

Love, True Love

Romans 12:9-13

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The Princess Bride is a classic movie full of great quotes. It's a charming, somewhat off-kilter fairy tale about two people overcoming all odds to spend their lives together. Throughout the movie, there are several quotes about true love. Probably the most famous comes from the clergyman as he performs a wedding, blessing the couple with the phrase, "And love, true love, will follow you forever. So treasure your love." Whether we realize it or not, movies like this inform what we think true love is. But as we look at our passage this morning, we'll discover true love is not something that happens to us, nor is it a mere feeling. True love is a response to knowing Jesus.

This morning, we're going to look at Romans 12:9-13. At first glance, it appears that Paul just gives a rapid-fire list of instructions for believers. But I think there is a thread that flows through his commands. That thread is love.

We always want to be mindful of context when we interpret a passage, so it's important to remember what immediately preceded these verses. Last week, we looked at Paul's instructions on spiritual gifts and how we should use whatever gifts God has given us to benefit His kingdom. So, it seems like an abrupt transition for Paul to go from speaking about spiritual gifts to talking about true love. But I think in Paul's mind, the proper use of our spiritual gifts is connected to a proper understanding of love.

Paul's most detailed explanation of spiritual gifts is in 1 Corinthians 12. He spends the entire chapter speaking about various gifts God gives and how to use them. The next chapter is 1 Corinthians 13, which is often referred to as the love chapter (with good reason!) In chapter 14, Paul returns to the application of spiritual gifts, specifically talking about the gifts of prophecy and tongues. So I don't think it's a coincidence that Paul moves from talking about spiritual gifts right into love in Romans either. I think Paul sees the two as inextricably linked.

I believe Paul is saying that unless we get the love component right, we will not make proper use of our spiritual gifts. And if we do get the love part right, using our spiritual gifts to build up the church and benefit others will be a natural result.

Really Love Each Other

With that said, let's unpack what Paul says about love.

⁹ Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. (Romans 12:9-10, NLT)

He starts by telling us to not just pretend to love others, but really love them. If you're like me, you might immediately bristle at the implication that you just pretend to love others. Most of us like to think that we're generally pretty loving people.

Let me ask you some questions though. Do you ever politely listen to someone, while inwardly rolling your eyes at them? Do you ever smile at someone, but the second they're gone, your face reveals how you really feel about them? Do you ever speak negatively about people behind their backs? Do you ever do something for someone grudgingly, because you know it will look bad if you don't? Do you ever see someone walking toward you, and you take a deep breath, because you're dreading speaking to them?

We don't like to admit it...but most of us do these things sometimes. And each of these things is us merely pretending to love another person. Most of us are very good at playing this game. Genuine love doesn't require pretending or feigning interest. Paul tells us to show real love. Before we can do that, we've got to admit that we pretend far more than we realize.

He continues by telling us we should hate what is wrong and hold tightly to what is good. Why does Paul tell us to love people, and then in the same breath, to hate what is wrong? Aren't love and hate opposites?

Genuine love wants what is best for a person. Evil is never what's best. It is always harmful. It is not loving for us to sit idly by and watch someone do something that is harmful to themselves. Sometimes we hate evil things, but our motives are wrong. We hate things because they're inconvenient for us, or because they make us look bad, or because we think that's what we're supposed to do. Such hatred isn't motivated by love, but by selfishness. What does a loving hatred look like?

Loving hatred should motivate us to action. When we see something that is harmful to those we love, we should take action to get rid of it. This may mean helping someone to get free of a pattern of sin that has a hold on them. It might mean lovingly pointing out a harmful pattern of thinking that is holding someone hostage. It might mean getting involved in a situation that we'd rather stay out of. This kind of hatred doesn't condemn the person, but comes alongside the person, seeking to lead them out of sin. Hatred of evil motivated by love results in action—not just once, but long-term.

This should be true not only when we look at the lives of others, but in our own lives as well. Evil things hold us back from being who God wants us to be, and if we hate what is evil, we'll be willing to take steps, even radical ones, to weed those things out of our lives. Our focus should be to seek what is good and escape what is evil.

In the last part of these opening verses Paul tells us to love with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other.

In the church especially, we are good at faking genuine affection. We play the part of the loving Christian, doing things that we're supposed to, being kind to people, tolerating people we'd rather not, but those actions are superficial. Genuine affection isn't a outward show, but rather a consequence of what's happening inside us.

I believe when Paul tells us we should take delight in honoring each other, he is telling us how we can learn to show genuine affection. We usually delight in bringing honor to ourselves, but Paul tells us to delight in honoring one another. Let's be honest, this is often not how we function. We are really good at identifying the flaws in other people, but not so good about highlighting reasons to honor them. Paul is challenging us to look at people differently. He says we should delight in finding the treasure in others. We should focus on seeing the blessings of others, rather than their failures. When we do that, showing affection isn't difficult, and it isn't a show. It comes naturally.

I'd like to think of myself as a loving person, but as I look at what Paul is saying, I realize how foreign this kind of love is to me. So, how do we do this? I think there is only one answer. We have to focus on the only example we have ever known of this kind of love. We must remind ourselves of the way Jesus loves us and then strive to emulate His example. Here's some thoughts I find helpful.

- He doesn't give up on me, even when I fail.
- He sees who I can become rather than who I am right now.
- He is patient with me when I don't seem to be getting it.
- He forgives me for the times I mess up.

Another thing that I think helps is to have an accurate view of ourselves. We sometimes imagine that we are easy to love, so we find it frustrating when the people around us are not. Let's be honest, none of us is easy to love. Think about how easily you become frustrated, how you often don't listen, how easily you can get distracted, how selfish you often are, or any other number of things. When we're aware of our own failures, it can help us to be more forgiving of those same failures in others.

Paul's point is that genuine love doesn't just happen—it's something we need to work at developing. But when we do, it bears wonderful fruit.

Love the Lord

The next two verses take a different approach, but I still think they are teaching us about love. The first two verses were talking about what it looks like when we love others, but these verses point to what it looks like to love the Lord.

¹¹ Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. ¹² Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. (Romans 12:11-12, NLT)

I love that Paul doesn't pull his punches. He tells us not to be lazy, but to work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. We don't want to think of ourselves as lazy, but let me give you some areas where I think we should make a concerted effort to work hard.

First is in our personal discipleship. We sometimes think that once we reach a certain level of knowledge or behavior or status, we no longer need to keep pushing to grow. Paul tells us that we should never become lazy in our faith. We should be diligent in working to read, understand, and apply the Bible to our lives. We should not only be

working to grow in our knowledge of the Bible, but we should also be diligent in weeding out the sin that is in our lives. That process will never be over, so we must keep pushing forward.

Second is in our service to others. Serving others comes from learning to love those around us. But this doesn't just happen, it requires work. We do not naturally value people for who they are, but for what they can give us. We need to learn to see others the way He does. We have to train ourselves to focus on the gifts, strengths, and treasures of others. We have to learn to see their potential, not just their problems. We must be diligent in learning to love and serve those around us.

Third is in our service in the church. Remember Paul's teaching on spiritual gifts. God has given each of us a role to play in the church. Sometimes we are more focused on what the church can do for us than on how we can serve the church. It's easy to criticize the weaknesses we see in a church, but it's hard to be part of the solution. Paul tells us, however, that we must work at ministry as well. Don't be afraid of commitment, don't be afraid to step up, and don't be willing to just sit on the sideline. Get in the game and do the hard work of ministry! Paul says if we love God, we'll do the hard (but rewarding!) work He has called us to.

In verse 12, Paul tells us to rejoice in our confident hope, be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. I believe these three things go together. We need to hold fast our faith in God regardless of the circumstances, threats, heartaches, or even the accolades that come our way. When everything in our lives is shaken, one thing remains firm—and that is the Lord. When we don't understand what's going on, we can cling to what we do know—that God is in control and has a purpose for everything.

Paul tells us we can be patient in trouble when we focus on what we know to be true. We often struggle because of what we don't know or can't control. The remedy to this is to recite what is true. Remember that God is in control and that He knows what He is doing. When we do that, we can be patient in waiting for the Lord to act, trusting that He knows what we don't, and He is in control of what we aren't.

Prayer is one more source of strength for the believer. Most of us struggle with prayer, and that's because it is a discipline that takes time to develop. But there is great power in prayer. Prayer brings our hearts closer to the Lord's. When we learn to pray, we'll see God move and change things. Sometimes prayer changes our situation—often it changes us.

Helping Those in Need

The last part of these verses returns to Paul's original theme of genuine love for those around us,

¹³ When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. (Romans 12:13, NLT)

This seems like a simple command, and one we'd like to think we do pretty well. But the statement that we should always be eager to practice hospitality carries with it an undertone that's easy to miss. This isn't just saying that we should be open to the opportunity to serve others when those opportunities arise, it is saying that we should actively be looking for opportunities to serve others.

Many of you know that when we went on vacation, we stayed in a lake house near Bloomington. The story of this house is wonderful. A couple in the church there bought the house to use for the sole purpose of blessing missionaries and pastors. They make it available for pastors to use as a retreat free of charge, and provide the home to visiting missionaries, so they have a nice place to stay when they are in the United States. They don't rent it out or use it as an income property—they use it as a means of serving others.

You may not be able to do something like that, but you can have the same attitude. Maybe you can always be ready to invite someone over for a meal. That may mean keeping a ham in the fridge, or some burgers in the freezer, or just always making sure you're prepared to add others to your guest list. Maybe you can set aside money each month specifically for meeting needs God brings your way. Maybe you've got skills you can use to help others, so you can set aside a day or two a month devoted to doing repairs for someone who needs it. There are lots of ways we can do this, but Paul's point is that genuine love causes us to look for ways we can serve the people around us. We should be eager to help them and care for them.

Far too often, we are concerned with what we can get from other people. Paul is challenging us to lift our eyes beyond ourselves, and instead begin looking at how we can best serve those around us. This is a totally different kind of orientation than what comes naturally to us. And it only happens if we work to change the way we think and act. And that's Paul's point. We should not settle for merely looking good on the outside—we must tend to what's inside of us, so that we genuinely love each other as Christ has loved us.

Conclusion

These verses read like bullet points of things Christians should be doing. And in a sense, I think that's exactly what Paul is doing. He wants us to see that the Christian life is not merely about right belief—but if we truly believe these things, then it will also cause us to live differently. The kind of love Paul is talking about, true love, if you will, doesn't come naturally. It is something we must work to develop. His goal is to help us to see what we should be doing, and to encourage us to get to work. Let me give you some practical steps you can take to begin developing this kind of love.

First, ask for God's help. We are never going to get better at loving people as we should until we can see the ways in which we don't love properly. Ask God to show you the areas where you are merely pretending. Ask Him to help you learn to show true love.

Second, reflect on God's love for you. The perfect example of true love is the Lord. Think about how the Lord deals with you and then try to emulate that love for others. When you struggle to forgive, remember how God has forgiven you. When you get frustrated that people just don't seem to get it, remember that God is patient with you as you learn. The more we understand the grace God has shown us, the greater capacity we will have to show grace to others.

Third, learn to look at people differently. Most of us know that we have good traits and some not-so-good traits. We hope people will see our good traits and be patient with us in the areas that still need work. But we tend to do just the opposite with the people around us. We gloss over their good traits, and instead focus on all the things we think they need to work on. We need to change how we look at people. Instead of rehearsing their failures, the ways they've hurt us, and the things they need to work on, maybe we would be better served to rehearse their strengths, their successes, and their progress! Make a conscious effort at this. When you find yourself focusing on a person's weaknesses, be intentional about changing the channel of your mind to rehearse their strengths and their successes. Choose to see their progress rather than their failures. I promise that when you do, you will find it far easier to love them.

Fourth, refuse to coast in your faith. When you first become a believer, there are lots of things to learn, and we can usually see lots of things we need to start doing differently. But eventually, we get to a point where we know the Bible stories, we know the songs, we have changed our language, and we begin to behave more like a Christian than we once did. Sometimes once we feel we fit in, once we're seen as "mature believers", we feel like the job is done. We stop working to learn. We stop trying to develop good spiritual disciplines. We stop trying to do battle with sin, because we imagine that we've dealt with the "big stuff" and all that's left is stuff that everyone struggles with. We become comfortable in the ways we serve, and so we just kind of coast. Paul cautions us not to let this happen. Continue to work at growing in your walk with the Lord. Continue to allow yourself to be stretched. Keep looking for new ways to serve, and keep doing battle with sin. Cruise control isn't part of the Christian life.

Finally, remember why we do this. Paul reminds us that we have a confident hope of resurrection, and we have the assurance that the things we do now will have eternal significance. You may not feel like other people see the work you're doing. You may not feel like you're making much of an impact at all. But remember that the Lord promises that He will use what we do for His purposes. When you get tired, when you get discouraged, remember that we serve a God who delights in using the little things to accomplish His purposes. Everything you do matters to Him.

The Princess Bride holds out to us the value of true love. But while the clergyman in the movie prays true love will follow them all the days of their lives, I'd hold out a different prayer. May you seek it all the days of your life. Because it's only when we seek true love that we will have it.

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