

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Growing in Love**

Romans 12:9-21

Today I continue our series of sermons on Christian maturity. Two weeks ago, we focused on wisdom as one of the key marks of a growing follower of Jesus. Living a wise and godly life, grounded in the fear of the Lord, is a sign of spiritual development. Then last Sunday, we focused on vocation as another significant trait when it comes to making progress in holiness. God calls us to participate in his work in the world through all the forms that work takes in our own lives. And as we respond to God's summons, we join in Christ's mission of making God's identity, and his redeeming love, visible in the world.

As we turn to today's text from Romans, we can now add a third trait to our understanding of Christian maturity. In addition to growing in wisdom and growing in vocation, God also intends us to grow in love. The necessity of love weaves its way through our entire Scripture passage. Love, Paul reminds us, is the moral norm for God's people. He doesn't mean that love is something we have to generate or attain by our own power and determination. No, love is the outworking of the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, individually and together.

Earlier in Romans, Paul has stressed how God first loved us. In the midst of our alienation from God, our disobedience, our rebellion and hostility to his will and purposes, God reached out and acted in Christ to reconcile us to himself, so that we could be forgiven, set free, and made new. According to Paul, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (5:8). The preaching of this good news creates and calls forth faith, which joins believers to the life of God. And this life of God and from God inhabits God's people. Paul says, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (5:5).

So our love for God and for one another is the fruit of God's Spirit operating in us. It's not our accomplishment, but the work of God. Christian love isn't some unattainable ideal, but the presence of Jesus in us and among us. As preacher Bruce Theilemann has put it,

Quite frankly, I'm sick to death of ideals. I have so many ideals and I've been so frustrated by them, I really don't care for any more. What I'm looking for is a savior—not someone who will just tell me what I ought to be, but someone who will forgive me for what I am, and then with his very love will enable me to be more than I ever believed I could be. It's exactly that that Jesus does.<sup>1</sup>

What we do is a response to what Jesus has done. This same dynamic is at work in the verses leading up to today's text. Paul begins chapter 12 by appealing to the believers in Rome to offer themselves as an act of worship in response to God's great mercy in Christ. This offering of themselves will be evident in how they adopt the mentality of Christ and are shaped by the pattern of his life, death, and resurrection. In other words, they'll be changed, individually and together. They'll embody the life of the world to come rather than the world that's passing away. And this new life in Christ will be evident in their attitude toward one another in the church, particularly the way that they exercise their individual gifts for the good of the whole congregation.

All of this assumes the absolute necessity of love, originating in God and working itself out in the community of God's people. So we shouldn't be surprised that the series of instructions in today's text begins with an exhortation to love. Paul says, "Love must be sincere" (v. 9). In our cultural context, love often gets sentimentalized. We reduce love to nice feelings that we have for others. While there's certainly an emotional dimension to love, it extends far beyond feelings of affection. Love requires concrete action that seeks the good of the other. That's why Paul follows his opening admonition with a collection of exhortations that get into the practicalities of mutual love. Remember Paul says that love needs to be genuine. It should be authentic, not fake. Then he goes into some of the ways that love will show itself to be true, not counterfeit. Things like seeking the good, mutual devotion and respect, service, patience, prayerfulness, generosity, and hospitality. These are all forms of love in action.

And notice that they're the kinds of behaviors that require a community. Paul has already stressed how each person in the church needs to be performing his or her particular role in the shared life of God's people. We form one body. We belong to each other. This shapes our understanding of love as well. Love involves interdependence. In order to love, we need one another. Being in community with other Christians is an indispensable part of growing in knowing how to love.

Remember that this series of sermons is about Christian maturity. In other words, growing in holiness. We tend to think of holiness as a very personal, individual kind of thing. I'm going to pursue holiness and cultivate godliness, especially by turning inward, examining my heart, searching my soul, and seeking a renewed mind. No doubt, the turn inward is part of making progress in Christlikeness. But being remade in the likeness of Christ also requires a turn outward toward others, to whom your life is connected. So holiness isn't just personal. Holiness is also inescapably social. Maturing in Christian love involves both the vertical, relationship with God, and the horizontal, relationship with others.

Pastor Ray Ortlund talks about the use of the phrase "one another" in the Scriptures. He points out that in searching the New Testament, there are certain "one anothers" that you can't find, such as:

Sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins, intensify one another's sufferings, point out one another's failings ...<sup>2</sup>

Instead, we get "one anothers" like the ones in today's text: "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (v. 10). If there's going to be holiness, especially in the form of love, there has to be plenty of "one another" in our lives. One another. One another.

There are upward of 30 imperatives in our Scripture passage. That's a lot of exhortation. Paul rattles off a whole series of do this, don't do that. What's striking isn't just the sheer quantity of admonitions, but the fact that all the verbal forms are plural. Paul is providing a picture of what life in Christ looks like in community. As one commentator has pointed out, Paul is using his syntax to say, "Don't try this alone."<sup>3</sup> If you're going to mature in Christ by growing in love, you need the church.

That doesn't mean you need a perfect church. If life in the community of God's people were perfect, Paul wouldn't need to say the kinds of things that he says in today's text. But in reality, the church there in Rome had its own share of issues, particularly tensions and divisions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. These strains in the fellowship became the opportunity to learn more about reconciliation and how to live in loving

solidarity with one another. Similarly, in our own contexts, the brokenness and sinfulness that we often experience within the life of the congregation creates the context in which we learn how to love.

Carmen Renee Berry wrote a book titled *The Unauthorized Guide to Choosing a Church*. It was inspired, she says, “by her odyssey from the deeply conservative church of her childhood into the world of seekers and cynics, and back again.”<sup>4</sup> Berry says that she withdrew from the church primarily because of her disappointment with church members who failed to act as Christians. But strangely enough, that’s also what drew her back to the church. She writes:

I had overlooked one essential factor—that I am as finite and flawed as everyone else . . . . When a friend committed suicide, I realized I could become too cynical, too lost, and too alone. I needed a church, a community of believers. I needed to live in my faith and visit my doubts. Something happens there that simply doesn’t when you are alone in prayer or on the Internet. As much as I hate to admit it, my faith is enhanced and enlarged when in relationship to other less-than-perfect human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Less-than-perfect love being worked out and cultivated among less-than-perfect human beings. That’s a pretty good definition of the church. That’s the reality within which Christians mature. As Bishop Joseph McKinney has observed, “Anyone can love the ideal church. The challenge is to love the real church.”<sup>6</sup>

It’s one thing to say, “I love everyone” or “I love humankind” or “I love people.” It’s another thing to love real people, particular people, who think and say and do particular things. People within your church. People in the larger church, beyond just your own congregation. People beyond the church and outside the church. Notice how Paul, in today’s text, keeps widening the circle of those to whom Christians are called to relate in genuine love. It starts with fellow believers in Rome, then expands to include the church more generally. Then it expands again to include enemies. Then it expands finally to include everybody. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (v. 18).

Learning to love within the church helps equip us to love beyond the church. Not because loving one another within the body of Christ is easier. Sometimes it can be just as hard, or harder. But the love that has been poured into our hearts comes from a God who knows exactly what it means to love enemies. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” We love out of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

So “let love be genuine.” Your love for one another in our congregation. Your love for brothers and sisters in Christ, anywhere and everywhere. Your love for those who do you wrong, who harm you, or oppose you. Your love for those who are different from you. Your love for those with whom you disagree. Your love for others in your family, your neighborhood, your workplace, or your school. Your love for everyone who inhabits this world, the object of God’s goodness and mercy.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Thielemann, “Telltale Tears.” *Preaching Today*, 1986 (*Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 115).

<sup>2</sup> Ray Ortlund, “‘One Another’s’ I Can’t Find in the New Testament. The Gospel Coalition blog (May 24, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, Commentary on Romans 12:9-21. Working Preacher website. August 28, 2011.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-22/commentary-on-romans-129-21-2> (June 17, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> *USA Today* (June 2, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> *USA Today* (June 2, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> *Leadership*, Vol. 6, No. 3.