

Fruit of the Gospel - Genuine Love

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[0 : 00] Let love be genuine. Is your love genuine? Do you have the real thing or have you settled for a fake?

Stephen Jory was Britain's most notorious counterfeiter. After a foray into the fake perfume industry in the 1970s, Jory moved up the criminal ladder and began to make money, literally.

He bought a printing press and set about creating a mint in the garage of a large house in a secluded part of Essex. After initial problems, the watermark of the Queen on the first batch of notes appeared to show her with a beard.

The operation became extremely successful. Jory and his accomplices were eventually caught in 1998, but not before he had distributed in excess of £50 million worth of £20 notes.

His notes were so deceptive that the Bank of England was forced to change the design of the £20 note to add extra security features. Counterfeits. Fakes. Not the real thing.

[1 : 11] Well, sadly, in our world today, we have a myriad of counterfeit examples of love. They are fakes and they are deceptive. They are ingenuine, but they are persuasive.

When presented with the gospel of Jesus Christ and his love, the world rejects it, saying, we have no need of such love. After all, most people are about as loving as anyone needs to be.

We're making poverty history. We're caring for the environment. We're not racist these days. We're inclusive. We're not bigots. We're tolerant.

In fact, it's you Christians who aren't loving. But strangely, at the same time, we can't help observing that family breakdown, divorce, abortion and greed are spiralling out of control.

Does the world's love have true worth? Or is it counterfeit? A cheap imitation of the real thing. Well, we're down to the practical end of the book of Romans now.

[2 : 16] We've heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, that we are naturally sinners, but that God has demonstrated his love for us in that while we were his enemies, Christ died for us.

We have heard that Christ's death was not an ordinary death, but was a sacrifice of atonement. That is, it was made in order to pay the penalty for the sins we have all committed against God, so that we could be reconciled to him and saved from eternal death.

We haven't earned this new relationship with God by works. It has been granted freely as a gift, received through faith alone. It is therefore secure.

It can't be taken away from us. And we've also been given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who brings God's love into our hearts. Now in chapter 12, we are dealing with our response to God's free gift. Having been saved, what are we to do? How are we to live? Last week, Lisa preached from verses 1 to 8 on the transformation of the mind and the exercise of spiritual gifts.

[3 : 23] This week, we focus on verses 9 to 21, which detail the surpassing duty of genuine love. I've broken the passage down into three main parts, if you've got it open there.

Firstly, from verses 9 to 13, let your love be well-rounded and complete. Secondly, verses 14 to 18, let love be harmonious.

Lastly, verses 19 to 21, let love overcome. In verses 9 to 13, the picture we're given of genuine love is that it is well-rounded and complete.

There are three aspects to this. Firstly, for love to be well-rounded and complete, it must always be concerned with truth. Paul says, Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. We see here a strange connection between love and hate. But aren't love and hate completely incompatible? Well, consider the example of marriage. A husband and wife who love each other hate marital unfaithfulness, even the thought of it.

[4 : 34] It is always this way with genuine love. It has a glorious exclusiveness about it. The world says that to be loving means to accept all lifestyles and all beliefs and not to judge.

But genuine love is always concerned with truth. And in the same way that a husband and wife hate unfaithfulness and hold fast to each other in love, if our love is to have the genuineness that God requires, we must hate evil and hold fast to what is good.

Secondly, in verses 10 to 11, For love to be well-rounded and complete, it must be from the heart. We hear expressions like this all the time, but what I want to draw to your attention from this passage is that love that is from the heart involves the whole being, including our emotions.

We've all heard the expression, Love isn't about feelings, it's about actions, or similar sayings that can have the tendency to deny a very important part of our being.

What we ought to say is, Love isn't only about feelings. It's true that love isn't simply about feelings, nor does it involve cheap, superficial feelings.

[5 : 47] But having established that, genuine love still includes the emotional life. We are told in verse 10 that we are to love one another with mutual affection. And we are told in verse 11 that we are not to lag in zeal, but be ardent in spirit.

Leon Morris translates it, With respect to the spirit, boiling. If our love is genuine, our spirits will be literally boiling with godly affection for each other and zealous ardour for our God.

Also verse 12, Rejoice in hope. Our hearts, including the emotions, are to be lifted up in praise to God, considering the future we have in Christ.

However, it must be stressed that godly affection, zeal and rejoicing are not to be equated with worldly enthusiasm. They are the fruit of God's spirit working within us.

And if we wish to cultivate them, we must deeply devote ourselves to God in prayer. Thirdly, for love to be well-rounded and complete, it must involve actions of service to God and to our neighbour.

[6 : 58] This affection, zeal and rejoicing is not shallow and lacking in direction, for it will motivate us to outdo one another in showing honour. Verse 10, An ardent spirit will drive us to serve the Lord.

Verse 11, And rejoicing in hope goes hand in hand with patience in suffering and perseverance in prayer. Love has traction. It must manifest itself in deeds, and not only when the going is easy. Patience and perseverance are two of the most difficult aspects of love. And often, Christians who highly value emotional fervour and even truth, stumble when it comes to patience in suffering and reveal barren prayer lives.

In verse 13, actions of service also involve contributing to the needs of the saints and showing hospitality to strangers.

Now, when the New Testament exhorts us to hospitality, the emphasis is usually on believers showing hospitality to other believers who are in need. Also here, hospitality is mentioned in conjunction with contributing to the needs of the saints.

[8 : 09] So I think it's most likely that by strangers, Paul refers to believers whom the Roman Christians had never met personally. However, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that we are to have concern for the well-being of all.

So in practice, we are to be primarily concerned to show hospitality to other believers who are in need, and then also to unbelievers who are in need. So to summarise verses 9 to 13, let your love be well-rounded and complete.

Don't separate love from truth. Be filled with genuine affection for each other, zeal for God, and rejoicing in hope. And devote yourselves to sacrificial acts of service to God and each other.

Now the main concern of the next five verses is harmony. So I've entitled this division, Let Love Be Harmonious.

Being a musician, I like harmony. But musicians sometimes develop funny ideas about what harmony actually is. The early 20th century American composer Charles Ives grew tired of traditional harmony, so he started to experiment.

[9 : 33] He would sit down at the piano and play a familiar piece of music, but with his right hand in one key and his left hand in a completely different key. If you don't know what key is, I hope you understand that one.

He gave the resultant jarring din the elevated term polytonality. Very intellectual description of noise.

Now for some strange reason, few people remember the name Charles Ives today. And thankfully for him, he kept his day job working in the insurance business, so he was able to pay the bills.

Well, in the world today, and even in the church, our relationships with others often seem to resemble the music of Charles Ives, don't they? Discord rather than harmony.

Jarring dissonance rather than singing resonance. But in verses 14 to 18, we learn that harmony among people is one of the greatest characteristics of genuine love.

[10:41] How do we make sure our love is harmonious? Well, firstly, for love to be harmonious, it must be offered to all, even those who persecute us. As it says in verse 14, rather than hate them and curse them, we are to bless them, which primarily means that we are to pray for their repentance and salvation.

Now, we won't reach harmony with our enemies unless they repent. But for our part, we are to desire harmony and do what lies in our power to achieve it. But whether harmony can be achieved with those outside the faith who cause trouble for us, it must be striven for and maintained among the body of believers.

Now, remember that harmony doesn't mean simply avoiding conflict or not getting in anyone's way. It means restored relationships and agreement. The reason we are to live in harmony with one another is because, as Paul said in Romans 5, we have been reconciled to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Having been restored to a harmonious relationship with God, we are now to strive for and maintain the same harmony with each other. So when we find ourselves in disagreement with each other, we're not simply to say, well, we're all Christians, let's forget about our differences, we're all one in Christ.

Rather, we are to say, we're all one in Christ, so let's live out that harmony together. Our oneness in Christ is not an excuse to continue living in discord and conflict with each other.

[12:10] Rather, it provides the motivation for us to strive for complete harmony in our lives together. Secondly, verse 15, for love to be harmonious, it must be practised in all circumstances.

We are to be in tune with those who rejoice and also be in tune with those who weep. More than that, we are actually to rejoice and weep with them.

This calls for intimacy in the body of Christ. How can I rejoice with you if I don't know that you're rejoicing? Or how can I weep with you if I don't know that you're in pain?

But more than that, how can I do either if I have a cold heart towards you which is more inclined to be envious of your successes and joys, or if you are in pain, quietly thankful that such calamities have not come upon me?

Genuine love is harmonious and not in mere word, but from the heart. Thirdly, in verse 16, for love to be harmonious, it must transcend worldly distinctions of class.

[13:19] We must not love as the world loves, associating only with people of our own class. We are one body and if the rich and wise are to be saved, they must be saved in the same way as the poor and the lowly.

Don't be proud. Associate with each other regardless of social position. Young people, consider visiting the sick. Older people, pray with the young.

We get so concerned about our own age group and class and want everything to serve our context. What we ought to do is practice getting out of our own context a bit and associating with others, especially those whom the world considers lowly. Remember that it is by the grace of God that we are saved, just as they. So let love be harmonious with all, especially believers, among the weeping and the rejoicing and do not have regard for worldly distinctions of class.

Finally, verses 19 to 21, We have here the most difficult aspect of love. Never avenge, Paul says.

[14:30] Are we ever tempted to avenge? The early Christians underwent extreme persecution, so vengeance was a constant temptation for them. We have been spared for the time being, at least.

But despite this, vengeful spirits among Christians are alive and well. sometimes, or perhaps even often, the offending party is another professing Christian.

Have you ever been hurt? Severely hurt? Perhaps by a work colleague? Perhaps by a family member? Perhaps even by a member of the church?

Have you been tempted to take vengeance? You probably haven't killed anyone, but you may have thought about it. You may not have even yelled at them. But you wanted to.

For reasons that God alone fully knows, sometimes he allows us to be hurt so terribly by other people that we can even be left feeling as though there's nothing left to live for. So we slump into despair and anger.

[15 : 37] Anger at the ones who hurt us. And anger at God who let it happen. We cannot forgive. We cannot let it go. Why?

Because forgiveness seems cheap when compared to the seriousness of what has been done to us. But we must not take vengeance either in action or in our hearts.

Why not? Well, firstly, in verses 19 to 21, God says, vengeance is mine. I will repay. In order to let love overcome, we must remember that God is judge, not us, and he will call our enemies to account.

Not one pang of our hurt escapes his attention and he will indeed repay. But you might object, but if the person who hurt me is a Christian, they can't be called an enemy, can they?

And being forgiven all of their sins, won't they just get away with it? No, they will not. Galatians 6-7 says, do not be deceived, God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.

[16 : 45] Paul said this so that Christians would not think that because they were forgiven, they could sin and get away with it. Christians who injure other Christians will certainly be called to account.

Either through God's discipline in this life, they will be brought to repentance. Or on the day of the Lord, they may find that their faith and love were merely a profession and not genuine at all. And that would be a terrible revelation, wouldn't it? God calls everyone to account. This is the first reason why we must let go of a vengeful spirit towards those who hurt us.

God is judge, not us, and he will certainly call our enemies to account. The second reason why we must let love overcome is because a vengeful spirit will eventually destroy us.

verse 21 says, Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. You see, if you harbour anger in your heart, it will eventually overcome you and destroy you.

[17 : 45] And in this respect, if those who hurt and injure are at risk of judgment, then those who have been hurt often end up equally at risk. What may have started off as a relatively small discouragement due to hurt soon ripens into deep-seated hardness of heart and before long that person is no longer following the Lord at all.

No, do not be overcome by evil. Treat your anger, resentment, and vengefulness as you would a mortal illness. Take it to Jesus Christ. Remember that no one was as injured, hurt, or rejected as he was.

The Lord understands. Confess that you are powerless to change your anger. Ask him to forgive you and replace it with his love and a spirit of forgiveness. Do not be overcome by evil.

Thirdly, we see some more application in verse 20. For if your enemy is hungry, feed them. Surely this is the hardest thing of all. But part of letting love overcome is doing good to those who hurt us. In many cases, this may mean no more than praying for their repentance. But we must do it and if we persevere, we will find that our anger and resentment is overcome and replaced with God's love.

[19 : 00] Now, the strange expression for by doing so you will heap burning coals on their heads probably refers either to our good deeds having the effect of shaming our enemy into repentance or it could refer to the sobering fact that if they continue to persecute us and do not repent, the good deeds we have done for them will in the end be heaped up as a burning witness against them when they stand before the Lord in judgment.

He will ask them why, given such an extraordinary witness of genuine love, they did not repent. In any case, both readings have an element of truth to them. If our good deeds do not shame our enemy into repentance, they will be a witness against them on the final day.

Now, we must pray that the effect would be the former rather than the latter. let love overcome. In conclusion, let's evaluate ourselves.

Is your love genuine? Or is it like Stephen Jory's counterfeit banknotes? A clever copy but having no real worth. None of us are perfect, all of us fall short, but this is God's standard of love.

This is the love that Christ demonstrated when he gave up his life for us on the cross. And this is the love that is the fruit of God's work in us. So make sure you have understood the gospel and are reconciled to God.

[20 : 25] Read Romans again, pray over it and believe what you read. If you have never done so, call upon God for salvation and a new heart. For those who understand and believe the gospel, set aside some time to evaluate your life according to this passage.

Write down the areas in which you are lacking. Confess them to God plead with him to continue his work of creating genuine love in you by his spirit. Also, make a plan of action.

What are you going to change in your life? Is your love full of action but cold in spirit? Devote yourself to prayer. Are you out of tune with other believers? Reconcile and spend time with them. Make use of small groups. Look out for the rejoicing and the weeping ones in the church. Are you defeated by a spirit of anger and vengefulness? Confess it to God.

Confess it to those you trust. Make a decision to deal with it God's way. Brothers and sisters, put aside the counterfeits. Let love be genuine.

[21 : 32] Amen. Amen. Thank you.