

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

I Would Be True

Romans 12:9-18

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Most of us at one time or another have written love-letter laments. Listen to this one: "Dearest Jimmy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! Yours forever, Marie. P.S. And congratulations on winning the state lottery."

This passage from the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome tips off with a very important four-word instruction: "Love must be sincere." And every instruction that follows will hang upon this thesis. To Paul, the church is a family, and like all families, he wanted the church to exhibit the intimacy and tenderness toward one another that mark the best earthly families. Indeed, from the language he used we can almost get the image of a woman busily knitting some special garment for her children – a soft scarf, woolen socks, fuzzy mittens. Knitting is composed of constant, repetitive actions, and so is love. Undergirding everything else that the apostle taught is the command to love from the center of who you are.

The problem with love is that it can be such a vague term. People fill it with almost any meaning they want. Particularly in a culture that thinks of love as something we fall in and out of, we need to know that biblical love is not an emotion – so we can't fake it. It's an attitude, a mindset, and it requires action. We're commanded to love, therefore it's a choice we make, a matter of the will. And frankly, none of us can love in the way the Bible asks us to without the enabling grace of God. Yes, it's our job to work actively at putting love into effect in the various relationships we find ourselves involved in. But we must also realize that God both establishes the standards of right behavior and inspires love for others within us. So these two cannot ultimately be in conflict.

That's why wherever you find love **flourishing**, you'll also find other good and wholesome **attitudes** sprouting up and prospering. That's the link Paul was making when he told us not to burn out, to keep ourselves fueled and aflame, to be alert servants of the Master, to be cheerfully expectant. That's the link he was making when he told us not to quit in hard times, to pray all the harder, to help needy Christians, to be inventive in hospitality. In essence, he was saying that creativity, motivation, and excitement should be clear external marks of our loving service. We're to serve God as though it is the most important activity of our lives.

And just as we are knit together with God in love, we in the church are also to be knit together with each other in love. So when someone rejoices over the good things happening in his life, we should rejoice with him rather than be envious of him. When someone grieves over some tragedy she's experienced, we should grieve with her rather than gloat over her affliction. For when we respond to everyone with genuine empathy and love, people – whether they're believers or unbelievers – will be able to see Christ living in us and through us.

Of course, trying times arise, and when they do it's easy for us to argue and fight with one another. But church, that's not our calling! God's people should always work to promote **harmony** and **unity**, not discord and division. And don't be swayed by social standing either! We should willingly associate with each other regardless of status in society or in the church. We're called to do our best at all times and in every circumstance to live at peace – especially with each other.

But also with all people! Even our enemies! Notice how the apostle urged us not to try to get even when others abuse us or exploit us. Retaliation isn't the answer; we're called upon to wait patiently for God to right all injustices in His time. But while we're waiting, there are some things we can do. We can give our hungry enemies food to eat. Jesus said by doing this, we'd be heaping burning coals on the heads of our opponents. But don't think the purpose is to hurt them! Our purpose is to put sincere love into action so that our generosity and kindness might cause them to rethink their ways. By showing love and kindness rather than hatred and vengeance, we can plant seeds of Christ's love in the **hearts of unbelievers.**

Most of us have learned how to pretend to be courteous – how to speak kindly, avoid hurting feelings, and appear to take an interest in others. We may even be skilled in pretending to show compassion for the needy or indignation in the face of injustice. But God calls us to real and sincere love that goes beyond being hypocritically polite. Sincere love requires concentration and effort. It means helping others become better people. It demands our time, money, and personal involvement. Still, no one individual has the capacity to express love to a whole community, but together as the body of Christ we do. As **individuals**, let us look for people who need our love; as a **church**, let us look for ways we can love our community for Christ.

Time and again Paul taught the churches that a major part of Christian love is Christian hospitality. But Christian hospitality differs from social entertaining. Entertaining, for the most part, focuses on the host: the home must be spotless; the food must be well prepared, delicious, and abundant; the host must appear relaxed and good-natured. Hospitality, on the other hand, focuses on the needs of the guest: a place to stay, nourishing food, a listening ear, or just acceptance. Let me blow your sense of priority out of the water with this: Hospitality can happen in a messy home! It can happen around a dinner table where the main dish is Campbell's soup! It can happen while the host and the guest are doing chores together! Don't hesitate to offer hospitality just because you're not wealthy enough or even too busy.

It had been an extremely rough week for Joan Cinelli, and trying to cope with a stiff neck had made it worse. By Thursday afternoon she'd used up her supply of energy and patience. All she wanted to do was get home, put on a comfortable robe, fix a bowl of soup, and collapse with her feet up. So when she pulled into her driveway and saw her daughter-in-law Wanda's car, she groaned in despair. She had forgotten that it was Bryan's night.

Since his parents' separation, Joan had tried to have her six-year-old grandson spend a few hours with her at least once a week – trying to make it a special time for him. Bryan delighted in the time with his Grandma as she did with him. But this night there was no way Joan could handle it. She was going to have to postpone. She hugged both Wanda and Bryan and explained how badly she was feeling: "Bryan, honey, I'm so sorry. But tonight Grandma Joan isn't up to any fun and games. Just a nice hot bowl of soup, a lazy hour of TV, and then early to bed. We'll have our night together some other time." Bryan's smile faded, and Joan saw the disappointment in his eyes. "But I like soup, Grandma." Joan's heart knew what he was really saying: *Please don't send me away; please let me stay.* Wanda spoke up and said, "No, Bryan. Grandma Joan's too tired tonight. Maybe next week." But in Bryan's eyes Joan saw the uncertainty: *Something else is changing. Maybe Grandma Joan won't want me to come anymore.* Joan hesitated and then tried again: "Just soup and TV, Bryan. No car games on the floor, no baking cookies, no books. I probably won't be awake long."

"I like soup," he repeated. So with a sigh of resignation, Joan gave in and placed her hand on his shoulder. "Then you are cordially invited to dine at my castle." In the end, it was worth it to Joan just to see his eyes light up.

While Joan put the soup on the stove and changed into her robe, Bryan set up trays and turned on the TV. Joan must have dozed off after the first few sips of soup. But when she woke up, there was an afghan over her legs, the bowls and trays were put away. Bryan was sprawled on the floor, dividing his attention between a coloring book and a TV show. Joan looked at her watch. Nine o'clock. Wanda would be coming to get Bryan soon. *Poor boy, she thought, what a dull time he must have had.*

Bryan looked up with a smile. Then he ran over and gave her a big hug. "I love you, Grandma," he said, his arms still around her neck. "Haven't we had a nice time together?" There were the two key words: *time* and *together*. They hadn't done anything really exciting or special, but they were together – spending time.

That night Joan realized something important. Bryan's visits didn't have to be a marathon of activity. The important thing is that he knows he has a special place in his Grandma's life – a time that is just for them to be together. Now Bryan still goes to Grandma Joan's house once a week. They still bake chicken or maybe eat out, they still make cookies or go for a walk in the park. But every once in a while they enjoy their favorite together time, their special feast of love: soup night.

This chapter does a superb job of summarizing the core of Christian living. If we love someone the way Christ loves us, we'll be willing to give and forgive. If we've experienced God's grace, we'll want to pass it on to others. Remember that grace is undeserved favor. By giving a friend – or an enemy – a drink, we're not excusing misdeeds. We're simply recognizing him, forgiving him, and loving him in spite of his *sins* and *shortcomings* – just as Christ has done for us. Howard Walter beautifully condensed this chapter in the words of this hymn: "I would be true, for there are those who trust me; I would be pure, for there are those who care."

Let us pray: Lord, may we as the recipients of Your eternal love be givers of love as well. Bring us, Your people, together in love – knit us together with love – that the world may know that we are truly Your children. Help us as we look for people who need our love; help us as the church as we look for ways we can love our community. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

Sources

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