

September 3, 2017

Romans 12:9-21: **“Real Love”**

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In a sermon from 1532, Martin Luther described the world as “the most hateful and unlovable object of all . . . a stable full of wicked, shameful people . . .” Well, Luther was never known for mincing words. And, know this as well, he also included himself as having been conceived and raised in the same stinking stable along with the rest of the animals. But, the words seem inflammatory by today’s standards, especially when so many pastors and people condemn the preaching of the law that shows sin, condemns, and punishes. We need to remember that without the harsh truth of the law, there is no sweet truth of the gospel that shows and bestows the forgiveness of sins.

Indeed! Only when we understand that we are first hateful and unlovable, do we really begin to appreciate the fact of what Luther says in the same sermon: “These shameful people God loves. This is love supreme.” Yes, those familiar words of John 3:16 become sharper now. “For God so loved a loveless humanity; a humanity that is unlovable.” We cannot possibly exhaust or enlarge this mysterious truth. After that, then add the words, “. . . that he gave is one and only Son!” and it’s mind-blowing!

A famous pastor once related this story about one of his earliest childhood memories. He said that he was trying to run away from home, but his oldest sister had a hold of him and she wouldn’t let him go. In anger and frustration he hauled off and slapped her, and said in her face: “I hate you!” She just hugged him close and said, “But, I love you!” He said that those words of hers simply melted him.

God is like the sister in the story isn’t he? We haul off and slap him and he is still hugging us and saying, “But, I love you!” Even the hardest heart ought to give pause to the whole expression: “For God so loved the world that he sent his Son!” And Jesus is **Real Love** - absolutely authentic in such a way that there isn’t any question about him when you ponder the fact that he endured the slap of our death and hell so that we might have life and salvation! He is the fulfillment of the law - he is love inside and out. He is love in the midst of a loveless world. John writes (1 John 4:10): “this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And nine verses later, there are these other words that we might as well add now to the mix: “We love because he first loved us (4:19).”

Paul begins our epistle lesson by saying, “Let love be genuine.” In other words, “Love is without hypocrisy.” A hypocrite looks great on the outside. However, on the inside it is a different matter. Sin has so devastated humanity, that when we talk about love or loving someone, we are always ultimately doing it for ourselves. It looks like sacrifice on the outside, but it is self-serving. That is part of what sin is all about. So, when Paul entreats the Christian to have **Real Love**, what are we going to do with that? Bottom line is that he wants our hearts to be in sync with our outward actions. That means that if our outward actions are doing something wonderful for someone, then it is supposed to be with no consideration of the self or personal reward whatsoever at any time. Is Paul demanding perfection? No!

If we are familiar with what Paul says before all of this in the book of Romans, we will know that he isn’t promoting impossible perfectionism. Paul knows that we carry around with us our selfish sinful natures, that we are wretched, but still declared righteous. Paul is also well aware of the mercies of God

as they are demonstrated in Jesus Christ alone. He also knows that in Christ we are given power to struggle with and overcome our selfishness. And there is no doubt that he is also aware of the fact that even though our best good works are touched by our selfish sinful flesh, they are nevertheless counted as selfless good works for the sake of the goodness and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Like the apostle John, who says “we love because he first loved us,” Paul knows that our ability to love, grow in **Real Love**, and live a life of love can only be accomplished in so far as we believe and are in Christ and he is in us. What appears to be nothing but a string of commands in our epistle lesson is, in fact, an urgent begging that we struggle to put to death our selfish sinful natures and become more and more like Jesus who loved us to death.

After saying “let love be genuine,” Paul goes on to say in our epistle lesson, “abhorring the evil, clinging to the good, in brotherly love [showing] familial affection for one another, in honor leading the way for one another.” These words are in essence the same idea as what John writes - again in his first epistle - “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers . . . Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions in truth.” As you can see, love is about action and truth. It is genuine. **Real Love** is about Christ who fulfills the law for us, loves us so much that he suffers and dies for us, endures hell for us, and gives us life and salvation. His love touches and moves us to love him and one another. We are to love one another to death; that is, we are to give up ourselves and what we might get for ourselves, for the good of another.

It is unfortunate to say that the church of today more often asks, “what’s in it for me?” Even in the political world, the now famous line of President John F. Kennedy - “Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country.” - sounds rather silly because everyone pretty much thinks that the government exists to take care of us. Back in the days of Jesus, the apostles had a hard time wrapping their minds around the moment when, as John writes, our Lord “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him (John 13:4-5).” Here was the creator of the universe cleaning up his creation. “Just what is Jesus doing?” they had to whisper under their breath.

And it doesn’t stop there. After Jesus is done cleaning dirty feet, he then says, “now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” In all of this we are faced with two very important thoughts. First, the Lord serves us. Secondly, if the Lord himself serves us, then having been touched by such service, we can hardly help but to serve others . . . even our enemies. It is through the **Real Love** of Jesus that we are changed to really love. Paul says in our epistle lesson:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. To rejoice with those who rejoice, to weep with those who weep living in harmony with one another, not setting your mind on haughty things, but associating with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

There was a Christian who was a rice farmer in China, and his fields lay high on a mountain. Every day he pumped water into the paddies of new rice. And every morning he returned to find that an unbelieving neighbor who lived down the hill had opened the dikes surrounding the Christian's field to let the water fill his own. For a while the Christian ignored the injustice, but at last he became desperate. What should he do? His own rice would die if this continued. How long could it go on? The Christians met, prayed, and came up with this solution. The next day the Christian farmer rose early in the morning and first filled his neighbor's fields; then he attended to his own. The neighbor eventually became a Christian, his unbelief struck by a genuine demonstration of a Christian's love for others.

What an example of what Paul is talking about! This is love in action. This Chinese Christian was no doubt a man who had to struggle with all kinds of possible reactions within himself toward his enemy neighbor. But, by the grace of God in Christ, whatever hurt or hateful feelings he might have had to deal with, he was willing to give up himself as Jesus had given up everything for him. And **Real Love** is shocking to those who receive it. Look at what it did to the neighbor. It broke through and caused him to really think: "Why would anyone ever do anything like that unless they really loved? And if they really love that way, then what do they have that I don't have!" With that, a person is brought only to the **Real Love** of Jesus who gave up his life, so that we might forever live!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott