

Displaying the Character of Christ—
An Exposition of Rom. 12:9-21, #9

**“Our Love Must Be
Sympathetic”**

**“Rejoice with those who rejoice;
mourn with those who mourn.”**

(Rom. 12:15)

--CEFC 7/7/19

It's been said that a parent can only be as happy
as their least happy child.

I think there is truth to that
simply because of the tremendous personal identification
that parents generally have with their children.

Parents naturally feel what their children feel,
so that seeing your child in pain
is one of the most heart-wrenching experiences of life—
whether that suffering be physical or emotional.

It is the quality we call sympathy—
a word that comes from the Greek words “sun” which means “with”
and “pathos” which means “feeling.”

“Sympathy” means to “feel with” someone—

to share in their emotional state.

The word “sympathy” comes from two Greek words,

while the word “compassion” comes from the same two words in Latin—

com-passion--“to feel with.”

Sympathy, compassion—

they both describe the quality of sharing the feelings of another person--

sympathy is essential to meaningful human relationships.

And sympathy is, especially, a quality of the “sincere love” that Paul is pointing us to

in our passage this morning from Rom. 12:15,

where he says that we are to “**Rejoice with those who rejoice;**

and mourn with those who mourn.”

Love is necessarily sympathetic—

For in love we identify with the feelings,

the experiences,

the well-being of others—

we care about them.

And it is interesting to observe, at the outset,

that Paul assumes here that, in this fallen world,

we can expect both joys and sorrows—

both rejoicing and mourning.

Yes, elsewhere Paul does say, “**Rejoice always,**”¹

for we do have an ultimate reason to rejoice

in whatever our circumstance—

for God’s eternal purpose for his people is good--always.

As Rom. 8:28 promises,

in all things, our God is working for the good of those who love him

and are called according to his purpose.

That is a good thing, which gives us grounds for a real and ultimate hope

in whatever situation we find ourselves in.

But in our immediate experience in this fallen world

we will still have reason to weep, even to mourn—

•we may mourn the death of someone we love—

a parent or a child;

•we may mourn the deterioration of our health—

losing the use a limb,

or having to undergo prolonged radiation treatments;

•we may mourn the end of some relationship—

a break-up with some person that we thought

might become a husband or wife;

•or we may mourn the extinguishing of some hope or dream—

the failure to get that new job or that promotion that we so longed for.

When someone experiences these painful losses,

Paul says love’s first response is **to mourn with those who mourn.**

As someone has observed,

¹ cf., e.g., 1 Th. 5:16.

just because Rom. 8:28 comes before Rom. 12:15
doesn't mean that that's the order
in which we deal with people in grief.

When Joni Eareckson Tada was in her hospital room as a teenager,
after a diving accident in which she lost the use of both her arms and legs,
she found some Christians hugely irritating.

She said in an interview--

"I had many well-meaning friends my age who said well-meaning things,
but they were uninformed
because the Bible says weep with those who weep.

Many friends would say to me, from [Romans 8:28](#),

"Joni, all things fit together into a pattern for good."

Or, from [James 1:3](#), "Welcome this trial as a friend."

Or, from [Romans 5](#), "Rejoice in suffering."

These are good and right and true biblical mandates,
but when your heart is being wrung out like a sponge,
sometimes the 16 good biblical reasons as to why all this has happened to you
sting like salt in the wound.

When people are going through great trauma, great grief,
they don't want answers.

Because answers don't reach the problems where it hurts in the gut,
in the heart."²

Remember Job's friends—

they were great comfort until they tried to tell Job

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/dont-you-dare-be-caught-rejoicing-with-those-who-weep/>

the reasons why he was suffering.

And in our study of Job,

we emphasized that there is a place for lament in the Christian life—

we can voice our grief.

We can mourn our loss.

Paul's words here provide the best initial response to those who are suffering—

We are to share their pain,

we are to mourn with, and not preach to, those who suffer.

But life, even in a fallen world, is not all pain and suffering.

We are also to rejoice with those who rejoice.

And in the context of our church family,

it seems we always have

both joy and sorrow going on at the same time.

Just two weeks ago as we gathered,

I announced both the death of Genia Kenshaft's mother

in an automobile accident

and Daniel McGuire and Brittany Bell's wedding engagement.

And we are called both to mourn with Genia

and to rejoice with Daniel and Brittany.

This is what love does,

if it is to have the quality of sympathy—

It **"Rejoices with those who rejoice;**

and it **“mourns with those who mourn.”**

For the love of God revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ
demonstrates just this kind of love.

We see it in Matt. 9:36--

“When Jesus saw the crowds,” he felt their pain—
“he had compassion on them,” we read,
“because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

We see this sympathy supremely when Jesus came to the tomb of his friend Lazarus,
who had died four days before,
and there he met Lazarus’s sister Mary,

We read that **“When Jesus saw her weeping,**
and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping,
he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled,”
and he, too, **wept** (11:33,35).

He mourned with those who mourned.

Jesus first saw people in their pain,
then he entered into their experience—
he shared their sorrow.

And Jesus sees us—
he knows our heartaches and trials.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of him as one who **“took up our pain**
and bore our suffering” (Is. 53:4).

Such is the love of God.

That's why the author of Hebrews can encourage us—

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven,
Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.
For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—
yet he did not sin.”

Our God is not distant;

he is not aloof, sitting in some heavenly deck-chair
watching us squirm in agony in this wicked earthly life.

In Christ, he himself has entered into our experience;

he shares our suffering and our pain.

He has taken that pain upon himself.

That is the kind of God we as Christians worship—

In becoming incarnate, in taking humanity into himself,
God, as the Word become flesh,
has taken into himself the pain of human suffering.

God has chosen not to be God apart from humanity,
apart from the suffering of humanity.

His is a sympathetic love—

His love flows through a great high priest—

who knows us

and who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses,

and who shares our joys and sorrows.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice;
mourn with those who mourn.”

It is interesting that the notion of “sympathy”
is much more often associated with mourning
than it is with rejoicing.

A common definition of sympathy reflects that—

Sympathy is defined as
“feelings of pity and sorrow for someone else’s misfortune.”

The word is synonymous with
pity, commiseration, condolence, solace, and support,

“Sympathy cards” are meant to convey words of comfort
to those who are experiencing pain.

I think it’s true—
we generally find it easier to share feelings of pain that we see in others
than feelings of joy.

Maybe that’s why that saying about parents I started with
was phrased the way it was—

It says, a parent can only be as happy
as their least happy child,
and not, a parent will be as happy
as their most happy child.

It is much easier for a picture of a suffering child
to elicit sympathetic feelings of sorrow,
than a picture of a happy child
to elicit sympathetic feelings of joy.

Though sometimes, if we are honest, we can have an opposite reaction.

The painful failure or fall of someone we don't particularly like
can elicit in us a secret delight.

The Germans have a word for that—
it's called schadenfreude—
the pleasure I get from another person's misfortune.

But much more common is the other opposite—
the dis-pleasure I get from another person's good fortune.

And there's a word for that, too—
It's called envy.

Let's face it—
it is envy that often keeps us from rejoicing with those who rejoice.

It can be hard for the person who longs to be married
to rejoice at the news of a friend's engagement.

It is a challenge for the couple longing for a child
to rejoice at another couple's birth announcement.

Or when a friend gets that promotion that you desperately wanted—
do you rejoice then?

Envy is essentially about competition.

It flows from a view of the world in which your social standing,
your happiness
and even your value as a person,
is measured in comparison to others.

So when someone you compare yourself to goes up in some way,
you automatically go down.

When we are gripped by envy
we want to bring honor to ourselves comparatively
by seeing our rivals dishonored.

Their good fortune, their happiness,
somehow diminishes mine.

The writer Gore Vidal is quoted as saying,
"Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little."³

Haven't you felt it—
think about some acquaintance of yours, maybe a friend in high school,
maybe you traveled in the same circles,
you were social equals,
but now you discover that that person has risen far above you
in wealth or social standing,
or career achievement.

You look at their Facebook page and instead of rejoicing at their good fortune
when you see pictures of their new house,

³*Portable Curmudgeon*, p. 104.

or their fancy vacations,
or you see their announcement of some promotion,
you feel this pull of discomfort or of sadness, or even of resentment.

As I said, envy is essentially about competition—

it sees others as my rivals for something I value,
something that somehow serves as a source of joy and personal honor.

Envy arises when we feel we have to merit some recognition,

we have to rise above others to establish our significance as a human being.

And envy comes from the fear

that there is only so much honor and good fortune to go around.

Any good that goes to someone else means less for me.

Susan and I used to be very sensitive to this with our boys when they were younger

because of this natural feeling—

Brothers tend to be very competitive,

so we were very cautious in praising one of them in front of the others,

because we knew of their tendency to see

the praise of one of their brothers

as a disparagement of themselves.

We didn't want them to feel that way,

and, by God's grace, as they have matured, I think they've gotten over it./

When we are cut off from the true source of that value,

that worth,

that significance that we all crave,

and the deepest source of real joy,
that comes through our relationship with God,
we have to find it in relationships with other people,
and in our fight for honor and happiness,
other people become our rivals in that struggle.

In our fallen state, we revert to that state of nature—
the survival of the fittest.
Life becomes a competition for limited resources.
It's a zero-sum game—
your success is my failure.
There are winners and there are losers.
And we don't want to be a loser!

That's why there is something very natural about envy—
that is, natural to sinful human beings in this fallen world.
That seems to be Paul's assumption when he addresses the Corinthian Christians.
To that factious church,
who were fighting amongst themselves—
he says in 1 Cor. 3:3—"You are still worldly."
**For since there is envy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly?
Are you not acting like mere humans?"**

You see, Paul is saying that the gospel ought to make a difference in their lives.
Envy doesn't make sense in the light of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.
You are no longer "**mere humans**;"
you are new creatures in Christ—

you are being recreated in his glorious image.

The gospel tells us that our true worth, our worth in the sight of God,

isn't based on any comparison with anyone else—

it is absolute.

We are valuable, our lives matter, because God says it is so.

He confers value on our lives.

He values us by creating us in his own image,

and even more, by choosing to set his love upon us—

and he loves us so much that he gave us his own Son to redeem us from our sin

and to draw us into a relationship with the eternal God of love.

Because our value doesn't come from within us,

it can't be earned,

and because it doesn't come from within us,

it can't be lost.

It is an unconditional love—

a secure and protected love.

And it is a love that we come to know in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ,

who loved us and gave his life for us.

And this love is not limited;

there's not some finite amount of God's love—like bitcoins or something.

It's not as if God's love for me leaves any less for you—

No, it is an infinite love,

and it is a love that is experienced all the more,

the more it is shared.

The gospel is the key to countering envy—

The gospel allows you to know who you are in your union with Christ—

it displays his great love for you.

Through the gospel, we can know that

all the honor and all the glory we could ever want or need

is already ours in our union with Jesus Christ.

When it comes to establishing our own worth as human beings,

we need to get out of the competition game altogether—

that's the way the kingdom of nature may work,

but not the kingdom of God.

That's not the world we are now called to live in by the grace of our God.

This is what makes it possible to “**rejoice with those who rejoice,**”

without falling into that mode of resentful envy.

The gospel enables us to move away from what I call “the competitive self.”

It is helpful to see that when we enter into in this new life of Christ,

and start loving others as Christ has loved us,

we don't stop loving ourselves.

What happens is that the self that we love is enlarged—

the self we love doesn't compete with others,

and it doesn't exclude others,

No, it includes them.

There is a very natural sense in which this extension of our selves happens in marriage.

The Bible says that in marriage a man and a woman become one.

Paul expounds this in Ephesians 5—

"husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it,"

When I got married I can say that my self was enlarged—

my self now includes my wife,

and her self now includes me.

We are united, such that when I love her, I am, at the same time, loving myself.

Her happiness is my happiness,

her sorrow is my sorrow.

My "self-interest," so to speak,

is broader than just myself;

Life is no longer just about me.

I think we have all experienced this expansion of the self in some way—

we can experience it in the love within a family.

This notion of the expanded self explains that saying I began with

about the happiness of a parent being related to that of their children.

I realize that there is a sense in which my self includes my sons—

I identify myself with their interests.

I don't compete with them,

I don't care for myself at their expense—

No, I share their joys and their sorrows.

Their happiness is my happiness.

When they were playing sports,

I think I was got nervous than they did.

There is a sense in which we even experience something of this enlarged self

when we identify with a sports team.

My team's victory is counted as my victory.

I rejoice when my team wins,

and I mourn when my team loses.

Or we identify with our nation.

If the US women's soccer team wins the World Cup today

won't we feel a tinge of pride,

as if we ourselves had done something to earn it.

Our self is expanded to include something or someone outside ourselves.

Isn't this what happens in sympathy—

sharing the feelings of others;

putting yourself in their shoes,

seeing the world through their eyes,

making their pain or their joy your own.

The 18th century pastor Jonathan Edwards speaks of this principle of solidarity--

the way that self-interest becomes love,

when the self is expanded to include others.

"Selfishness is a principle which does,

as it were, confine a man's heart to himself," he writes.

"Love enlarges it and extends it to others.

A man's self is as it were **extended** and **enlarged** by love.

Others so far as [they are loved]

do, as it were, become parts of himself;

so that wherein their interest is promoted

he looks on his own as promoted,

and wherein their interest is touched

his is touched."⁴

And that's just what Jesus has done in the gospel—

Edwards continues:

"Such was Christ's love to us that he was pleased in some respects

to look on us as himself.

By his love to men he has so espoused them [as in a marriage]

and united his heart to them

that he is pleased in many respects to look on them as himself.

His elect were from all eternity dear to him,

as the apple of his eye.

He looked upon them so much as himself

that he looked on their concerns as his concerns,

their interest as his own,

and has made their guilt his by a gracious assumption of it to himself,

that it might be looked upon as his by divine imputation.

And his love has sought to unite them so to himself as to make them, as it were,

members of himself so that they are his flesh and his bone;"⁵

⁴ Edwards, *Charity*, pp. 262f.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 266f.

Edwards is just echoing the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5, isn't he—

"Husbands, love your wives,

just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, . . .

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies.

He who loves his wife loves himself.

After all, no one ever hated his own body,

but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—

for we are members of his body."

Jesus so identified himself with his church

that in loving us, he was loving himself.

His self was enlarged to include his church.

And doesn't that now speak to us--

Edwards draws the application:

"Consider how by your profession

you are united to Christ, and to your fellow Christians.

You are one body, . . .

Christ the Head and Christians the members" (p. 270).

Shouldn't our selves be enlarged to include one another—

shouldn't your well-being be my concern,

and my well-being your concern.

Doesn't it make sense that we would mourn with those who mourn

and rejoice with those who rejoice—

for we are one body.

If I love you, I am loving myself.

In love, my happiness is linked with yours.

Paul expounds this very point in 1 Cor. 12—

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts,

but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—

As it is, there are many parts, but one body. . . .

so that there should be no division in the body,

but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

If one part suffers, every part suffers with it;

if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (12:12,20,25,26).

On the cross, Jesus' love flows out especially to his own body-- his church,

for whom he died,

and in his incarnation he identifies with all humanity.

His love flows out to the whole world.

So a Christian's love is first toward the body of Christ in the church—

our immediate family of believers,

but it is also to extend to every person created in God's image.

The Scriptures declare that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.

We are to look upon the interests of every person

as, in a sense, one with our own.

So enter into the love of God found in the gospel—

and let your self include the Christ who redeemed you,
your fellow believers in his body for whom Christ died,
yes, even your neighbor,
whoever they may be,
who shares in the same divine image. //

Let's face it--sympathy doesn't come naturally.

By nature, we are all on the autism spectrum—closing in upon ourselves,
not sharing the joys and sorrows of those around us.

sympathy takes effort—

it requires attention to other people—

We must first see them as real people

with real feelings just like ours.

We must see people as Jesus did.

So in this church family,

let's rejoice with each other's joys—

let's celebrate each other's successes,

let's honor each other's victories—

as if they were our own--

celebrating graduations, weddings, births,

promotions, school and professional awards,

sports wins—whatever they may be.

Let's rejoice in them—

as if they were our own—for they are our own!

But also let's share each other's sorrows—

may come along side those who grieve—

send notes and cards—

offer assistance, bring a meal.

Let people know that they do not suffer alone.

Love recognizes that life is not a zero-sum game--

for since God is love, there is an infinite amount of love to go around.

In fact, the more I give it away, the more of it I receive.

I'm not diminished by the success of others--

in love I can rejoice with them.

For my success comes from a God with a limitless supply of love to give away.

And when people suffer loss,

I can be an instrument of God's love toward others,

and mourn with them.

For in Christ God shares in my loss and mourns with me.

Sincere love—the love displayed in the gospel-- is sympathetic.

It rejoices with those who rejoice

and it mourns with those who mourn.

Prayer—

Communion—

1Pet. 3:8—**"Finally, all of you, be like-minded,
be sympathetic (sumpaqeivβ),
love one another, be compassionate (euisplagnoi) and humble."**

We reflect on God's love for us in Christ—

who became one of us—identifying with us
so that he might bear our sin and shame

We also reflect on the one loaf which we all share—

pointing to the one body we are a part of—
the body of Christ.

We belong to one another—

we are to share each other's joys
and each other's sorrows.

None of us is alone—

This communion meal reminds us that we are united to Christ
and to one another in an indissoluble bond.

May we live it out in a sympathetic love—

rejoicing with those who rejoice,
and mourning with those who mourn./

Displaying the Character of Christ—

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

July 7, 2019

“Our Love Must Be Sympathetic”

(Rom. 12:15)

*“Rejoice with those who rejoice;
mourn with those who mourn.”*

It is sometimes said that a parent is only as happy as their least happy child. In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul contends that that same emotional identification should characterize our relationships within the family of God. To do so we must move from the “competitive self” to the “enlarged self,” as we reflect the love of our limitless God who in his Son identifies himself with us.

I. A sympathetic love identifies with the feelings of others.

II. A sympathetic love reflects the love of God.

III. A sympathetic love enlarges our “self concern.”

A. The Competitive Self

B. The Enlarged Self

IV. How we can display a sympathetic love—

Sermon Response:

**“Our Love Must Be
Sympathetic”
(Rom. 12:15)**

- What experience comes to mind when you think of a time when you shared someone else’s feeling of joy or sadness? What prompted that feeling?
- Why is it often easier to share someone’s suffering than to embrace their joy? Is envy something you struggle with? What can help you overcome it?
- How can the Apostle Paul say both that we are to “rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16) and that we are to “mourn with those who mourn” (Rom. 12:15)?
- How does God “sympathize” with us? Do you experience that sympathy?
- What does it mean to say that through the gospel our "self" is enlarged? How does this change the way we think of "loving our neighbor as ourselves"? How is this "expanded self" experienced in your life? How would you like it to be experienced?
- What are tangible ways that we can “rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn”?