

Genuine Love

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[0 : 0 0] As you stand, let's pray together. Father, we have sung tonight of your love and your compassion.

We have proclaimed in the psalm that unless you are involved in an activity, there's really no point to it.

I mean, you are the one who must build the house. And all the things that we do, in comparison with that, will be without eternal value unless you come and work.

And so, we know that that's true now, that we can talk and think and consider ideas and consider a text all we want, but if your Holy Spirit isn't here acting in our hearts and opening our minds and changing us from the inside out, it's just not worth it.

It's not worth anything. And so, we ask that your Spirit will be very active among us. Will you teach us? Will you be the teacher? Thank you. In Jesus' name, amen.

[1 : 1 2] Hi, everybody. Go ahead and sit down. And take out your Bibles, if you would, and turn to, I mean, the reading that we just had, Romans chapter 12.

And we're going to be looking at verses 3 through 21. So, you can just kind of stay over on page 948.

The central question in our passage tonight is this question. What does it look like when a church is deeply transformed by the gospel?

You know, last week we looked at Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, and one of the things we found there, one of the things we discussed last week is that the gospel, this message about Jesus, all that he has done for us on our behalf, the gospel is now, beginning in chapter 12, the emphasis is on how the gospel transforms us, changes us into a new kind of people.

And this portion is all about how, what it looks like when the church is deeply transformed by the gospel. And more specifically, the text that we have before us tonight is all about what our relationship relationships look like in a church that is deeply saturated with the gospel.

[2 : 4 8] Now, I don't know if that seems like a really important question to you or not. You know, there's a lot of people who, a lot of Christians who often kind of dismiss the church a bit.

So, you'll find a lot of Christians who say, Jesus is very important. That seems fairly obvious. And then they'll say that my personal relationship with Jesus is really important.

That seems fairly clear. But then when you get to the church, there's a little bit of ambiguity. It's like, well, the church is good to the extent that it's helpful to me in my personal walk with Jesus or something like that.

And, you know, when you have an attitude like that and you have a thought process like that, there's a lot of good reasons for thinking that way. The church can be very, very disappointing at times.

But if we think that way, we've got to understand that that's not the way the New Testament talks about the church. And if we're going to take the New Testament seriously, we have to take seriously the fact that God really cares about the church.

- [3 : 58] In fact, the church, not just all of us individually apart from each other, but all of us together as a community, is actually central to God's purposes within the world.
- Do you remember John chapter 17? So this is just minutes before Jesus gets arrested. And he's in the Garden of Gethsemane. You remember he's praying.
- The disciples have fallen asleep, which is, you know, it's a terrible moment. And Jesus is praying. And in that moment, he's only praying about the really important things.
- And the very last thing he prays for is the church. All the disciples that are going to follow in the years to come. And he looks to the Father and he says, Father, I pray for the church and I pray that they may be one.
- What he asks is, he says, Father, I pray that the church may demonstrate and exhibit the same kind of love, the same bond of love for each other that exists between me and you, Father.
- [5 : 09] And then he says something very interesting. Father, I pray that they may be one in order that the world may look at them, see their love, and realize the only explanation, the only way you can explain that kind of love is if Jesus really is from God.
- That's what Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane. And I point that out for this reason. If Jesus is right, if it is true that somehow our love for each other within the church, that our love for each other is the way in which God demonstrates to the world that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God and has come for the salvation of the world, if that is true, then friends, there is nothing more important than the transformation of our relationships within the church.
- And that's the question that's before us in our passage. What does it look like when the gospel really takes hold of our relationships? So what I want to do is I want to show you three movements in this passage, three shifts that need to take place in a church that is being rigorously transformed by the gospel.
- Here's the first one. The first shift that will need to take place is we will need to move from being self-absorbed to being humble.
- Look at verse 3. Paul writes, For by the grace given to me, I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment.
- [6 : 53] And then note this phrase, Each according to the measure of faith, what does that mean? That God has assigned. As Paul begins to describe the characteristics of a church that is deeply transformed by the gospel, the first thing he mentions, the first impediment that he comes up against is the impediment of self-absorption.
- We are all narcissists, aren't we? I mean, every one of us, if we're honest. What other creature spends as much time in front of a mirror?
- My dog is not that interested in the mirror. My cat is... And typically, if you find an animal that is interested in its own reflection, it usually wants to attack the mirror.
- Okay? But humans are weird. We like to look at ourselves. Often. We are narcissists. We are deeply self-absorbed, every one of us, to one extent or another.
- And here's the problem with narcissism when it comes to relationships within the church. Narcissists don't love very well. And the reason we don't love very well when we're narcissistic, when we're self-absorbed, is that we're always focused toward ourselves.
- [8 : 17] Right? And you can't really be focused on somebody else if you're focused on yourself. And then when we are focused from time to time on other people, the more we're self-absorbed, the more we'll try to use the other person to somehow validate ourselves.
- Right? So even when it looks like we're engaging in authentic relationship, it's really still very, very self-centered. Narcissism, self-absorption, just doesn't work with real relationship.

Now, here's the question. What's the antidote to narcissism? Look at verse 3. The antidote to narcissism in verse 3 is faith.

Look at the second half of verse 3. Paul writes, Think with sober judgment. Don't think too highly of yourself. Instead, think with sober judgment. And then note the phrase, Each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Somehow, in this passage, faith is the antidote to narcissism. Why is that the case? Okay. Think with me.

[9 : 24] When we're self-absorbed, we're narcissistic, we are focused in on ourselves. Right? Faith. Faith. This is one of the ways you can think about faith. If you're a little fuzzy on what faith is.

One of the ways to think about faith is faith is when God grabs us by the chin, lifts our eyes away from ourselves, fixes our gaze upon Jesus, so that our focus is no longer upon ourselves, our focus is upon Jesus, and particularly, our focus is upon receiving all the good benefits of the gospel from Jesus.

Right? So, and this is what we've been talking about all through Romans. The focus is not upon my works, but upon receiving Jesus' works. The focus is not upon my righteousness, it's upon Jesus' righteousness.

The focus is not upon my status, it's Jesus' status. Now, you see the point? And the more our faith increases, the more our focus upon Jesus and receiving from Him increases, the more humble we will inevitably be.

Right? Because we'll realize, we'll become humble because we'll realize that we're not the center of the universe, even though it feels that way. Jesus is the center of the universe.

[10 : 48] And the more humble we become, the greater capacity we'll have to love. You see, Paul talks, Paul emphasizes humility here.

He doesn't use the word, but he emphasizes the concept here. For this reason, humble people are the only people that can truly love because they're the only people who are not self-absorbed.

So if we are to be transformed by the gospel, it needs to be a movement from self-absorption to humility. second shift that needs to take place. We need to shift from being consumers to being servants.

This is going to be in verses 4 through 8. The reason I use the word consumer here is once again, just like all of us are narcissists, consumers. All of us are consumerists, right?

And to some extent, that's natural, and that's inevitable, and to some extent, it's the way God designed it, right? Anything that is alive has to consume. You know, you got to eat, otherwise, it doesn't work out that well.

[11 : 56] But in our society, it's, you know, that it's just gone to the max. We live, as a society, because we have so much excess income, we live to consume new products.

And we are always asking the question, what's in it for me? Now, that question has some benefit, or it works, to some extent, in an economic context, right?

When we, in our free market economy, we ask ourselves, what's in it for me? And that motivates the economy, and motivates the producers of the economy, to create, or to sell, theoretically, the highest, you know, higher priority, or higher quality goods at a lower price.

And therefore, it creates a certain type of competition that moves the economy forward. And regardless of whether or not you think that's a good thing, it seems to be how it works. But, in as much as it may work to some extent economically, the consumer mindset, asking yourself, what's in it for me, destroys, murders relationships.

Think about a marriage. Think about a marriage where two people come together into a marriage asking the consumer question, what's in it for me?

[13 : 31] Now, a marriage like that, and it happens all the time, a marriage like that may have a very intense romance, but it will be short-lived. And the reason it will be short-lived is if both people are asking, what's in it for me?

The minute that they stop perceiving a benefit from the other person, they'll quit. And they'll look for something else. They'll go back to the free market, so to speak.

Right? And the same thing, the same dynamic happens within a church. When the people of God come together, if our first question of each other and of the church is what's in it for me, we will never exhibit the deep kind of relationship and love that Jesus desires for us.

And the reason is, the minute things get hard, the minute things get disappointing, we'll check out, and we'll go back to the free market. Now, I say all of that to bring us back to the text.

The shift needs to be to go from being a consumer to a servant. Look at verses 4 and 5. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members, one of another.

[14 : 57] Okay, now, pay attention to the image. What's the image? The image is not the free market. The image is a body.

And according to Paul, all of us are members of one body, members of each other. Now, a healthy body part, I'm not a doctor, but I'm pretty sure this is true.

A healthy body part is defined as a body part that is supporting and helping the rest of the body. I think that's reasonable.

My heart is healthy if it pumps blood to the rest of my body. Right? Now, imagine there was a portion of your body that, rather than supporting and aiding the rest of your body, consumed the rest of your body.

I think we would call that some sort of cancer or a parasite or something. The point is, Paul uses the image of a body and says that we're all members of the body to emphasize the fact that we are to relate to each other, asking the question, not, what do I get out of this relationship?

[16 : 09] That's not the primary focus. The primary focus is how may I contribute to one another? How can I contribute to the rest of the people? And the way we contribute to each other is through the spiritual gifts.

Look at verse 6. Paul writes, having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. Now, look at that line and I want you to look at the word grace and the word gifts.

Now, those two words are related. The word grace in Greek is charis. The word gifts in Greek is charisma.

And you can hear charis and charisma. Both the words come from the same root. And Paul's making a very intentional sort of play on words.

These two concepts are related to each other. Let me describe how this works because it describes how we are to serve one another. every Christian by definition is someone who has received grace from God.

[17 : 23] Right? According to the grace given to us. And if you could think of it for a moment as when we receive grace from God, it's in a sense a vertical type of grace.

Right? I say vertical because it's coming from God to us. And it includes all sorts of things. It includes the mercy that we receive when God forgives us. It includes the daily strength to love God more than anything else.

It includes all of those things. Now, a spiritual gift is when we take that vertical grace and reflect it horizontally towards another person.

Let me illustrate this. Paul in the text mentions seven gifts. Right? And we could this is an exhaustive list. There are a lot more spiritual gifts than this.

But you could divide it up into two categories. He talks about word gifts and he talks about what I call hands-on gifts. Right? So word gifts are prophecy, teaching, exhorting.

[18 : 29] For lack of a better word, hands-on gifts are serving, giving, leading acts of mercy. Take the word gifts for a moment.

what happens when we prophesy or when we teach the Bible, when we exhort one another, what happens is one way or another we receive grace from God.

We receive some sort of insight into the scriptures, some sort of insight into somebody else, some sort of insight about how the gospel applies to this specific situation at a specific time.

And at the same time we receive the grace and the ability to communicate that insight. Now, a spiritual gift happens when we receive that grace and then we reflect it out towards the people around us.

We share it with the people around us so that they can see Jesus more clearly than they had before. That's all a spiritual gift is. And the exact same thing is happening with hands-on gifts, serving, giving, leading, acts of mercy.

[19 : 37] what happens is, once again, God gives us grace, a willingness to care for other people, an affection for other people in their need, a kind of a desire to give away your money, things like that.

God gives us a grace and then we reflect that out and we share it with the people who need it in order that after the experience they are able to see Jesus more clearly than they did before.

Now the point is, friends, that our, the call in this passage is for our minds to be shifted and reoriented so that we come to church not primarily saying, what do I get out of it?

But primarily saying, how do I contribute? Open your eyes and look around. God is calling you to be a conduit of His grace to other people.

and God has shaped you and designed you uniquely to share grace with other people in a way that I could never do, in a way that other people around you could never do.

[20 : 42] It's a glorious honor and as we focus on serving one another rather than primarily what do we get out of it, you will end up receiving more than you ever dreamed.

So that's the second shift. We need to shift from being consumers to being servants through sharing the gifts of the Spirit. Thirdly and lastly, we need to shift from being, I don't have a better way to say this, shift from being stingy to being extravagant in the way we show love.

This is verses 9 to the end of the chapter. What do I mean by stingy? One of the indicators of a not yet properly transformed church is that we become satisfied with stingy, calculated, moderate, socially acceptable love.

Do you know what I mean by that? Like, society has a base expectation of you when it comes to caring for others. I mean, society has a base expectation that you're not going to be a jerk.

Okay? One of the characteristics of the teachings of Jesus and also of Paul is that from time to time, Jesus will say, you know, don't be satisfied with the world's expectations of you.

[22 : 12] If you're going to be my disciple, we are going to go way beyond the cultural expectations with respect to how we treat one another. So, for instance, you can read a bunch of these in the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus says, you know, don't just love the people that love you. Everybody does that. Love the people you would naturally hate. That'll, that's something different.

Love your enemy. That's an indicator that you're my disciple. Okay, in verses 9 through 21, we can't go through all of it, but that's what Paul's doing here.

He's saying, we are to go way beyond the normal expectations of loving each other. We are to be extravagant in our love, and we are to be extravagant to such an extent that our love can only really be explained by considering the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a couple of examples. In this, these two paragraphs, verses 9 through 21, Paul talks about being extravagant towards others within the church, being extravagant in our love towards our enemies, and being extravagant in our love towards God.

[23 : 30] Let me show you an example from each. We are to be extravagant in our love towards one another. Look at verse 10. I love this because I think this is a verse that we usually don't focus a lot on.

Love one another with brotherly affection, and then this is the part I want to focus on, outdo one another in showing honor. Don't you love that? All your life, you've been competing with people.

You competed with people when you were a kid in athletics. You competed with people when you were in school for academics. You competed with people in your career. And in every moment, in every phase of life, you've competed with people, usually, in order to accumulate honor for yourself.

Right? When I used to run cross country, I ran to win, and I liked it. This passage turns it around.

Paul says, yeah, compete with each other. Compete with each other. Outdo one another. But not in order to attract honor or accumulate honor for yourself, but in order to give honor away to other people.

[24 : 40] Now, just think for a moment. What would it be like if we were a church that was deeply competitive with each other on how to show honor to one another?

I mean, can you imagine what that would be like? Can you imagine the warmth that would mark a community like that? Can you imagine the kind of affirmation that we would enjoy with people trying to outdo us by honoring us?

Can you imagine, those of you who are married, can you imagine what your marriage would be like if you treated each other in a sense competing with one another and how to honor one another? What would that be like?

I tell you, if Vancouver could look in and see us outdoing each other when it came to honoring one another, they would not know what to do with us. They would think we're wacko, but they'd think it was something worth investigating.

Okay. That's one example of being extravagant in our love towards one another. Let me give you an example of being extravagant toward our enemies. Look at verse 14.

[25 : 53] Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. When you get hurt by somebody, when we get hurt by somebody, usually there's one of two natural reactions.

One is somebody hurts us and we create distance, social, relational distance to, for safety reasons often and because oftentimes there's hostility there.

and then the other thing that we do sometimes if we're a good and virtuous person is we'll say, you know what, I can see why the other person did what they did.

They had a hard life. They had a hard childhood. They didn't really know what they were doing was really hurting me and things like that and so and what happens is we kind of let them off the hook for hurting us because we can imagine excuses for them and that's not an entirely bad thing to do but that's not what Paul is asking us to do here.

Paul is asking us to bless those who without any excuse persecute us, hurt us, purposefully hurt us.

[27 : 21] Paul wants us to bless them, not to curse them, not even in your heart. Now, this is not saying that we need to be buddy buddies with the people who abuse us.

It's not saying that. But at the same time, the New Testament is really uncompromising on this point. I mean, Jesus talks about it a bunch, Paul talks about it a bunch, Peter talks about it, it's all over the place.

And I think one of the reasons the New Testament emphasizes this aspect of love, loving the people we would naturally hate. I think one of the reasons is that this is a unique type of love that displays God's own love more clearly than any other kind of love.

Because God is the one who above all else and beyond all that you could imagine loved his enemies. And loved his enemies to the point of through Jesus Christ dying on their behalf.

And so when the church of Jesus Christ is able to love the people we should naturally hate, that is an indicator, that is an irrevocable indicator that Jesus Christ and his love is operative in our hearts.

[28 : 41] We're to be extravagant towards our enemies. And then of course we're to be extravagant towards God. Look at verse 11. Do not be slothful and zeal. Don't be sleepy.

But be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Literally, be fervent in spirit is boil over in the Holy Spirit. Do you hear the extravagance there?

Boil over in the Holy Spirit in your love and affection for God and make that drive you to serve him. And the question is, and I mean this is the love that fuels all the other loves, right?

I mean, our love for one another, our love for our enemies, none of that matters. None of that will have any life if it doesn't flow out of a deep and extravagant love for God.

And so the question, and this is where we'll end, the question is how do you get that kind of extravagant love? How do you become transformed like we've talked about?

[29 : 44] How do you make these shifts? And this, remember friends, chapter 12 of Romans is completely based on chapters 1 through 11. It's, you become extravagant in your love for God and for others and for your enemies by looking to Jesus and by looking to the gospel.

You become extravagant in your love for God when you look at Jesus and you see that he was not a narcissist nor self-absorbed, that he was deeply humble.

and he came to us not as a consumer, though he had every right to be, to demand something from us. He came to us not as a consumer, he came to us as a servant.

And the servant that was marked by such love and such grace that it moved him to the extravagance of dying upon a cross for us.

And when you look at Jesus, when you look at Jesus and his love, that is when our stingy, consumerist, self-absorbed hearts break.

[30 : 53] And then God fills us with his spirit, fills us up so that we boil over in love and affection for God and that flows out in love towards others, love towards the enemy, and increasing love towards God.

And friends, that's where God's calling us to. God wants us to be a place where when Vancouver looks at us, it sees Jesus. Let's ask him to do that.

Let's pray. Father, we ask that you would grant us that we may be transformed.

Kill our narcissism, replace it with humility. Destroy our consumerism, replace it with servanthood.

Stir up the gifts of the spirit among us and grant us that view of your extravagant love that produces that same love within our hearts.

[31 : 54] Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Ru ■■■■ will be caught in