



## **Marks of the Christian 1: Love**

Romans 12:9-10

*Rev. Fred Greco*

---

Our text this morning is a short one, verse 9 and half of verse 10, but it is the inspired Word of God, so I would ask that you would please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 12, beginning at verse 9:

*“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.”*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would open up your Word to us. We pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would illuminate our minds, that you would soften our wills, and that our hearts would be opened to the truth your Word brings to us. Help us, O Lord. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Chapter 12, as we have seen, is the break in the book of Romans. It is from this point on in the book that Paul is setting forth how Christians are to live in light of the salvation that has been provided to them in Christ. The first 11 chapters are doctrinal in that sense. We also spoke of them as being indicative, who you are in Christ. Now, from chapter 12 on through chapter 16, we see more of imperatives, commands, how we are to live because of who we are in Christ.

We saw in the first two verses Paul laid down a general principle. Because of the mercy of God, we are to live lives of holiness and service to the Lord. Then he moved on in verses 3-8 to describe how God equips us in that life. He equips Christians with gifts to bless others in the church. Now, in this third and longest section of chapter 12, Paul will start to show in some detail how the Christian is to relate to others both inside and outside the church.

He is going to share with us a series of marks of the Christian. We're going to look at the first of these marks this morning: *love*. The first of these marks is a great principle that governs all the rest. Love is to govern our attitudes, our circumstances, our reaction to people, even our reaction to right and wrong. So, this text, while it is short (but one and a half verses), contains much for us to think about and to show us how to live.

This morning, I'd like us to see three things about love from our text. First, we see *love's principle*. What is the principle that love is founded upon? Secondly, we see *love's action*, that love is not just something we talk about or think about, but it is something we do. Thirdly, we see *love's pursuit*. Love pursues others around us. We show love to others in our midst. Love's principle, love's action, and love's pursuit.

## Love's Principle

Let's begin, then, by looking at this third section of chapter 12 with verse 9. Paul starts by saying, "Let love be genuine." As Paul begins with love, we need to understand that verses 9-21 are more than just a series of random collection of virtues. Paul is beginning intentionally here with love because it is the overarching virtue. What do we mean by that? What we mean is that if we think we can have other virtues when we do not have love, we are mistaken. We cannot.

Paul puts it so well in that great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. In the first three verses he writes, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

What Paul is saying there is that no matter what virtues or gifts we think we might have, the greatest that can be described in the Bible...tongues, prophecy, mystery, faith, self-sacrifice...if we have these and don't have love, what we truly have is nothing. The other thing we need to remember about love is that love makes possible all of the other virtues. We cannot exercise these other virtues apart from love.

Think about it. How would we rejoice without love? How would we contribute to the saints without love? How could we live in harmony with others without love? Love is essential to living as a Christian. After all, Jesus summarized all of the commandments in this one phrase: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus is there summarizing all of the Old Testament, all of the regulations and laws of the Pentateuch, the summary of the Ten Commandments. All are boiling down to love.

So, as we learn about biblical love, it will help us to understand all aspects of the Christian life. The very first thing Paul tells us is that love is to be genuine. This word *genuine* has to do with the true reality of love. It is translated *sincere* or *unfeigned* or perhaps the best translation of it is *without hypocrisy*. What Paul is telling us here is it is not enough for love, so-called, to be apparent before people, to be something on display. It needs to be something that is real and sincere, genuine.

In the first place, this word *genuine* has negatives associated with it. It tells us what love cannot be. As I've mentioned, the most literal translation is not *hypocritical*. This is important, because hypocrisy is something no one likes and no one respects. It's putting on false pretenses, pretending in the worst possible way. As a matter of fact, hypocrisy is often called the worst of all the vices. It is destructive because it contradicts the truth.

If we think about, for example, the betrayal of our Lord Jesus Christ by Judas, how is our Lord betrayed? With a kiss. It's hypocrisy at its worst. So, how could we possibly try to join the worst of the vices with the greatest of the virtues? It will not work. Paul tells us there is to be no deception in love. This has a twofold aspect to it.

I think when we say love is not to deceive, we understand that means we are not to deceive others with our love. We're not to make others have a false impression, but there is another aspect to this deception as well. We are not

to deceive *ourselves*. We're not to deceive others and we're not to be self-deceived. We have to stop and think about the nature of love.

Are we just going through the motions? Are we obeying God's command to love from the heart or are we instead just trying to protect our reputation? That is love that is non-genuine. It is hypocritical love. If all we seek to do is to show others a façade of love so they will have a false impression of who we are, then we are not exercising Christian love.

Love is also not to be mere sentiment either. This is perhaps the strongest contrast with our society. Our society views love as being weak or tender, as an emotional outpouring, as something we observe. It's soft. Instead, love is strong. The Bible's description of love is as a commitment to others at the sacrifice of yourself. Don't think you can work up love just by having the right emotions. It's not something that can be manufactured. Love is a commitment we have.

Love is also not politeness or courtesy. There is absolutely nothing superficial to love. It is not something that is put on in public like a mask. That is actually the origin of the word *hypocrite*. A *hypocrite* was one who in Greek culture put on a mask. He was a part of a play. You put on a mask to convince someone you were someone you were not. So to be hypocritical is to try to show others something you are not, and love doesn't do that. Love has to be real. It has to have depth. It goes beyond the formal. It goes to the heart.

What, then, does genuine love look like? Paul uses a word for love here that he is fond of. It is the Greek word *agape*. You may have heard of it. It's used 75 times in the Bible by Paul, more than 100 times in the New Testament, but the remarkable thing is that this word for love is one of four Greek words for love, but it is the least used in Greek literature. It is rare, uncommon.

Oftentimes, you will hear a pastor give a sermon about love and go to great lengths to tell you about the radical differences between these four words and that one word can only mean *this* and another word can only mean *that* and there's very little overlap. That's not what I'm here to tell you, because these four words actually have a good deal of overlap, but I think there's something significant about this Greek word *agape*.

The significance is that it is as if Paul intentionally took a rare word for love so he could pour biblical meaning into it. In other words, he doesn't have to undo the cultural concept of this word. It's a rare word. It becomes a Christian word. Not because other words for love are inferior, but Paul chooses to take this word and make it his own.

It is a word that is often used to point to God's love. We have seen it before here in the book of Romans. In this book, this noun, up until this point, is only used to refer to God's love. It is used once in chapter 8 in a verb form to describe God's love for man, but even in that it is in the context of man's love for God because of what God has done.

Here is the first time where we see this word used to describe not God's love but man's love. Now what does that tell us? It tells us immediately that our concept of love needs to be governed by God's outpouring of love on us.

Our idea of love is linked to God's love. Love is principled. There are things about love we cannot change or mold to suit our interest. True love is understanding the truth. It is living in light of the truth.

Remember the theme of the second half of the book that we saw in verse 1. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God..." Paul is telling us we are to live in light of the truth of what God has done and who he is, and when we understand that truth and when we believe it, it moves the heart. When we know who God is and when we know his Word, then we can love as the Bible tells us to love.

This is why Paul can say in chapter 13 that love is the fulfilling of the law. It's not as if doing a list of things, checking off a list, brings love. No. It's that love shows itself in action and in our conduct. When we *have* love, then we can see it. So, the famous chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is a listing of just such actions. They are not a theory.

Paul tells us love has certain characteristics. He says love is patient and kind. It doesn't envy or boast. It's not arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It doesn't rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Perhaps the last time you heard this list rattled off at a wedding you thought about love as a concept and hoped the bride and the groom would latch onto that concept of love and manifest those aspects of love.

I'm here to tell you that 1 Corinthians 13 is not an abstract list. It's not describing a concept; it's describing a person: the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind. Jesus doesn't envy or boast. Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus is not irritable or resentful. Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. You see, if we want to understand what love is, what genuine and true love is, we must understand the one who *is* love. Love is founded in truth because it is founded in the truth of who the Lord Jesus Christ is.

Have you ever watched a couple that has been married for decades, how they know each other so well, how they serve each other in the little things? You see, love is found in the day-to-day, much more so than in grandiose gestures. Love is found in the day-upon-day, week-upon-week, year-upon-year actions we bring to another.

This is what Jesus said in John 14. He said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Then in verse 21: "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me." And in verse 23: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." Do you see what Jesus is describing? Love is shown by commitment to the truth, to *God's* truth. That's what love is. It's founded in truth.

That doesn't mean a mechanical obedience to Jesus is love. Love is rather a heartfelt commitment to the Lord and to his truth. This is what the psalmist writes in Psalm 119. "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day." "...your commandments are my delight." This is what we're talking about here. It is the relationship that matters more than the actions, but the actions show the relationship, and the relationship is founded on the truth. That's love's principle. It's genuine. It's founded in truth.

## Love's Action

Paul then goes on to describe love in the second half of verse 9. He says, "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." Once again, he breaks up our society's stereotype of love. Society views love as a kind of feeling, something that comes and goes, something you have no control over. After all, how do we often describe love? We talk about "falling" in love, as if it's something that just happens to us. We don't even know it's going to happen. We have no control over it. We fall down, and there you go; we're in love.

How do we picture it? Well, we picture it as being overcome by soft music and by birds tweeting and by flowers. That's what love is, isn't it? Paul says love is not mindless. Love is actually thoughtful. It distinguishes between good and evil. Paul says that genuine love, real love is active, and he describes it in two phrases which are actually commands for us. Paul says if your love is to be genuine you must do these things.

The first of them is to abhor evil. Now, that is certainly not what we first think about when we think about love. I don't think there is any woman who is dying to have her man walk up to her and say, "Honey, I just love you so much I abhor evil." We don't think of evil, even in the sense of being away from it, as a part of love, but that's what it is at its core, Paul says. Love determines how we should react to evil.

What is used here by Paul is a very strong word. It's an unusual word: *abhor*. It means to hate something, to hate something with an emotional element behind it. It's to consider that evil is not just something that's not good, not just something unhelpful, but rather to utterly dislike evil, to have a horror of it, to see it and to want to be away from it.

This verb is actually a combination of two words. One means to hate, and one is a preposition that means away from. So we are to hate something so much we are to be away from it. The whole idea is that we want no part of evil. Now why is that? What is evil? Well, evil is not just the absence of good. It is, instead, active opposition to good. That explains why true love hates evil. Evil is actively against God and against his will.

If we know who God is and we know what he has done for us (there's verse 1 again), then we will hate that which is against him. What does that mean practically? It means love is more than just avoiding doing the wrong things. We are to hate them. We hate them because God hates them, because the Christian life is being made more and more like Jesus, and the more we are like Jesus, the more we will hate what Jesus hates.

This was the problem with the Pharisees. They acted in a certain way not because they loved God but in order to complete a list that was before them. That is the definition of legalism: forgetting God while trying to complete a list of requirements. What Paul is telling us here is that we act out of a love for God, and that love commands that we abhor evil, but love in action is more than hating evil. It is also being committed to what is good. That is what Paul explicitly says in this second phrase: "...hold fast to what is good."

There is a parallelism here. You cannot choose between one and the other. You must abhor evil *and* hold fast to what is good. This verb *hold fast* is important. It gives us a good image. Notice Paul does not just say you are to *do* good. He says you are to *hold fast* to what is good. Action is important, but the action must flow out from the heart. The heart of love clings to what is good. It wants more and more of what is good. It gravitates toward the

good. This verb has the meaning of to stick with glue. It is used to describe the process of joining two pieces of wood together with glue.

Now let me ask you a question. Have you ever had the experience of getting some strong glue on your hand, perhaps something like super glue? Then you made the mistake of touching something, and you realized you were going to be carrying that thing around with you for a while, because you weren't going to be able to get rid of it. Not only was it not going to fall off; you couldn't *pry* it off. It's stuck on there. That's the picture Paul wants us to have of the effect of love.

It's the same verb Jesus uses in Matthew 19 when he describes how a man leaves his mother and father and holds fast to his wife. We've lost a sense of what that means in our society because of the prevalence of divorce, but Jesus is actually describing a holding fast that cannot be separated by man. The man and the woman are so close together they are referred to as *one flesh*.

Now how can that happen practically? Would it be enough to just avoid doing things that would separate a husband and a wife? Of course not. What Paul is saying here is that love must actively cling to what is good. You must be actively looking for what is good and looking to bind yourself to it. It is active. Love, Paul says, is a passion for holiness. It is a passion for God.

Are you living your life like that? Are you seeking after God daily? If not, then pray to the Lord that he would give you such a desire. Pray that by his Holy Spirit you would see love in your actions, fleeing from what is evil and holding fast to what is good. So love is founded on principle. It has to be true. It has to be real. Love is also active. It is not all emotion and sentiment.

### **Love's Pursuit**

Paul has one more thing to tell us about love. Again, he is brief with his words. He uses another participial phrase, just like he did twice in verse 9. He says, "Love one another with brotherly affection." Let me say one thing here. Paul's language is very brief and concise. There is no nuance we need to be worried about here. There is nothing difficult to understand. We are to listen and to obey.

The next phrase is difficult to translate because it actually has two words for love in it. Both of these words have the root *love* in them, and that makes it harder to translate. Not that we don't understand what Paul is saying here, but we need to get the force of what he's saying. He has been telling us that love is more than emotion or mechanical obedience. It's an outflowing of the heart based on the love we have received from Christ.

We might translate this phrase in *this* way: "Be devoted to each other with brotherly love, the strongest kind of family love." Let's take each of these aspects in turn. First, *affection*, and then, second, *relationship*. The first verb is one that describes the devotion our love is to have, and it is a word that is only used here in the Bible. It is actually a combination of two of those four Greek words for love. You remember I told you there are four Greek words for love. We've looked at the first one, *agape*.

A fourth one that doesn't occur here is *eros*. We get our word *erotic* from it. But the other two words are *phileo* and *storge*. *Phileo* is something we understand. You all have heard of the city of Philadelphia. What is the city of Philadelphia? Well, it's the city of brotherly love. That's *phileo*, love. The second word, *storge*, means affection or feeling concern for someone. It is used of love within a family. We might think of it as the bond of affection.

This is important for us to hear, because we rightly saw that love is not just emotion, that love is principled and is shown in action, but that doesn't mean there is *no* emotion in love. Don't go to the other extreme. This love is to be particularly shown within the fellowship of the church. Paul says we are to have an affection for others around us in the church, a love for them that is marked by affection.

Think about what Paul is calling you to here. It's not enough for you to do the right thing. It's not enough for you to hate evil. You are to be active in your expression of affection for your fellow believers in the church. Think about how that would revolutionize the church if we all practiced that. Would we be concerned about getting our own way if we practiced that? Would we focus on our needs to the exclusion of others if we practiced this kind of love? Or, instead, would we look around us and see others and pour ourselves into them with affection?

Imagine a young couple. The man is completely devoted to the young woman. He hangs on her every word. He opens doors for her. He does things like watches certain movies, goes to certain restaurants, even wears certain clothing because it's pleasing to her. You may have said to yourself, "What if marriage was always like that?" (Ladies, do not expect that.)

But let's think about something even better. What if the church was like that? What if we so loved each other we went out of our way to show affection and love to each other? What kind of place would the church be? What kind of witness would the church have to a world that is starved for love? This is what Paul is telling us.

Paul further describes this affection in a second word. The ESV translates it *brotherly affection*. This is a word we do know well. This word is *philadelphia*. It means brotherly love. It is literally the word for *brother* stuck together with the word for *love*. Although this word for love is less about affection than the previous word, although there *is* some aspect of affection here, what this word for love carries more with it is the connotation of the relationship.

It's a word that means to have a special interest in someone or to be on intimate relations with someone. Even without the word for brother, it has an emphasis on love that comes from a relationship. Paul is reminding us here that the love we are to display in the church is to be natural. It's not to be affected. It's not to be something we put on. It just comes from who we are and the relationships we have. This kind of love does not come from circumstances, like having the same interests, because it is innate to us because of our relationship with people.

What Paul is doing here is comparing the relationship of Christians to each other with the closest relationship we can think of: family. Love for family is instinctive, so much so that when we see an absence of this kind of love, we are shocked. We are horrified. Can you imagine a mother who doesn't love her children or a child who doesn't love his father? It horrifies us. It shocks us. It's not natural, we might even say. Paul tells you not to put on your feelings like some kind of garment but rather to put on love because of the relationship you have to other believers.

This is why we have the practice in the Bible of referring to fellow believers as brothers and sisters. It is not some kind of fancy title. I don't expect you to walk up to me after the service and say, "Hello, Brother Fred. How are you?" "Just fine, Sister Jane." It's not a title. In the same way that brothers and sisters at home don't do that. If they did, it would be quite odd. "Sister, would you please help me clean my room?" "Why, of course not, brother. I have so many other things I have to do." No, we just don't do that, but there is a reality, a substance to the relationship.

What Paul is saying is as you think of that relationship in the family, you are to transfer it to the church with fellow believers. We are bound together by the work of Jesus. We have been brought into a family together, the family of God. Just like it is true that you are ready to do things for family you would not do for others...not friends, not coworkers, not neighbors...so you should think about the church and other believers. You should be ready to serve them in ways you would serve your family.

This is hard. It's hard because church is often a place where we get hurt. That shouldn't surprise us, because the church is full of sinners, including you. Just because you have a bad experience, you don't give up on your family. You don't say after dinner one day, "You took my piece of pie. I'm done. I'm moving out." We don't do that. "You wrecked the car, son. Go get yourself an apartment. I'm done with you." We go the extra mile. That's what Paul is pointing us to here. You don't give up on the family of God.

In conclusion, love is the chief of all virtues. Love demands much of you. It demands that you be honest. It demands that you have integrity. It demands that you not be hypocritical. It demands that you know God and know the truth. It demands that you show your love in your actions, hating what God hates and loving what God loves, and it demands that you pursue others with your love, showing them that they are valued and that you are committed to them.

Now how can you do all that? The answer is you *can't* in your own strength, but Jesus Christ has shown you *his* love, and his love can change you. His love is like that living water that springs up a well of living water within you. As you follow the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit will make you more and more like Jesus. *That* is how you will grow in love.