



Often times when I'm reading the Bible and come across some of the things Jesus said, I'm left wondering if that kind of life is really possible? Has that ever happened to you? Jesus said some crazy things like, "Forgive seventy times seven...Love your enemies...Live without worry...Sell your possessions and give to the poor." I think we end up ignoring those statements because they seem impossible. And I think that's one of the reasons why we fail to immerse ourselves in the words of the New Testament, and even avoid them, because the life we see there is often so unlike what we know from our own experience.

We learned last week that the first and primary relationship is vertical—our relationship with God. In view of God's mercy we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Now, Paul turns our attention to our horizontal relationships—our relationships with people. He's answering the question: What does real love look like in the Body of Christ, the church? And what does real love look like in our relationships with people outside the church. As we go through this passage, trust me, you are going to wonder, is this kind of living realistic?

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 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. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

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. 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 (Romans 12:9-21).

Real love should shape our relationships with one another in the family of God

Believe it or not, I have a 17-point sermon today! To help me and all visual learners, I'm going to use a prop. Here is a large stock pot. In verses 9-16 Apostle Paul gives us 11 fresh ingredients needed for the recipe of real love in the church. He'll then give us 6 more ingredients for showing love outside the church. Let's start by adding the first ingredient to the pot.

Real love is sincere

Paul starts by writing a headline and the rest of the chapter is a description of real love that's sincere. The word for love used here is *agape*. Up until this point, all references in Romans to *agape* love have been directed at the love God has for us. But here, the focus is on the kind of love we have for others. *Agape* love must be sincere, genuine, and unhypocritical. Everybody hates fake and phony people. False sincerity is the worse. But, real love is unhypocritical. It's not fake in our dealings with people.

Real love hates evil and clings to good

While starting to talk about love, Paul immediately uses the word hate. It seems a bit odd. But, this means love is not blind. Love is discerning. Love hates evil. The word for hate is a really strong word and is only found right here in the entire New Testament. To hate is to abhor, to be horrified, and to have a vehement dislike of evil. Love abhors evil. So what does God, who is love, hate? Listen to these words from Solomon, "*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*" (Prov. 6:16-19).

Love not only hates, it clings to what is good. The word for cling means to glue, join, and attach. It's the same word Jesus used to describe a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving, being glued to his wife to become one flesh. The Persuaders sung it well, "It's a thin line, between love and hate." In Paul's mind, if there is too much hate, we become judgmental. We need to learn how to hate what is evil in people, but not reject people because of the evil. On the other hand, too much love is mushy and fake. Often times we condone sin because we love the person. They can do no wrong in our eyes. But, that's not real love. This means we cannot love rightly without hating rightly. Do you know what God calls evil and what he calls good?

Real love is devoted to brotherly love

Paul uses another word for love, *philo*, which is brotherly love. The idea is a warm affection shared among members of a family. I have a unique bond and love for my twin brother. But, in the church, I should have that same brotherly love toward others. Paul is saying we should love people as if we were related to them. So, blood is not thicker than water in the family of God! This is hard because we've all been raised in an individualistic society. It's all about us and our needs, not others. But real love is deeply devoted to one another.

Real love honors

Honor means to treat someone or something as valuable and precious. Honor means to respect. It means letting go of your own preferences in nonessential matters. Real love listens with consideration. There is a type of competition Paul has in mind. In the original language he says literally, "outdo one another in showing honor." This means real love puts others first. It doesn't care who gets the credit. The focus is on the needs of others. In marriage, this means we listen to our spouse and are aware of their hopes, joys, needs, and fears. Does anyone need help in that area? I sure do. Does this really mean we should honor all people? If we truly believe we are all made in God's image. That we are all precious to Him. That means each person we meet is worthy of our honor. Real love honors.

Real love passionately serves the Lord

We learned early in Romans that zeal without knowledge leads to fanaticism, especially when it comes to religion. But, zeal is not necessarily a bad thing. Paul says, never lack in zeal but keep your "spiritual fervor." That phrase means to literally boil over with the spirit. Let your enthusiasm for God boil over like hot water spilling out of a pot. This is the opposite of being lukewarm or indifferent. Instead, be passionate, be on fire, be excited, get "lit" about the Lord. We sometimes get annoyed with Christians who always seem happy. Paul says, that's a sign of real love.

More than having passion, real love serves the Lord. The word used there is literally, "serve the Lord as a slave." That means the only thing that will keep us passionate and excited is our service for the Lord. This is talking about kingdom work. We are all ministers. We are all supposed to use our gifts to build up the Body, the church. The problem in the Bay Area is we are enthusiastic about our jobs and lukewarm about serving the Lord. And then we wonder why we don't have much passion for God.

Real love is joyful in hope, patient in trouble and faithful in prayer

Real love rejoices in hope. What's our Christian hope? It's the future hope of Jesus coming back to redeem and renew our broken world. Because we can rejoice in hope we can also be patient (persevere) in affliction (tribulation), whatever its form or difficulty. In tribulation we are driven strong toward prayer to God.

Real love keeps our hope focused on the Lord's return, is patient through trials, and address it all in prayer.

Real love shares and is hospitable

Real love is generous. Real love combines both feeling and action. Love in the NT is almost always an action, not a feeling. The word for "share" is the same word for fellowship. To share is not just to write a check. It's to get close and enter into relationship with people. We are to share our homes, our money, and our things to those who need them. We don't just share or practice hospitality with those we like and know well. It's really interesting that the word for hospitality brings in the idea of a "love of strangers." Hospitality was really important in that day because there were very few Motel 6's. And like today, those places were dangerous and seedy. So, it was essential for Christian people to open their homes to travelers. Real love even pursues people to be hospitable to. This was such a common practice in the early church, one that is sadly missing today. Acts 2:42-45 says, *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."* Real love is not that radical, is it?

Real love blesses

To bless is to ask for a bestowal of special favor from God. When you bless someone you are calling down God's gracious power on them. Real love blesses even when persecuted. No doubt Paul is thinking about the teaching of Jesus who told us not only to "bless" those who curse us, but also to "pray" for them and to "do good" to them. I think this means we don't go around bad-mouthing people behind their backs. Instead you speak well of them to others. Anyone convicted of that? I am. The other day I got honked at and bad mouthed for trying to merge into a lane of traffic. Real love says, "God bless you" when you get the bird on the 101. Try that this week!

Real love rejoices and mourns

Real love is sympathetic. It's never aloof from other people's joy or pain. Real love celebrates when there is a party and cries when there is pain. Men, we are especially terrible at this. This means we need to learn how to adjust to people's moods. When someone comes into your office depressed, love doesn't blow it off and pretend nothing's happening. Love doesn't say, "What's wrong with you?" Or "Why are you always so needy?" Paul says adjust yourself. When someone is happy, when they get the promotion or that new car, be happy for them too! When someone is hurting, hurt with them too.

Real love lives in harmony with others

Real love is accommodating. The word harmony means to give careful consideration to something. To set one's mind on, be

intent on, and to live in agreement with. To live in harmony with others doesn't mean you have to agree with them, but it means you seek to understand before you are understood. Real love listens and doesn't pick fights. It finds common ground without sacrificing truth. Real love is a peacemaker.

Real love is not conceited

Real love is humble. Paul is saying, "Don't be a snob!" Real love goes against the culture of our day and associates itself with people who are not like us and people who are not in your "tribe." Once you come to understand and embrace God's love for you, it's almost like you are compelled to be around people in the eyes of the world who have less than you. Real love is even willing to take risks to embrace them. It sees everyone as people to love. Real love makes genuine friends with the poor and marginalized. Paul put it this way in Philippians 2:3, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves."*

Ok, so that's the first 11 ingredients to real love. The focus has been on our relationships within the church. We all know that the church is supposed to be a place like that, where love is evident all over the place. But, sadly, many people come to church hoping to find a place of real love and instead it's cold, legalistic, and depressing. I'm so proud that our church isn't like that! Sure, we have work to do, but thank God we are trying to be a loving community of faith.

Real love should shape our relationships with our enemies

In these last 5 verses, Paul now shows us how Christians should respond to a non-Christian world. Tomorrow morning you'll be back at your jobs, your school, and your neighborhood, and Christian love should be evident there as well. Paul gives some very practical help on this. He throws six more ingredients into the pot.

Real love does not seek revenge

Real love doesn't try to get even. It doesn't get back at people. It doesn't plot ways to hurt those who've hurt you. Jesus told us what to do, *"Bless those who persecute you."* So we don't wish harm to come on those who hurt you. Instead we bless them.

Real love seeks to do what is right

Paul tells us to "Be careful." The idea is to have a vision to do what's right. Real love looks past the offense to see what good can be done. Real love doesn't blow up, it's not passive aggressive and it's not reactive. Instead real love is careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

I read a funny story this week about some officers during the Korean War who rented a house for themselves and hired a Korean boy to work for them. He was a cheerful, happy soul, and they were young and had a lot of fun playing tricks on him. They would nail his shoes to the floor, and they would put water up

over the door so that when he pushed it open the bucket would fall on him. They played all kinds of tricks, but he always took them in such a beautiful and good humor way that they finally became ashamed of themselves. They called him in one day and said, "We've been doing all these mean things to you and you have taken it so beautifully. We just want to apologize to you and tell you that we are never going to do those things again." He said, "You mean no more nail shoes to floor?" They said, "No more." He said, "You mean no more water on door?" They said, "No more." "Okay then," he said, "no more spit in soup!" That's real love!

Real love seeks to live at peace with everyone

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. That begs the question, is it always possible to live in peace with **everyone**? Not always. We need good boundaries with certain people. But, it's possible to do your part. Often times I find myself counseling someone who has some deep relationship problems. Maybe their marriage is on the brink of divorce or they haven't talked to their best friend for months. Whatever the relationship issue, I try to get that person, who is asking for my help, to focus on how they contributed to the problem. I tell them to think about the entire problem as a pie, and the pie represents all the issues. Then I'll ask, what is **your** piece of the pie? How have you contributed to the mess? You can't fix them or change the situation, but you can focus on you. You know what I've found? It's really hard to get people to do that. "As far as it depends on you..."

Real love leaves room for God's wrath

We are told again not to take revenge, but in this command there is a little twist. Paul tells us why we shouldn't seek revenge. Instead of revenge, leave room for God's wrath. This means that God will have the final word. That God is the just judge and when he returns, he will call everyone to give an account for how they lived. You are not the judge or the jury. Real love ultimately leaves all judgment to God. I love what Billy Graham said years ago, "It is the Holy Spirit's job to convict, God's job to judge and my job to love."

Real love treats enemies the same way as strangers

Some of you are thinking, "What if someone hits me, do you expect me to just sit there and do nothing?" Oh no. There is something you can do. Paul tells us in verse 20, *"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink."* That's our job. Why? Because in doing this, "you will heap burning coals on his head." This doesn't mean you get to burn people with hot coals! The coals are meant to heal, not inflict pain. In the ancient world if your fire went out, it was embarrassing. You would need to borrow coals from a neighbor. The borrowed coals were placed in a clay pot and carried home on your head. So, it's a word picture of humbly serving your enemy

with good deeds. The idea is that their shame may turn into repentance. Hopefully they will see how loving you are and they will be ashamed of how they treated you and change their ways. Jesus gave us the ultimate example of this on the cross, didn't he? On the cross Jesus didn't retaliate. Instead he said, "**Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.**" (By the way, this isn't saying you shouldn't defend yourself against an attack, or protect your home or family. There is a huge difference between protection and retaliation.)

Real love overcomes evil with good

And finally, we come to the last ingredient of real love. It's really a summary of the entire chapter, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." The word overcome is a military word that means to overpower. Love overpowers evil! So, if we repay evil for evil, then we have given ourselves over to evil and are defeated. If you hate the person who has wronged you, that person has won. Instead we are peacemakers, we leave all judgment to God, we love and serve our enemies, and in doing so, we win them over to love.

Years ago Ray Stedman shared a great story about this, "I was reading one day a story about a boy who was in the army. He was a Christian and had formed the habit of praying beside his bed before he went to sleep. He kept up this practice in the army, but he became an object of mockery and ridicule to the entire barracks. One night he knelt to pray after a long, weary march. As he was praying, one of his tormentors took off his muddy boots and threw them at the boy, one at a time, hitting him on each side of his head. The Christian said nothing about it, and just took the boots and put them beside the bed and continued to pray. But the next morning, when the other man woke up, he found his boots sitting beside his bed, all shined and polished. It so broke his heart that he came to that boy and asked him for forgiveness. That led, after a time, to that man becoming a Christian. This is what Paul means when he says you overcome evil with good. As Abraham Lincoln once said, 'The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him your friend.'"

If you haven't realized it yet, living like this is not easy! That's why Paul calls it a "living sacrifice." It's countercultural. It's not normal. It's not even natural. That's why we need help. We cannot obey these instructions without a source of love greater than our own. That source of love is Jesus. Ultimately, real love is loving like Jesus. Real love can only come from the power he gives us to love. In Romans 5:5, Paul says, "**And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.**" The Word of God tells us what to do, but the Holy Spirit gives us the power to do it.

How can we love people we don't like and yet still be "sincere"? This is where the power of the gospel comes in. This is another pot, the pot of the gospel. The gospel is the life transforming message of Jesus Christ. The gospel says we are not loved by God because we deserve his love. We are loved because Jesus died for us when we were unlovable. This means you can't love like Jesus on your own. If you don't have a personal relationship with Jesus, if you are not growing in your understanding of the gospel, then you can't love like him. You can try to be nice and moral, but you'll end up being fake.

But, as you come to embrace the fact that you are just as messed up as your enemy, you'll be humbled and softened. As the Holy Spirit works in your heart you'll be able to draw from his resources and practice real love. The gospel shows us that God has been patient with you, that we are just as lost and sinful as anyone else. And it's in the gospel we find a love that now lives in us. That's the secret to any relationship. The power to love people comes from the gospel—Jesus in us, the hope of glory. That means we are to live as Jesus did and love as Jesus loved. Can you imagine what would happen in the Bay Area if Christians would begin acting this way? How would this kind of love impact your marriage? Your parenting? Your friendships? And all your relationships?

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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Catalog No. 1418-26N