

***A Life of Love***  
*Romans 12:9-13*

A couple summers ago I read Eugene Peterson's memoir. In that book he tells about his friendship with a man named Willi. When Eugene was in seminary preparing to be a pastor, he served at a church in NYC where Willi was the janitor. Willi's passion was painting. They struck up an honest friendship, and Eugene soon found out that Willi had great hostility toward the church. Willi had grown up in Nazi Germany and had seen the church capitulate to Hitler and the Nazis. Because he liked Eugene, Willi warned him against becoming a pastor; he said that the church would have an evil, corrupting influence on him. He said that churches destroy pastors.

After a couple months, Willi asked if he could paint a portrait of Eugene. On Friday afternoons Eugene would sit there for an hour while Willi painted. But he would never let Eugene see the painting. One afternoon Willi's wife walked in and saw the painting; her comment was "*Krank! Krank!*" ("Sick! Sick!") She was upset because Willi was painting Eugene as a sick, old man even though he was in his 20s. Willi's explanation was, "*He's not sick now, but that's the way he will look when the compassion is gone, when the mercy gets squeezed out of him.*" When he presented the painting to Eugene a couple of weeks later, he gave this explanation:

"I told [my wife] that I was painting you as you would look in twenty years if you insisted on being a pastor. Eugene, the church is an evil place. No matter how good you are and how good your intentions, the church will suck the soul out of you. I'm your friend. Please, don't be a pastor."

Eugene kept that painting in the closet of his study for 45 years as a warning/prophecy of what he would look like if he ever lost his compassion for people.

My experience and my theology are very different from Willi's. But I fully agree that the church will be deadening (instead of life-giving) to pastors and everybody else if our lives and our relationships aren't marked by compassion. Paul's great exposition of love in 1 Corinthians 13 supports this. Paul taught that it is possible to do all sorts of good things without love - things like using your spiritual gifts, having knowledge and faith, giving to the poor. In 1 Corinthians 13:2 he wrote:

2 If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Our love for others isn't some minor or optional issue. Whether or not we love each other is an essential issue when it comes to our health as the body of Christ. Paul concluded the chapter by writing, "faith, hope, and love, these three remain; but the greatest of these is love." There's a sense in which love is the greatest virtue. Faith and hope obviously aren't unimportant; but the greatest of these is love.

Today's passage, Romans 12:9-13, describes "a life of love" - the type of life that we will live if loving others is our priority. I'm not sure if I've ever preached a passage quite like today's passage in terms of its structure. These five verses contain fourteen rapid-fire exhortations. Most scholars agree that the first one in verse 9 serves as a banner over all the rest: "Let love be without hypocrisy" or "Love must be sincere/genuine." The following thirteen commands explain ***the type of life that is compatible with genuine love*** for God and love for others. Paul keeps circling back to various aspects of love in these verses; he will speak of brotherly love, honoring one another, meeting others' needs, and practicing hospitality. And so we understand that Paul is describing the type of life that is compatible with a commitment to genuine love.

We'll consider this entire passage, but I doubt you'll walk away from this message with all fourteen of these commands at the front of your mind. Actually I'd encourage you to focus in on one or two of these commands that are especially important for you given ***your*** life and ***your*** circumstances right now. Generally speaking it's more fruitful to a laser focus on one or two specific ways your love might grow than to have a vague commitment to be more loving. As we go through this passage pay attention to the specific commands that grab your attention.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we invite You to impress upon each of us the specific aspects of love that we need to cultivate. We admit that our love is inconsistent at times; our love is weaker than it should be at times. We ask You to show us specific ways that our love needs to grow.

***Sincere (unhypocritical) Love. (Romans 12:9)***

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

The NIV translates the first phrase, "Love must be sincere." The term Paul used for love wasn't a commonly used term in his day: *agape*. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek (the Septuagint), *agape* appears only 19 times. But Paul used the term 75 times in his writings (116x total in the NT). It's hard to give a precise definition of *agape* because it is so comprehensive and nuanced. The term was used of the love God shows us and therefore the love that we are to show others. This is at the heart of the NT ethic: we love others with the same love that we've experienced from God. Love is so integral to the experience of knowing God through faith in Jesus Christ that John wrote this in 1 John 4:7-8:

7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

At its core love means being devoted to others' well-being; if you love people you want what is best for them. Specific actions toward them will vary depending on the circumstances, but love wants the best for other people. John says that "love is from God." We love others because God has loved us; He did the very best thing possible for us by sending His Son to die for our sins. A Christian is someone who has experienced

this love from God and who in turn shows that same love to others. Love is so essential that John writes, “The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

In Romans 12:9 Paul acknowledges that love can be compromised in different ways (“Let love be without hypocrisy.”). Love can become hypocritical or insincere. In other words, a person can be “loving” but not be fully committed to others’ well-being. Insincere love could be intentional or unintentional. The rest of the passage will fill out what it means to have sincere/unhypocritical love.

This suggests that learning to have sincere love is something we need to pursue. Given the influence of the the world, the devil, and the flesh (the “unholy trinity”), we need to learn how to love without hypocrisy. Instead of thinking, “Love? I learning how to love other people a long time ago. . .” we should think, “Learning to love is a lifelong pursuit.”

With that in mind, let’s consider the other exhortations in this passage. I’ve grouped them under five headings/categories for sake of clarity. Paul is talking about the type of life that is consistent with sincere love. Again, try to identify one or two of these commands that are most relevant for you right now.

***Evil and good.*** (Romans 12:9) In verse 9 the second and third commands are two sides of the same coin:

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

On the one hand, we should ***abhor*** or ***hate*** what is evil. This is the only time this term for hate is used in the New Testament. It is a strong, even extreme, term. This is a basic aspect of holiness: we are to hate what God hates. Evil is anything that is contrary to the will of God. Honestly, I don’t always think in terms of “hating what is evil.” I know I’m supposed to avoid what is evil, but ***hating evil*** is more decisive and resolute. It’s appropriate to hate the evil we see in the world and in other people; but to grow in love we need to hate the evil we see in ourselves. If we hate the evil that tempts us, we’re more likely to pray as Jesus advocated in the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 6:13), “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Perhaps you can identify ways in which you have been tolerating evil in your life instead of hating it. As you know, tolerating evil (or sin) will siphon off your spiritual strength and will compromise your ability to love as you should. Is there some manifestation of evil that you need to learn to hate?

As we hate what is evil, Paul says we are to “cling to what is good.” Since God is good, this is a challenge to be committed to the will of God. Instead of holding onto God’s will loosely or tentatively, we are to ***cling*** to what is good. This is the same term used in Matthew 19:5 when Jesus said, “. . . a man shall leave father and mother and cling to his wife.” Can you identify ways in which you need to be more committed to an area of obedience or virtue? an area of obedience that you’ve considered optional? As we cling to what is good, our love will grow.

**Devotion and honor.** (*Romans 12:10*) In verse 10 Paul challenges us to be devoted to one another and to honor one another. This suggests that we be very intentional in our love within the body of Christ.

10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;

Most of you already know the Greek word Paul uses here for “brotherly love.” What is the “city of brotherly love”? “Philadelphia” means brotherly love. Since the church is “the household of God,” we are to treat each other as family - as a healthy family, that is. In a healthy family brothers and sisters would do anything for each other as long as they live. That’s the type of devotion Paul is urging. In a church the size of Faith, you obviously can’t have this type of devotion to everybody else in the church. But there should be a few others (friends, life group members) to whom you’re devoted in brotherly love.

As well, Paul writes, “give preference to one another in honor.” The ESV translates this line, “Outdo one another in showing honor.” What is it that makes you feel honored? What makes you feel noticed and valued? One person would say, “When someone addresses me by name I feel honored.” Another, “When someone follows up a conversation with a phone call or email or text I know they value the relationship with me.” You could begin honoring others in the same ways that you would want to be honored. We live such busy lives that it’s hard to slow down long enough to honor each other. But this is the type of thing that could really influence the culture of a church or a family or a workplace.

**Diligence and fervency in service.** (*Romans 12:11*) The first two exhortations in verse 11 complement each other; the first is negative and the second positive.

11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

In the first phrase Paul is warning against being lazy when it comes to pursuing God. The ESV translates it, “Do not be slothful in zeal.” Like everything else in our lives that matters, intensity and effort are important. The New Testament doesn’t advocate living our lives in a frantic, chaotic way; but it does advocate being intentional and disciplined about things that matter. Can you think of ways that you’ve become spiritually lazy? Such slothfulness will dull your love for others.

By contrast, he tells us to be “fervent in spirit.” While some take this to be a reference to the Holy Spirit, I agree with those who understand Paul to be talking about the human spirit. I think he’s urging the opposite of being spiritually lazy; he’s urging us to be enthusiastic or energetic in spirit. This isn’t a matter of temperament or personality. Introverts and extroverts can be equally “fervent in spirit.” They might express their fervency differently, but they each have an intensity and intentionality about seeking God.

The final phrase in verse 11 is probably meant to qualify the second. In our fervency and enthusiasm, we are to be “serving the Lord.” Paul was in Corinth when he wrote this letter to the Romans; we know from 1 Corinthians that they had a hard time avoiding the excesses of associated with enthusiasm; they were very unhealthy. It may be that Paul had them in mind when he urged the Romans to make sure they were serving the Lord. My observation is that people who devote themselves to serving God remain healthy in this respect. When you come to worship or when you go to life group (or another gathering of believers) are you thinking only of yourself and the benefit you hope to receive or are you looking for ways to serve the Lord? When you do your work, are you doing it “unto the Lord”?

**Hope, perseverance, and prayer.** (*Romans 12:12*) These three exhortations speak to the issue of longterm, steady faithfulness. Instead of growing discouraged and cynical and giving up, Paul urges this:

12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

Hope is our rock-solid confidence that God will deliver on everything He’s promised. That hope/confidence can and should fill us with joy. That’s why Paul wrote in 5:2 that “we exult in hope of the glory of God”: we have a confident, joyful expectation that one day the glory we lost at the fall will be restored. We celebrate ahead of time that God will one day finish what He has begun in our lives. Instead of be dejected over the future, we “rejoice in hope.”

This perspective changes the way we approach “tribulation,” the troubles we face in this life (especially those we face because we are following Jesus). Instead of giving up and becoming bitter people, we persevere. We fix our eyes on Jesus and endure our lesser troubles the way He endured His greater troubles. Through everything, we are “devoted to prayer.” Instead of praying when it’s convenient or when we feel like it, we devote ourselves to prayer. Prayer is one of the most tangible ways that we express our faith. In prayer we ask God to meet our needs and accomplish His will in our lives and in the lives of those we love.

Without hope, perseverance, and prayer we won’t love each other well; we won’t have anything to offer each other. Hope, perseverance, and prayer will fuel our love for each other.

**Sharing and hospitality.** (*Romans 12:13*) This last pair of exhortations focuses on loving people in tangible, material ways.

13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

The term translated “contributing” is often translated “sharing,” usually in connection with sharing material goods. In Ephesians 4:28 Paul wrote that one reason for working and earning money is so that you “will have something to share with one who has need.” This is a basic principle found throughout Scripture: those who have more have a

responsibility to share with those who have less. Here Paul is specifically urging us to share to alleviate the needs of the saints (other believers).

Paul adds, “practicing hospitality.” The term hospitality represents yet another form of love: literally “love of strangers.” When you practice hospitality, an outsider becomes an insider; a stranger becomes part of your family. In the first century hospitality was critical for the spread of the gospel. Hotels were expensive and often characterized by immorality. Practicing hospitality meant welcoming traveling Christians into their homes and treating them as family. In our day hospitality can take that a similar form (welcoming people into your home); few things communicate acceptance and relationship like having someone into your home to eat your food. But hospitality can take place in many different contexts. However it happens, hospitality turns strangers into family.

Some of you really excel in sharing and hospitality; people feel welcomed into your lives and into the body of Christ through your words and actions and invitations. Perhaps others of you have never considered that God might use you to turn guests into family or to meet tangible needs. Perhaps this is an aspect of love God wants you to test-drive in coming weeks.

There you have fourteen rapid-fire exhortations that describe a life of love, a life that is compatible with loving God and loving others. Can you identify one or two that are most relevant to your life right now? I suspect that some of you are “locked in” on something in this passage; you’re excited about learning to hate what is evil or to honor those around you or to turn strangers into family. I also suspect that this list might seem overwhelming to others of you. If so, I’d encourage you to consider this passage from God’s perspective. I think God would say to us, “This is the type of love I have for you. I am urging you to show each other the same love that I continually show you. This is the very best life you can live.” These exhortations are good news, not bad news.

In Philippians 1 Paul recorded a very specific, insightful prayer. He prayed that the Philippians would grow in their capacity to love.

9 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.