

***All Roads Lead Here: True Love Part 1***  
***By Jason Huff***  
***October 29, 2017***  
***Leviticus 19:15-18; John 2:13-17; Romans 12:9-12***

Today's final Scripture reading is Romans 12:9-12. This is the holy, inerrant, and infallible Word of God for God's people. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."

What is true love, and how can we practice it? Jesus taught us that all the law and the prophets – and how we are to live as Christians – is summed up by, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." While that sounds promising, we live in a society that is extremely confused about love.

Think about the popular songs when we were still asking about it. Foreigner sang, "I want to know what love is." Whitesnake asked, "Is this love that I'm feeling? Is this love that I've been searching for?" Whitney Houston thought she had it when she sang, "Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all." People ask the question, but very few people have answers. And because we only have one word for love, we don't have a way to differentiate brotherly love and family love and friendship love and romantic love and godly love.

In our passage today, Paul begins a segment where he tells us what love should look like in the Christian community. Last week, he bonded us together as a family – Paul showed us how we are gifted to bless one another in the church. And if you were here, you know our homework was to ask about the specific gifts we have and how we might use them to glorify God and to serve one another. Now, he's telling us how to live together – how to stand apart from the world and be holy, set apart for God, in ways that show that we belong to God.

It would be easy for us to look at these short phrases as a bunch of nice sentiments, kind of a checklist of "being good." But each one is packed with meaning that will help us live our lives in godly ways. It's important not to rush through them because each one is loaded. They will encourage us and point us in the right direction, but they'll also challenge us to live differently as children of our heavenly Father.

First – "Love must be sincere." The Greek word here for "love" is *agape*. This is the kind of love found over and over again in the New Testament but rarely in other Greek literature. *Agape* is self-giving, self-sacrificing, godly love, both from God to His people and amongst His people for one another. It's the kind of love epitomized by Jesus giving His life over to helping and teaching others, and finally giving His life for us.

The giving, sacrificing love we're to show must be sincere. In Greek, it is literally, "not hypocritical, not masked." It's love coming from deep within us as believers in Christ, not a love we wear on Sundays and leave behind. It can't be faked, and it can't be for ulterior motives.

At no other point in American church history has this been so important. When millennials are asked what might help them consider Christianity or returning to a church, the item that comes up over and over again is being real. Being sincere. They don't need a church that's going to pretend that everything is OK all the time. They need folks who are going to be there for them no matter how messed up they are, no matter how much time or money they have (or don't have) to give to the church, who love them in spite of their flaws or their viewpoints that don't yet mesh up with Christian teachings.

The church has tried to bring in people with coffee bars, hip pastors, light shows that outdo concerts, all with pretty limited results in actually making disciples of Jesus. You can't just say you're real or look the part – you have to live it. That actually makes churches like CrossWay the wave of the future – which is actually the way of the ancient church. Small groups of Christians meeting together in homes, in courtyards, in barns and anyplace they could praise God together – that's the way of the church we read about in Acts. They'd meet in the synagogues when they could, but after they were thrown out, persecuted, they banded together in smaller groups.

In the small church, sincerity's just as important. You can't fake it. But you can be truly welcomed here. Here, you matter to us. You aren't going to get lost in the shuffle. The biggest thing we can do in a congregation is to take a genuine interest in people outside of church. To care about them, to befriend them, to love them, not because we need them to become members, not because we need their donations, but because we want them to know the love of God, the relief of knowing that sins can be forgiven, the joy that comes from knowing that God will clean us up after we come, not that we must clean ourselves and then come.

We love them for no other reason than that God does. Not because they seem like they'd make good Christians, not because they'd fit into this ministry or that, not because of any externals. Just because they matter to God.

Moving on – “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Seems simple enough, but it's richer and more challenging than we might think. Now hate is just as misunderstood a word as love is these days. In our modern language, to hate is bad. Hate usually has a violent negative passion to it; hatred destroys; hatred harms; haters tear down. We hear, “don't be a hater.”

But the word “hate” here in Greek is more than that. It's actually very strong in Greek, a passionate hatred. But its meaning is also to abhor something, to be repulsed by it, to despise it, to loathe it, to avoid it at all costs by any means necessary. We are to be utterly repulsed by sin, wickedness, vileness, and evil. The intensity of Paul's language means that we give evil no quarter. We can't be more against it. We can't give an inch in our fight against it.

We are numb to evil. We hear about awful things like the Los Vegas shooting and we think, “how awful,” but somehow we've grown accustomed to it. Perhaps you've heard about all the people – directors, producers, major figures in Hollywood – who are being exposed as not just mean bosses or bad people but criminals, getting away with major felonies and hiding them behind payoffs that are finally coming to light. And what's weird is how hundreds of people are admitting that they saw it and did nothing. They became numb to it; it became part of business.

Our society is in love with evil. It creeps into what we hear and watch and see. If we do not hate it, if we don't abhor it, it eventually becomes acceptable to us, little by little. We justify slander because everyone talks badly about our coworker. We justify theft because we deserve nice things. We justify lust because it's on our TV or computer and not full-blown adultery.

Paul says, flee it all. Hate it with passion. This isn't passion against people; it's against evil deeds, mentalities, actions, but people can change. It's not a crusade to carry picket signs to tell everyone how wrong something is. To hate evil is to be aghast at it, to despise how it warps and cracks and breaks the image of God in us, to see it as the deadly soul poison it is.

In comparison, we are to "cling to what is good." The phrase is literally, "be cemented to good." We're to be so united to good that we're joined to it at the hip. Goodness is part and parcel of who you are. It's a bond so firm that it's not going to go away. Just as strongly as you want to be separated from evil, you want to be bonded to goodness. It's the same language used to describe a married couple bonded together.

The word "good" is full of meaning too. In Greek, it means "in a moral sense upright, just; kind, generous; clear of conscience; perfect; inherently good (as God is good)." We aren't talking about having nice thoughts or watching nice movies or reading nice books. They are good, but only as they benefit our actions. That's what's this is, being cemented to good action – making moral choices, acting for the benefit of others, being compassionate, having integrity. This is what true love looks like. True goodness is in thought and word and deed.

Next up – "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." Ever heard of the city Philadelphia? Officially, it's the city of brotherly love, taken from the Greek. Now Philly doesn't live up to its name, but we Christians are supposed to take it on. Not only are we supposed to have self-giving, self-sacrificing love, we are to love each other like family.

For many of us, this seems problematic. Our families argue. Sons fight; daughters bicker. Our society has as many families without dads as it does families with them. We don't have a great picture of what families ought to be. But in our minds, we know what they should be like. And that's what the picture of the church family should be. If the saying "blood is thicker than water" is true, then communion wine is thicker than blood.

It's not just, have brotherly love for one another. It's devoted love, dear love. It's love where we consider those in the church as if they were our own household. It's that close. And we should look for ways to be around each other more than an hour on Sundays. You can't have a family-style love without being around each other. We have begun to develop that over the years. But we should think carefully how we prioritize our time so we truly be a family of faith.

"Honor one another above yourselves." We spoke about this a little last week, when Paul told us not to think more highly of ourselves than we should. But this takes it to a different level. When we honor one another, what do we do? We celebrate each other's accomplishments. We thank them for their service to the body, whether that's playing percussion or singing or serving as an elder. It's looking for ways to lift one another up. One translation describes it as, "outdo one another in showing honor."

How do we honor one another? We honor one another by giving time to each other, by choosing to spend time we could be doing something else coming together to serve and worship and enjoy the Lord. We honor one another by thinking of the needs of one another and fulfilling them – whether that’s a kind word or an extra \$10 that week or dinner on the night when everything is falling apart. This one could inspire creativity – how can we honor one another?

Next, Paul says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” This is incredibly countercultural. Because what are you supposed to keep out of polite conversation? Religion and politics. And today, people will tell you exactly what they think about politics, but religion is off-limits. To be a fanatic for the Tigers or the Lions is considered a good thing. To be a fanatic about one’s deeply held religious beliefs is considered a bad thing.

But this is not really about talking to people about religion, even though if you have spiritual zeal, it will naturally come up. It’s really about enthusiasm and devotion to our Lord in our everyday lives. When it says “never be lacking in zeal,” a strict translation is literally, “don’t be lazy in zeal.” I have trouble with this, and I imagine you do too. When we’re hectic, it’s easy to sleep in and not take 15-20 minutes in prayer and Bible study each morning. It’s easy to skip out on Military Avenue, easy to skip Bible study. Pretty soon, Sundays look like a lot of work.

Yet God wants us to be devoted and enthusiastic about our faith. Maybe instead of thinking about how we can add more God things to our already packed schedule, maybe we need to look instead at what we can eliminate to make room for God to work. It is hard to be devoted and enthusiastic about any one thing when we have twenty things going on. To be devoted to God means that He is front and center.

And in the final analysis, the stuff we eliminate from our lives will likely be good things, just not the best things. Many of our hobbies and interests aren’t evil. But if they hold us back from devotion to God, then they can become that way; they take the place of God; they start leading us to a kind of idol worship. But staying devoted to God, clearing out space for Him as the King of our lives, that pays all sorts of dividends.

There are many days when I think, “What would it be like to have an undivided heart, a heart that doesn’t yearn for all these worldly things alongside God?” I think we would be less anxious, less worried about what is to come, less stressed about our income, our families, our health. Because if we keep our spiritual passion, if we are on fire for God, troubles will come, no doubt about it. Yet they will not look so awful in the light of eternity. Paul’s encouragement to stay zealous for God is for our own benefit, as well as the benefit of others who see our enthusiasm and realize that the goodness of God is for them too.

Lastly for this week, we have this phrase – “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” This really picks up on the attitude of the faithful Christian. To be joyful in hope is again stronger than translation can give us. It’s an attitude of rejoicing, for one. But perhaps more important, hope here is a firm confidence based on previous experience. We hope we’ll have sun and not rain or snow, but that hope is pretty weak (especially in Michigan in October!) We hope that our candidates will win in the upcoming election. Hope for us means “wishful thinking.”

But in this context, our hope is not like that at all! Instead, Paul is saying, you have a firm confidence that the Lord has saved you, that Jesus' blood has redeemed you, that the Holy Spirit is reforming you. So be happy! Be joyful! Give praise to the Lord!

“Be patient in affliction.” Now that one's painful. We are impatient by nature. We don't like it if we can't get into our doctor the same week we get sick. Our expectation is that everything can and should be fixed NOW. But some things take time. The troubles and difficulties we face can either break us or build us into someone that more resembles our Savior. Paul reminds us that an attitude of patience shows the attitude of Jesus. God is incredibly patient with us in the midst of our sin. He is patient as we take tiny steps with the Spirit in holiness. So when things get tough, be patient.

We as a church have had to deal with a lot in the last three years, and while we still won't have a permanent building, we still have to be patient for that, having a place to meet on Sunday mornings – which we'll talk about in a few minutes – is something we never would have been able to achieve if we hadn't been patient. Those of us who have stayed the course here have seen God's hand at work. And I've seen Him working in your lives as many of you have patiently dealt with trials and tribulations of your own. Maybe you don't see it, but others do. Christ is building His own image in you as you show patience in difficulty.

“Faithful in prayer.” Now again, the wording might throw us off. Does this mean that we must have great faith in prayer, that only people who believe strongly that God is going to move and act in the way we ask for will get what they want? Not at all. Some translations say “keep praying regularly,” “continuing steadfast in prayer,” “devoted to prayer.” It's not about the size of the faith; it's that you keep approaching the throne of God's grace.

There are days when I'm a good husband, and days I'm a great husband, and plenty of days when I'm a lousy husband. The important part is not so much that I'm awful or good or great or lousy, but that I keep at being a husband, that I don't throw in the towel. The same is true with prayer. There are days, weeks, months sometimes when all we can squeak out is a “Lord, keep me in your grace and save me from myself.” And other times, prayer flows clearly and naturally and we feel God's grace in prayer. It's not a call to more faith or to ten hours of prayer a day. It's that consistent nurturing of our relationship with God from talking to Him every day.

All three areas have the element of patience to them. We don't get what we want right away – in our prayer, in our suffering, in our hope of a new heaven and a new earth and getting to be in God's Kingdom forever and always. But in patience and faithfulness and joy, we can get through the wait. We know that for all the hardships we go through, at the end waits our Savior, our full redemption, our full transformation, our eternity in His glory and grace.

Next week, Paul will continue to give us more encouragement on how true love as a Christian is lived out. As we head home this week and into everyday life, let's consider how we can put these things in practice. Take this week's Scripture and place it on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror. It's not long. Let it talk to you this week, and let it inspire you to become more like our awesome Lord Jesus, your King and friend.