. A friend of mine used to say, you can't love until you've been loved, and then you'll only love to the degree that you've experienced love.

I'll say that again. You can't love until you've been loved. I have to be loved first. And then, I'll only love other people to the degree that I've experienced love for myself.

[18 : 28] And that's the gospel. Christ first loved us. But a transformer, the current coming into a transformer, receives it, and then it either calms it down or speeds it up, but it doesn't terminate there.

Christ's love for me is to keep going through, is to keep being dispersed. very, very strong to some, more mild to those that are more distant or new in a relationship with Christ.

But it's fueled by Christ's love to me. It keeps me then on perspective that by my love I'm actually like the Lord.

I'm imitating Him in the body. Fourth, it's joyful. Joyful. He says here that we're to be joyful in hope. The hope is the hope of the future. So that when those in our midst are facing trial, afflictions, even fierce temptations, we meet them with encouragement.

[19 : 40] We meet them with the promise that the Lord is with us and there is a better day. if not here in eternity where we're promised, we're promised eternity with our loved ones and our friends in Christ with the Lord Jesus and there we'll experience eternity with peace from all trials.

Is it a part of our conversation? Is it a part of your prayers? What do you tell people that are going through fierce trials? What gets you through the fiercest of trials that last and that linger?

That hope and hanging on to that hope like a hand grasping that hope and yet not simply for yourself but looking for occasions to share it with others.

Hospitable. Hospitable. Walter included this in his prayer. Hospitable is where we well let me let me reframe this.

If you've got I know a new international version the English standard version does this as well but if you've got your Bible with you you will probably see a footnote beside the word there well the word practice.

[21 : 11] so when Paul is saying practice hospitality he was speaking to a church that would have normally practiced hospitality to travelers maybe strangers but what the word means is more than that it actually means pursue it's a word that is used in hunting and also war to give chase to look to search to be on the prowl for to chase it and to bag the game origin says this we are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us but actually inquire after and look carefully for strangers to pursue them and search them out everywhere less perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads what does it look like today

I would say that we've got an epidemic of loneliness there are people of all ages that that they seem they seem to be a part of a crowd or a community but they're terribly alone there are certainly those that live alone and have very few conversations with their neighbors we have people that because of their the state of things single parents for instance that they're doing most of their life without even family to come along and assist them alone today one of the greatest and most successful methods of evangelism and outreach is hospitality but it's not it's more than entertaining and it's more than reciprocating with our friends or family it's more than that it's pursuing it's looking for every opportunity to bring people outside of my life and bring them inside and it's a challenge when Paul was saying this again they were practicing hospitality he's encouraged them to do more that would get me more time perhaps more expense you might be thinking well I'm a student or I'm a single it's more than that it can be a coffee it could be more than having people simply in your home it is going into their space and all the while looking for opportunities to love them to love them out of the love that we've experienced six benedictions benedictions this is in verse 14 where it says bless those who persecute you bless and do not curse in first

Peter chapter 3 verse 9 he writes do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult or sarcasm with sarcasm I added that on the contrary repay evil with blessing because to this you are called so that you may inherit a blessing now this is that's that sounds rather odd but he's saying you are called you are designated to bless people that's a part of your ministry and your service to Christ and when you bless people you receive a blessing in just a few moments at the end of the service I'm going to give a benediction and I'm going to raise my hands now I know we're Presbyterian and we're reformed so we we don't we very rarely raise both hands because we think someone's going to take a picture of that and they're going to post it and they're going to say we've gone charismatic but it's okay in fact I encourage you to hold out your hands and receive a blessing not from me but from

God and physics are important because physically what I'm doing is I'm holding my hands I'm trying to connect to God and radiate out to you a blessing from God your father to his children to his sons and daughters in Jesus Christ and as I am but a vessel as I experience God working through me to

bless you I feel my union with him I receive a blessing as well so you're I'm ordaining you all tonight to give benedictions and I would encourage you I would encourage you often enough particularly when you're in conflicting situations where you face insults where you face some level of either evil or persecution I'd encourage you to raise a hand maybe just down low and bless them every man and every woman every person is fighting a battle it may not be the same battle we're fighting or the same degree but there's something behind that there's trouble we're asking

God God put your peace upon him God let them know your love God give them a fresh sense of safety and security that can only be found in you bless them again we're imitating the Lord we should take some sense of even delight that I can actually represent him in the congregation as well as in the world number seven and eight I'll take together number seven is rejoice and number eight is mourn a whole sermon could be made off of just this one verse because it could actually be an umbrella over all of these things but to come along and to celebrate and to rejoice and to laugh with one another one of the most human of all emotions is to laugh but also to weep and to cry and we are called because we understand mourning and because we understand what it's like to be able to we can laugh at the future we understand and we can not simply join because we identify but again because we have been so loved out of that we can enter into those intimate moments the peaks as it were the peaks of celebration and the depths of mourning loss and grief but I'm going to tell you which one's harder

[28 : 52] I agree with Chris his son he writes and says that rejoicing with others is harder than mourning with them when someone else succeeds rather than you it's a challenge to rejoice with them how are we going to do it well the way that we do it is again we put our own ego aside we put our own selfish desires aside or our own wants and we leave those and trust the Lord's good timing you know when you're ministering to other people who ministers to you if you're loving like this who's going to love you again Christ but he also in the church in this dearest place on earth he surrounded us he surrounded us with people that will love us number nine harmonious number nine is harmonious now this is not simply agreement with one another it's not being mutually agreed a mutual agreement society one of the problems that a lot of churches have is we get into a culture of niceness and so we think that that's what harmony looks like is that we all have to be completely united in opinion well you've never been to my family yet and I've seen some of you

I've been in thank you for letting me in and showing hospitality to me and Wendy I've seen some of your families and so and you're wonderful but you don't always agree with one another so we're not talking about simply being agreeable in harmony you know like a great piece of sheet music there's there's different notes but he's saying here that harmony is we're not puffed up my ego doesn't get in the way of us being together and I'm also though I'm I don't have this attitude of superiority I also don't have the attitude of inferiority where I'm always caving in in other words in a situation we get harmony and love where it's not necessarily your thought or even my thought but we both go together and say what does what does Christ think what is what is the Lord doing here that we're very agreeable in that

Cranfield says agreement among themselves is something which Christians owe to the world if we have union with Christ and because of Christ we're brothers and sisters despite our differences then we should be able to agree with one another as we agree with Christ it's a tremendous witness and it moves the mission forward think of a sermon recently that Colin preached on the Tower of Babel where we had the opposite mission the building was moving forward until there was a disunity a lack of harmony among the nations and among the people God pulls us together and with a shared love of Christ at work in our midst and we're able to move forward in unity for mission and his work and then finally humble says there at the end of verse 16 do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position do not be conceited can you admit or maybe confess with me that we're not as wise as we think that we are

I certainly know that I'm not I have a new year's resolution to be less proud and I'm proud of it so I would tell you that this is a struggle out of these 10 characteristics of the dearest place on earth a place where the love of Christ is visible palpable being experienced in our midst and being shown to one another in that community in that church you're going to find humility there's a there's a footnote for the word low position and it's really a footnote for associate with people of low position and it's because of the article in the Greek and it doesn't matter because it's both in the sense of is it a mark a visible mark of a humble person is that they're not only willing and desirous and they think nothing of it of associating with people of low position but they think nothing a very humble menial task

maybe unknown task dirty work that might need to be done even anonymously
Paul says when you see that that's a sure sign of the gospel at work think of these ten characteristics think of Christ and how he modeled all of these love characteristics to us that by his humility his taking the low place even to death on a cross on our behalf as he came into our low position and died a death that we should have died he gave us forgiveness and he gave us life in him he's placed us in a community a church and now out of gratitude and that love at work in us we shall imitate him

[35 : 03] I would encourage you if you dare perhaps you you failed to take me up on checking one of these ten that you would like to maybe God is giving you an edge this is an area you could work on if you failed to do that then I dare you to talk to a family member or a friend who's close to you and ask them if there's any area in your life if they would see any of these characteristics that might need a bit of work invite others to look into your life and say is there anywhere that I could be and grow more loving is there an area that I could invite you to pray and to consider and ask God God this year in this dear place on earth I want to grow in love toward others and do so and delight all the while that you're imitating

Jesus in our midst and we thank God for it let's pray Heavenly Father we thank you that we've come to experience the love of Jesus Christ and we ask that we would do more so we ask Father that you would remind us of the great mercy that has been shown to us for it is something that we take great joy in that we came that time and we ask you to take our life and to wash us by your blood and forgive us and then raise us to our feet in a new life with you and now to use our hands and our feet and our mind and our heart in grateful and glad imitation of you and your service and ministry in the church to others and what you've asked from us and through

Paul in Romans 12 is both easy and hard it's easy it's easy to love one another in this place we are so loved it's so easy to reciprocate but it's also hard when we when we run out of steam and run out of fuel to love people naturally so what we're asking for is that you would infuse us again you would ignite us again you would kindle a love from your love for one another that it would bubble over in this place and that we father we father would delight to be so used as you're using us in imitation of Christ whom we adore will you do that father father and father we thank you we thank you for the benefits of being so loved in this place and we ask father that you would you would match hearts and hands even tonight that you would be the great matchmaker they are those tonight that are discouraged that are beat down that are fearful or they're struggling with a battle perhaps an addiction or a temptation or trouble and trial and they're struggling alone those surrounded they're alone father would you send us to them would you match our hand with their hand that we can take it would you would you cause us to be on the prow and look tonight for an opportunity to speak a word of encouragement or to listen long or to invite people in or to meet a need father we want to be a blessing even as you have blessed us so use us use us in this church and congregation the dearest place on earth and to that degree we pray in Christ's name for his glory amen I o word aussie o o o o o o o o o o