

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 23, 2017**

## **CHRISTIAN LIVING 101**

### **Romans 12:9-16**

Relationships, as I said last Sunday, can be messy. And often are. Relationships can be complicated, for the simple reason that people are complicated. Relationships can bring tremendous joy and exhilaration. They can also be the source of deep sadness, disappointment, and pain.

What is true of relationships in life in general is also true of relationships in the church. Even in the church – the body of Christ, the family of God – relationships can be messy. They can be complicated. Why? Because even though Jesus died for us, once for all to save us from our sins, to make us new creatures in Him, and to restore us to a right relationships with God through faith, our sanctification is not yet complete. We are still works in progress. Which means that we still have to deal with the presence of sin in our lives and relationships, and in the world all around us.

For this reason, because we are all relationally-challenged to one degree or another, Paul finds it necessary to give some very specific and practical instructions here in Romans 12:9-16 for living in relationship to one another in the fellowship of Jesus' followers. Depending on how you look at it, there are as many as 20 imperatives for Christian living in these verses. No need to worry, though. I promise this will not be a 20-point sermon! I'm just going to pretty much walk through the passage verse-by-verse.

Just to be clear about what Paul is saying and not saying, he is not saying: "These are the things you must do, this is how you must live, in order to earn God's favor and approval." No. On the contrary, he is saying: "Because of what God has done for you, because Jesus took your sin upon Himself on the cross, because you are the recipients of God's favor – His grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will, because you have received forgiveness and new life through the mercies of God; let your lives be characterized by these attitudes and actions, as a way of showing your love to God and your gratitude to Him."

Do you see the distinction?

### **LOVE MUST BE SINCERE**

In verse 9, Paul gets right to the heart of the matter: "Love," he says, "must be sincere" (NIV). The ESV says: "Let love be genuine." The word Paul uses is the Greek *anupokritos*, which literally means "without hypocrisy." There is such a thing as fake news, as we noted last Sunday, and there is such a thing as fake love. But there is no place for it in the fellowship of God's people in the church. And there is no place for it in our relationships with people outside the church. Our love for one another must be sincere. It must be the real thing. It has to go beyond just words to actions that prove our love is genuine.

“Without hypocrisy.” A driver was pulled over by a police officer, who asked for his license and registration. “What’s wrong, officer?” the driver asked. “I didn’t go through any red lights, and I know I wasn’t speeding.”

“No you weren’t,” said the officer, “but I saw you waving your fist as you swerved around the lady driving in the left lane, and I observed your flushed and angry face as you shouted at the driver who cut you off, and how you pounded your steering wheel when traffic came to a stop near the bridge.”

“Is that a crime, officer?”

“No, but when I saw the ‘Jesus loves you and so do I’ bumper sticker on the car, I figured this car had to be stolen.”

Ouch! “Love must be sincere.” Without hypocrisy. Not just words on a bumper sticker.

In one *Peanuts* comic strip, Charlie Brown’s friend Lucy protested: “I love the world! It’s people I can’t stand.” At times, some of us may feel that way about the church. We may want to shout: “I love the church! It’s the people I can’t stand.” The reality, of course, is that “the people” are “the church.”

John Owen, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century English Puritan, wrote this about the love of Christians for each other: “Let none pretend that they love the brethren in general, and love the people of God, and love the saints, while their love is not fervently exercised toward those who are in the same church society with them. Christ will try your love at the last day by your deportment in that church wherein you are.”

Jesus, you know, said that the quality of our love for one another is the test by which the world outside the church will judge the credibility or genuineness – the sincerity – of our claim to be His disciples. You remember what Jesus said: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

The kind of love Jesus is talking about, which is the same kind of love that Paul says must be sincere, is distinguished by the word *agape*. You probably know that the Greek language has three other words for different kinds of love: *eros*, *philos*, and *storge*. We won’t go into the distinctions between them this morning, except to define the word *agape*. *Agape* love is the kind of love God shows toward us. It is the kind of love Jesus incarnated, modeled, and demonstrated in His suffering and death for us on the cross. *Agape* love is self-giving, sacrificial love that seeks above all what is best for the beloved. It is the kind of love with which Jesus loved – and loves – us. And it is the kind of love that is to distinguish our relationships with one another in the church. Not only with the people in our church family we find it easy to love, but also – and especially – with those we have a hard time loving.

The church is not a place to fake love. It is not a place to try to fool people. It is a place where, with the help of the Holy Spirit at work in us, our love must be sincere. Without

hypocrisy. You don't have to be BFFs with someone in order to love them. You don't have to agree with someone on everything in order to love them. But the command to "love one another" is not negotiable. And if our love for one another is not sincere, then we all need to get down on our knees to confess and repent of our sin. We need to cry out to God for forgiveness. And we need to commit ourselves to loving one another the way Jesus wants us to love.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians said that this kind of love is the all-purpose piece of "clothing" that we must never be without in the wardrobe of Christian virtues (Colossians 3:14). Peter refers to this love when he says that we must "love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22, NIV), "as if (our) lives depended on it." (MSG).

Whatever else people outside the church think of us, we should live out our faith and love one another in such a way that they will sit up and take notice, and maybe even see not only that it is real, but that it is from God.

### **DISCERNING**

In addition to being sincere, our love for one another is to be discerning. That is, we are to be careful to distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong. We are to "hate what is evil" and "cling to what is good" (12:9b). *The Message* says: "Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good." Loving one another in the family of believers doesn't mean that anything goes. Yes, this is a place of grace. And we all need grace. But it is not a place of what Bonhoeffer famously called "cheap grace." We can't close our eyes to sin. We can't embrace wrongdoing and figure that grace makes it all okay.

### **DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER**

In verse 10, Paul says we are to "be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (the word Paul uses is *Philadelphia*, which means "love of brothers"), and we are to "honor one another above (ourselves)."

Among the characteristics of the church in Jerusalem after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost were that the believers there were "devoted ... to the apostles' teaching" – meaning, to the preaching and teaching of God's Word – and they were "devoted to the fellowship" (Acts 2:42). They were devoted to the Word. And devoted to one another. Which is to say, they were all in. They were totally committed. There was nothing casual about their belief in Jesus or their participation in the life of the church.

Paul says our love for one another is to be marked by this kind of devotion: An unwavering affection for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and a desire to honor one another above ourselves. Paul expresses the same kind of thought in Philippians 2:3, where he says: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

## **PASSION**

Verse 11 is a reminder not to let the fire of our passion for God, our enthusiasm for the things of God, or our love for one another grow cold. In the ESV, it says: “Do not be slothful in zeal.” In other words, don’t allow yourself to become lazy or lethargic with respect to God or the fellowship of His people. On the contrary, maintain “your spiritual fervor” as you keep on serving the Lord. As Paul says elsewhere, “Do not become weary in doing good” (Galatians 6:9), because “your labor for the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

## **PATIENCE**

Next, since patience is one of the distinctive qualities of *agape* love, Paul urges us in verse 12 to exercise patience in the various aspects of life. We are to “be joyful in hope” (which involves waiting patiently), “patient in affliction” (or trouble), and “faithful” (or constant) “in prayer,” waiting patiently for God’s answers to the cries of our hearts. We are to be patient with our circumstances, patient with ourselves, patient with one another, and patient as we wait for God’s timing, which is something that not many of us are good at. But the hope we have in Christ *can* produce in us joy, patience, and faithful perseverance in our times of waiting, if we will fix our eyes and hearts on him.

## **GENEROSITY**

Verse 13 is about generosity and hospitality. To love one another sincerely prompts, even compels, us to share generously with those among us who are in need. The verb “to share” is *koinoneo*. The word for “generous” is *koinonokos*. Both have the same root. And both are related to *koinonia*, which refers to the shared life or fellowship of believers in the church. To share in the needs and sufferings of one another, and to share what we have with needy brothers and sisters in Christ, lie at the heart of true biblical fellowship.

## **HOSPITALITY**

Hospitality may not seem like a big deal to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is probably a bigger deal than we think. As a church family we have a beautiful opportunity to “practice hospitality” this week as the Presbytery of the East meets here this Friday and Saturday with folks coming from as far away as Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Our General Assembly Stated Clerk Jeff Jeremiah will be here for part of the weekend, as will Assistant Stated Clerk Ed McCallum. This is only the third time in the history of our church that the Presbytery will have met here at Faith. It is a privilege to welcome and host pastors and elders from the 40 or so churches in our Presbytery. It is a lot of work, too, as I hope you know, since we have been trying to recruit people to help with different aspects of the Presbytery weekend. We want to bless the Presbytery and all who attend the meeting as a way of expressing our love for our sisters and brothers in Christ, and our unity in Christ. Hospitality matters.

But it doesn’t happen just at big events like a Presbytery meeting. Listen to what Max Lucado says about hospitality in his book *Outlive Your Life*:

“Long before the church had pulpits ... she had kitchens and dinner tables. Even a casual reading of the New Testament unveils the house as the primary tool of the church. The primary gathering place of the church was the home. Consider the genius of God’s plan. The first generation of Christians was a tinderbox of contrasting cultures and backgrounds. At least 15 different nationalities heard Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Jews stood next to Gentiles. Men worshiped with women. Slaves and masters alike sought after Christ. Can people of such varied backgrounds and cultures get along with each other?

“We wonder the same thing today. Can Hispanics live in peace with Anglos? Can Democrats find common ground with Republicans? Can a Christian family carry on a civil friendship with the Muslim couple down the street? Can divergent people get along?

“The early church did – without the aid of sanctuaries, church buildings, clergy, or seminaries. They did so through the clearest of messages (the Cross) and the simplest of tools (the home).

“Not everyone can serve in a foreign land, lead a relief effort, or volunteer at the downtown soup kitchen. But [just about everybody can be hospitable.] Do you have a front door? A table? Chairs? Bread and meat for sandwiches? [And maybe a vegetarian option?] Congratulations! You just qualified to serve in the most ancient of ministries: hospitality.

“Something holy happens around a dinner table [or a living room]. In a church (sanctuary) you see the backs of heads. Around the table you see the expressions on faces. In the (sanctuary) one person speaks; around the table everyone has a voice. Church services are on the clock. [Well, not always 😊.] Around the table there is time to talk.

“Hospitality opens the door to uncommon community. It’s no accident that hospitality and hospital come from the same Latin word, for they both lead to the same result: healing. When you open your door to someone, you are sending this message: ‘You matter to me and to God.’ You may think you are saying: ‘Come over for a visit.’ But what your guest hears is: ‘I’m worth the effort.’” (Lucado, *Outlive Your Life*, 55)

That is a powerful message. Hospitality matters because relationships matter. The NIV says: “Practice hospitality.” But the word Paul uses (*diokontes*) might be better translated “pursue.” *Pursue* hospitality. *Pursue* opportunities to extend the ministry of hospitality, not only to build relationships and enjoy fellowship with other believers but to make connections with people who do not yet know Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Some of you are really good at this. For others of us, it is more of a challenge. Maybe it is something that takes you outside your comfort zone. But sometimes it is necessary to go outside your comfort zone for the sake of people who are spiritually lost or confused.

### **BLESS OUR ENEMIES**

Verse 14, with its call to bless our enemies, echoes the teaching and example of Jesus, and is a prelude to verses 17-21, which we will talk about next time.

## **SYMPATHY**

In verse 15, Paul urges us to “rejoice with those who rejoice” and to “mourn with those who mourn.” This is the ministry of sympathy. If we love sincerely and without hypocrisy or fakery, we will choose to identify with one another’s joys and sorrows, successes and failures, and tears and laughter. We will not remain aloof or distant. We will come alongside one another and walk with each other through good times and hard times. It is what love does.

## **HARMONY AND HUMILITY**

Finally, in verse 16, Paul concludes this brief primer on love in the church family with a call to harmony and humility. We are to do everything in our power to “get along with each other” (*MSG*), as long as we don’t compromise with sin. And we are to make sure we don’t act like stuck-up snobs, thinking we are better than other members of the body, or that we know better than everybody else. Pride is just as deadly to love as hypocrisy.

This is *Christian Living 101*. These are the basics, the fundamentals, the essentials of the shared life to which God calls us in the fellowship of His church. Our love for one another – our practical application of these biblical instructions – is an expression of our love and gratitude and devotion to the God who loves us. It is at the heart of what it means to be the church. And, as I said earlier, it is the basis on which the unbelieving world will judge the genuineness of our faith and devotion as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

As Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room after washing their feet: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17).

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.