

LOVE, HATE, HOLD

Romans 12:9

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Scripture today is found in Romans 12:9: “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (NIV).

We’ve been some months now in Romans 12, and we’ll yet be some months in it as the Lord wills and directs. This important chapter of Romans really falls, as we have previously noted, into three broad divisions. It begins by talking about our individual consecration. This is in view of all that’s been said about how our salvation has been won in Christ. Paul, for example, does not exhort us at the beginning of the Romans letter to be aglow with the Spirit to serve the Lord, to rejoice in hope, to let love be genuine. Because that would only contribute to an understanding of the idea that salvation is something we accomplish—that our motivation and our ethics as believers fall out of that true realization of God’s grace. We have been forgiven and accepted. It’s not what we do; it’s what Christ does that makes the difference.

Having started with that basis in Romans 1 through 11, he begins chapter 12—the first two verses—with individual consecration. It’s a foundation of all of our experience together as a Body. If we are not individually committed to Christ, it will be impossible for us to achieve within Christian community, within the Church, what God wants.

Then verses 3–8 speaks of our uniqueness in Christian community. The discovering of our gifts, the ways in which we bless one another, the body of Christ.

Then we come to the third major section of this chapter, which speaks of the universals in Christian community. The traits of experiences and attitudes and values which we are all to cherish and have to practice among us. It is the assumption throughout this twelfth chapter of Romans that the Church, as a living organism, is so fundamentally different from the idea of an audience. An audience can go to a theater or to a dramatic production. It really doesn’t matter

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that there isn't any interrelationship among the people that are there. They simply come to see what is going on up front, and they can go back to their separate ways—never having bothered to establish some kind of relationship with one another, either inside the building or outside of the building.

Church is far different. It is, of course, not an audience. It is a Body. And, as Paul has indicated in verse 4: "In one body we have many members."

I feel constrained to spend a little bit more time in ministering on this subject of what it means to be a Body. This is where we're at in the experience of our church. God has put many, many people together in rather rapid fashion. We're kind of at a dividing of the road if you will. We can choose to be an audience, or we can continue to make those sorts of choices which will weld us together as a Body, a New Testament church.

I'm learning a little bit about the body of Christ through watching what's happening in my own body. For the last ten days, my back has gone out on me. As I was going through this bad back, I thought, "Surely, Lord, there must be some theological lesson in this, some sermon illustration to redeem the time. All this time suffering with this crazy thing must have some redemptive purpose." So I, at the introduction of this sermon, have four theological lessons from a bad back which relate to the concept of the Church as a Body.

The first lesson is this: There would be no problem if the parts of the body were not interconnected. If my back were not connected to the rest of me, it wouldn't bother me that it hurt. I could simply put it on the wall of my office. There's my spine hanging there. And I could look at it. I could say, "Hurt? It doesn't bother me." But on the other hand, if I had no spine there would be no me. So you can't take that out of me and still have me. The same way with each of us in the church. There would never be any problems in the church, there would never be any strife, discontent, or anything if it weren't for us. If he'd just take us out individually, we would

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be a perfect church. But then we wouldn't be a church, would we? So if there's going to be an interconnection of the parts, we need to be aware of the fact that most of the time all of the parts are healthy. Every once in a while, there comes along a part that needs attention. Our being interconnected means we give it the attention.

I would rather have a sick back than no back at all. This disinterconnection of the parts we see within our fellowship—those that are hurting and not all well emotionally, and maybe even relationships with other believers in the congregation not where they ought to be—I'd rather have you, and me when I get that way, as part of the church than not part of the church at all. Because we're interrelated.

I like the phrase that someone said, "The church is like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell within." There's a terrible storm out there in the world, but there's really not much smell in this congregation. We're a remarkably healthy body. We want to see it continually go that way. The continual word that's used to describe us as believers in the body of Christ is maturing believers. Not perfect believers. That's our goal. We recognize when something slips with one of the parts, but thank God the part is there to slip. Thank God we have it. We're interconnected. It's just so important within our midst, within our congregation, that we recognize indeed that God has called us to an interconnectedness—that the Lord did not design the Christian life to be lived alone.

The second theological lesson about a bad back is when one member of the body is not functioning, the whole body hurts. Of course, if the parts aren't interconnected, they can't feel it when one part is hurting. We're going to be placing a good deal of stress this year on seeing the kinds of mechanisms that help us experience community. I know when my back is hurt, it bothers the rest of my body.

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Two things it does to the rest of my body: The rest of my body experiences pain, and the other parts of my body are denied pleasure. For example, right now my eye is extremely angry at my back because the back has denied it pleasure this last week. The eye likes to, once a week or so, get out and see the beautiful blue sky and green grass and the little, white ball that rolls along the grass.

On the other hand, when my body is well, when my back is well, the eye tends to take things for granted. The eye doesn't go along saying, "Thanks, back, for doing your job. I appreciate you." That's often the way it is in community. We don't really become as acutely aware of one another until a hurt develops. This is why there's a tremendous need, by the way, for exhorters. They keep encouraging us to keep going when everything's going all right.

My back, on the other hand, doesn't say, when everything's going well, "The eye hasn't said thanks to me lately." God has so put us together in the body of Christ. It is intended that, when we're functioning in the Body, when one part hurts, the rest hurts.

A third thing about a bad back theologically. The function of one member is subordinated to all the members or the purpose of all the body. If you ask my back what its principle purpose was, it would probably answer back, "My principle purpose is to hold you up." If you ask my body what its principle purpose was, it would respond, "My purpose is to make you live."

When we have looked at Romans 12:6–8, we have been looking at specific functions in the Body. While there may be a specific function for a person to be an exhorter, or a teacher, or a prophet, or a server, or a contributor, or a giver of mercy, or exercising leadership, that is not the fundamental purpose of the Body. The fundamental purpose is not to go out and say, "I've got a gift." That's an important way that the Body functions, but the overall purpose of the Body, the overall purpose of this church, is to glorify Jesus Christ, and to edify the saints, and to evangelize

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the lost, and to meet human needs. And all of the functional gifts relate somehow to those broad purposes.

We would be remiss if we began saying, “My function is why the Body exists.” No, the body exists, and my function is there to help it accomplish its overall goals. Thank the Lord, my back is better behaving and is holding me up. But it does so only because my body is at work wanting to give me life.

What do we mean when I say it is our fundamental purpose to glorify God? I grew up, as a child in church, hearing that word “glory.” I could never figure out what “glory” was. I’m still not so sure I’ve got it all figured out. But the kind of thing that has struck me from the ministry of Jesus which helps me understand the word “glory” is that when Jesus finished His priestly prayer in John 17, just before He went to the cross, He said to the Father, “I have glorified thee on earth.” What I think He meant by that was simply, “Father, I have lived life in such a way, and I have taught in such a way, that I have left a complete and accurate representation of what You are like. If anyone wants to know what God is truly like, then I have represented You. I have glorified You, for I have manifested what You are.”

That is a calling of the people of God individually and corporately. That in the world, people that are searching for what life is, what truth is, what love is, can look at us as individuals and look at us as a church, as a Body, and say, “What an understanding of God those people reflect and relate.” Of course, the world will judge us not by our doctrine. Primarily, they’re going to judge us by our zeal, by our love. Jesus invited us to use that as the test. Invited the world to use that as the test of whether or not we are disciples of Christ.

A fourth quick thing on the back. If you want a sick member to get well, then take the pressure off. It doesn’t do any good if my back is not feeling good to say, “Get going on an eighteen-hour day, and go out and ride your bicycle.” It’s good to just get the pressure off. But I think

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sometimes it's possible—and preachers are notoriously guilty of this—of dumping guilt upon people instead of letting the Holy Spirit put guilt there.

I appreciate in this church the people that have come to me when they don't agree with something I do or say. I would encourage you to do that. It's immensely valuable for me to get this kind of feedback. Don't be scared to come to me. A member our congregation came to me and said, "You always end your sermons on a down note. We leave so guilty. We've come to church. We listen to you. We know we've failed again." I hadn't realized I was doing that, but as I analyzed what I was doing, inevitably I was implying that what I was preaching, people weren't really doing it. Laying it on. Putting the pressure on. The Lord said, "That's not the way I taught. That's not the way I minister." If you're a member of the Body and you're going through struggles, it's not our responsibility as the Body to put a lot of pressure on you and tell you, "Get with it." We're to nourish and cherish you and exhort you and give you rest. But woe to you if a well member pretends to be sick. Then it's a legitimate exercise of putting the pressure on. We're to be careful and sensitive to one another in the Body.

That's what I want to say on theological lessons of a bad back. Then I want to come to the text that I read. "Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good." Paul, in chapter 12, verses 9 through 21, really divides the sphere of love into two parts. In verses 9–13, he tells us what love looks like when it is practiced in the family of God. In verses 14–21, he tells us what love looks like when it is on display in the world.

I. His lead theme is, "Let love be genuine."

Notice as you go through verses 9–21, there is a whole series of exhortations. It looks like they're all of equal value. Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection, etc, etc. But if you understand that the first phrase, "Let

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love be genuine,” is the heading for the whole theme, all the rest of the phrases that flow out of verse 9–21 are an exposition of what it means for love to be genuine.

In loving, the apostle is assuming that loving in Christian community does not happen automatically. I know as a teenager that love happens automatically. I know as a married person and father that it happens not only automatically, but it needs to be worked on.

So Paul proceeds in describing what love looks like in the family of God to go on and give us twelve indications of how to love. Just in verse 9–13 alone, the words “love one another” themselves occur some sixteen times in the New Testament. If love among believers happened automatically, why in the world is the New Testament telling us sixteen times to love one another? Jesus alone, in the Gospel of John, tells us five times to love one another. The assumption behind those instructions is that it does not happen automatically.

Love no more happens automatically than, I guess, giving to the Lord happens automatically. For my seven years as pastor here, I had managed to preach one sermon on tithing. And that was at the request of the congregation last January. I just assumed that if we all give attention to the Scripture, it will just happen automatically. I have been absolutely shocked to find out that it wasn't, evidently, happening automatically. Something wild has happened to the income of the church.

I guess love doesn't happen any more automatically than tithing happens automatically. There must be some exposition, some development. So my purpose is to give myself to this. Love, of course, in our church body, is going to have a depth and a breadth. There are going to be some you're called to be extremely close to. You cannot get close to all of these people in this room. You can, maybe, if we go through with some of the plan we're working on and develop a Polaroid bulletin board, get everyone's picture on it. Every family, alphabetized. Then when you don't know somebody, you can kind of go out there and stare at it until you figure out who they

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are. That way, maybe in breadth, you'll get to know everybody and just kind of touch a lot of people. That's a beautiful exercise of love to have that kind of breadth.

But love also needs depth. With some, we're going to sink in with deeper relationships that God has called us to. It's very important to seek a climate in our church where love is so easily expressed, whether it's in depth or in breadth.

We try to do this even at the close of a Sunday morning worship service by saying, "Give a hearty handshake or a healthy hug or a holy kiss." I was reading a sermon by Ray Stedman on this particular text. He called it "How to Hug." He said that he wanted to comment on the title of his message. "It was suggested to me by a man who was walking down the street, passed a used bookstore, and in the window he saw a book with this title 'How to Hug.' He was taken by the title, and being of a somewhat romantic nature, went in to buy the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was the third volume of an encyclopedia and covered the subjects from 'How' to 'Hug.'" Stedman goes on to say, "I often thought, as I think of that story, that the Church is like that. Everyone knows that the Church is a place where love ought to be manifested. And many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to discover an encyclopedia of theology. But I am grateful God is changing that today. Thank God that hugs are returning to the churches. Here, we often greet each other with a hug, and I think that's great. In the Early Church, the Christians actually greeted each other with a holy kiss. You don't see that too often these days, but perhaps it's coming back. At least we've begun to hug one another. Once in a while, you see somebody greet somebody with a kiss. I don't know if it's holy or not, but we have at least begun to hug. That's great because that's what the church is to be like."

Love does not happen automatically. Paul says love is to be genuine. There's nothing said about love being perfect, just love being genuine. The word for genuine is literally "without

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hypocrisy.” Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts 5, demonstrated a love with hypocrisy. It was not genuine. They acted like they were really loving when they weren’t really doing that at all.

Love is nongenuine if love is simply spoken out, not meant. To say, “I love you,” and not mean it is to exercise a nongenuine love—love which is only spoken and not done in deed. Genuine love, true love, is sincere. And, indeed, a way of understanding Paul’s phrase “let love be genuine” is to say, “let love be sincere.”

This word which we use in the English, “sincere,” helps carry the idea of genuine. It’s a word which originally comes from the Latin. “Sincere” in its Latinized form means “without wax.” That’s what the meaning of the word is. In early Rome, merchants set out the earthen and porcelain jars for sale. If a crack appeared in a jar, then they would fill it with wax. The color of the wax was the same color as the porcelain vase to hide the defect. A person would buy it, but they wouldn’t have it for long before they discovered that, indeed, there was a great crack in it as the wax would melt away. So persons used to learn to become astute buyers of pottery and porcelain. Finally, some of the merchants got on to this that the people wanted reputable products. So they guaranteed that their product did not have any wax covering any fissure. They stamped on the pottery jar “sincerus,” which means “without wax.”

That embodies the kind of concept Paul is talking about here about love. Let love be genuine. Let it be unfeigned. Let it not be make-believe or put on, but really mean what you say and really do what you indicate.

With that, Paul gives a manifestation of love. As he starts detailing how love functions, he immediately ticks off two characteristics.

II. A genuine love will hate what is evil.

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And a genuine love, on the other hand, will hold fast to what is good. Hate is a true expression of love. In fact, if you do not know how to hate, I really would question whether you know how to love. Because hatred and love flow out of that same mix in the depths of the volcano of the soul. Take, for example, the Son of Sam, David Berkowitz. I was reading the story of his father. How would you feel if you were the father of a boy you thought you brought up right and he turned out to be the killer of all these people in New York City? How would you feel? This father has had this terrible dilemma—still loving his son, but deploring what his son has done. In fact, he was so at a loss about what his son had done, he was going to move out of the set of condominiums that they managed. He came back visiting his son in New York. I think they lived in Colorado, if I remember the story correctly. The tenants of that place had taken a vote among themselves and unanimously agreed, and they put a letter on his door: “Please do not move. Please do not leave. We love you and we understand.” Here is this dad. If he loves his son at all, with that love is going to be a profound hatred. A hatred for what he did, but a deep love yet for his son.

This is the kind of thing that Paul is talking about. The kind of thing which Jesus continually expressed in His ministry. Paul is not saying, “Hate *who* is evil.” But rather, “Hate *what* is evil.” There are two words which Paul could have used for “hatred” here. One is kind of a concealed hatred. The other is an expressed hatred that carries the idea of loathing or deploring. It’s here that he uses the latter term. Loathe evil. When you see it in your life, when you see it in the body of Christ, loathe it. But don’t reject the person. That’s why Paul goes on to the third admonition.

III. “Hold fast to what is good.”

The idea of holding fast can be translated by words like being “wedded” to what is good. Be joined to what is good. Be cleaving to what is good. Even, perhaps, cemented to what is good. It is the balance to the idea of hating.

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I went through an experience in my life. I spent some teenage and college years in a rather religious town, a town where church headquarters were located. I went to a church-related college. There's one tremendous failing that often takes place when Christians gather together if they're not careful to work on it. The devil doesn't work on communities of Christians so much from the aspect of sensual sin. Here and there, we read about someone who falls into gross sensual sin. But, by and large, he works against Christian community through spiritual sins. Especially sins of pride. Especially sins which involve domineering other people and stepping over them and playing games like one person is more important than another. And doing things which are discourteous and unkind and proud. As a young person growing up in that kind of atmosphere, I saw that from time to time. I guess, instinctively, I reached out to do what Paul is saying, "Hate what is evil." It made me mad. I was the expert in diagnosing hypocrisy. It kind of strikes me that now I'm no longer just a critic of the system. But as pastor of the church, I realize that maybe even people can sometimes see the inconsistency in my own life and think that of me. I hated what was evil. But if you stay on that fixation, then you don't have love which is genuine because there's an imbalance to it. You must, in addition to hating what is evil, hold fast to what is good. You must be able to look at a situation, whether it's an individual believer or a body of believers, and not only have the perception to see what may be wrong—what needs to be corrected—but also see what is right and what can be built upon the things which are true, the things which are just, the things which are pure and honorable. You need to look at those and hold fast to that which is good.

I kind of got a closure, a reconciliation, on this when I was leaving college as a senior. I'm one of these kind of persons that get sentimental and writes poetry or something to celebrate an occasion. On the occasion of my graduation from college, I wrote what, to me, was a long, epic poem, about three or four pages. I reviewed my college career. I was leaving the circumstances

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which I had gone to school in. I said this line, and it kind of strikes me as being kind of related to this text: “There was too much good to reckon with the bad.” Too much good. A prophet, if we go back to the ministry of the prophet which we developed several weeks ago, is going to have the tendency to see what is wrong. Hopefully, they’ll see what is right.

It’s possible in a Christian community, as we seek to build what God has called us to do, that you can, at certain times in your experience, really focus on things which are deficient. You can see things which are deficient in my life and the life of the church and the life of other believers or other Christian organizations or whatever. You need to be discerning. God doesn’t call us to unscrew our head and deposit it in the church foyer when we come into the church building, then pick it up on the way back out. He calls us to use all of our faculties. But with all of that discernment and prophesying, hold fast that which is good. Build upon what God is doing, and praise Him for it. And build one another up. Doesn’t the Lord do this with Peter? He takes this man, in whom there was so much that was wrong and petty, and turns him into solid rock.

It’s possible to get your eye on the evil and you do not see what’s right. God wants you to hold fast what is good.

Three good guides for the new year: Let love be sincere, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.

Closing Prayer

Lord, as we gather today, there is an air of expectancy in our hearts. I know it’s in my heart. I feel that over these past years in our church body, You’ve been collecting us for a purpose.

We’ve come from backgrounds that are different. Each of us has been saved differently. Each of us has been led to this Body differently. Somehow, we’ve all got here to this moment in time. I guess I really feel that at this point in our own experience, we’re the 120 believers in Acts 1. For years, You’ve laid a foundation. In those three years’ time, You just had a small, dedicated

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company. But in that company there were persons whose hearts were low and knew that You were Lord. We know that today. We know that You're risen from the dead. We know that You've called us.

Now, at the outset of this year, we don't know what You have in store for us, Lord. We have tried to make our hearts ready for anything. We want to be flexible and not put upon ourselves, or upon this church, worldly expectations. We simply want to be what You want us to be. Lord, if that involves, over this coming year, our church body growing in a way that would allow us to start twenty new churches, and this church would go down to fifty people in order to do it, have Your will, Lord. We don't need to build anything. But let us be used of You. Let Your Spirit come upon us, because we are truly gathered in this place. There is truly one Spirit in this place. The Spirit of the Lord. Let Your Spirit energize, empower us as individuals, as a church in this new year, that we could rise up with strength spiritually to do Your will and to serve You. In Jesus' Name. Amen.