

Displaying the Character of Christ—

An Exposition of Rom. 12:9-21, #2

“Our Love Must Be Morally Discerning”

Rom. 12:9

--CEFC 5/12/19

What do you mean when you use the word "love"?

It's a crucial question, you know, for as one writer put it,

love is a many-splendored thing--

"In tennis, love means nothing;

in marriage, love means everything.

And in between, it can mean anything."¹

I use the same word when I say,

"I love chocolate ice cream"

and "I love my wife."

Does that word really mean the same thing in both contexts?

What about the story-tellers of our culture—

the novelists and the movie makers

who create a lens, a narrative, through which we view the world.

What do they mean when they use the word love?

¹Bruce Shelley, *Gospel*, p. 164.

Love in their eyes is almost always about romance—

Love is cupid's arrow that pierces the heart.

It just a feeling, a mysterious emotion that comes upon you.

And sadly, in our cultural narrative,

love then becomes a euphemism for sex—

as in "making love,"

for "falling in love" almost immediately results in sharing a bed.

And for many, the whole same-sex marriage debate

is summed up in the simple question—

Why should anyone tell anyone else who they can love?

Is that what love is all about?

New Testament scholar Tom Wright suggests,

“The English word ‘love’ is trying to do so many different jobs at the same time
that someone really ought to sit down with it and teach it how to delegate.”²

The ancient Greeks already understood that the one word “love”

could never bear so big a load.

So, as you may know, they had several different words for love.

ΔEro is one-- Ero is a romantic love;

it's the word which we get the term "erotic"—

it's a love of passion and desire.

Then there is filiva—that's a fraternal love;

² *After You Believe*, p. 183.

the love of companionship shared among siblings or friends.

Another is storgh—that's a paternal or maternal love—

that natural and instinctive affection

that parents have toward their children.

That's the love we celebrate on Mother's Day.

But as I mentioned last week,

the word for love Paul uses in our passage in Romans 12 is ajgavph.

There was nothing special about the meaning of the word itself.

It was just a general word for "a warm regard for and interest in another person."³

But words have a way of gaining new meaning with use—

like the word "friend" in this age of Facebook.

The deep significance of the word ajgavph comes

not in the way the Greeks understood it,

but in the way Paul and the early Christians used it.

They filled it with a new and deeper meaning

to characterize their new understanding of what love could and should mean.

ajgavph was the word they used for love

in the light of what God had now revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus said, "**A new command I give you: Love one another,**"

what was new, was not the command to love one another—

That was found in the Old Testament.

³ so BAGD. It was not commonly used in sexual contexts, but it could be (cf. the LXX use of the word in the Song of Songs [2:4,5,7; 3:5,10; 5:8; 7:7; 8:4,6-7], and even of the lustful attraction of Amnon to Tamar in 2 Sam. 13:15).

What was new was the new way that command to love was now to be understood
in light of the way God has revealed his love to us in Jesus Christ.

It's the love of John 3:16—

**"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

Or as Jesus describes it,

"As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).

"As I have loved you"---even to death on a cross.

The cross of Christ provides a new dictionary meaning of the word "love."

In a sense, God has acted it out for us, so that we could understand.

It is as if now, when playing charades,

all you need to do to communicate the word "love"

is to make the sign of the cross.

1 John 3:16--**"This is how we know what love is:**

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."

So, in our passage from his letter to the Romans,

as a consequence of his understanding of the gospel,

Paul is at pains to spell out how Christians are to understand love

ajgavph love--

now that that love has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is important to understand ajgavph love—this Christian love—

as a revealed reality.

It is not a natural love—as romantic or fraternal or parental loves are.

All those loves can point to it in some way;

but this love is distinct.

For God is the source of this kind of love,

for God is love—ajgavph love—

and our love is to be a reflection of his nature as love.

That's why we need to pray for this kind of love,

even as we seek to practice it,

because it has a supernatural quality to it—

enabled by the Holy Spirit of love who now lives in us.

This love is displayed in,

and it is made possible by,

various moral virtues—

things like compassion and kindness and humility and patience—

without which there can be no love.

All these human virtues are in the service of ajgavph love,

which is the sum of them all.

Love is the brilliant white light that captures the whole of the spectrum of colors

that these moral virtues shine forth in human life.

And in the quality of love highlighted this morning

we see its moral dimension in full display.

Rom. 12:9--“**Love must be sincere,**” Paul writes.

“Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

Does it surprise you that the very first thing that Paul says about “sincere love”
is that hates?

Love hates?! How can that be?

Perhaps you've seen those bumper stickers
that I'm sure are meant to take a stab at the Religious Right--
they say, "Hate is not a family value."

Here Paul would beg to disagree.

In Paul's view, authentic, genuine, sincere love must include an element of hatred.

And the word he uses here is a strong one⁴—

it means "to detest," "to abhor," "to loathe."⁵

It includes the idea of rejection, even repulsion,
implying a turning away from something.

“**Hate**” is a strong word.

When our boys were growing up,
we didn't allow them use that word in our house
when talking about people.

They could say they disliked someone,
but they couldn't say they hated them.

But it is critical to note that Paul doesn't say anything about hating people—
even people who oppose you—your “enemies.”

⁴ aÓpostuge÷w

⁵Cf. Dunn, LSJ, SH.

In fact, as we'll see in this passage, Paul will say just the opposite about that

No, Paul says that sincere love must hate evil.

Here Paul uses the strongest word for evil or wickedness in Greek,⁶

and this is its only occurrence in Romans.

Love must hate, it must abhor, it must reject and even be repulsed by, all that is evil.

And instead, love must "cling to what is good."

And that expression "cling to" is also very strong—

It's the same word used of dust that "sticks to your feet,"⁷

or even of a husband who leaves his father and mother

and "joins himself" to his wife.⁸

We are to "grab hold of," "hold on to," and "embrace," what is good.

Because of this, by its very nature, sincere love necessarily involves moral discernment—

it involves an assessment, a moral judgment, about what is good and what is evil,

and more than that,

it includes a movement of the heart away from one and toward the other.

Yes, Jesus said, "**Don't judge lest you be judged**" (Mt. 7:1),

but that certainly didn't preclude the exercise of moral evaluation—

after all, just a few verses later he says,

"Don't give what is sacred to dogs;

and don't throw your pearls to pigs" (Mt. 7:6).

⁶ ponhro/β

⁷ Luke 10:11.

⁸ 1 Cor 6:16,17; also Matt 19:5.

Surely, determining who are the dogs and the pigs
are would require some ethical appraisal.

In Paul's view, love must include this moral evaluation of actions,
without indulging in the moral condemnation of people.

Think about it this way--

If I love someone, and sincerely desire their welfare,
won't I naturally hate all that would destroy them?

I should hate the deadly power of cancer;

I should hate the viciousness of violent crime;

I should hate the abuse of drugs or of alcohol or of sex

that so wrecks people's lives.

Sincere love is no sentimental fantasy,

a blind emotion that feels good about everything and everybody.

This silly tolerance of all things,

except anyone who is intolerant of anything,

which is so flippantly espoused these days is just ludicrous!

Sincere love is morally discerning--

it recognizes that some things are evil and cannot be loved,

and some things are good and must be loved.

What kind of family value would not properly teach a hatred of racism

or the hatred of the violent abuse of women and children?

Susan and I have wonderful neighbors!

Our neighbors two doors down from us have a sign in their yard—

perhaps you've seen one—

It says, "Hate has no home here."

I went by their house to ask them about it, but they weren't in.

Since the sign was written in 6 languages,

I assume it was some sort of protest against what they perceived to be

the angry hostility of some people toward immigrants in this country.

That was the "hate" that they were opposed to.

And that's a good thing.

I wanted to ask them if they hated what those people were doing.

They might hesitate, but they probably would say that, yes, they hated it.

Then I wanted to ask them if they hated those people

who they thought hated immigrants.

I doubt they would say that—

Surely, they would say it was their ideology that was hateful.

That's what they hated.

And that would be fair enough—and I think that's what Paul is saying.

Sincere love hates evil—not evil people,

for, as Paul says later in this passage, this sincere love

to which we are called

blesses those who persecute us

and does good to those who oppose us.

Does that mean, then, to use that old slogan,

that we are to "hate the sin and love the sinner"?

Well, yes, but I don't think that is a very helpful way of putting it.

As far as I can tell, this idea goes back at least to

the great theologian Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century,

who said something very similar.

In a letter addressing a problem of discipline in a nunnery,

Augustine urged Christians to live with "**love for the persons and hatred of the sin.**"⁹

But Augustine knew the human heart very well.

Commenting on Paul's words in Gal. 6 about correcting a brother who has sinned, he writes:

"We should never undertake the task of chiding another's sin

unless,

cross-examining our own conscience,

we can assure ourselves, before God, that we are acting from love. . . .

And if, as often happens, you begin some course of action from love,

and are proceeding with it in love,

but a different feeling insinuates itself because you are resisted,

deflecting you from reproach of a man's sin

and making you attack the man himself—

it were best, while watering the dust with your tears,

to remember that we have no right to crow over another's sin,

⁹ "*cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*", (Letter 211 (c. 424)). The context: "Moreover, what I have now said in regard to abstaining from wanton looks should be carefully observed, with due love for the persons and hatred of the sin, in observing, forbidding, reporting, proving, and punishing of all other faults."

since we sin in the very reproach of sin
if anger at sin is better at making us sinners
than mercy is at making us kind.¹⁰

All of this is simply Augustine's reflections on Jesus' words
about not talking about the speck of sawdust in your brother's eyes
without first taking the plank out of your own eye.

We better be very careful in hating a person's sin
that we do it,
and show ourselves to be doing it,
out of love for the person.

And notice, too, Augustine talks about hating the sin, but loving—not “the sinner,”
but “the person.”

We are to love “the person.”

“Hate the sin, but love the sinner” tends to put the person saying it
on the side of the righteous
who stands over against all those “sinners” out
there.

That's not right—we are all sinners before God.

It is much better, with Augustine, to speak of hating the sin but loving the person.

For we are to treat every person with the dignity that comes
with being created in the very image of God,
whoever they may be,

¹⁰ Augustine in his Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians (57).

and whatever they may have done.

We dare not forget that. /

We are to love, but our love does not dissolve all moral distinctions.

ajgavph love is not a nice or pleasing disposition,

and it is not complacent in the face of wrong.

It hates evil.

As one writer put it, "Whoever does not hate evil does not love good."¹¹

It seems that in some way the Corinthian Christians had failed to see this.

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul seems shocked at the report he had heard

of a case of sexual immorality among the Corinthian Christians that was,

Paul says,

"of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate."

It is a case of incest: "a man is sleeping with his father's wife" (v. 1).

And what was the Corinthians' attitude to this evil?

5:2—"And you are proud!" Paul says with some amazement.

"Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief

and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?"

I agree with one commentator on this episode:

"Genuine love would never join in the mood of self-congratulation or arrogance

concerning tolerance or even warm acceptance of [this] incestuous man."¹²

¹¹ James Edwards on Rm. 12:9.

¹² Thiselton, on 13:6.

This is not love as Paul defines it—

the love that hates evil,
and disciplining that unrepentant man by putting him out of the church
was, in Paul's mind, required as an act of love.

It would demonstrate to that man the serious error of his ways
an error that threatened to lead to his own destruction—
both in this age and in the age to come.

Sincere love hates evil—

It hates the sin, while loving the person.

And the final state of those persons
is something we must leave to God alone.

And the evil we are to hate is not just personal,

it can also be social—
the structural and institutional injustices that hurt people.

The prophet Amos speaks to this—

**“Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts” (Amos 5:15).**

Consider the prayer for social justice found in the Book of Common Prayer
which says that love “makes no peace with oppression.”

Our own Free Church Statement of faith makes this same point—

Article 8—**“God commands us to love Him supremely and others sacrificially,
and to live out our faith with care for one another,**

compassion toward the poor
and justice for the oppressed.”

It is love that ought to compel us to hate the evils of an unjust society,
and in this fallen world there will always be injustices to oppose.

I think of the tragic lingering effects of racism in this country, for one./

But I think the emphasis of Paul’s statement here in our passage
is not about how we act toward other people at all.

It is much more about how we look at ourselves—

Do we hate evil in ourselves?

That’s the first place we are to look—

the plank in our own eyes.

So let’s talk more about this “**evil**” that sincere love must hate.

Significantly, Paul’s assumption here is that evil is real—

it is something that exists outside of our own heads.

There is real, objective evil—

it is not a matter of personal preference—

it is not simply what I, subjectively, don’t like,

as in, “I hate broccoli.”

No, evil has an objective reality—

because the notion of evil is grounded in the very character of God.

Evil is more than just what we think might harm another person

or what may discriminate between people unfairly—
which seem to be the only two moral standards allowed in our culture today.

Evil, as the Bible conceives it, is much bigger than that—

Evil is all that is contrary to the will of God,
for God is the source of all good;
he is the standard of all moral judgment.

Evil is what is contrary to God's design for human flourishing—

it is what spoils his good creation,
it denigrates human dignity,
it violates the ways that human beings are meant to live.
it undermines the social structures that make for ordered living.
it thwarts God's good purposes for human life,
which includes the ways that we are to relate to him as our God.

Evil is transgression of God's law,

it is living apart from him,
it is not treating God as God.

Evil is all that is done out of human pride and arrogance,

and all is done for human glory and not God's glory.

You see, the God who is love also hates—

God hates evil.

He hates all that is contrary to his nature,

for he is holy and righteous and just and altogether good.

Listen to these words from God--

Psa. 11:5 "The LORD examines the righteous,
but the wicked, those who love violence,
he hates with a passion."

Is. 61:8 "For I, the LORD, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing."

Zech. 8:17 "do not plot evil against each other, and do not love to swear falsely.
I hate all this," declares the LORD.

And God especially hates false religion—

religion that deceives and misleads--

especially the idolatry of the nations.

He warns his people Israel as they were entering the land of Canaan--

Deut. 12:31—"You must not worship the LORD your God in their way,
because in worshiping their gods,
they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates.
They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods."

Deut. 16:21,22—"Do not set up any wooden Asherah pole
beside the altar you build to the LORD your God,
and do not erect a sacred stone, for these the LORD your God hates."

But God also hates false religion among his own people—

when Israel's own forms of worship have lost their meaning

because the people have no concern for righteousness—

Amos 5:21--“I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me” (cf. Is. 1:14).

God hates the perversion of his design for sexual relations outside of marriage--
Lev. 18:22--“Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman;
that is detestable.”

That revulsion is expanded in other ways in Prov. 6:16-19—

“There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:
haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.”

All this, God hates.

And the evil that God hates—and which we are to hate—

is expanded by Jesus--

Mark 7:21-23—“For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—
sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness,
envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

This is what the Lord hates,

and that's what love must hate,

if that love is to be the love that comes from God.

For all these things—all these evil things—these immoral things--

they all hinder real love.

Do you see it?—

this necessary connection between moral virtue, the will of God, and love?

Which means that if you are to love other people better

you must become a better person,

a more godly person.

I cannot love my wife and engage in sexual immorality.

I can't love you and lie to you.

I can't love people while I am consumed by greed.

I can't love my co-workers or fellow students

and then gossip about them.

I can't pour myself out in love to other people

when I am arrogantly full of myself in pride.

Love must hate evil and cling to what is good.

That's the way it must work.

But Jesus says,

"it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—...

All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

That's a big problem, isn't it.

If we are to love well, there is something inside each one of us that we must hate—

the evil that flows out of our own hearts—

"For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—

sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness,
envy, slander, arrogance and folly."

There is something deeply wrong with us,

for these evil thoughts lurk in the shadows of our own hearts.

We do not love what we ought to love,

and we do not hate what we ought to hate.

Our hearts are not aligned with the heart of God.

Too often we get things mixed up—

we call evil good, and good evil (cf. Is. 5:20).

For the heart that loves,

the heart that is rightly ordered,

that good heart looks at evil as something that is ugly,

it is something that repulses rather than delights.

But too often we are attracted by evil—

it looks good to us.

But a person who loves with this agavph love Paul is describing here

has, what you might call, "good taste"--

that person has a heart that is drawn to and is attracted by

what is good.

That person sees beauty in goodness.

Love "clings to what is good."

So here is the central idea I want you to grasp this morning—

Real love—the love that Paul has been describing in this glorious passage—

this love will flow out of us

when we see the goodness and the beauty of God's goodness—

God's moral order,

reality as he has designed it to be.

That must be attractive to us,

such that we rejoice with it, we cling to it.

We must want our lives to conform to God's goodness and truth in all its fullness.

A heart filled with that desire

becomes the fountain out of which the decision of the will to love others—

even those who hurt us—

will inevitably flow.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13—

“Love does not delight in evil

but rejoices with the truth” (13:6).

The one who loves with God's love

finds beauty and joy in God's goodness and truth.

Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 119--

“I delight in your decrees;” (v. 16)

“I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.” (v. 14)

“Your statutes are my heritage forever;

they are the joy of my heart.” (v. 111)

“The law from your mouth is more precious to me
than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.” (v. 72)

“Your statutes are my delight;” (v. 24)

This truth, this goodness, of God, was revealed to the psalmist in the law of Moses;
that was enough to bring forth such passion.

But now we have even more reason to rejoice in the goodness and truth of God—
for now, grace and truth have been revealed in a person—
the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said of himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

When Paul says, “loves clings to what is good,” and “love rejoices with the truth,”
he is pointing us ultimately to the source of goodness and truth,
the ground of goodness and truth,
the very embodiment of goodness and truth,
which is found in Jesus.

It is in Jesus that we see what love looks like—
and we will choose to love
to the extent that we think that the life that Jesus lived,
the life that he calls us to,
the life that he promises to give us—
is the life that we really want.

To extent that we believe that he has come to give us life in all its fullness,
that he is the bread of life that satisfies our deepest hunger,
and he is the living water that satisfies our deepest thirst—

as we are drawn to him
and rejoice in knowing his love—
to that extent, we will choose to love as he has loved us.

Yes, love is an action,
but it flows from a feeling—
a disposition of the heart that hates what is evil,
and clings to what is good—
a heart that is drawn to the beauty of Jesus
and wants to become like him.

All our loves become rightly ordered,
only if our highest love, and our deepest joy—
what we are drawn to first and foremost—
is directed toward the truth and the goodness and the beauty
of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. //

Sincere love—the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ—
that love necessarily has this moral dimension to it.
We can't escape it—
and to think that love is just some sentimental feeling
that simply wishes people well,
however they may act or whatever they may believe,
that kind of squishy love is simply out of touch with reality.

Sincere love must hate what is evil cling to what is good
because the love that Paul is expounding here—this agape love is God's love—

the love that has its source in the holy God who is love,
and it is the love that he has shown in the gospel of his Son, Jesus Christ.

On the cross of Christ, God shows that he hates what is evil.

Jesus in the garden prayed to his Father on the night before his death—

“If there is any other way, let this cup pass from me.”

There was no other way.

We could be reconciled to a holy God,

we could be justified before him,

only through the sacrificial death of his Son—

a death which displayed to the world

the severe penalty that our human sin deserved

and which displayed to the world

the righteous judgment of God upon all that is evil.

On the cross, the God who is love demonstrated to us that he hates evil. /

And yet on the cross, God also demonstrated that he clings to what is good.

He displayed his grace and mercy to sinners like you and me.

He loved us when we were unlovable,

loving us when we were his enemies.

1John 3:16—**“This is how we know what love is:**

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

See, from His head, His hands, His feet,

Sorrow and love flow mingled down;

Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,

Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

This is the supernatural love that must grip our hearts;
this is the love that has the power to change us from the inside,
for when we turn to Christ in faith,
God works by his Spirit to infuse our hearts with that some love.

1John 3:16—"This is how we know what love is:

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."

Prayer—

O Lord, may we love with a sincere love—your love--

a love that hates evil and clings to what is good.

Forgive us—

Change us--

Empower us—

Closing Song: *Be Thou My Vision*

Benediction:

Phil. 1:9-11 [May] your love may abound more and more

in knowledge and depth of insight,

so that you may be able to discern what is best

and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ --

to the glory and praise of God.

Displaying the Character of Christ—

An Exposition of Rom. 12:9-21, #2

May 12, 2019

“Our Love Must Be Morally Discerning”

Rom. 12:9

“Love” can mean lots of things, but the Apostle Paul wants to convey the meaning of love as it has been revealed by God through Jesus Christ. Christian love flows from God, and for that reason it must reflect the moral character of God.

Love Hates?

Love Hates Evil—

Good and Evil and the character of God.

What is the Evil love hates?

Why is this moral dimension of Love so important?

Love and a rightly ordered heart.

The moral love of God in the cross of Christ.

Sermon Response:

“Our Love Must Be Morally Discerning”

Rom. 12:9

- What are different ways that we use the word “love” in our culture?
- How does this verse contradict a simple sentimental view of love and simply a happy tolerance of everyone?
- What is wrong (or can be wrong) with the slogan “Hate the sin; but love the sinner”? How is Augustine’s version better?
- Why must love be understood in terms of moral virtues?
- How does the cross of Christ define love for us?
- How can we develop a repulsion toward evil and an attraction to what is good? In other words, how can we develop “good taste” regarding good and evil?