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Romans / Love; Sincere / Romans 12:9–21

Series Number: 24

Readings:

- 1 Samuel 24
- Psalm 35
- Romans 12:9-21
- Matthew 5:38-48

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Introduction

Introduction Proper

Is there anything this world is confused about more than love? Many evolutionary biologists think love is just instinct, hormones, a chemical reaction in the brain that helps our species evolve and use teamwork.

Many of our popular songs and famous poems describe love as this ultimate, even spiritual, feeling that has a force of its own.

But we all instinctively know that a feeling isn't *enough*, and *words* aren't enough - because actions speak louder than words.

And then we have marriage, where love isn't just action, feeling, or words, its a *commitment*. Yet we so often break that commitment, so many people just give up on making it.

Our society, then, is largely confused about what genuine love looks like.

Well this morning we'll see that the ancient wisdom in the Bible offers astounding clarity here. It shows us that genuine, sincere love looks like *devotion*.

In particular, sincere love looks like:

- Devotion to God and one another
- Devotion to our opponents, and

- Devotion from our Saviour

Review

Now, we've been studying an ancient letter written by the Apostle Paul to the city of Rome, called *Romans*.

In the first part of Romans, chapters 1-11, Paul explains that humanity has committed unspeakable evils throughout history, so we deserve God's judgment. But because he's merciful, Jesus came to die for us and take God's judgment on himself. Then he rose to life again, so that whoever believes in him can be *saved* from that judgment. And we're saved just by *believing* in Jesus, not by doing lots of good works. So that's chapters 1-11.

Then in chapters 12-15, Paul says "in view of God's mercy", we should live a certain way! Today's passage talks about love being sincere, so we're going to see: What does sincere love look like?

Devotion to God and one another

State the Point

Well firstly, sincere love is utterly devoted to God and one another. Sincere love is utterly devoted to God and one another.

Show from the Bible/Explain/Apply

In [Romans 12:9-21](#), Paul gives us a long list of things we should do and not do.

In v9, Paul says "Love must be sincere", not hypocritical. And this statement summarises the whole passage. We're to love *genuinely*, not *pretend* to love people just to get what we want.

Then he says, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." This means more than just *liking* what is good. It means to *cling*, to be *glued* to what is good. And the Greek word "hate" Paul uses here is very strong. It means we should , "loathe, detest, or abhor" evil.

- Is that how we feel about evil? Do we absolutely detest lying, gossip, neglect, lust, greed? When we find these things in our own hearts, do we really *grieve* over them?

› Pause

Paul says in v10, “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” In Rome, the city Paul is writing to, they were *obsessed* with honour, with gaining respect in other people’s eyes. But Paul says not to pursue respect for ourselves; rather, we focus honouring others. In fact, it doesn’t matter whether someone is honouring *us* or not - we honour them *first*, and we honour them *above* ourselves.

› (Hellerman 2005)

In v11, Paul writes, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Never lack zeal? Really? Let’s admit it...most of us aren’t always enthusiastic about God! Its like Paul is telling us to control how we *feel*! Is that even possible?

Well, think about this:

I can’t control whether I feel fit and healthy right in this moment, can I? But if I’ve been eating fast food for a month and skipping workouts, I’m gonna feel pretty sluggish right now, aren’t I?

Its like that spiritually too. You can’t always control your enthusiasm for God in the moment. But if you give yourself a steady diet of good spiritual food *and* spiritual exercise, you may start to feel alive, zealous, and ready to serve Jesus!

V12 says, “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Why are these phrases lumped together? Well, when we’re going through difficult times, its easy to be anxious, to complain, or even give up. But what does sincere love for God do?

It finds joy our future *hope* - that one day Jesus is coming back, and he’s going to fix everything that’s wrong with the world. That helps us be *patient* - often, there’s nothing we can do to take the affliction away, but hope helps us get through it.

But there is *something* we can do - we can persist in prayer to God, who *can* help us.

In v13, Paul says: “Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” Now hospitality here means much more than having family and friends over for a meal.

- Hospitality in the ancient world meant inviting a stranger from out of town to stay as a guest in your home. That’s a whole other level, isn’t it?
- Now, Paul is not asking us to be irresponsible; he would want us to take precautions. But he *is* urging us to care for our brothers and sisters in Christ who need it. He actually uses the Greek word meaning *pursue* - we should *chase* opportunities to give up our time, our space, our money, and our energy for fellow believers - even if they’re strangers!

› (Kruse 2012, 478-479)

Illustrate

About 11 years ago, I *was* that stranger from out of town. As part of my graduate engineering job, I had to move to Canberra for a 6 month placement. The first Sunday there, I went to church. I'd planned to visit lots of churches in Canberra, but I felt so welcomed and loved that I stayed at this one.

And I told them I was leaving after 6 months, but that didn't stop them pouring love into me! They welcomed me in their friendship groups, included me on their soccer team, invited me over their houses for meals, counselled me for hours, and even threw me a farewell party! They clearly cared about me whether or not I stayed in their church - their devotion to me was *sincere*.

In fact, they were so hospitable that one of them even followed me to Adelaide and married me! You can't get more hospitable than that, can you?

Sincere love shows true hospitality and genuinely cares for each others' needs.

In v15, Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." To rejoice with someone, you have to put envy aside. To mourn with someone, you have to put your own happiness aside. That's *sincere* love.

› (Kruse 2012, 480)

In v16, Paul writes "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." We saw last week how arrogance and pride get in the way of true community; sincere, *humble* love is the only way you can be friends with rich and poor, old and young, happy and sad, friendly and difficult.

Sincere love looks like devotion to God and to one another.

Devotion to opponents

State the Point

Now, if all that wasn't enough, Paul then goes on to show that sincere love looks like devotion to our opponents, too! Sincere love is devoted to its opponents.

Show from the Bible/Explain

In v14, Paul writes, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” Paul is quoting the teachings of Jesus here.

Now, in vv17-21 he’s got a cool structure going on, something called a chiasm. That’s where you have layers of matching ideas surrounding each other, with a key idea in the centre.

- So, Paul has two matching ideas in v17 and 19, marked by A. These are the negatives, the things we’re *not* to do: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil”, and “Do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath”.
- Between those, he has another two matching ideas in vv17-18. This is the positive action we’re supposed to take instead: “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”
- And the idea itself is relatively easy to *understand*. But intellectually *understanding* it doesn’t make it easy to *do*, right?

But Paul goes further still. If you see your enemy hungry, or thirsty - in some kind of desperate need, really - *help* them.

If you do, you’ll be heaping burning coals on their head! What does that mean?

Well most likely it means they’ll see your love, they’ll feel ashamed of their evil behaviour, and hopefully they’ll change. Wouldn’t that be a good result?

› (Kruse 2012; Moo 2018; Waltke 2005)

Paul says in v21 *good* overcomes evil. If you retaliate with evil, you’re just adding *more* evil to the situation. *no-one* wins. And you’ll open yourself up to God’s judgment!

But sincere love is different. Sincere love is devoted even to its opponents.

How? How do you get to that point?

Well, sometimes our society thinks love is primarily a *feeling*, or *emotion*. That feeling then results in *actions*, and if things are going well, we might make a *commitment*.

But sincere love works the other way. Throughout history, God bases his love on covenants, promises, commitments to his people. And that’s how our love should be. Then, based on that commitment, sincere love takes *action*. And action can sometimes produce *feelings* of love.

So even though we can *feel* angered and hurt by someone who wrongs us, our actions won’t be based on feelings, which come and go - we base our actions on a commitment to them as fellow human beings that God made in his own image. So we can still act with kindness towards them.

Illustrate

And we see that in the story about David and King Saul that we read earlier, right? David has faithfully served Saul for years. But King Saul gets jealous and paranoid.

So Saul grabs a bunch of his soldiers and chases David relentlessly through the hot desert. And this goes on for years.

And one time David's hiding in this cave, and Saul goes in there to relieve himself. And David's soldiers are saying, "here's your chance, David! God promised he'd help you, this is it! Go kill him!" But David refuses. Is it because of his feelings of deep affection for murderous, hateful Saul? No way!

It's because David is committed to God, and *God* chose Saul to be king. So David mercifully spares Saul. And that heaps burning coals on Saul's head - he becomes ashamed of his behaviour and promises to never harm David again.

Apply

Sincere love is devoted even to our opponents, our enemies.

And you might think, "I don't have enemies! I'm a peaceful person!" That's good! We should do what *we* can to live at peace with everyone. But sometimes enemies choose *you*. If someone is intent on harming you in any way, they *are* your enemy. It's *not* always possible to live at peace with everyone, is it?

You can't choose how they treat you, but you can choose your response. Usually we pick fight or flight. Maybe we fight fire with fire and send back an even nastier email, or we clap back with a worse insult. Or maybe we flee - we avoid them because we don't want to be treated badly again and we hate conflict.

But Paul gives us a third option, a much better one. We *beat* their evil with *good*. When they treat us badly, we treat them with kindness. And we start to find sincere love is far more powerful than hate.

So sincere love looks like devotion to God and one another, and it looks like devotion even to our opponents.

Devotion from our Saviour

State the Point

Now, thirdly, sincere love looks like devotion from our saviour.

Show from the Bible

All of these things Paul is telling us to do sound quite beautiful, don't they? But if we're honest, they also sound thoroughly intimidating. How are we supposed to actually do them all?

The secret is to access a power, a devotion, outside ourselves.

That's where Jesus comes in. When we study Jesus' life, we find that he actually lived all of these out!

And in the light of *his* love, every selfish pursuit, every trace of envy, every arrogant thought seems pitiful and pointless in comparison. Why? Because he lived these out *for us*.

Jesus hated evil - that's why he exposed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his day. He hated their greed, their pride, the way they led others astray. But *he* clung to what is good.

Was Jesus not devoted to us? When he came across a guy with a contagious skin disease, everyone else would chase him off, but Jesus *touched* him. When he was going for a much-needed rest with his disciples and he saw crowds of needy people waiting for him, he had compassion on them and spent the day with them.

Jesus certainly never lacked zeal - when people were turning God's temple into a marketplace dominated by greed, Jesus made a whip and zealously drove them out of there.

The night before he was crucified, was Jesus not patient in affliction and faithful in prayer? He willingly went to the cross because he was sure of the hope of saving us and the joy of the resurrection that would follow!

And we rebels desperately need of righteousness for God to accept us. But look how Jesus shares his righteousness with us when we believe! He welcomes us poor, needy strangers into heaven, into God's the father's open arms, into heavenly reward that *he* earned, not us.

Did Jesus not rejoice at his disciples victories, and didn't he weep with Mary and Martha at the death of their brother Lazarus?

And remember how he spend time with the lowly - the poor, prostitutes, tax collectors - wasn't he called a "friend of sinners"? Thank God he is willing to befriend sinners like us.

Jesus was crucified, nails hammered into his wrists and ankles, hanging naked on rough, splintering, planks of wood, hearing the mocking, cursing and taunting from his people below. But did he not cry out for God to forgive them?

None of us have lived out the sincere love God requires in this passage, have we? By ignoring God's commands, and even his existence, we made ourselves his *enemies*.

But he does not repay our evil with more evil. By his death and resurrection, he satisfies our hunger for righteousness and quenches our thirst for forgiveness.

His kindness teaches us to hate evil and cling to him.

Apply

So how can we live out the amazing, sincere love this passage demands? Only by knowing Christ's devotion to us. His genuine love for us fuels our love for God, for others, and even for our enemies.

The more we look at him, the more we become enraptured by his beauty and overwhelmed by his grace! We learn to utterly hate evil - every kind of selfishness, greed, pride, and lust. They show themselves to be poor substitutes for his love. But his goodness teaches us to *love* all that is truly good and satisfying - zeal for God, joy, hospitality, peace.

So we don't obey these commands just by gritting our teeth and trying harder. We'll fail!

Instead, focus on Jesus' love for you. Search the Bible for it, listen for it in our songs, hear about it in church, immerse yourself in it daily. Let it capture the affections and longings of your heart, and you'll soon find that his love satisfies like nothing else. You'll find yourself longing to live out these commands, and then your love will really be *sincere*.

Conclusion

As the violence of World War II broke out, two sisters, Corrie and Betsie, lived with their father in Holland. They were horrified by how the Nazis were treating the Jews in their city, so they took some Jews into their house. They made them secret compartments to hide in, they fed them, and they cared for them, when most other people hated them or cowered in fear of the Nazis.

Eventually, Corrie, Betsie and their father were *caught* by the Nazis. Their father died in jail. Corrie and Betsie were sent to a concentration camp in the most awful conditions. How did they respond? They didn't abandon their faith. They didn't attack the Nazi guards. Instead, they started up Bible studies and tried to care for their fellow prisoners.

But in that concentration camp, Betsie dreamed of starting a home to care for people after the war ended. Which people? Was it the prisoners? Maybe the oppressed citizens of Holland, or Allied prisoners of war? No.

She wanted to start a care home for the Nazi guards that tortured her.

She told Corrie how she wanted to set up a big house where she could teach the guards to love again. She dreamed of loving her enemies. Betsie ended up dying in the concentration camp, but later, Corrie set up a care home for people who had collaborated with the Nazis.

› (Ten Boom et al. 1996)

You see Betsie and Corrie truly lived out sincere love. They were devoted to God and the other inmates around them. They truly loved their opponents. And they could do all that because they deeply understood that this is how Christ had loved them.

Sincere love doesn't come from us - it comes from God. So every single day, drink deeply from the love of Jesus, and you will find this sincere love growing in your heart too.

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