

Genuine Love
Romans 12:9
53rd in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – Sunday, January 14, 2007

Introduction – Please turn to Romans 12:9-21.

I doubt that there is anything in this passage that is difficult to understand. There are no big interpretive questions, no instances where we scratch our heads and wonder what Paul meant. At the same time I don't think there is anything in the passage that is necessarily easy to do.

I'd like us to look at Philippians 1:9-11. This passage reveals a prayer for the Christian people in Philippi, and he asks that their love would increase – “abound more and more” – but not in ways that we might normally think. Paul is praying that their love would be characterized by increasing knowledge and discernment. And it is important that we see that because love relates to more than other people. Paul is not just interested in *who* we love and *how* we love, he is interested in *what* we love, and in making sure that we understand that what we love has an impact on what we are like.

When we look at the rest of Romans 12, we should keep this in mind. Who we love and what we love has bearing on:

- Our relationship to good and evil.
- Our relationships within the church.
- Our commitment to serving God, including times when things are not going well, and
- Our relationships with those outside of the church, including people who oppose or mistreat us because of our faith.

While there is a unifying theme to this section, Paul has not followed a logical outline. For the purposes of teaching this section, though, I would like to look at what he writes about the categories in front of us, and ask God to help us learn not only how to love, but what to love.

Pray

About Love

1. What is love?

In our cultural understanding, when we talk about love, we talk about emotion. When we say we love someone, it means that we feel something for them, or that we regard them as being important to us. We use love to explain a depth of feeling or opinion toward inanimate things as well. We love foods, we love sports, we love kinds of music, and we love geographic locations. And love certainly has an emotional component to it. But biblical love is more than that.

When we understand what the Bible says about love, we find out that love involves commitment, a decision. Love is a decision that I make to regard someone or something as being of value, and to demonstrate that in the way I treat them (or it). That's not a dictionary definition, but it works here.

That's why God can tell us to love other people because we can choose to do that even when we don't feel it. That choice is the heart of a marriage relationship. I was sharing that aspect of love when I challenged my nephew and his bride the other week. You may have times when you feel like strangling your spouse, but you choose to love them. Similarly, there may be times when your children's behavior makes you contemplate selling them to gypsy's, but you choose to love them in spite of how you feel.

Saying that love is a decision or a choice or a commitment is not rocket science, but it is certainly neglected in our culture with its emphasis on feelings and emotions. Therefore we need to understand what when God tells us to love someone or something, he is not just telling us to feel toward them. In fact, the decision to love may fly in the face of how we do feel.

2. Why is love such an emphasis in the New Testament?

I should broaden that, perhaps, to ask why love is such an emphasis in the Bible. Some people think that the Old Testament is about law and the New Testament is about love, but that is not an accurate generalization. It is true, though, that there are more admonitions and encouragements to love in the New Testament. Love is the subject of some of the passages most familiar to us:

- But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, Matthew 5:44, ESV
- "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16, ESV
- A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. John 13:34, ESV
- Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends. John 15:13, ESV
- But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, Galatians 5:22, ESV
- Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:1-2, ESV
- Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:8, ESV
- Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 1 John 2:15, ESV

And who can forget the great love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13?

Again, why is this such an emphasis? The reason is that love is a foundational virtue. Matthew records this interaction between Jesus and one of the Pharisees:

³⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.* ³⁵ *And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.* ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”* ³⁷ *And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.* ³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* ⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* Matthew 22:34-40, ESV

That is why Paul says, in Colossians 3:12-14

¹² *Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,* ¹³ *bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.* ¹⁴ *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* Colossians 3:12-14, ESV

Love is the essential Christian virtue. Which is why Paul begins a discussion of relationships by telling us about love. And he says that love must be genuine.

3. What does Paul mean when he says that love must be genuine?

I think that in these simple words lie one of the most difficult commands in the Bible. We would be more comfortable if Paul had said, “act as if your love was genuine,” because we that seems to be within our reach. We could go to Used Car Salesman School and take the class in “Making the Customer Think That You Really Care.”

But that’s the precise thing Paul does not want. In the Greek language of Paul’s day there was a word, *hypókrisis* (*u-PO-krees-is*), from where we get our word “hypocrite.” In ancient Greek, the word hypocrite identified someone who was an actor, someone who pretended to be someone else. By the time we get to Paul’s day, the use of the word was used in its moral or character sense – someone who was pretending or who was insincere.

But Paul wants us to be *anupókritos*. As one language reference says, *Originally it meant inexperienced in the art of acting. In the NT, it came to mean one without hypocrisy or pretense, unfeigned, genuine, real, true, sincere.*¹ So pretending or acting like our love is genuine won’t work. It is not what God tells us to do. So how on earth do we pull that off?

If we can use my definition of love as a decision that I make to regard someone or something as being of value, and to demonstrate that in the way I treat them (or it), we

NT (New Testament)

¹Zodhiates, S. (2000, c1992, c1993). *The complete word study dictionary : New Testament* (electronic ed.) (G505). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

will find the “how” as we go through the rest of this book. Because Paul is not saying, “Feel love for your brothers.” He says, “Love your brothers and here is how.” He is not saying, “Feel love for those who mistreat you.” He says, “Love those who mistreat you, and here is how.”

And most of us – probably all of us – have a lot to learn about how to love.

Conclusion

Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” So in the weeks that are ahead, we’re going to learn how to love. I’m going to learn it because I need to learn it. And the same is true of you.