

A LESSON IN LOVE - Part I
ROMANS 12:9-21

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

M.I. GODLY LOVE IS THE GLUE THAT HOLDS GOD'S FAMILY TOGETHER. GODLY LOVE IS THE FERTILE GROUND IN WHICH SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, AND RESOURCES CAN GROW AND MANIFEST THEMSELVES. GODLY LOVE IS THE CHARACTERISTIC THAT SEPARATES HIS PEOPLE FROM UNBELIEVERS. GODLY LOVE IS NOT NATURAL. IT IS SUPERNATURAL.

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Let me take a moment to remind us where we are in the book of Romans because I think the context in this morning's passage is just as important as the passage itself.

Chapter 12 started out by exhorting us to offer our bodies as holy, living, and pleasing sacrifices to God. Since Jesus gave His body to redeem us and to make us a community, then it is our logical response to offer our bodies back to Him in love and for the service of His community.

We learned that the way we do this is by identifying our spiritual gifts, talents and resources, and then we use them to build up one another. This is the real meaning of church. Church is not a building or an organization; church is the community of believers centered on Jesus Christ.

The second concept we came across in chapter 12 was that we are not to allow the world to squeeze us into its way of thinking. Instead our lives are to be transformed by allowing God to renew our minds through godly thinking.

This will become especially important as we start to identify and use our spiritual gifts, talents, and resources. If worldly thinking slips in, then pride, arrogance and a desire to control will take these wonderful gifts that are meant to strengthen us and bind us together, and use them to split us apart and fracture the community.

Renewed thinking, spiritual thinking, and supernatural thinking demand that love and humility guide our use of spiritual gifts. If you don't think that worldly thinking is a problem in the church, then I would challenge you to go back and read Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. Corinth was arguably the most spiritually gifted early church, yet we find that the

people were using their gifts, talents and resources to divide the church. This was a problem from the very beginning.

Let me reinforce that just a bit: If you were to take the three major New Testament texts concerning spiritual gifts, you would find immediately connected to each one of them a love passage.

You know at weddings, we almost always read the I Corinthians 13 love passage. However, if you were to take time to examine the context of that passage, you would notice it falls directly in the middle of two spiritual gifts chapters. The passage is not about marital love, it is about using our spiritual gifts to build one another up. This love passage is a church love passage. God's people are to be characterized by love and humility.

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus also echoes this thought. In chapter 4 he lists some spiritual gifts and then immediately follows it up with an exhortation to love, humility, and unity.

And that brings us to today's passage. Paul just got through describing some of the spiritual gifts, and now he attaches this love passage to ensure we know how God's transformed people use their gifts, talents, and resources.

Sometimes I think we get the wrong idea of what love is because we have been confused as to how the world has defined love for us, this morning's passage will define love according to God's design.

Let me give you an idea of how people can get the wrong idea. I often frequent this one particular bookstore in which this bubbly clerk Carol works. She loves to refer to the church as the body.

A couple of years ago, you guys had a surprise birthday party for me and bought me a great C.D. player. Further, some of you went into this bookstore to buy me some cards and gift certificates.

The very next Saturday, I went to the bookstore to buy some gifts with the certificates you gave me. I told Carol all about the party you guys gave me and she was deeply moved.

Spontaneously, she exclaimed, “Oh John, I just love your body!” The customers in the store burst into laughter, leaving me there speechless, with a stupid look on my face ... and Carol’s too.

Let’s try to remember one thing; spiritual gifts, our natural talents, and our resources are powerful things. They have potential to be used for great good or great harm.

In today’s passage, Paul is going to quote from a variety of wisdom texts in the ancient world. He will use the Old Testament, as well as other Jewish, Greek and Egyptian wisdom literature. Paul approaches this passage with some basic assumptions where he assumes that as God’s people, we are gifted with many resources. We are rich with spiritual gifts, natural talents and abilities, and material wealth. God richly supplies His church. Second, he assumes that we understand that we as Christians are family. Even though we come from different ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds, we are one family and we all have something to contribute to the health of this family.

Based on these assumptions Paul’s message to us this morning is this: **GODLY LOVE IS THE GLUE THAT HOLDS GOD’S FAMILY TOGETHER. GODLY LOVE IS THE FERTILE GROUND IN WHICH SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, AND RESOURCES CAN GROW AND MANIFEST THEMSELVES. GODLY LOVE IS THE**

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Basically, that is to remind us that we are to use our gifts, talents, and resources to build up one another in love. Love is what holds our family together. Godly love demonstrates that we belong to God. This kind of love is not natural. In fact worldly love is self-centered. Only by God's power can we love the way He wants us to love.

1. LOVE IS GENUINE (V. 9a)

Let's look at some of the things that describe Godly love. The very first phrase of verse 9 states that Godly love is genuine. In order for you to get a flavor of these verses, I need to tell you that there are not very many verbs; they are a bunch of staccato phrases. Like when we were kids and someone would want to call someone out for a fight. They would say something like, "You! Me! The parking lot! After school." That's the flavor of the whole section. I think Paul does this because he assumes the church people in Rome know this stuff and he wants to reinforce it. Now our English texts translate most of this section as imperative commands. That's kind of the idea.

Our English versions translate the first sentence in verse 9, something like, "Let your love be sincere." Actually there are only two words in the Greek, "Love ... genuine." The word love is the usual love that Paul uses to characterize Christians. The word is Agape. It refers to an intimate love. It characterizes love between a husband and wife, a parent and child, or brothers and sisters. This kind of love is to be the sole motivation why we do things in life. We are to love God and one another. Jesus made the Christian life simple. He said, "Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Love one another as Jesus loves us." If we do that, we'll be fine. This kind of love will set us apart from the rest of the world.

But this kind of love must be genuine. The word genuine here is very interesting. It takes a word with a negative connotation, and then negates it. It takes the word hypocrite, and then negates it. If we could translate it into English, it would read, un-hypocritical. You know that the word for hypocrite in Greek also means an actor. Our love towards one another is to be genuine; there is to be no acting. The one group of people Jesus can't stand is hypocrites. We must be sincere with God, with one another, and with ourselves.

2. LOVE IS DISCERNING (V. 9b)

That brings us to a description of this sincerity in the second half of verse 9. Love is discerning. In other words, Godly love is based on honesty and truth, we are to hate evil and love truth. It is easy to get caught up in people who are pleasing on the one hand, or self-gratification on the other. However, true love, genuine love, is based on the principle of pleasing God first, all our actions, everything we do or say, should be looked at through the filter of pleasing God first. If we ask this one question before we do or say something, I think we have a good start at genuine love, "Is what I am about to say or do going to make God happy?" The word picture here is that we are to push evil away from us and cling to and hold on to that which is good.

3. LOVE IS NOT SELF-CENTERED (V. 10)

Verse 10 goes on to say that love is not self-centered. The world tells us that love is pleasure that we get from someone or something. But the Bible defines love as what we give to others. Look carefully at the sentences in verse 10. We are to devote ourselves to one another. When you go to work, does your boss devote herself to you? When you go to the store, do the salespeople devote themselves to your best interest? In fact, can you say that you even know what it feels like to have someone devote them to you? How many of you wives can say, "I

know that my husband has devoted himself to making me happy?” How many husbands feel as if their wives have devoted themselves to making them happy? Here is the problem; we have to get these worldly notions of love out of our heads. Love is not self-centered. The greatest example of love and devotion is Jesus dying on the cross for you and for me personally. That’s devotion. He died to set us free.

I think that most of us come to church each week to get something. We come to learn something from the sermon. We come because we like to sing songs. We come to see friends. But my guess is that not many of us come here with the attitude that we are devoted to the well being of every person here. We don’t have that concept of community in the United States. Our attitude each week in coming to church should be, “I am devoted to hearing God speak to me, and devoted to serving God’s people here in meeting spiritual and physical needs as they present themselves. I am devoted to using all I have to build up this body.”

And how do we do that; by honoring one another above ourselves. Instead of always thinking about me, what I need, what I want, and what I like, perhaps we should start to value other’s opinions, needs and wants above ours.

Just think about this, if you were a stranger, and came to our church, and we as a church devoted ourselves to meeting your spiritual and physical needs, and if you felt like an honored guest, do you think you would come back? Do you think you might be excited about what God is doing in this church? Do you think you would bring other people to church? A church that devotes itself to one another, a church that honors one another, a church that is not filled with self-centered people, but filled with Godly, loving people will be a church that is growing like wild fire. You couldn’t build buildings fast enough to hold all the people.

4. LOVE IS HARD WORKING AND HIGH ENERGY (V. 11)

I really like the next characteristic of love as described in verse 11. Love is hard working and high energy. This is a pretty graphic verse. Literally it reads something like, “Don’t be lacking in fire. Serve the Lord by being set ablaze with fire from the Holy Spirit.” In other words, we often have great ideas, but because we try to do them on our own strength, we fizzle out. People who love the Lord and are serving the Lord are incredibly energetic and positive. In a community, there are two types of people, energy giving or energy draining. If you are self-centered or trying to do ministry out of your own motives or on your own energy, you will ultimately be energy draining to the community. On the other hand, if you have been set on fire by the Holy Spirit, you will give a great deal of energy to give to the community.

But please ... please don’t miss this phrase, about serving the Lord in this verse. There are many churches, and many individuals, that manifest all sorts of spiritual gifts and appear to have lots of energy. They are shouting, crying, speaking in tongues, and fueled by enthusiasm. However, truth must govern and regulate enthusiasm. Oftentimes extremely gifted individuals and churches end up serving and glorifying themselves rather than Jesus. Oftentimes gifted churches end up in a devastating split. High energy and hard work must be governed by a high dedication to glorifying God and Him alone.

5. LOVE IS OPTIMISTIC (V. 12)

Godly love is optimistic according to verse 12. Look at the three characteristics here. Christian love is characterized by joy, patience, and faithfulness. Those of you who study your bibles regularly immediately recognize these as fruit of the Spirit. But please notice how this all works together. Godly people don’t panic because they have a good perspective on life and death; we are to be optimistic because we know the end.

Christians are joyful in hope. Hope in the Bible is never defined as wishful thinking. Hope is what we are looking forward to in the future. Hope is learning to take an eternal view. I am looking forward to the day when I no longer need to struggle with sin. I am looking forward to the day when I can be with Jesus face to face. I am looking forward to the day when I no longer need to struggle with physical, psychological, and spiritual sickness. I am looking forward to the day in which I will spend eternity ... in heaven ... with my Lord and Savior, Jesus. I am looking forward to the day Jesus will come to take me home and give me a new resurrection body. It will happen. It is certain. It is already a done deal in the mind of God. That is the hope that we as Christians are to live with. Paul has already told us that there is nothing in this world or the next that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

That's real hope. And that's why we as believers can be patient in affliction. We live in a sinful, fallen world. Things will go badly. People will treat us poorly. We will experience many disappointments, sicknesses, and ultimately death. However we can be patient because our hope is that God is with us through it all. This world is not our home. And this life is only temporary.

And how do we access all this joy and patience? By being faithful in prayer. I want to throw this out there for you to think about: Prayer is not asking God to do for me what I want, prayer is meant to conform to my will so that it matches God's will. As we allow God to change our minds, He will transform our lives. We will be characterized by joy, patience, and faithfulness.

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6. LOVE IS GENEROUS (V. 13)

Let's go on to describe more characteristics of Godly love. Verse 13 describes love as generous. There was a great need in the early church for hospitality where some people were cut off from their families and friends when they became Christians. They often had no job and widows and orphans had no financial help. We are an inner-city church; we have a lot of needs and all of us face difficult situations at one time or another. We have proved to be a generous church. Please keep it up. You are a very generous community.

Look at the last phrase in verse 13. It says, "Practice hospitality." Actually it would be better to phrase it, "Pursue hospitality." You see in Paul's days, the hotels and the inns were unsafe. They were notorious for being a place you could easily be robbed, beaten, or killed. They were filled with drunks and thugs. Since the church was mostly serviced by traveling teachers and Apostles, it would be important to have them stay in a safe place.

Let's talk about pursuing hospitality here at Devon Church. Remember, the command is not to simply practice hospitality, it is to pursue hospitality. Now I'm going to mess with you a little. Let's talk about the coffee and doughnut hour here after the service. Would you say that you pursue hospitality? Do you look for people who are sitting alone? Do you pursue hospitality by going to them, introducing yourself to them, sitting down with them, and bring them to your table to introduce them to others? Is the coffee hour a time in which you look for people to meet? If not, then maybe the coffee hour is a waste of time. If it's a waste of time, maybe we should get rid of it. Just a thought! We are to pursue hospitality. Look around you. Do you know everyone here? If you don't, then you have an opportunity to pursue hospitality.

Introduce yourself to that person at the coffee hour. Invite someone to lunch or dinner. Devote yourselves to one another. Pursue hospitality.

7. LOVE IS THICK-SKINNED (V. 14)

Here is a quality I'm going to need after messing with the coffee and doughnuts. Verse 14 warns us that love must be thick-skinned. Listen. Because we are all human, we are all sinful. If we achieve this goal of being a tight-knit family, there are going to be times that we get on each other's nerves. There will be times that someone hurts your feelings by doing or saying something unkind. It will happen; I promise. The natural reaction to being hurt is to want to get even or withdraw. That's natural thinking. But we are called to supernatural thinking. We are to exercise Jesus thinking. Remember how this section started. We are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Being a member of any close-knit group requires us to have thick-skin. I know there are times when I will hurt some of you and I hope you will have the thick-skin and the grace to forgive me. I'll ask for your forgiveness in advance, and I promise I will be thick-skinned and gracious when you hurt my feelings.

8. LOVE IS EMPATHIC (V. 15)

Verse 15 describes love as empathic. The very first exercise we do in premarital counseling is learning to be empathic communicators. I'm sure if you were to ask every couple who went through premarital counseling with me, they would say that empathic listening was the hardest and most painful part of the counseling. I am amazed to see how married couples don't really listen to what their partner is saying. Empathic listening requires putting all our agendas, all our self-protection mechanisms, and all our own fears aside to authentically enter another person's world. Les Parrott gives a good illustration of what empathy is. If someone were drowning, basic sympathy would be throwing him a life preserver; but empathy would be us

jumping in the water, thrashing around with him, and then swimming back to safety together. In order to truly rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn, we must be willing to be vulnerable and brave enough to leave the comforts of our world, and enter theirs. By the way, that's one way we honor each other, by entering one another's world.

9. LOVE IS COMMUNITY-ORIENTED (V. 16)

We said before that love was not self-centered. Verse 16 reminds us that love is not something that can happen in isolation or individualistically. Love is community-oriented. Harmony is the way we are to exist in the Christian community. Now please listen very carefully: Oftentimes we make the mistake, and think the goal in the Christian community is for everybody to think and act alike. In musical terms that would be described as unison. Unison is where everybody sings the same note at the same time. That is not our goal. Harmony is our goal and harmony requires different notes to be sung at the same time. Harmony is the blending of different notes into a beautiful sound. The key of blending different gifts, talents, resources, and ideas into a beautiful song, is to be sure that we understand what our common goal is. Our common goal in the church is to glorify God by reaching unbelievers, growing believers to maturity, and building community. If we focus on these common goals and submit to one another in love, we will produce a beautiful symphony.

But look, there are two things, yes even three that destroy harmony. Pride, arrogance, and prejudice can destroy the harmony of a church. If I think that my note is more important than that of others, or if I think my voice is better, then I will sing louder and throw off the balance of the harmony. That is one of the reasons I choose not to use titles like Reverend, Doctor, Pastor, etc. (Joke – If you insist on addressing me by titles, You Holiness or Your Eminence will do.)

Here is what I want you to remember. Each one of us has been given a spiritual gift. We all have been given natural talents and abilities. We all have resources. If we are not using them here at Devon Church, then we are holding everybody else back.

On the other hand, if you are extremely gifted, then you must be careful not to drown others out. Good harmony depends on our ability to hear and blend with others.

We are family. If one of us has success we all enjoy success. If one of us is suffering, we're all suffering. If I have anything, I'm willing to share it with any of you. We are family.

10. LOVE IS DESIGNED TO MAKE ROOM FOR GOD TO WORK
(Vs. 17-20)

I think that this next criterion for love is where most people get stuck in their walk with God. Many people are holding on to grudges, hurts, and anger. They just can't seem to let these feelings go. Please follow closely verses 17-20. Love is designed to make room for God to work. I could and would like to preach a whole sermon on this topic. In fact, I think instead of trying to hurry up and finish this text, it is worthwhile preaching this as a separate message. I'll do that next time we are together. But for now, let me say that when we forgive someone, it frees us up to enjoy life, and at the same time it gives God room to work on that person.

I will finish this sermon next time. But for now, let me remind us that we all have spiritual gifts. We all have natural talents and abilities. We all have resources and assets. All these have been given to us by God and they are meant to be used for the good of all. There are two dangers: First, we can forget that all of these blessings are meant to be used for the common good. If we hide them or don't use them or somehow we come to think that our faith in God is some individual journey, then we are crippling the church by non participation. We are missing your gifts, resources, talents, and abilities.

11. 11. LOVE IS GOD-CENTERED (V. 21)

On the other hand, if we are proud about our gifts, talents, abilities and resources and using them arrogantly, then we are tearing the body apart.

Godly love is characterized by humble, service to God. A Godly church is characterized by love that is genuine, discerning, other-centered, hard working, high energy, optimistic, generous, thick-skinned, empathic, community oriented, forgiving and God-centered people. I don't know about you, but that's a place where I would like to worship. Let me encourage all of us, I think we are very close to achieving this goal as a church. Please, let's never get tired of trying to get better: **GODLY LOVE IS THE GLUE THAT HOLDS GOD'S FAMILY TOGETHER. GODLY LOVE IS THE FERTILE GROUND IN WHICH SPIRITUAL GIFTS, TALENTS, AND RESOURCES CAN GROW AND MANIFEST THEMSELVES. GODLY LOVE IS THE CHARACTERISTIC THAT SEPARATES HIS PEOPLE FROM UNBELIEVERS. GODLY LOVE IS NOT NATURAL. IT IS SUPERNATURAL.**

Today we are celebrating communion. Communion is symbolic of several things. First, it is symbolic of the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Second, it is symbolic of His saving death on the cross for our sins. And third, it is symbolic of who we are and who our head is. We are the Body of Christ. We are the church and Jesus is our head.

Look at the altar and picture the bread and wine as we hold it in our hands. ... Now take a moment and look carefully at the people around you. ... No, take a good hard look.

Now, listen to the words of C.S. Lewis,

“Next to the blessed sacrament (the bread and the wine) your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses.”