

Genuine Love

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Date: 22 May 2011

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, that you would set our affections in order. And so we pray again now as we hear your word, that you would teach us to receive your grace and to be channels of grace, to receive your love and to exhibit that to others and to bless others as we indeed have been blessed.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen. Well, you'll find it helpful if you open your Bible to Romans 12, Susie read to us just a moment ago, 9.48.

Thank you very much for welcoming our Scots friends last week. They had a great time. And it is very good to see you this morning because seeing you here, I know the rapture has not happened. Now, two weeks ago, we came to the end of the top of the mountain, really, at the end of chapter 11.

And the Apostle Paul gave us a pair of binoculars. He looked back over every trail we've walked on and he sums it up in those little words at the end of chapter 11, from him, through him, to him are all things, to him be glory.

And now we're on the downhill slide. I mean that in a positive sense. From chapter 12 to the end, it's basically all application. It's all, you know, the so what.

[1 : 2 8] I mean if chapters 1 to 11 is true, gloriously, wonderfully true, what does that look like? What does it look like in real life? What difference does it make? And so in chapter 12, as it was read this morning, you can tell that Paul gets dangerously practical because true worship begins on Monday morning.

And the reason it's taken 11 chapters to get here is that you can't live the life of chapters 12 to 16 unless you believe chapters 1 to 11 because the real test of belief is your behaviour.

Or put it the other way around, show me your behaviour and I'll show you what you really believe, not what you say you believe. Faith isn't ticking the right boxes. Yes, Trinity, yes.

It's receiving the mercy of God with open hands and it's being placed into a vital and living union with Jesus Christ and that will show, it has to show, in real transformation.

And last week, as Willie preached, it struck me that there are two, in verses 1 and 2, if you just turn back there, there are two separate powers at work on us all the time.

[2 : 4 8] The first is the pressure to conform. So you see that at the beginning of verse 2. We are under mass, there's a massive power of conformity in the world.

We're all desperate to fit in and not to stand out. And there's almost no belief we won't compromise, there's no untruth we won't believe, so that we're not going to stand out so that we might be accepted.

A friend of mine in Vancouver here joined a club and expressed a Christian opinion on something. They were taken aside and said, you know, you are the only one here who believes anything like that.

It's a very interesting thing when you think about it. Not, while I disagree with what you say, you've got a perfect right to believe it. No, no, no, the great sin is stepping out of line, is being different, you see.

It's the old frog in the boiling water thing. We are in these surroundings and we become more like our surroundings until it can, in the end, kill us. And in high school it's a cruel force and as we grow older, of course, it becomes more subtle and more sophisticated.

[3 : 55] And my view is that the more affluent and the more educated you become, the more likely you are to capitulate and conform to the spirit of the age. We are immersed in the world which lives according to the pattern of Romans 1 to 3.

So that's one power, the power to conform. But there's the other power, of course, which we majored on last week and that's the power of God transforming us, remaking us from the inside out.

So if you become a Christian, you take your ethics from God and his word, not from the culture because we offer our bodies to him ongoingly. We try to walk in the pleasing will of God on a daily basis and we try to draw our life and our strength from his mercies on an hourly basis and we're meant to live with increasingly renewed minds, transformed minds.

So the church, you see, is not the church of Oprah. Our mission statement is not something like taking nice Canadians and making them nicer. This is about transformation, the renewal of our minds.

So that when you become a Christian, you need to rethink your whole life, every part of your life. And if you stop rethinking parts of your life, it's a good thing to start again.

[5 : 18] What does it look like? Well, there are three sections in 3 to 21, if you turn over and have a look at that. The first section, there are three paragraphs nicely, 3 to 8, speaks about our relationship to Christians.

And then the last paragraph, 14 to 21, speaks about relationships with non-Christians and even those who are hostile to Christian faith. And the middle little section, 9 to 13, is a hinge.

And we ask the question, what does a renewed mind look like in action? And I've called verses 3 to 8, the first section, it looks like a community of grace.

Very interesting, you know, where would you begin applying the 11 chapters of Romans? You know, mission, evangelism, social justice, Bible study, sexual morality?

Nope. The place the apostle starts is the fact that we need to be, we need to take our place in the local church. verse 4, as in one body, we have many members and the members do not all have the same function.

[6 : 31] So we, though many, are one body in Christ, individually, members, one of another, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

In other words, the first thing we're meant to rethink is our self-identity. The moment you place your faith in Jesus Christ, God places you in the body. Being united to Christ means you are united to the other people who are also united to Christ.

It's like being born into a family. You don't have a choice about this. The choice is how you think about yourself. And we are no longer to think about ourselves simply as individuals who decide and choose our involvement based on our personal preferences.

We're meant to see ourselves corporately in Jesus Christ. Or as Paul says here, individually members one of another. Could you put it any more strongly than that?

That's why verse 3 starts, do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to, but think with sober judgment. There's a terrible arrogance about individualism and consumerism, which is one of the marks of the culture around us.

[7 : 48] You know, it's my needs, my desires, my preferences that count. And these other people in the body of Christ, they're just not worth my getting truly involved. It's pride that is at the root of disengagement and disrespect for the body.

It's pride that is the enemy of the community of grace and unity and serving one another. And the flip side of that is there are some who say, well, I'm not good enough really. There are so many others better than me, which is still a form of pride when you think about it.

Paul says, this is something all of us need to rethink. It's impossible to be a true Christian and be casual and standoffish about your local church.

And here, when Paul uses the word, speaks about the body, he means the local congregation. To belong to Christ means your involvement with the local church cannot be a secondary or a tertiary concern for you.

It's much more than just attendance, you see. He's talking about a renewed mind, the way we think about ourselves, our involvement, being members of one another. It's so helpful to be, it's so practical in verse 6.

[8 : 56] He says, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. Now, you know, in the Greek, the word gifts is charismata, literally, grace things.

And the sentence reads, having grace things that differ according to the grace given to us, use them. So, every single Christian has received a gift or many gifts of grace.

Yes. So, I say this carefully, but every local church, therefore, is a charismatic church. because all of us have charismata, charismata gifts.

You see, how does God come into a community, a Christian community, and transform it into a community of grace? The preaching of the gospel is essential, but it's not enough.

So, what Paul is saying here is that the way in which God demonstrates and expresses his grace within the body is as you exercise your grace things, your gifts.

[10 : 12] It's very straightforward. If God has given you a gift, you don't need to go to university and get a degree in your gift. If you try and rethink your involvement, if you try and build up other people and contribute to the good, the common good of the body, you will find what you can do.

And if you're good at it, people will ask you to do it again. And if you're not, try something else. The point is that we make use of our gifts for others. See, your experience of grace at St. John's and our experience of grace together is directly proportional to whether you use your gifts, the gifts God has given you or not.

It's impossible to be the source of grace for other people without serving them, without using your gifts. And actually, there's a lovely moment that often happens in the Christian life. Sometimes it happens very early on when you're a new Christian.

And you realise that your involvement with the Christian community is more about God blessing other people through you than about you getting blessing. And you start to realise, well, I'm not wanting so much for myself.

I take the little that God has given me and I give it to others and it not only blesses them but it blesses me because now I become a channel of God's grace. And I don't have time, we don't have time, there's so much in this passage to look at the gifts in detail.

[11 : 36] There's a lot of attention being given to the first few, the upfront gifts, preaching, prophecy, teaching. I just want to look at the last three gifts with you for a moment in verse 8. The one who, I won't do exhortation, I'll do the next one.

The one who contributes in generosity, the one who leads with zeal, the one who acts, who does acts of mercy with cheerfulness. So he or she who contributes in generosity.

There are some people in our congregation who find it very difficult to make ends meet financially. And every real church depends upon the financial contributions of every member and often larger contributions in giving by financial giving by some who can.

Here, this gift Paul is talking about is a man or woman who has the capacity to make a significant financial contribution. It doesn't matter whether they've come by their wealth by accident or by inheritance or by their own ability.

It is one of the charismata. It is a charismatic gift, a grace thing, a gift from God to be used for his good just as much as prophecy or evangelism.

[12 : 52] And it's very helpful that we have this passage on the Sunday before we go into summer. This is part of God's equipment of his church and I want you to think about that. What the apostle is saying is that if God has given you wealth, you become a channel of his grace as you give to others and contribute only, do it with generosity.

Don't do it with strings attached or hope of recognition. Don't do it with complaining or reserve. Do it generously. What about the next one? The one who leads with zeal. This is the person who has wisdom, leadership, has the ability to preside at groups, meetings, chair, decision making, committee members.

This is a grace thing. It's a gift from God, a channel of grace to others. And those of you who are on committees and chairing committees, do it with zeal. Literally, the word is zest.

That is, it takes energy. Invest your energy and time to be a blessing to the body. These people are often not seen. And then the last one Paul mentions here is one who does acts of mercy, do it with cheerfulness.

We have plenty of people who have this gift at St. John's. Those who have the large heart, who know how to bear the burden of others. And you think about the practical realities and the needs of others.

[14 : 15] If you have this gift, I think the temptation is to overdo it, take on everyone's burdens. But you are also a channel of grace to the body of Christ.

But you need cheerfulness. Just as it's just not helpful to give money resentfully and it's not helpful to chair a committee lazily. So any act of mercy that's done grumpily, it's just not helpful.

So this is the first sign of the renewed mind. It's going to show itself in a community of grace. And I encourage you to take it home and read through it today. Pray through these words.

Well, let's look secondly then. What's the second mark of the renewed mind? And I come to this hinge passage, 9 to 13. It looks like a community of love.

Now, this is condensed. It's like a little catechism for new Christians, these verses. And the headline is love, verses 9 to 10.

[15 : 19] And then there are a couple of examples of love, I think three. Why is the headline about love? Well, it's a bit obvious really, isn't it?

If we're going to be a community of grace, it means we're going to have to exercise our gifts. But if you exercise your gifts without love, you may as well not bother.

That's what 1 Corinthians 13 is all about. It's not gifts that make a true church of Jesus. It's gifts exercised in love.

So you can have the gift of teaching or giving or prophecy. You can have a church with all the programs and money in the world. But if love is not there, you don't want to be part of that church. So what does Paul say?

Just let me read verses 9 and 10. Let love be genuine. That word means without hypocrisy. For poor what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

[16 : 18] Love one another with brotherly affection. And do one another in showing good. Paul is not saying all you need is love. Altogether now, he's saying our love's got to be real.

Okay, we all think that. What does real Christian love look like? And the answer is the next phrase. Abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

In other words, true Christian love has a moral content. True Christian love is not just a tepid tolerance. It's not a superficial, sentimental feeling which avoids moral issues at every cost.

Christ. It's a love, and this is a very strong word, it's a love which hates and loathes what is evil and wicked and clings to, holds, is glued to the word, literally means what is good.

If it's not, it can't be called Christian love. Just stick your finger in Romans 12 if you would and turn your Bibles back to Psalm 139. I want to show you something that's been a help to me.

[17 : 31] Psalm 139. If you get stuck in Psalm 119, keep going. 5-2-1.

A beautiful Psalm of David. And it'll be familiar to you, I'm sure. It begins, verse 1, O Lord, you've searched me and know me, you know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from afar.

Down to verse 4, even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it all together. Verse 6, such knowledge is too wonderful, too high for me, I can't attain it. Where shall I go from your spirit?

Where shall I flee from? It's the beauty of God's inescapable love and grace. Verse 13, for you formed my inward parts, you knitted me together into my mother's womb.

I praise you for mine fearfully and wonderfully made, wonderful are your works. Verse 17, how precious to me are your thoughts, O God, how vast is the sum of them.

[18 : 33] So far, so good, right? Yes? And then we come crashing down at verse 21. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with a complete hatred, I count them as my enemies. Now, for years and years, I've always thought, oh, maybe David put his pen down at verse 18 and picked it up again at verse 19.

I just, it seemed to be so negative. But when you study the psalm, there's a progression, it's beautiful. And it speaks about the progression, not just a physical progression of life, but a progression of moral, godly, a god-focused life.

And if you trace it, the person with moral maturity is not a moral jellyfish who just takes a live and let live attitude to life.

They care more and more deeply about the things that God does. They learn to love what God loves and to hate what he hates. And it's obvious, really. I mean, if you love and you have no moral compass about what is right and wrong and true or false, you will end up loving what is evil.

[19 : 51] But true love loathes what is evil and clings to the good. Back in Romans, if you just look at that verse again, Paul's talking about more than action.

He's talking about what's going on in our hearts. Because, I mean, you can do good things and you can do evil things without your heart being in it. The mark of a Christian is that in our hearts we hate, we loathe what's evil, we love what's good.

It means we're completely committed against certain things and for certain things. True love, it's not going to turn a blind eye to evil. Turning a blind eye is not, that's not love, that's just caring less.

And without this moral content, our Christian love loses any unique Christian witness to the world. I think there are two kinds, probably two kinds of Christians and two kinds of churches, broadly speaking.

one finds it easy and natural to hate evil but struggles to love what is good and that breeds a kind of a self-righteous, legalistic, judgmental church.

[20 : 57] But there's another form of church or Christian who finds it easy and natural to love what is good but really struggles to loathe what is evil and that produces self-indulgence, cheap grace and a superficial fellowship.

There's a lovely wholeheartedness here. That's why I prayed the prayer at the beginning about our affections. There's nothing half-hearted or lukewarm about the section. I mean, have a look at verse 11.

Can you recognise a passive spectator-consumer mentality in verse 11? Do not be slothful and zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. What about the tranquil, serene equanimity in verse 12?

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. This is about being hot on fire for God and my experience is that it gets harder as you get older.

And where does the fire come from? Where does the energy come from? Well, I think verse 11 is very helpful. Be fervent in the spirit, I think it ought to be and the word fervent means bubbling, boiling, something in a pot with a fire underneath it.

[22 : 11] It's the Holy Spirit who is the fire. He supplies the energy, he supplies the love of what is good and the hatred of what is evil and he continues to kindle the fire and set our lives bubbling and we're to cultivate the bubbling and to stop anything that's going to quench the flames.

Or in verse 12, you know, are you weary of opposition? Are you weary, tired, is it beyond your strength? The best remedy for us is to work a prayer. That's where we draw on God. I can't leave this section without saying, don't you think that a true Christian community, if we're going to be a community of grace and a community of love, it ought to be a warm place, yes?

It ought to be a place we can come and warm our hands and warm our hearts. And I know we're facing an anxious time together as a congregation, we have been for years now, but don't let yourself be drawn by your anxiety, allow your anxiety to drive you to prayer.

If I can use the dog illustration, there needs to be less barking and more tail wagging. I was going to say less biting and more licking, but I thought that might be misunderstood.

So, what the renewed mind shows itself in is a community of grace, a community of love, and thirdly, a community of blessing. Look down, please, verse 14.

[23 : 36] Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. The basic call of God for all of us is to rethink our relationships.

To be a blessing. Not just to those in the body. Not just to those who are outside, who are non-Christians, our neighbours. But to those who are hostile to our faith.

And there are two expectations in these verses, 14 to 21. The first is, God expects us to live in the real world. He expects us to be engaged in the common life of the community.

To know enough about our neighbours that we share their joys and their sorrows. True Christian communities, we don't isolate ourselves and create a quarantine. We don't build up high fences to keep people out and keep ourselves in.

You should know what's going on next door where you live. You at least should know their names. God expects us to live in the real world and secondly, we will have opposition.

[24 : 41] I mean, if you're living out a renewed mind in this world of conformity, you will be opposed. Your workplace, your community, it may not be a comfortable place for you.

Because if you live out a renewed mind, it's very threatening to the status quo. How do we bless the world? How do we reflect the new mind here? Well, just look down verse 17.

Repay no one evil for evil. Verse 19. Never avenge yourselves. Verse 20. If your enemy is hungry, feed him thirsty, give him something to drink for by doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Now, it's one thing not to retaliate. We were taught that at a high school. It's another thing to bless those who injure you.

I mean, this is a bit hard, isn't it? Helping them when they're hungry. It's exactly what Jesus taught. It's exactly what Jesus did. As he was being nailed to the cross, Father, forgive them.

[25 : 48] They have no idea how wicked their actions are. He was praying for their conversion. But this is not La La Land. There's a lovely realism here and next week in chapter 13, 1 to 7, it deals with going to court and using the secular courts to deal with injustice.

However, look at the realism of verse 18. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live at peace or live peaceably with all.

The first two phrases show that we live in the real world because it's not always possible to be at peace with all. There are people who will not allow you to make peace. Sometimes it doesn't depend on you.

You can forgive and bless and give water and food. It's wonderful. It's very realistic, isn't it? However, when we are injured and abused and discriminated against for doing what is right, God says, leave it to me.

Verse 20, I'm sorry, verse 19, vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. I think the way this works, you can see in the book of Psalms, can't you?

[27 : 07] You know what it is to be hurt and to become bitter about something? It's just so unfair. And I think God wants us to take it to him and to pour it out without any politeness, to pour out what we really think in prayer to God and then leave the execution of justice to him.

I think that's what the last verse means. Do not become, do not overcome, sorry, do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. Now you can't overcome evil with strategy or program or ability or power.

You can't overcome evil with a stronger evil, a show of power. The only way to overcome evil is through its opposite, by doing good. God's not going to change Vancouver by bringing some great preacher, evangelist in or through advertising campaigns or churches with the most alluring programs and most attractive song leaders.

Only through each of us where God has put us in the place where we are overcoming evil with good. Do you think that's relevant for us today? I think it is.

I mean, our lawyers have told us that we may hear soon as to whether we have been given a leave to appeal. If the answer is no and we may have to vacate buildings in the next few months, I'm not saying it is, but if we do, we're going to be given plenty of opportunity to put Romans 12 into practice, aren't we?

[28 : 38] A community of grace, a community of love, a community of blessing. I mean, what would it mean for us to bless those within our community and those who are against us? How do we overcome evil with good?

How do we continue to genuinely love the good and loathe what is evil? Well, rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, patient, stay under tribulation, be constant in prayer.

It's very practical, it's a wonderful passage and I just want to finish with two comments. The first is this, I hope you can see how very attractive this is.

You know, a community of grace with a sort of supernatural unity, a community of love where there's a genuine affection, where the people in community habitually honour one another highly and a community of blessing where we joyfully overcome evil with good.

My question is, how are we doing? I mean, I know there's no church on earth nor ever has been that's constantly living up to these things, but do you see this morning that your primary identity is not as an individual but as a member of the body?

[29 : 55] Is your love genuine? Are you using your gifts to serve others? Are you bubbling in the spirit, constant in prayer? Are we overcoming evil with good?

I don't know what you think about that but I think we've got a fair way to go. The question is, how? How? How are we going to do that? And that takes me to my second and last point.

Did you notice that every piece of this chapter is completely unreasonable, impractical and impossible? That none of these things, none of us have hearts big enough for them apart from the renewed mind.

But did you notice that underneath each section, in each section, God himself is present? In the first section, verse 3, it's God who assigns the gifts.

Verse 4, we are members of one another only because we're one body in Christ. In the second section, it is the flame of the Spirit which keeps us fervent and bubbling.

[31 : 05] The only one we really serve is the Lord, Christ himself and the way for us, I believe, to grow in joy is being constant in prayer.

And in the third section, let me just point you to verse 19. He begins verse 19 by saying, beloved. He's not saying, guys, I love you.

He's saying, loved by God. Just remember, this is a congregation in Rome that received this letter ten years before the fire of Rome and before Nero's persecutions.

Beloved, he said, never avenge yourselves, leave it to the wrath of God for it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Give place for the wrath of God.

The reason we can deal with the feelings of anger and bitterness, the temptation to revenge and justice, the only reason Christians are able to bless those who hate them is because we belong to and we trust in a righteous judge, a God who is good, a God who is living, a God who is clean and holy, a God who says in the Old Testament, if anyone touches you, they touch the apple of my eye.

[32 : 27] So, you see, the key to this renewed life is not our great abilities, try harder, try harder, try harder. It's learning to draw on God, to walk with him, to abide in him, to look to him.

We can't be a channel of God's grace until we begin to draw on his grace. Can't be a community of love, unless we know that we are loved by God.

Can't be a community of blessing to others unless we receive the blessings of the gospel. As Paul began, I appeal to you therefore, brothers and brothers, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, the good, well-pleasing and perfect will.

Let's bow our heads and pray. Now comes and leads us in prayer.

[33 : 38] Let me pray again the calling for today, which seems so apt. almighty God, you alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful human beings.

Grant to us, your people, that we may love the thing which you command and desire the thing which you promise. And so among all the different changes in the world, our hearts might surely be fixed there, where true joys to be found.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. I'll see you next time.