

Love Must Be Sincere
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
June 12, 2022-AM Service
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Romans 12:9-21

Today we begin our summer worship series. For the whole of the Summer we will be studying one passage of Scripture, Romans 12:9-21. It's a well-known passage which comes towards the beginning of the section of the letter where Paul starts to give moral counsel to the Roman church. Romans follows a structure that you often see in Paul's letters. Paul often starts his letters with a proclamation of the gospel. He begins by telling the church the good news of what God has done for them in Jesus. And then Paul follows that with a section of advice and moral instruction.

Some people have characterized this structure by saying the first part of Romans is about what God has done for us, the second part of Romans is what we should do in response. But that's not quite right. Especially in Romans. Because—and you heard this in Kristy's sermon on Romans 8 last week—the message of the gospel is not, 'God saved you, so be good.' The message of the Gospel is that 'God saved you through Jesus, and he is still transforming you. He put his Holy Spirit in you and that Spirit is making you a new creation. If you belong to Jesus, this is happening!' Nothing can stop the process, because those he calls he justifies and those he justifies he glorifies.

So when Paul finishes his proclamation of the gospel at the end of chapter 11, and he starts his section of moral instruction, he's not calling us to an act of self-creation, he's calling us to an act of cooperation. He's not saying, "Now that Jesus saved you, here are the blueprints for the new person he wants you to be, now get to work and build your new self. You're the foreman! Get busy!" He's saying, "God's the foreman and here's the kind of person he's making you to be. You should join in the work. You should cooperate." We really need to keep this in mind when we hear our passage. Because when I read it in a moment, it's easy to hear all the instruction, all the imperative sentences, and get the feeling that: "Ok this is all on me. I've got to create this godly person. C'mon Peter, Grit your teeth! Roll up your sleeves! You gotta make this new person." But in the context of the book that's a mistake. We are called to do something in Romans 12, but first of all we should hear these words as a description of the kind of person the Holy Spirit has already started to build in us.

Here's a way to think of it. It's like when you get a renovation of your kitchen. You've been living in a dilapidated kitchen at your house. It's dark and dingy. But now you're finally going to have it renovated and, as a way to defray the costs, you are going to help out with the renovation. Before the renovation starts, the contractor comes over with a digital picture of what your kitchen will look like when its done. It's bright and airy and welcoming. It's gorgeous! You are so excited. Tomorrow you will start working and you are so excited to get started. It's going to take a while, but your contractor is amazing. He will see the project through and it will be beautiful. You know it'll be a mess, you know the work will be hard, you know that, like all renovations, there will be complications along the way. But you are ready to get to work! So, as we study this passage this summer, before it reminds you of the work you have to do, let it inspire you with a picture of the finished product—the person the Spirit is creating in you.

Romans 12:9-21, what is the central defining characteristic of a Christian community? When an outsider looks at a Christian person, when an outsider looks at a Christian community,

what aspect of their life should come to the fore? What should they notice? That's actually a hot question right now. A lot of Christian institutions—schools, churches, parachurch organizations—are writing statements of faith. They are putting these statements together as a way to say, this is what we stand for! This is who we are! And as these statements are being put together most of the debate inevitably goes into the church's moral stance on a hot button issue. These days those tend to center on issues of race and issues surrounding human sexuality. Which are important issues.

But according to our passage, and according to scripture, what is the central defining characteristic of the body of Christ? It is love. I want to focus today on the first four words of our passage. "Love Must Be Sincere." Those aren't just the first four words of our passage; they are the title of the whole summer series. That's because these four words are like a heading for the section. In the Greek, there are only three words. The Greek simply says: "e Agape anupocritos." There's no verb there. Just a noun, an adjective and an article. Literally translated it says. "Sincere Love" The NIV has translated it by supplying a verb which is fine, because clearly Paul is calling us towards sincere love, but commentators note that there is no verb and they suggest that these words are more like a title than a sentence. It's like when you were in middle school and had a paper to write, you put the subject of the paper at the top of your page—"Panda Bears"—and everything below that was what you wanted to say about Panda Bears. That's what Paul is doing here with 'Sincere Love.' That's his title, and everything underneath is a description of what sincere love looks like. Paul puts love front and center.

Love isn't just front and center here, all through the Bible, love is held up as the central feature of Christian character. In the Old Testament the people of God recited the Shema every day: "Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength." Love at the center. In Exodus 34, when God passes in front of Moses, when he shows Moses his back, he proclaims his glory to Moses "The Lord, the Lord, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Love at the center.

And of course in the New Testament, as we heard in our call to confession, when Jesus is asked to summarize the law, when Jesus is asked to say what a disciple looks like, he said, "love." "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind; love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets are summed up by that love," says Jesus. Love at the center.

The apostle John lifts love high. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world he sent his one and only Son." Or even more pointedly, in 1 John 4 he says, "God is love, and the person who does not love does not know God." Love at the center.

And Paul puts love at the center, most famously in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says love is the greatest of all the Spirit's gifts. If you have all kinds of other strengths but have not love, you have nothing. In fact, love at the center.

And then back to Romans, if the opening of our passage isn't enough to convince you that love is the central characteristic of our moral life then let me direct you to words in Romans 13:8ff. "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

... love is the fulfillment of the law.” The central characteristic of our moral life is love. When people in the outside world look at us the first thing that should come to mind is our love. When we explain to others what we are about at the center of that explanation should be love. When people spend time with us and live with us over time the thing that should impress them, the thing that stands out about us, should be our sincere love.

Now some may say, “Ok, but isn’t that a bit mushy and undefined? All this love talk! It makes us sound like a bunch of hippies! Hey man let’s just love each other. All you need is love. You do you and I’ll do me and we’ll just get along.” Are we talking about some sort of mushy relativism where everyone can do what they want and we’re supposed to smile at them and say, “hey that’s cool! love you man!”

That’s a legitimate concern, and as we shall see in this sermon series, that’s not what Paul means, that’s not what Scripture means, by love. The love that centers us is not a big blob of sentiment. The love that centers us has shape and direction and a source. Through the summer, as we study Romans 12, that love will get definition and shape, and by the time the summer is over we will have a better idea of love’s path and purpose.

For today let me just point out that our heading already gives some definition. The Greek word for love is *agape*. That’s a word that just about all of you know. I’ve talked about agape up here before. Agape is the word Paul uses and most of the New Testament writers use when describing the love God has shown to us and to describe the love at the center of the Christian life. Here’s what you may not know about agape, before the New Testament, agape was not much used in the Greek language. Scholars have gone back through Greek writings from before the New Testament, and they’ve found that while the word agape certainly exists, it’s rarely used. But after the New Testament is written the word starts showing up all over the place.

What happened there? Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wanted to talk about the love at the center of the church. He knew that this love was different. He knew that love wasn’t just like any old love, so he couldn’t just use the same words that the Greeks used for romance and desire (*eros*), so he chose agape. He wanted readers to think, “Agape, why did he choose that word? What does he mean by agape? He must mean something different when he talks about love.”

And indeed he did. Agape is a cross shaped love. Agape is not moved by beauty or passion or desire. Agape is moved by need and hurt, it sees need and hurt and it moves towards it with sacrifice, care, grace. That’s Jesus’ love. Jesus didn’t move towards us because we were attractive and morally impressive. Jesus moved towards us and loved us because we were a mess, and he sacrificed himself to heal our mess. Paul has already identified this kind of love as Jesus’ love back in chapter 5:8 when he said: “God showed his love (his agape) for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That’s agape. We’re a mess, we’re sinners, we’re hostile, but even though we are spitting at him and slapping him and cursing him, Christ dies for us and saves us. That’s a distinct kind of love. Paul chooses this obscure word to describe it so no one would ever confuse it with mushy sentiment. That’s the love that the Bible puts at the center of our lives and at the center of our community. Agape is our central identifying characteristic.

And it’s not just the Bible that tells us that this is the best love, we know this from experience. I do a lot of funerals, and in the process of doing funerals, whether its meeting with the family or during the funeral itself, you get to hear families explain why their loved one was special. As I’ve done that I’ve noticed something about the stories that provoke the deepest emotion. The stories that provoke the deepest emotions are not about the person’s profession

qualities – “he was such a good accountant.” It’s not the stories of big events – “we went on that Caribbean cruise together and we had such a good time.” The deepest emotions are stirred when people talk about how their loved one was there for them in the hard times. “When I was going through depression Dad called me every day.” “When I was starting out as a teacher, Bob came by my room every day just to make sure I was okay, I don’t think I would have made it through that year without him.” “When I went through my divorce my sister had me over for dinner every Sunday because she knew Sundays would be hard.” It’s when people remember that stuff that the emotion rises.

Why? Because they are describing agape. It’s the most excellent love. We all need this kind of love in our life. We all need some people who love us in our mess and who aim their love at that mess. We need it like we need water. When we have people who love us like that we thrive. When we don’t have anyone like that in our life we wither. The human soul responds to that kind of love like a plant to water and sunlight. Because our souls were made for this kind of love! This is God’s love and our souls were made to be in communion with God. We respond so strongly and joyfully to agape when other people show it to us, because those human expressions of agape are a shadow of the love that is meant to fill our souls—the love of God that is in Jesus Christ. We were created to live in this love, so when we get even a taste of it from another human being, our hearts rise as if they are looking for their true home. If agape was the identity marker of our churches, if people thought of LaGrave as a place where this kind of love flowed free, I promise you these pews would be full.

I’m tempted to end this sermon by saying, ‘okay people! Go out there and practice agape! Do it. Work at it!’ But that would be putting things in the wrong order. Instead let me proclaim, this love is the love that is already in you. This love is already filling you and changing you! So let it flow through you so that this love can water the world.

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