

Sunday 30th August 2020

Online Sermon

Romans 12 v9-21 – Living in Love

Introduction – Change of Gear

Last week, as we looked at the first half of Romans twelve, we discovered that Paul was urging us to become living sacrifices. We were encouraged to lay down our personal wants and desires, to discover a new and greater purpose, as we take our place in God's family.

As we respond to God's call, He equips us for this new life, and that is what we focused on last week, the abilities and gifts that God has given us and the need to use them for His glory.

This week, Paul changes gear, he moves away from specific giftings, to a more general overview of what it looks like to give yourself fully to Christ!

Love

In John's gospel Jesus said:

³⁴"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13 v34-35)

So, it should come as no surprise when Paul starts talking about what it means to follow Christ, to live a life of sacrifice that he turns his attention to love, stating:

"Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them." (Romans 12 v9)

I think here, Paul is recognising the difference between works and genuine love. He is telling us that we should not be going through the motions, because we've been told that is what we have got to do, instead we need to truly learn to love, as our Father in heaven loves us!

The Basketball Team

Before we move onto the practical advice that Paul provides, about what that kind of love looks like, let me share a story I came across a few years ago in UCBs Word for Today, which I think speaks into the genuine love of our heavenly father.

Author and columnist Rochelle Pennington writes,

'one day I stopped at a dairy queen restaurant and sat down beside a family celebrating their sons basketball game. Since the aisles were narrow, I soon felt like part of the party. "So, your team won?" I asked.

The little fella smiled, "We lost 24 to 2."

Well you must have made the only basket then," I said.

"No, I missed all eight shots, but three of them did hit the rim!"

I was utterly confused; they were celebrating because his team lost, and he had missed all eight shots. I had absolutely no clue. So, after another mouthful of cake and still grinning from ear to ear, he added, "We're having a party because last week I missed nine shots and none of them hit the rim. Dad says that all my practicing is really paying off, I'm making progress.'

I love Pennington's story, because it speaks to me of God's unconditional love! Here is a father, that takes a delight in his son, who wants to see the best, to encourage and build up!

The Father of our Lord Jesus is a father who finds delight in us! We might not be the best, we might make mistakes, but because we try it brings him pleasure.

Paul writes in Romans 8:

³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. **(Romans 8 v38-39)**

We do not do anything to earn God's love, He loves us because He is love.

His love is unconditional, freely offered, but like an invite, we need to respond. The only thing that God asks of us, when we respond, is that you:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' **(Matthew 22 v37-38)**

What does genuine love look like?

So, what does genuine love look like?

In answer to that, Paul provides a series of bite size statements.

These statements are not unique to Paul, they echo Christ's teaching from the gospels, and teaching provided in the first letter of Peter.

Let us now briefly look at some of those statements and the application of them in our lives!

Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of Good.

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To Love the Lord your God with all our heart, soul and mind, is not just about trying to live a good life. On our own that would be impossible anyway, that's why Jesus needed to die on the cross in our place, and why God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit to transform us by the renewing of our minds.

To genuinely love God, is to be committed and dedicated to Him, and so by definition, those things that stand in the way of that, or are against His Kingdom values we need to make a stand against.

I think something we are all susceptible to, is allowing our faith to become diluted and compromised. We don't speak out against wrongs, or injustices, we tolerate things our lives, that are not in accordance with God's will or word, and so Paul says, 'Hate what is wrong, stand on the side of good.'

Never be lazy, but serve enthusiastically

Next Paul tells us 'Never be lazy but serve enthusiastically'. As a vocation's advisor, I have noticed that Christians often inadvertently fall into a sacred and secular way of thinking. They see their day to day life and work as secular and their church duties as sacred.

This thinking is to misunderstand what it means to be a Christian. The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, coined the phrase many years ago 'Full time Christian worker'. What the LICC had recognised and wanted people to understand, is that you are not just a Christian on a Sunday, or when you are doing something specific for the Church, but that you are a Christian 24-7. Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you are still a Christian. In our work life, with family and friends, when following our hobbies, we are Christian, and should carry out these roles with passion and joy, full of the love of God.

There is a link here back to Joseph, who we were looking at a couple of weeks back. Remember his attitude as he served his slave master Potiphar? He worked hard, rather than moan about his situation, and God blessed him. Whatever situation God has placed us in, we are there for a reason, so let us serve joyfully and with commitment so that our Lord may be glorified.

Be patient and prayerful

Paul's next piece of advice is to be patient and prayerful. Again, returning to Joseph, at the age of 17, God revealed to him that he would rise to a position of power and authority, but he had a long wait before that came to fruition. Joseph may well have been in his 30s when he eventually became Pharaoh's right-hand man. It was a long journey where he learned both patience and humility. Whatever season of life we are in, God is there with us, and may well be using it to form us, and shape our character. We need to learn to have patience, and to stay close to God through prayer. Yes, it is ok to pray that God will change us and our situation, but we must not get frustrated when that change takes time. God's timing is perfect.

Be the one to help out / Invite guests' home

The next piece of bite size advice moves the focus temporarily away from us and onto others! It is advice that dovetails with Jesus teaching on 'love your neighbour as yourself' and 'treat others as you would like them to treat you'. Paul tells us to be quick to help others, and to demonstrate hospitality, inviting people into our homes for meals and accommodation. For the apostles, such hospitality was vital if they were to be able to travel around the churches, offering teaching and support.

The final piece of teaching that we have time to look at this morning is our attitude to those who harm us!

Paul provides three pieces of teaching on this subject!

Pray for your persecutors / Do not take revenge, leave that for God

Do not repay evil for evil, instead give food and drink to your enemies!

On the cross Jesus gave the ultimate demonstration of this love in action. He hung there as an innocent man, for the sake of you and me. At any point he could have called upon a legion of angels to rescue Him, or rained down fire from heaven, but instead he prayed to his father for his persecutors 'Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do'.

We picked this up the other week with Joseph when he was reunited with his brothers. Instead of taking revenge, he forgave them, welcomed them back, and fed them.

Most people associate the teaching of do not repay evil for evil, with Jesus' teaching on forgiveness, and although Jesus did say these words, he was quoting Proverbs 25:

²¹If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

²²In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the Lord will reward you.

Around the world today, there is much religious persecution. The charity Open Doors produces each year a world watch list of the worst 50 countries for religious persecution! It is estimated that 260million Christians face a high risk of persecution and that in 2019 2983 Christians were killed for their faith!

But despite this level of persecution, Christians stand firm in their faith, and try to live to God's standard of love. In their August Prayer diary Christian Solidarity Worldwide, shared this statement from a member of the Early rain church in China:

"Our three families have now been under guard for more than 480 days. They saw the guards bitten by mosquitoes in the summer and almost frozen in the winter... The families felt compassion. Sometimes

they give the guards food, sometimes a bible... This is the way these Christians are expressing their love. Yes, we treat the guards as human beings, even if their leaders do not, using them as chess pieces and dogs."

These believers in China, are living out God's call to love, even those that persecute us!

When we show love and kindness to those who seek us harm, it turns the situation on it's head. It challenges their behaviour in a way that arguing, and retaliation could never do. It shines a spotlight on their behaviour and reveals the injustice of it. It is easy to be mean to someone if they are mean and argumentative back, but when that person responds with love and compassion, then that's a game changer. God calls us not to get drawn into negative behaviour, but to stick to His Kingdom values, and to leave the justice to Him!

As I close, I return to Paul's opening words in our bible reading:

"Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them."