Romans 12:9-21 Sermon Manuscript

“Do You Love Other Believers?”

Think about the most difficult believer to love in this church, here at Bethel Baptist. Think about the most annoying person that you just can’t stand to be around, or the most awkward person to be around here in this church. Okay? Now I am going to ask you a difficult question. Do you truly love this person? This brother or sister in Christ? Ask yourself the question, “Can I truly love this person?” And furthermore, “HOW do I truly love a difficult person?” Today’s passage is going to show you what love truly looks like and how we should love our brothers and sisters in Christ in the church. Last week we looked what it looks like to serve one another in the body of Christ through using our spiritual gifts. And we saw that ultimately we must look to Christ to empower our service to one another because Christ perfectly manifestly all the spiritual gifts within Himself and His obedience to the Father. But the apostle Paul is going to take us the root cause, to the core of why we serve…we serve because we have been affected in the deepest level by the love of Christ. And so we love others just as Christ loved us and gave His very life for us.

Now it is not random that Paul is bringing up these commands of love. If you remember, the looming issue surrounding the book of Romans is that the Jewish and Gentile believers were not getting along with each other. The Jews were once expelled from Rome by the emperor for causing a theological squabble, which created a vacuum for the churches in Rome…suddenly the churches of Rome became Gentile in nature and style. Then after a number of years, the Jews were allowed back to Rome, but now these Jewish believers were stepping into these predominately Gentiles churches with their Gentile ways of life which created tension. There was friction and there was not unity as there should have been. And what is the one virtue that binds people together? What is the action and the expression that Jesus said we must do to each other in order for the world to see that we are disciples of Jesus? Love… He said the world will know we are His disciples if we love each other. And so Paul is going to address the source which creates unity in the church, love. He will go more specifically and practically into what that looks like for the churches in Rome in chapter 14, but for now we are going to look at “love,” which is the defining mark of a believer, which is why I asked earlier “do you love the person you find most difficult to love in the body of Christ?”

Well what does love like according to God’s definition? It looks like this, Verse 9: “*Let love be without hypocrisy – by abhorring what is evil, clinging to what is good*.” First of all, love must be genuine and honest… literally in the original unhypocritical. Without hypocrisy. That word in the original was used of actors in Greek plays and theaters that would put on different masks having different faces, but it’s exactly what it is…a mask! It is a mask that conceals the true emotion and true face of its beholder. You can’t say I love you to one person or appear to be loving when inside you hate and despise that person. That would be putting on a mask that says “love” when in fact your face says “hate” on it. One of the major sins that God hated in the nation of Israel was the sin of religious hypocrisy. When the nation rejected God and pursued idolatry and all forms of wicked acts, they still pretended like they were faithful to the Lord and offered sacrifices and worshipped Him at the same time. So in response God would say to them like He said to them in Amos 5:21-22 “*I hate, I reject your feasts, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them*.” God hated the mask of religious worship they were putting on, when in reality their true faces were hidden. As Isaiah says, they drew near to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him.

But what does love consist of? What does love look like? It looks like this, “*by abhorring what is evil, clinging to what is good*.” Notice that God is not just saying “reject what is evil and accept what is good.” He says, “abhor” what is evil and “cling” to what is good. It’s strong emotional language that goes deeper than simply our actions of rejecting what is wrong and accepting what is right. It goes down to our affections and our emotions. It goes to our heart. We are to be disgusted, horrified by what is evil, by what dishonors the glory of God and we are to desperately love what in God’s eyes is “good” and pleasing. Because that is what we should be as who trust in the Lord. The psalmist in Psalm 97:10 says to us “hate evil, you who love the Lord.” But do you know it’s possible to deceive yourself into thinking you are pleasing the Lord by “doing” all the right things when in fact God is displeased with you?

Maybe you see that person that you try to stay away from like the plague in church stranded on the highway with a flat tire. Although you despise that person and wish you weren’t there to help him, because you know it’s the right thing to do, you do it all the while in your heart horrified that you have to help this person you so despise. That is not “abhorring what is evil, and clinging to what is good.” Also I want you to notice that true love does not tolerate evil but hates sin and evil. That goes against everything in this culture sadly. Our world and society have exchanged the word “love” to mean to tolerate any and all beliefs, persons, and lifestyles, no matter how sinful it may be. You’ve heard of the popular slogan “love is love” right? Even you see it sadly on many billboards of churches, “love is love,” with some form a rainbow color behind it.

What does 1 Corinthians 13 say about love? Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but what?...rejoices in the TRUTH!” When you warn someone that they will go to hell if they don’t repent of their sins and trust in Jesus, or say anything that shows the way they are living their life is morally wrong, the world views it as “hate speech.” But actually, telling people about sin, righteousness and judgment is the most loving thing you can do and say for someone. If you truly care and love about the souls of those who are lost, you will tell them what might offend them. If you truly care and love believers who are ensnared by sin, you will risk offending them and receiving an angry, justifying response for their sin, if it means them waking up from their deception and pulling them out of the fire of sin. Bethel my prayer is that you will possess that kind of love…a love that is bold enough to confront sin and evil and praise and cling to righteousness and all that is good.

Now that we know what the nature of biblical love is, how are to act it out? Verses 10 and 11, be “*devoted to one another, in brotherly love, giving preference to one another in honor, not lagging behind in diligence, being fervent in spirit, serving the Lord*…” Paul is again careful here to destroy any notion that Christian love can be this stoic, emotionless action that we show to one another. “Devotion” is mentioned here, “brotherly love” or brotherly “affection” in some translations. There is no room here for doing the right action towards one another without also having the right affection for one another. And frankly some of you probably wish I would just stop preaching this passage and tell everyone to go home, because you feel the conviction. This is a difficult passage to carry out because we know our love for each other is imperfect and tainted with sin. We know that for some people we have this brother love and devotion to, but for others in the church, sitting on the other side of the section of the aisles, we don’t have for others. And furthermore, God you say, “*we need to give preference to one another in honor*?!” Well that guy is a scoundrel! He’s insensitive and it’s so difficult to talk with him because he’s so full of pride. He’s the type of guy that’s either my way or the highway! I know…I know…I feel you, it’s not easy. But do you know what 1 Timothy 6:1 says? “*All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be slandered*.” That command included masters who treated their slaves good but also wicked masters who were abusive and did not treat their slaves right. Whether they had a good or a bad master, Christian slaves were to honor them.

If you find yourself struggling to show brotherly affection and honor to a specific Christian in the church whom you don’t like…here’s a way to help you overcome that. Remind yourself, preach to yourself no matter how annoying or imperfect this person or persons might be, remind yourself that Christ shed His blood for them. He bought them, purchased them from before the foundation of the world…He has forgiven them and declared them righteous in His sight. That is why you honor them…because to honor and give preference to someone you don’t like is giving honor and preference to Christ and His work on the cross for them. Jesus said, “whatever you have done to the least of these, you did it to me.” But to do all of that requires intentionality on your part. That is why verse 11 says, “*not lagging behind in diligence, [but] being fervent in spirit, serving the Lord*.” You can’t passively expect to grow in your affection towards someone if you are not actively looking for opportunities to grow in your affection. For example, have you ever noticed that it’s really hard to not like someone or to hate someone when you are praying for them and serving them? The more we spend time with someone, the more our affection for that person will grow (at least most of the times). As long as you continue to avoid someone in church and walk in the opposite direction of where he is going, you won’t grow in your affection and service to him.

Verse 12 we are to be “*rejoicing in hope, persevering in affliction, being devoted to prayer*.” In the midst of painful trials, debilitating sicknesses, cancers and all manner of disease that comes from living in a fallen world, we are to rejoice in the hope of Jesus Christ and His salvation. To rejoice in the hope that He will one day come and get rid of all sickness, disease, and sin once and for all. And if we keep rejoicing in hope, we will persevere in our afflictions because we know that God has promised us hope, hope for our souls in the here and now, and hope for our bodies when He comes again to give us the resurrected body. If you’re not rejoicing in that hope, then you won’t be persevering in your afflictions when they come. But when we are persevering in our afflictions, this drives us to our knees in prayer…pleading and asking for God to strengthen us and to renew our hope in Him. When we see other believers in the church rejoicing in that hope, that encourages us to also rejoice in hope. Verse 13 “*contributing to the needs of the saints, pursuing hospitality*.” Hospitality in those days was a big and important aspect of Paul’s day. Opening up your home to a brother or sister in Christ who was traveling was one of the most loving things you could do to them because inns or motels in those days were known to be unsanitary and unsafe places, filled with robbers and known for having sexually immoral activity going on.

But there are many other ways you can contribute to the needs of the saints beside doing the obvious. One is of course tithing and especially when we give towards the deacon’s fund that’s meant specifically to meet the practical needs of church members. But there are so many other ways as well you can “contribute to the needs of the saints.” Giving rides to places, providing meal trains, and on and on it goes. I am glad to be a part of this church that I think does this well. Now here comes the really difficult commands: verse 14 “*bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse*.” Why is God telling us to bless instead of to curse? Well because we are prone in our sinful flesh to strike back when struck and say something bad in return for someone cursing us. I wonder when we are in heaven, when we ask people why they are here and how they got here, how many of them will say because I persecuted a child of God and he did not strike back at me but blessed me instead. I wonder how many people became Christians that way. I mean we owe the existence of the book of Romans thanks to Stephen who was stoned to death by the authority of Paul before he was saved. Remember as he was dying in Acts 7, he looked up to heaven, He saw Jesus and said to Him, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!...” Just like how Jesus said to His Father while he was crucified on the cross… “*Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*.” We bless and do not curse because that is one way God uses to bring people to saving faith in Him.

Verse 15 “*Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.*” Do you know why God commands us to do this? Because we have a tendency to not rejoice with those rejoice and not weep with those we weep…because sometimes when people rejoice that something wonderful that has happened to them…we ask ourselves “why isn’t this wonderful things happening to me? What about me?!” And when people weep and suffering and going through terrible tragedy, we don’t like feeling that sadness and uncomfortable feeling of loss that they are going through, and so we tend to avoid people who are weeping. But this is not an optional thing here. We saw last week in Romans 12:5 that individually we are members of one another…we are connected to each other in a deep way in the body of Christ. We are not separated from the body having the option to do our own thing and decide to help when we feel like it. No we are connected with one another, so whether you like it or not, we rise or fall together. 1 Corinthians 12:26 says, “*if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it*.” And what’s going to help you dear friend to “*rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep*” is verse 16: “*by being of the same mind toward one another, not being haughty in mind, but associating with the humble. Do not be wise in your own mind*.”

It all goes back to pride. Pride is at the root of every sin. If you lack love for others, it’s because you are prideful, it’s because you are in love with yourself and you have no room to love others and put them first in your life. The Pharisees come to mind as THE illustration for a haughty mind. They were so pure, so religious, so law abiding, that they detested any and all Gentiles as these dirty dogs that they wouldn’t dare go near for fear of being defiled. They didn’t associate with the humble, those with sordid pasts, those with no significance or no financial wealth. But you know who did? Jesus Christ. He dined with tax collectors and sinners, the worst of the worst in society, not to approve or condone their sinful lifestyle but to save them from their sinful lifestyle. And then we come to verse 17 where Paul speaks on revenge again! He’s already touched on a vengeful mouth in verse 14 of giving a blessing instead of a curse to your persecutors. But this problem of paying back evil for evil is so prevalent in society and it’s so natural to our sinful flesh that God felt it necessary to repeat this issue. And when something is repeated in the Bible, that’s the author’s way of saying to us “pay attention!” And this time, the command goes not just for how we are to act towards other believers, but even to nonbelievers.

Verse 17 “*Never paying back evil for evil to anyone, respecting what is good in the sight of all men*.” Does “never” mean sometimes we can pay back evil to evil to someone based on the circumstance? No! never means… “NEVER!” Jesus said, in Matthew 5:38-41 “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take yourtunic, let him have your garment also. And whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two*.” Unbelievers are watching the church and watching you Christian in how you act in public society. And if you strike back evil for the evil that you received, unbelievers can tell that is not good and commendable. Now some might try to defend you saying “well that person deserved being struck down because he started it…” but you striking back is not going to be considered necessarily “good” in the sight of all men.

Verse 18 continues the thought and adds, “*if possible, so far as it depends on you, being at peace with all men*.” The author of Hebrews in Hebrews 12:14 says *“Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord*.*”* Is our world a world of peace? No, it is filled with strife, hatred, and war. Historians have said that of all recorded history, there have been only three hundred years where there were no wars. Only three hundred years out of what 10,000?! One wrong word said, one hateful act can plunge an entire nation into war and bloodshed and violence. Such is the human heart. It is desperately wicked and evil above all else. How can you say humanity is inherently good and not evil when you see all the terrible things going on in the Middle East today? You won’t be able to solve world peace, but what you can do is manage peace in your own personal relationships. Well let me give you some helpful verses from Proverbs that is noteworthy to take down so you can memorize it. Do you want to be a Christian that is known to be a peacemaker? Here is some wisdom from Solomon on how you can do that. Proverbs 10:12 “*Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions*.” Proverbs 12:16 “*An ignorant fool’s anger is known at once, But a prudent man conceals disgrace*.” Proverbs 15:1 “*A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger*.” Proverbs 17:9 “*He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates close companions*.” Proverbs 17:14 “*The beginning of strife is like letting out water, So abandon the dispute before it breaks out*.” Proverbs 29:22 “*An angry man stirs up strife, And a hot-tempered man abounds in transgression*.”

Just so that there is no misunderstanding, Paul flushes out what he means in verse 17 in verse 19 for us: Verse 19 “*never taking your own revenge, beloved – instead, leave room for the wrath of God. For it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord*.” Because of our sin, we have a temptation to take vengeance on others. But we are not take vengeance because vengeance belongs to God’s territory. One day all sin will be punished, whether punished on the sinner or the sin being punished on the cross. God is the ultimate judge, and He alone can judge the world in righteousness and perfection. We are imperfect judges and our judgments are tainted and corrupted by sin. No, we trust and we leave room for the wrath of God. So that is what we are not supposed to do, to take vengeance. What then are we to do instead? Paul you have shown us what we need to “put off” but what do we need to “put on” instead? Put on this, verse 20 “*But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head*.” When someone strikes you, he is expecting you to strike him back…but when you don’t strike him and instead you bless him and do something good for him, it will be like heaping burning coals on his head.

What does that mean? Well it’s a quote from Proverbs and putting on burning coals on your head was a symbol of shame and guilt for one’s sins. It was a practice that the ancient Egyptians used to do to show contrition for bad things they have done, which the quote from Proverbs may be referring to. You never know what God is going to do when you decide to bless your enemy instead of retaliating against him. It could lead to his salvation. Jesus heaped burning coals on Pilate’s head when he refused to say anything to justify himself or accuse the Jews of setting him up. Through that Pilate saw Jesus’ innocence and was greatly disturbed in his conscience that he was about to crucify a man not worthy of crucifixion. Yet, sadly, Pilate buried his conscience and did not allow it to lead him to do the right thing. The world is constantly seeking to overcome good by evil and one of the ways it does that is provoking us to be overcome by evil by returning evil for evil. But in all of this, verse 21 says “*do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*.”

The question in all of these commands to do and not to do is “how is it possible that I can return love for the hatred shown to me? To not strike back when I am unjustly struck?” Well, it’s not possible on your strength or your own self. It’s only possible when you yield yourself to the power of the Holy Spirit. The danger to hearing these moral commands to do or not to do something is to think that you, on the strength of your own flesh can do this instead of relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible, and God the Holy Spirit living inside of you can fulfill what God commands you in Romans 12:9-21. Romans 8:3-4 says, “*For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*.” What we’ve just read in Romans 12:9-21 are the righteous requirements of the Law and it can only be fulfilled when you walk not according to your flesh but according to the Holy Spirit who indwells inside of you. What this is all talking about is the process of sanctification, the process of being set apart to look more like Jesus. And the one sin that’s going to get in the way of you showing true genuine biblical love to your fellow church members as well as to the world is your own pride. So, submit all your control to the Holy Spirit, to the Spirit of Christ, so that it may do its humbling work of overcoming evil with good. And evil was ultimately overcome at the cross when the ultimate good, Jesus, triumphed over evil when He rose from the dead. So look to Jesus and live a Spirit submissive life.

Let’s pray