

All Roads Lead Here: True Love Part II
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 34:12-17; Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:13-21

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 12:13-21. This is God's holy and inerrant Word and revelation of Himself to us. "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Actions speak louder than words or grand designs. Take for example, the sad story of Alexander Carlisle and Thomas Andrews, Jr., the architects responsible for the RMS Titanic. We all know what happened to the Titanic, but you might not know that their original proposal included more than double its number of lifeboats, a double hull, and watertight bulkheads. They were shot down due to time and cost. Yet if the men in charge had listened, the Titanic would not have sunk, and even if it did, almost everyone could have been saved. As it was, Andrews went down with the ship, and Carlisle's career was marked by an avoidable tragedy.

I tell this tale not to get us thinking about the Titanic so much as to get us thinking how our actions as Christians spell out who we belong to. Our relationship with God is meant to show through our actions in the real world. Just as lifeboats only matter if they're actually included on the ship, a life is only truly Christian if our actions show the reality of our faith.

Last week, Paul taught us this: "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." Now we build off those ideas.

As we think about the actions Paul calls us to in last week's passage and this one, it's less of a list of "shoulds" and more a list of "cans." Without Christ, living kind, upright, thoughtful lives is not only impossible, we would have no desire to live that way. But with Christ, with the Holy Spirit living inside of our hearts, we can actually become the people of godly integrity God intends. So let's see what a life of true love looks like.

This section starts: "Share with God's people who are in need." Now Jesus told us in Luke 6:30 to give to anyone who asks of us; Paul uses similar language later in this chapter. So what's the difference between that and what Paul says here? This is a greater, fuller giving to Christians who are in need. Give to everyone; share with fellow believers. The Greek implies a partnership where both parties have an interest.

We in the church are united, and so are our finances and the things we own. What we have is given to us by God to bless us, but it's also to serve God's people. This isn't communism where the church says, "We own everything you own." Not at all! It's realizing, as we've talked about the last several weeks, that we are family. We give in generosity to those outside the faith to show them Christ's love; to those in the faith, to those who are family, we have a much greater responsibility. We share in such a way that others can see that kinship.

When we give, we prioritize the family of God. Wouldn't it be a great witness if those who truly claim Jesus didn't go hungry or without shelter because we, the church family, provided? It doesn't speak well of us when we serve at the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter but don't take care of our own faithfully. This means we take care of our own.

That bleeds into our next point: "Practice hospitality." This is not bringing food to a potluck or treats for Fellowship Hour, though that's great. It's opening our homes and lives to those within the family of faith. In ancient Near Eastern culture, hospitality was huge. Inns in that day had bad reputations; they were dangerous. You wouldn't stay at the Holiday Inn; you'd stay with family. When Christians were disowned in the first century for believing in Christ, their new family relationships were built within the church and they showed hospitality.

In some ways this is harder than it was in the first century. We have a lot more room than people in the first century, but it was something expected throughout the ancient Near East, You had it ingrained in you as a child. Here, we think taking in folks is weird. We also don't know how to be good house guests because, again, we aren't trained in it. We don't expect it.

This is one place I want to praise our congregation. Some of us have taken in family and friends who had nowhere to turn, not just providing overnight lodging but letting them set up camp with you. Some of us have been hurt by it, taken advantage of – and yet I am so glad that you have made the effort and done what is right by God. In our culture, nobody expects you to do it, but you have. I applaud those who have made that sacrifice to be more Christ-like.

Moving on – "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." We don't take blessing and cursing seriously much anymore, but they were a big deal in the ancient world. When people made them, they were calling upon their deities to do something. And at its root in Greek, to "bless" is to say a good word about someone.

The world thinks this one is nuts. We hate our enemies. To say a good word about someone who persecutes us is to give them the benefit of the doubt, and even when it's beyond a doubt, to give them credit for the good they *have* done, and if you can't even find that, to find it in your heart to say a word to God on behalf of them that they might turn around. And how much do we see that? Not very much.

America is a divided culture. We often don't have friends across our dividing lines of faith and race and politics and interests. We have nothing good to say about the president that's not from our party. We make fun of the guy whose interests differ from ours.

This is not the way of Christ, the one who asked the Father to forgive those who were in the process of executing Him. The way of Christ is to love even those who stand against us. It doesn't mean we excuse their sin or join them in it. But it does mean that we have a kind word to them and a kind word about them. It means we don't just say nothing – we bless.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” This is a hard one for me. I'm introverted, and I'm self-centered. I don't like it when someone else's attitude gets in the way of mine. And so I do what a lot of us do – I try to change the mood. What happens when someone tells us their wonderful news? We say, “Well, at least that's better than what happened to me.” We try to bring them down. What happens when someone has something really terrible happen to them? We try to artificially bring them up – “it's not so bad; you'll get another one; at least it wasn't worse; at least, at least, at least.” We lie to them to get them to pretend like they're feeling better so we can go on with our lives.

But that attitude can change when we approach it from God's point of view. We can genuinely rejoice when people rejoice. We can be happy for someone else's success because we have the joy of knowing that God is with us; we always have something to rejoice about. Their happiness doesn't come at our expense. There isn't a limited amount of happiness to go around. If you know the joy of the Lord, you can always rejoice with others, even when your own circumstances aren't great, because you can find joy in your salvation and your Lord.

We can also genuinely mourn with people. Nobody likes to feel bad or sad. And we really hate it when our friends and family feel that way. Yet we have to mourn to move past a bad situation. Sometimes people mourn over things we secretly rejoice about, like that awful relationship someone was trapped in that just ended. Yet we are to mourn with them. We are to come alongside them and grieve the loss *they* feel as if it were our own.

And nowhere in the Bible does it say, “Thou shalt tell thy friend, it'll be OK.” Even if it will be OK, when we mourn, we want the right to feel the way we feel without apologies. We need to know that others are OK with our grief. Mourning is less words and more “I'm sorries” and hugs and tears and presence, being with them, for them. Jesus became human so that He would relate to us in a way we could understand. We can relate to others where they are as well.

Next up – “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” Does anybody find it hard to live in harmony with others? If I'm not at war with my neighbors over their lawn, I'm upset with someone at work saying or doing the wrong thing. History is the record of people fighting with one another. If we live in harmony, it reflects the harmony of God, who is one God in three persons in perfect harmony so that the one is three in a way we can't even understand.

A harmonious church is a wonderful thing. But a couple of things destroy the church from the inside out. The first is pride. The kind of pride Paul mentions is when people think highly of their status, enough that they won't associate with others. In Paul's church, slaves who weren't considered persons by Roman law sat right next to full Roman citizens. It just wasn't done – except in the church. Paul knew there was no difference between us in God's Kingdom.

Sadly, Sundays are the most racially segregated day in the country, but it goes deeper than that. People worship with others like them – which is why there are Greek and Russian and Polish churches, why you go to Grand Rapids and the Reformed church means the Dutch church, why if you're German you're expected to be Lutheran. People tend to worship with others who aren't much richer or poorer than they are. That's the norm. But that's not who we are called to be. We are called together as Christians who band together through our differences. Diversity is a good thing when it is united around our shared faith in Christ.

And being conceited is, simply in the Greek, “being wise in your own opinion.” Conceitedness tells us our way of running things is best, that the carpet should be brown and not white, that if only everyone would listen to us, then everything would be great. I am thankful we have rarely run into this at CrossWay, but it's easy to think that we could solve the church's problems. That's actually why we have a Session and I don't run the church. In the Presbyterian church, we believe God speaks through a variety of elders, not just one person. So keep it up – continue to live in harmony with one another.

Next up – “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Living in harmony without pride or conceit is what we do inside the family of faith. This is for dealing with the outside world.

Because people are watching. People want to know what a Christ-follower really looks like. While many people are agnostic and claim not to know what truth is, we all have this God-built conscience where we know basic moral rights and wrongs. Be careful to do what's right in everybody's eyes because those are things about which there's no question. Don't harm others. Don't steal. Don't cheat on your taxes or your wife. Show respect and kindness. Few people disagree with these. If we live them through the love of Jesus deep in us, it will be noticed.

Can we live at peace with everyone? No. Some people are genuinely cruel, unkind, and thoughtless. They look to pick fights. They don't want peace. But let it not be on us. In our neighborhoods, in our communities, we are the reliable ones, the ones willing to give a ride or lend a lawn mower or to make peace when other neighbors aren't happy with one another. Don't decide who you'll be nice to based on who's like you or nice to you. As it depends on us, let's show God's love to others by living – as Paul told the young Timothy – “quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”

Here's our last section. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We like revenge stories. Whether it's Westerns like *True Grit* or fantasy adventures like *The Princess Bride* or classics like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, we enjoy seeing the bad guy get his due. What's surprising is that there are a decent number of revenge stories in the Old Testament. Samson gets revenge on the Philistines who took away his strength and took him as their prisoner. Absalom takes revenge for his sister on his half-brother Amnon. David's commander Joab avenges his brother. It was such a big deal that God's law created sanctuary cities so a person who accidentally commits manslaughter could be protected against an avenger.

But God did not intend for His people to take revenge – instead, He will judge. It's not wrong to want retribution when we have been wronged; it's just not our place to make it happen outside the practice of law. The ancient Near East and Greco-Roman culture were full of blood feuds. To forgive instead of to avenge was unheard of. But Christ taught us a better way. His way ends the cycle of bloodshed and retribution.

In fact, Paul quotes the Old Testament when he says to give food and water to your enemy. Why would we do that? “To heap burning coals upon his head” is the idea that caring for an enemy leads either to shame that leads to reconciliation, or it provides reason for condemnation – how can you consider someone who would take care of you an enemy? If they yield to the shame, you have a friend – if they don't, then their condemnation is all the more just. This behavior sets us apart. It looks like Jesus. It looks like the cross. The power of forgiveness really is greater than the power to avenge.

Christ-followers are on a different path – a crazy path to the world – a path that overcomes evil with good, a path that matters. You want to change the world? This is how you do it. And this is the path that gives hope to hopeless people. It's the path that means we can have joy in suffering. Jesus has saved us, and we rejoice in that. When we know we're saved, this kind of life isn't the life we are forced to live, but the life we want to live. We won't get it all correct today, but given time and the Holy Spirit's work, we can be known for these things. May our actions that reflect Christ speak so loudly that those around us will want to hear the life-giving words that Jesus is alive and has given His life that they may be redeemed.