



Lately I've been thinking a lot about what kind of legacy I am preparing to leave behind after I'm gone. What will I be leaving my kids, my church, my friends, my neighbors, even my world? A legacy certainly includes making sure all my things are in order, but really there is so much more. Over the past few weeks we had some big things happen in our family. First, my father-in-law passed away suddenly. He was in pretty decent health for an 89-year-old who worked steadily up until two years ago. When we gathered as a family to celebrate his life, we thought about the legacy he left each one of us. He left Julie's mom safe and secure financially. He left to all of us a powerful example of work ethic, a generous spirit, a love for education, travel, and business. But most prominent to me was that his legacy was shaped by his love for my children, his grandchildren.

A month after his passing we had my oldest daughter's wedding. There was certainly a big empty chair at the wedding without her grandpa there. So as I thought about his legacy, I began to think about my own legacy. How will my legacy shape my daughters, their future families, and most importantly how will my legacy shape my future grandchildren? What things will they remember about me and my life with them? What smart things can I do right now to make their lives better? So on this emotional roller coaster ride we celebrated my daughter's marriage and gave her the best day we could, and we waved good-bye as she and her new husband drove off in her little Honda Civic loaded with all Katie's worldly possessions to Wisconsin to start a new life. It was truly a Karen Carpenter *We've Only Just Begun* moment. Let me just tell you, if you are old enough to remember Karen Carpenter, you are almost too late to begin thinking about your legacy! You're actually never too late to think about your legacy. And if you are young, it's never too early to think about your legacy either.

The text this morning should get all of us thinking about our legacies. Have you ever considered that it's quite likely that the most lasting and influential part of our legacy has to do with how we treat others? Have you considered that how you love others will be what truly shapes your legacy? Our text is about our relationships. Paul unpacks for us how to love those closest to us, as well as those we interact with out in the community, and he even tells us how to love those who don't even like us.

Turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 12. Let me review where we have been. The letter to the Romans is God's plan of salvation. In chapter 1 through chapter 3 verse 20, we learned from Paul that our world is infected by sin and is dying. He also described mankind as infected by sin and dying. Then Paul declares that we are dead in sin, hopeless, and unable to save ourselves. And through chapter 5 we learned that salvation comes through the death of Christ and is received by grace alone, through faith

alone, and in Christ alone, and that we are justified by God's grace and given a new identity as a child of God because we are now joined with Christ who brings new life.

We learned about God's faithfulness and what it means to walk in the Spirit, and what it means to know that our eternal destiny is secure. Then we learned about his sovereignty and his mysterious and unsearchable ways he builds his kingdom. These first 11 chapters of Romans contain the greatest explanations of the greatest doctrines we have. And last week we entered into chapter 12 and turned a corner. We learned that because of what we now know about God and his incredible mercy to us, we are compelled to present our ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice to God as an act of Holy Worship. That God's incredible outpouring of love to us because of the gospel that flows into us is now to flow out of us and to those around us.

May these verses not just inform us but also empower us to leave a legacy of love to all who cross our path. May true love be our spiritual act of worship. And may true love shape our legacies. In verse 9 Paul gives us our overarching description of True Love.

The Nature of True Love

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good (v. 9).

The word Paul uses for love is *agape*. Agape was actually an unpopular word for love in Greek culture because it called for an unpopular thing. Agape means a sacrificing or unconditional type of love. The notion of surrendering my needs, of paying any kind of personal price to love someone, was considered a sign of weakness, not virtue. But Paul re-introduced agape love in a whole new light as the supreme kind of love for Christians.

Sincere in the original language means unhypocritical. Literally, "love, unhypocritically." The word comes from the idea of acting or performing. In other words, when you love don't make it an act. Don't pretend. If hypocrisy creeps in, love ceases to be love and instead looks like flattery or performance, not for the benefit of others, but for what I might get back in return. Not only is love to be unhypocritical, it is also to be discerning. Then Paul uses the word "hate" to help define the nature of love. He says hate or "literally be horrified" at the things that God calls evil. Do you know what horrifies the Lord? Prov. 6:16-19 says, "**There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.**"

Paul is telling us that true love doesn't love everything. It discriminates. It's not mushy sentiment. It knows there is a difference

between good and evil. It stands up for what God says is good and rejects what God says is evil no matter what other messages our culture sends out. Paul is saying cling or literally "glue or bind" yourself to what God calls good. It's the same word Jesus uses to describe a man leaving his father and mother and to be glued to his wife to become one flesh. Do you know what the Lord loves? Phil 4:8 says, "*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*"

True love has the courage to tell the truth and expose a lie. Sometimes the most loving but the hardest thing we can do is have the hard conversation and tell a person the truth. This recently made sense to me as I was thinking about showing others grace. We love that grace doesn't condemn—it accepts, it meets people where they are. It's giving undeserved favor. But it hit me. When someone has the courage to lovingly but clearly tell me the truth about something wrong in my life, I know at first it doesn't feel like grace. It hurts. It feels like judgment. But in reality, this person is indeed giving me undeserved favor. Loving me enough to do the rare and courageous thing and help me out. True love is willing to confront, even willing to lose the love of someone else in the short run if there is a chance to help.

Now that Paul has given some shape to what he means by true love, he then shows us specifically what true love looks like in action. When I consider my legacy these are the things I want my family and church family to see in me.

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (v. 12).

The word "devoted" comes from two ideas: friend and family love. It's a love not based on physical attraction or desirability; it's based on commitment to be a loving and close knit and supportive family. It communicates a warm affection shared among members of a family. Paul uses this term not just to describe a love in one's biological family, but he also uses the term to describe the kind of love to have for the local church family as well. Paul says, don't wait for others to honor you, you go and honor them first. For those of you who are drawn to competition, Paul's wording here encourages us to try to out-honor one another. Literally, in regard to what you ought to be doing, don't be lazy in your actions. And after addressing actions, he addresses attitude. Keep your fervor or enthusiasm. That word fervor gives us the picture of a pot boiling over with enthusiasm. It's not just enthusiasm without direction, but instead it's focused, focused on the work and cause of Christ. Notice it says keep your spiritual fervor focused on serving the Lord. Remember why we love: We love because he first loved us. Remember the goal of love: To point people to Christ.

In verse 12 Paul acknowledges that leaving a legacy shaped by love is hard even in church relationships. For some of us, that may be a shocker. It's totally natural to lose the joy when we don't feel the love back, it's totally natural to lose patience when things get hard, and totally natural to tire of praying when things don't appear to change,

So Paul pauses right here to talk about hope. He says remember the future, it's bright. Be joyful, my kingdom will come in the future in fullness, hold on to that as you love those hard to love. God is saying to us, "you are pointing them to their cure for their pain, which is pointing them to me." When you are in pain, persevere, hold on, one day God will take away your afflictions. And when there are opportunities to pray, keep praying. God uses prayer to meet needs in the best way for his glory.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality (v. 13).

Simply share. The word is *koinineo*. It means to share our resources with others in the family. We get our church word fellowship from this. And to balance love for brothers and sisters, we get the call to love strangers. It's not just being open to strangers, Paul means pursue it. You want to shape your legacy with love, open your homes to those in need; it's the heart of the gospel.

Paul continues to instruct us on how to love our church family, but by inserting the phrase, "Bless those who persecute you" it's safe to say Paul is expanding the circle of letting love shape our legacy to not just people in the church but to all people we interact with in our neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and the people we do business with. Look at what he says next.

I think most of us would like to cover our eyes and ears when we think of Christian persecution, but Paul is compelled to remind his readers that Jesus predicted that his followers would be persecuted. He says in John 15 "*expect the world to hate you because you do not belong to the world, you belong to me.*" The fact that we simply identify with Christ can bring hatred from anyone who hates Christ and his cause. For us persecution can take different forms. It can feel like we are being disrespected. It can feel like we are being discriminated against. It can feel like our intelligence is being questioned because we believe in Christ. Paul's point is that when we feel persecution we are to bless and not curse. Paul lifts this from Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount. It is the most natural thing to fight back at those who personally hurt us. Instead Paul says, bless. Ask God to rain his goodness on them. From the word bless we get the English word eulogize. We give eulogies at memorial services by saying good things about people after their passing. Paul is saying, no, you need to eulogize these people that are hard to love while they are living. That is what it means to bless them. How do we eulogize those who persecute us?

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn (v. 5).

Again Paul quotes Jesus from his Sermon on the Mount. He says let your legacy be shaped by empathy for others. That's the ability to identify closely with someone else. Love never stands aloof from the joys and pains of others. There was a custom practiced in ancient Jerusalem. When the temple was built on the temple mount, it had only one entrance located at the base of the southern wall. There are remains still there today. Farther east on that same wall was the exit. The people would enter through the opening that allowed them to go through the wall, ascend the stairs to the temple and then exit on the east side. Huge crowds flowed in and out in steady streams. There was one

exception to this pattern. One group of worshipers was to go the opposite way entering by way of the exit and leaving through the entrance. As they bumped into and squeezed against each other, the two groups came face to face. The sad faces of those who were experiencing sorrow could be seen by those in the opposite direction and in those brief moments their grief could be shared. To leave a legacy shaped by love we need to occasionally walk the opposite direction and proactively look and engage with those faces going the opposite direction and share their grief. As the poet Robert Frost said, "Take that road less traveled because it can make all the difference."

Live in harmony with one another (v. 16).

The idea here is don't stir up trouble in the neighborhood. Love and connect with people and what they care about, find common ground without compromise so they can see Christ through you in the neighborhood.

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

In Roman culture one who wanted to be upwardly mobile didn't associate with the lowly. To be seen with a lower rank could affect one's career. But Paul said, risk it. Seek out people on the fringes and embrace them. I think it's fair to say that most people desire the kind of love described so far by Paul. So why is this kind of love so rare? One reason is our pride. Are we too prideful to stoop down? Too prideful to reach out? Too prideful to ask for help? Too prideful to be vulnerable?

Another reason this kind of love is rare is fear. Some fear loving another because it comes with the terrifying risk of loss or rejection. The ironic thing is that people are not stupid. People know pretty quickly when our love is hypocritical. So if it is becoming clear to you that there is absolutely no way you can manufacture a love like this for others on your own, you are getting your arms around what it is going to take to leave a legacy shaped by love.

Hold that thought. Paul has talked about the nature of love, what should shape our legacy of love in our family and those closest to us, and what should shape our legacy in those who live and work in our surrounding community. Now he takes this to the farthest lengths. He says, "True love should shape our legacy with those who express hatred toward us."

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord (verses 17-19).

Let's all try to be honest here. We all have people in our lives we do not like, and a common reason we don't like them is because they don't like us and have done something to hurt us or hurt someone we love. We read here that fighting back and personally retaliating is not Christian. But it's hard, especially when we are tired and discouraged. We think about our enemies a lot and we think about justice a lot.

For us to apply these scriptures requires God's love flowing with force into us and then through us. Remember verse 14. "*Bless*

those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." It starts with our speech. Don't repay anyone with harmful speech. To avoid repaying evil for evil, we must bring our tongues under control. "*Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.*" The idea is to see ahead, count the cost, know the consequences of not doing what is right. The word "right" can mean what is beautiful, honest, good, true, and honorable. It also implies here that people are watching how we react when we are in hot water.

And he assures us that there will be justice. We are to leave room for God's justice. Justice can be through God's instrument on earth, government and law, or it may not be seen until our enemy appears before God's judgment seat. God promises us that he will judge. We can leave it up to him. Some of us are going through terrible things right now that enemies have inflicted on you. Your faith is being tested to the breaking point. Let the wonderful resources at CPC come alongside and support you. Talk to your community group leader, a trusted Christian friend, a Biblical counselor, the people at our Men's Fraternity table or WBS table. Hang in there.

Paul understands that some people are just determined to be our enemy no matter how lovingly we behave. When people seek to harm us, Paul tells us to let it go and don't personally retaliate. Why? So that we leave room for God's wrath. The wrath of God in this age is to punish, but when we look deeper it is also an opportunity to redeem. The wrath of God can apply pressure by pursuing someone, cutting off his escape, confronting his sin and allowing misery to lead to repentance. Room for God's wrath is actually room for God's grace.

This isn't a passage telling us we are not to stand down and not defend ourselves, our families and our property when under attack. This is about personal relationships and how love should shape them. It's easy to forgive once our enemy has apologized, but what if my enemy doesn't apologize and actually takes delight in my sufferings. If I can't retaliate, how do I respond? Look at verses 20-21:

"On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Extend your enemy hospitality. If he has needs, meet his needs. Then there is an odd statement: Heap burning coals on our enemy's head. The idea here is not to burn your enemy's head. It's to act in a way that will lead him to be humbled. Paul borrows a practice from ancient Egypt to explain this. In the home, fire for cooking and heating was a precious commodity. You never wanted to let your fire go out. It was humiliating to let your fire go out. It was being irresponsible. If your fire went out, you had to go through the humiliating process of going to your neighbor's house and asking for some of his red hot coals to restart your own fire. The idea was for the irresponsible one to learn a lesson. He had to put his neighbor's coals in his coal pan and then carry that coal pan through the neighborhood on his head so that everyone could see as a reminder of his irresponsible behavior. The idea was that people saw it and it was embarrassing. The right response was to be humbled, be truly sorry for not

caring for your family, and that my neighbor's generosity to give me his hot coals would lead me to a change of heart repentance.

When I started in a church, we needed to make some changes in the music. I really tried to move slowly and value the long-term traditions. We had a very traditional volunteer choir director who didn't like me. I was a threat to his music style. Strike one! He didn't vote to call me and he had a small group around him that didn't vote for me either. But I really tried to value this guy for several months. It didn't help when I didn't recognize his wife who was my cashier one time at Wal-Mart. Strike two! So one night I went to choir practice because I had to make an announcement. I stood at the back; he knew I was coming. I was holding my infant daughter, who started getting impatient. And he made me wait. And I waited. I had the right to just interrupt, but I waited at the back. Holding my daughter was like trying to hold a slippery trout. But after they went through the entire rehearsal he let me make my announcement. I made it. This guy never came on board, but the next day a young woman from the choir came in and told me what it meant for her to see me handle that situation with patience and a loving attitude. She told me that she didn't vote to call me as the pastor either. But after that lack of retaliation, I had won her and her husband over. She became a big supporter to bring about positive change to our music ministry. The choir director had his burning coals opportunity but chose not to be humbled, and his influence rapidly decreased.

So the question that many of us are thinking right now is: How can anyone really live this way toward their Christian family, their friends, and especially their enemies? I cannot manufacture this love. It's not in me. Paul has already told us. We can only do it if we really do live "in view of God's mercy." It's the gospel that makes each of these commands to love possible. How? Because the gospel changed me, and when the gospel flows out of me and to those around me, they can experience God's love through me.

How can that be? Because of the gospel, we realize that we are lost sinners, as lost as anyone on the face of the earth, so whoever stands before us, whether he is a Christian or not, a decent person or not, he is no "lower" in sin than we are. We stand before God as loved and accepted by a God who is already pleased to be our Father and dwell in us. We don't need to seek out people just like ourselves to find acceptance. The God who accepts us unconditionally empowers us to love others unconditionally, even the outsider, the difficult, the person that requires the most TLC. Because of the gospel, we know that Christ is our joy. And if he is our source of joy, we can share in the joys of others without envy or coveting.

Because of the gospel, we know that Christ is our peace. And if he is our peace, we can enter into the grief of others knowing that because of the gospel there is hope. If Jesus, the man of sorrows, suffered pain and took my pain on himself, so I can take on the

pain of others and know that through suffering the purposes of God are often revealed until that final day when all will be revealed and suffering will cease.

Because of the gospel, we know that we have been forgiven much, so we are compelled to be able to forgive our neighbor who hurt us. And when we suffer for doing good we are following in Christ's footsteps.

Because of the gospel, we know there is justice. The justice of God fell on Christ on the cross and the penalty was paid. The gospel reminds us that God administers justice; we are not the ones to do it. Because of the gospel, we know that God has poured out his love on us at a great cost to himself, and in view of that love, we can love others at a cost to ourselves. Because of the gospel, God's legacy is shaped by love. So our own legacy can be shaped by love.

A daughter complained to her father about how hard things were for her. "As soon as I solve one problem," she said, "another one comes up. I'm tired of struggling." Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen where he filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In one he placed carrots, in the second, eggs, and in the last, ground coffee beans. He let them sit and boil, without saying a word. The daughter impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing. After a while, he went over and turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. He poured the coffee into a bowl. Turning to her he asked, "Darling, what do you see?" "Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied. He brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled, as she tasted its rich flavor. She asked, "What does it mean, Father?" He explained that each of them had faced the same adversity—boiling water—but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. By being in the boiling water, they changed the water.

It's the power of the gospel that makes us unique. It's the power of the gospel that changes the water. It's the power of the gospel that keeps us from becoming a soft carrot or a hard-boiled egg. When we remember the gospel and ask God for the supernatural power of the gospel to invade our relationships, true love is shaping our legacy. True love is the rich flavor I want to emit when the heat is on. Because of God's mercy, true love can and should change all our relationships and shape our legacies.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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