

True Love

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[0 : 00] so tourism must be good, and so on and so forth. Of course, most people don't really analyze it, but it boils down to following our desires and feelings.

Are you familiar with the phrase, how can it be wrong when it feels so right? Well, that captures it in a nutshell, doesn't it? And if external rules constrain those desires, then it's the rules rather than the desires that are to be questioned.

Now, this is a new, of course, what I've just described is essentially hedonism. And it's been around since the time of the Greek philosophers. In fact, it's been around since the time of Adam and Eve. Just think the forbidden fruit. Well, in our passage today, God offers a very different relationship between what is love and what is good. And so on the next slide, with God, what we ought to love is defined by what's good.

Of course, good is defined by God, not us. Our job is to love what he's determined is good. The good comes first, and then love follows.

[1 : 14] And so here, at the very start, in verse 9, Paul says, Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.

Now, the first sentence translated is literally the unhypocritical love. There's no verb, and it serves almost like a section heading. By it, Paul announces that love must not be fake.

It must be true to what's right. Hence the title of my sermon. This true love, then, must align itself with what's good and hate what's evil.

So the idea of sincere is not just to be well-meaning, but to be aligned to what's right. Actually do what's right and don't just pretend on the surface to do it.

Truly hate what's evil and cling to what's good. Incidentally, the word for love here is agape. On the next slide, the purest type of love, which is attributed to God's own love.

[2 : 19] It's a higher order than philio, which is brotherly love. Or eros, which is sexual love. A true love, then, involves doing what is good. And this is our focus today.

Paul, however, doesn't list all aspects of love exhaustively in this passage. Rather, he merely provides a flavor of what true love is. Hence, the instructions we find are punchy and short.

So in the first point, in your notes, in verse 10, love involves doing good, being expressed toward one another. And so we read, Be devoted to one another in love.

Honor one another above yourselves. Love, you see, invariably manifests itself in how we treat others. Self-love may be a thing nowadays, but it actually isn't true love, is it?

Because self-love is simply self-centeredness, following our own desires. Every human can do that by default. On the other hand, true love, that of doing good to others, often is at a cost to ourselves.

[3 : 30] That is much harder. But that's the kind of true and sincere love that God desires. Have others' welfare before our own. And what's more, Paul says, be devoted to it, which has the idea of being committed to this way of living.

It's such a far cry, isn't it, from the type of love we see on *The Bachelor*, or *The Farmer Wants a Wife*. There, the main focus of the contestants is to find love for themselves.

I'm here to find someone for me, is what they always say. Someone that suits me, who will look after me. Someone who is good for me.

Well, self-love, or selfish love, is really an oxymoron, isn't it? A contradiction in terms. If you love someone, then you give your life for them.

You seek to do right by them all the time, and not just when it suits you. Now, this isn't easy, of course, because if it's not returned, we're left exposed, aren't we?

[4 : 39] Feeling unloved. And even if it's reciprocated, it's tiring to keep at it, isn't it? Because we're sort of selfish by nature, and it takes effort not to be selfish.

Nevertheless, Paul exhorts us not to be like that in verses 11 and 12, to keep at it. He says, That is, we are to keep doing good, even when it's hard, by being zealous for it, applying spiritual fervor. The idea of spiritual fervor here is to do it with God's Spirit, the fervor of God's Spirit, as it were. So this isn't simply trying to sum up our willpower and pushing ourselves by sheer force.

Rather, as we remember God's mercy toward us, remember Romans 12, verse 1, it motivates us from the strength God gives us by His Spirit to keep desiring to do what's good.

We're reminded ultimately that even if it goes unnoticed, we're actually serving the Lord. So much so that even if it leads to affliction and suffering, which is what I think the rest of that verse is about, we're to remain joyful in hope, patient in affliction, and faithful in prayer.

[6 : 10] God, you see, is the one who will sustain us as we serve Him to do good to others. To show love to others. Well, Paul then moves on with my third bullet point, to do good with generosity.

That's his encouragement, verse 13. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. I think here's a particular application of honoring one another in love, and we are to do it by sharing with the Lord's people.

You see, as Paul was writing to the Romans, these are Christians who are now united, Jew and Gentile, across that divide. Some perhaps had to leave their traditional family and social networks, whether they're Jews or Gentiles, in order to become a Christian.

And so Paul says, Now, as the church family, you ought to support and share with one another. Share as is needed and show hospitality. Perhaps they've been made to leave their own family homes to become a Christian, or they may be traveling from city to city, or others coming from other cities as Christians.

Whatever it is, Paul says, be generous. Practice hospitality. Share with those in need. Now, I don't want to dwell on all these examples because they're sort of well understood.

[7 : 32] I think we all know what we're meant to do. And by and large, I see the generosity and the love that you do show to one another. So keep it up.

Well done. Instead, what I want to spend more time tonight is on the more challenging section that follows. And that is Paul's exhortation to do good, even when there is evil, even when we've been treated by evil people.

After all, Jesus did say, didn't he, that it's easy to love those who love us, because even the pagans do that. Scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours.

But what about the person who stabs you in the back? Can I return that by stabbing them in the back as well? Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

Otherwise, where is the justice? Well, not according to Paul, and not according to Jesus. For in verse 14, we read, Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.

[8 : 35] Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. Now, as we read this and hear this, I think there are two common reactions. The first is to say, this is just impossible.

It's one thing to just walk away when we're hurt, maybe even forgive. But then, really, we don't want to have anything to do with that person anymore, do we? But it's quite another to ask someone to keep blessing those who have persecuted us.

That almost seems like a bridge too far, doesn't it? A note to the command applies whether the person repents or not. Paul doesn't say, Bless those who persecute you, but then afterwards repent.

No, just bless them whether they repent or not. That makes it even harder to swallow, doesn't it?

But if we are meant to do that, we would think, well, aren't we allowing evil to go unpunished?

Where's the justice in that? Well, that's the first sort of reaction. The other common reaction, I think, is to read this and go, Yeah, that sounds fine. I'm a Christian.

[9 : 45] No problems. Love your enemies. That's what Jesus says. I can do that. Well, if that's your reaction, then either you're Jesus, or I suspect that you haven't been hurt by people too much.

Or maybe you're too busy hurting others. To be hurt in return. You see, I think we're really honest. There's really no two ways about this, is there?

This passage is hard, if not impossible, to apply. When Paul follows in verse 14 by instructing us to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn, I think he's saying, apply that even to those who are persecuting us and giving us a hard time.

It's almost like having a colleague, for example, stab you in the back, causing you to be overlooked for promotion, and then they're promoted themselves. And the way you apply this is to rejoice with

them over their promotion.

I mean, who could do that? Who could really bring themselves to rejoice in such a situation? Unless God, of course, miraculously gives us the strength to do that.

[11:01] And again, we're being taken back, aren't we, to Romans 12, verse 1, where we remember God's mercy, and that motivates us to be living sacrifices for Him.

Now, often we can imagine, you know, Romans 12, verse 1, that serving Him is almost heroic, isn't it? That we're fated and honored and sort of encouraged as we act sacrificially.

But instead, what if we are ridiculed and maligned for doing good, and yet, we're asked to press on, just like Jesus did?

It's hard enough, isn't it, to lay down our lives for others, even when we get the credit for it. How impossible, don't you think, when we're laughed at for doing so.

And so I think, of course, it's only with God's help and strength that this is at all possible. Well, Paul now goes on to point out three aspects to help us to understand why God is asking this of us, why He will give us the strength, but as we understand why, perhaps that is also a source of motivation for us to do the right thing and to keep doing good, even when we are being persecuted.

[12:20] First, Paul gives us the reason that we are to do it so that we can keep watch on our own pride and sin. So in verses 16 to 18, he says, live in harmony with one another.

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. I think here he begins with urging us to live in harmony within the Christian community.

Verse 16, I think that's where, because it's a one another kind of language. Whereas I think when we get to verse 18, he's applying it to the wider society, including those who may be persecuting us and who do not believe in Jesus.

Now, of course, conflict and persecution can happen inside or outside the church, can't it? As we all well know. But whatever the source of it, whenever we're wrong, what usually happens is that there is a misuse of power, isn't there, by someone.

[13:28] Our freedoms and basic human dignity is taken from us. So it could be discrimination, it could be disrespect, it could be humiliation. And in such a situation, our instinct is to get back at others.

But Paul warns that that could stem from pride when we do that. You see, although the instruction in verse 16, don't be proud, could be aimed at someone in a lofty position, I think in this context it's more focused on a situation where, as a result of persecution or a wrong being done to us, someone finds their position now being lowered.

They've been disrespected or maligned, they've been made to feel debased or denigrated. Well, it's natural to want to retaliate, but Paul says, don't give in to pride at this point.

If you're now made to identify with lowly people or subjected to menial tasks as a result, don't think it's beneath you, for that's to give in to pride.

Which is always a temptation, isn't it? Whether we're in a lofty position or a lowly position, our temptation as fallen creatures is always to give in to pride.

[14:44] You see, if we're honest with ourselves, when we've been wronged, our desire for justice, and that's rightly so, is so often mixed in, isn't it? With the sinful desire to nurse our wounded ego.

So Paul warns, firstly, that we need to watch our own pride, even when we're persecuted. And retain a humble attitude. Don't be proud and therefore seek to repay evil with evil.

Instead, Paul says in verse 19, take a step back and leave room for God's own justice. He writes, do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, it is mine to avenge.

I will repay, says the Lord. Now doing this takes a few things into account. First, it recognizes that we're sinners as well. Those who persecute and those who are persecuted are sinners alike before God.

Paul here quotes from the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32. But as Gillian read it earlier, did you notice that God wasn't limiting his judgments just to Israel's enemies, was he?

[15:56] Rather, that passage extended to Israel's own sins as well. In other words, only God is worthy to mete out justice.

All sinners like us have no right to be a judge. Of course, when we get to next week, in the next chapter, God does appoint humans with the authority to act on his behalf to mete out justice. But as sinners, as individuals, we're not to take justice into our own hands. Further, if we take the role of judge without God's approval, then we're usurping his role.

Vengeance is mine, says God. Leave it to me. I know perfectly what's going on and I know when the right time is to execute justice. Don't do my job for me.

Because you don't know what the right kind of justice really is anyway. Besides, when we take revenge, what we've done is we've become God, haven't we?

[16:58] And that's an act of immense pride and sin, don't you think? Let me say here that I know just how tempting revenge is to see people punished for their wrong.

It's just an innate sense of justice that we want in our own self, isn't it? But that comes from a place of pride. As though we ourselves are beyond reproach.

As though we ourselves are so righteous that we can judge others. Now, practically, how does this work? What do we need to learn this self-control not to take vengeance into our own hands?

Well, I think firstly, we need to learn the practice of praying the moment we're wronged so that we don't respond at all in anger. Instead, we're to bring our grievance to God, cry out to Him for justice, pour out our emotions to Him instead of venting it on others or the person that wronged us.

Then perhaps, after that, if we have a trusted friend or perhaps a husband or wife or something like that, find a chance to just talk it through with them and debrief.

[18:09] Here, you can be honest, maybe even unload what's really bugging you and really hurting you. But that's our chance to reflect on what's going on.

And if, for example, you're someone that is trusted, then offer to help others do that as well. And then once we've prayed and reflected upon it, then that's when we try and work out what the best thing to say in response is or do.

That allows you, for example, to see that perhaps there were mitigating circumstances, that maybe they were unintentionally hurting you. even though that in itself is sinful. So I don't think that this passage means that we just don't point out the faults of others or the wrongs or never take action in response to being hurt.

But I think it means we don't do it with a spirit of vengeance. That even if they are our enemies for hurting us, try and work out what's really good for them.

What can I say or do that will really help them? And if they remain unrepentant or refuse to reconcile, then so be it. Leave the justice to God.

[19:25] Which brings us then to that third thing I want to say in that bullet point. And that is when we are wrong, we're to repay evil, not with evil, but good.

So verse 20, On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink, in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This image of heaping coals here is a bit unclear, but I think it has two outcomes. Either it results in the person being shamed into repentance, or else, if they remain unrepentant, it's a picture of a sign of God's, the sign of God's ultimate judgment on them.

That is, it adds further fuel to God's wrath when it finally comes. Because they were given a chance to repent, but didn't. Now I don't think we're meant to repay evil with good in a gleeful or sadistic way, you know, as if to add fuel to the fire, I'll just do more good so that they'll get more judgment. Rather, I think this good that God wants us to do must proceed from a pure heart. We're to do this and in some sense it will still bring us a deep sense of joy and satisfaction, not so much because we're seeing what is being the effect on our enemies, but rather we're doing this looking to God and knowing that what we're doing is pleasing to Him.

[20:57] After all, this is very much as we saw last week, the good, perfect, and pleasing will of God we're called to do. And part of that pleasure comes from knowing that, that we're doing God's will.

And ironically, when we do that, when we don't take justice in our own hands but we repay evil with good, we're actually becoming God's agents for justice.

We're taught not to mete out justice in our own hands, but even as we do good, that is really God's way of expressing His will and justice in that situation.

For you see, at the end of the day, repaying evil with good is part of God's perfect will. It's actually the very essence of the gospel in action, isn't it?

And if we put the gospel to practice, then we're really just reflecting the mind of God. For that's how He works. The gospel expresses and shows us exactly how God desires to work in this world.

[22 : 10] And so that's why I've summarized right at the bottom of my outline today the verse earlier in Romans, chapter 5 and verse 8. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

At its core, the gospel is all about God repaying evil, which we're all guilty of as sinners, by doing good for us, sending His Son Jesus to die for us.

And He did it before any of us responded in repentance. He repaid evil with good. This is the ultimate, isn't it, in true love that God has demonstrated to us through His Son.

And the gospel also shows us, doesn't it, how God demonstrates His justice. He poured out His wrath and vengeance not to those who deserve it, but to His very own Son, holy and blameless.

And that's why God doesn't want us to take vengeance into our own hands. He's already dealt with injustice through the cross. And He will deal with the unrepentant one day.

[23 : 22] Instead, our job is to repent, is to remain humble, and model that repentance so that others can repent as well. You see, if we try and get even, then we fall into pride and sin and we allow evil to overcome us.

Even Jesus, who is perfect, never took justice into His own hands, but submitted Himself and trusted Himself to the will of God. He knew that God would do the right thing by Him in the end, even though that led Him to the cross.

And so this is the God we're talking about. Who else could be more concerned for justice than He is? For He is a holy and just God, isn't He?

So, Tian, let me encourage us to entrust ourselves into God's hands, even when wrong is being done to us. Live out the gospel joyfully by being living sacrifices.

so that the beautiful aroma of pleasing God will waft up to Him. Let us hate evil and by hating evil, let us not repay it with vengeance, but by overcoming it with good.

[24 : 40] Let's pray. Father, we do struggle when we suffer at the hands of others. We feel violated, we feel put down, we feel abandoned and unloved, and our natural retaliation is to strike back.

But Father, help us to see that this is not Your way. Help us to see that we are not forgotten, that You will ensure justice is done. Teach us to love our enemies and to long for them to repent and turn to Christ when they see us living out the gospel.

by repaying evil, not with evil, but with good. Give us Your Spirit and that almighty and miraculous strength to do that.

Teach us to be just like Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.