

# Let Love Be Genuine

*Romans 12:9-21*

Let's play a word association game. [*could be bad*] I'm gonna say a word, and I want you to say out loud the first word that comes to your mind. "Love."

Most of you probably didn't think, "Brain." But yet, that's in fact what we just used to talk about love. You didn't feel a word association, you thought it. When I say, "I love ice cream," my heart has very little to do with that decision.

Does *love* have more to do with your *heart* or with your *mind*?

[This week, my son, Jacob did his first personality test [Myers-Briggs] – if you know Jacob, you know that he is smart, but he's also very thoughtful – so it's probably unsurprising to you that Jacob is more a T than he is F – he's a Thinker. Many of you know that I am a strong F – I'm a Feeler – but you wouldn't know it from many of sermons, certainly not this one. I love the life of the mind. And don't you know that Jacob is not a cold and calculating Thinker – he has feelings too.]

(v.9) "Let love be genuine." What does that [every word] mean? This morning, I want to speak, as simply as I am able, about the complexity of love. Whether you're a cold and calculating Thinker, or you're an up-and-down Feeler, love is complex.

"Let love be genuine." This is a really complicated sentence, for many reasons. Firstly, it's not really a sentence. Grammatically, this first part of our reading, with the entire paragraph, it all seems to point back to (v.5), "we, though many, are one body in Christ." *Sincere love*, whatever that means, points back to the body – love is like the sinew, the connective tissue that holds together the body.

The words in this clause are complicated. *The. Genuine. Love.* What is *agape* love? What does it mean for love to be sincere? If I am sincere, does that make my expression of love true? We sacrifice many things on the altar of sincerity – "I sincerely believe that I am a woman trapped in a man's body, therefore it is okay for me to abandon my wife and children." – (CSL) "We have all heard of people who are in love again every few years; each time sincerely convinced that

‘*this* time it’s the real thing,’ that their wanderings are over, that they have found their true love and will themselves be true till death.” – I don’t doubt the sincerity of these feelings, but at what cost? And is my sincerity the mark of my love?

“Let love be sincere,” Paul says, and then he adds, “Abhor what is evil.” Paul begins this list of exhortations [imperatives] about genuine love with a strong word only used once in the NT – “abhor” – “hate,” “despise” – other words in this word group carry the idea of turning away, of casting out – “abhor evil” – *and* hold fast, cling to, be joined together with good. (v.10) “Love one another with the love that holds a family together.” At the beginning of our reading it feels a little bit like whiplash, “love,” “hate,” “love,” and it gets even more difficult in the rest of the chapter – he goes on to exhort the Romans, “Live within the family of God with love, and even more than that, bless your enemies – even as you love what is good and you hate evil, when someone does evil to you, don’t return evil for evil – release your desire for vengeance, give it to God, “I will repay,” says the Lord – (v.21) Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” [not to mention the complexities of Romans 13 and Paul’s continuing discussion of what loving our neighbor has to do with the government and fulfilling of the law] ...

All of this talk about hating evil and at the same time blessing those who kill you and curse at you – does any of this sound like a discussion about love? Sincere love. What does any of this have to do with love?

(D. A. Carson, 647-648, NDBT) “The expressions ‘love’ and ‘to love’ have a wide range of uses when human beings are the subject: he loves his work; they fall in love; she loves her husband; they make love; he loves woodwork and milkshakes. Similarly, precisely because God is a person who enters into a variety of relationships, the Bible speaks of God’s love in several distinguishable ways.”

### **(1) God is love.**

(1 Jn 4:8) “God is love” is perhaps the most popular statement in the Bible, but what does it mean? At the very least it means that God, in himself, is personal – the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the Father, the Holy Spirit gives this intra-trinitarian love that is in God – Father, Son, Spirit – (Rm 5:5) “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

(John 3:35) “The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.”

(John 14:31) “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”

(John 15:9) “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.”

## **(2) God loves the world.**

(John 3:16–17) “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God is love. When love came down to us, Jesus Christ displayed God’s love for you and for me and for the world, giving himself for us.

(Charles Wesley, *And Can It Be [Amazing Love]*) “He left his father’s throne above, so free, so infinite his grace, emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race.”

Listen, hear the good news – I have in mind teenagers especially this morning – you are absolute mess, so am I – you might be able to hold it together for a few minutes on Sunday morning, but your head and your heart are exploding inside you, and that’s okay – God in Christ delights in you – He loves you, not because you are clean, you’re a mess – He loves you because He is love and he delights to show you his grace – (Rom 5:8) “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

(Judges 7:16–20) And [Gideon] divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars. And he said to them, “Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, ‘For the LORD and for Gideon.’”

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!”

We are jars, broken jars – and when the light of Christ comes into our brokenness, the gospel shines out into the world through us through all of our cracks – God in Christ loves you and died for you in your mess – crush the pot, be broken completely and let the torchlight of the gospel bring you warmth – blow the trumpet of your sin *and* of God’s love for you to the world. This is the love of God that we will hear later in our liturgy as we come to the Lord’s table, “Holy and

gracious Father: In your *infinite love* you made us for yourself; and when we had sinned against you and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent your only Son Jesus Christ into the world for our salvation.” On our knees, in just a few minutes you will hear again these comfortable words, believe it now and again, “God so loved the world.” [this story of light brings us to Jn 3]

### **(3) God’s covenantal love.**

(Jn 3:16–21) “For God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people *loved* the darkness rather than the light because their works were *evil*. For everyone who does wicked things *hates* the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

When the love of God breaks into this fallen world, this light exposes the darkness. And even more than that, it exposes not only that we are in darkness, but that we love the darkness. Over and over again, I was shocked to find how often love *and* hate, love *and* evil go together in Holy Scripture.

(John 15:9–10) As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

(Jude 20–21) But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.

(Romans 12:9) Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

There are many ways to speak about the love of God, because genuine love is deep and personal and complex. In one breath it requires nothing of you, and in the next breath love requires everything, even death. Our holy God loves fully, sincerely, and one way that his love is made manifest in the lives of his beloved is in the obedience of sincere love.

(1 Peter 1:22) Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,

When love breaks into our mess it exposes our broken, twisted loves. In Holy Scripture, love very often is right alongside evil and hatred, and obedience.

Love, sincere love, the true Christian love is complicated. Love and hatred, good and evil, obedience and rebellion, blessing and curse. So where do we go from here?

**Know Jesus, know love.**

Do you want to understand love? There are many ways to speak about the love of God from Holy Scripture, but everyone of them points us to Jesus. **414 times.** That's how many times I picked up my phone last week. Pay attention to Jesus and you will know love. Focus your attention upon Jesus in Holy Scripture and you will not only experience his love for you but you will, more and more, (you will want to) love what he loves.

**Obey Jesus before you feel like it.**

Do you find it more difficult to love political enemies far away from you? Enemy love is hard. "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." If it is easier to love your wife right now, and it is hard to love President Biden, get on your knees and give your vengeance to God in prayer.

Do you find it more difficult to love someone in your own home? Brotherly love is often much harder than enemy love. "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." If you find it easier to forgive those furthest away from you, get on your knees and ask God for patience with those in your home.

**When you fail to love, don't run away.**

We talk about God's love in so many different ways – it can be confusing. But every Sunday, we're invited to consider the obedience of love that Paul outlines in Romans 12. "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ says: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We begin the service with the summary of the law, and every service, we come to confession: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word,

and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.”

Even when Jesus’ law of love exposes our disobedience, don’t turn your face away – “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.” – Come today with sorrow for sin, and run to our loving God, who, for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ, has mercy on you, he forgives you, he delights in you, he loves you, and he will give you everything you need to walk in his ways, with sincere love.