

Hate What Is Evil, Cling to What Is Good

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 12:9-21

So we continue our sermon series on Romans 12:9-21. All summer long we will immerse ourselves in this passage and let it form us. All summer long we'll hold up this passage as a picture of what happens when the Holy Spirit renovates your heart. As I mentioned last week, renovation is a pretty good way to think of this passage. We are in the middle of renovation project. The Holy Spirit is leading this renovation; we're helping. It's not our kitchen getting renovated, it's our life. The project is under way, and it will be finished, but it's there's a lot of stuff that needs straightening. In Romans 12:9-21 it calls us to cooperate in the reno, and he shows us a finished product of what our renovated heart will look like when it's done. That picture keeps us focused and hopeful when the going gets hard. Last week we focused on the first phrase in the passage – "love must be sincere." Today we will focus on the second phrase. "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

So last week we asked the question 'what is the central identifying moral characteristic of the church? What should people think of when they think of this community?' And the answer of our passage, the answer of the rest of the Bible, is love. Sincere love is the heading of our passage. God's love, poured out in Jesus Christ, is the center of our life together. When people think of us, they should think of God's love. Agape love. I also mentioned that when we talk about love at the center, when we say that we are people of love, it might sound a little squishy. It might sound like mushy sentiment; it might sound like hippie talk. Hey man, let's just live and let live! Let's just be!

Any notion that the love proclaimed in this passage might be squishy sentiment vanishes in the very next phrase. "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." This love is not squishy sentiment. This love has purpose and direction. This love says yes to some things, and no to others. This love takes aim. This love is disciplined and intentional. This is love lived in the trenches of a battle. A battle between good and evil. There is a battle in this world between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And in this battle we are called to hate what is evil and cling to what is good.

"Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good." I wonder, when Paul says, "hate what is evil" where does your mind go? When you hear "hate what is evil," what are the first things that popped into your mind? What sorts of evils did you think of? My guess is (and this is my guess because I know how my mind works) that your mind went to evils out there in society. My guess is that your mind went to the evil and destructive things that people do in this world. Racism. There's so many racists out there and I can't stand the sin of racism. Or maybe it's some sexual sin. There are so many people out there who are sexually promiscuous and they are totally distorting God's will for our sexuality. I hate that evil.

But in the context of our passage, where are the evils that Paul identifies? When Paul calls you to hate what is evil and cling to what is good, where does he want you to look first? Is it out there? Is it looking at what others are doing? Does he list off the terrible sins of the pagans? Does he enumerate the monstrous wrongdoings of the empire? Nope. He calls his readers to look at their behavior and their own heart. Every phrase in this passage points at my behavior, my heart. Because that's where the battle starts. When Paul says hate what is evil and cling to what

is good, he doesn't start with great evils out there; he starts by calling you to look at the attitudes and the actions of your own heart, because that's where the battle begins. Don't be lacking in zeal. Be joyful, patient, faithful. Do not be proud. Do not be conceited. Do not be vengeful. Those are all attitudes of your heart. Practice hospitality, and sharing and blessing, giving your enemy something to eat – those are all acts of your hands. The line between good and evil is drawn down the middle of the human heart. When we are called to the hate what is evil and cling to what is good, the theater for that battle starts in our own hearts.

Thinking about this, I realized that most of the public discourse that talks about the troubles of the world does not train us to look at our own sins first. On TV, in social media streams, when the problems of society are addressed and blame is assigned, it's always somebody else who's causing the problem. The greedy corporations, those elites in academia, those do-nothing politicians, those no good democrats, those no good republicans.

When you take in media, they have a kind of liturgy that they follow. A pattern that they repeat. And like all liturgies, when you partake of it again and again, day after day it forms you. What's the pattern? First, they will tell you about a problem, a societal evil. They will get you worked up about it. Then they will tell you who's at fault for this evil. And it's not you. It's people on the other side of the ideological line. It's a kind of liturgy of self-righteousness. Here's a problem. It's terrible. It's their fault. It's a liturgy that makes you feel righteous. It's a liturgy that gives you a feeling of superiority.

The Bible does not follow this liturgy. The book of Romans specifically pushes against this liturgy of self-righteousness! Here's the Biblical pattern as laid out in Romans and elsewhere. First, we all stand guilty before the throne of God. There is no one righteous, not even one! All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That's Romans 1-3. Paul's whole purpose in those chapters is to destroy the notion that any of us can boast about our righteous achievements. Second, despite our sin, God in his mercy saved us through the sacrifice of his Son. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; all are justified freely by his grace." "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)" Through the cross of Jesus, we have been given a rescue that we didn't deserve. Third, now that God has saved us, we are called to cooperate with the Spirit's renovation project. And that renovation starts with you - your heart and your actions. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That's Romans 12 and 13.

Only after those three steps are completed do we take the final step where we look at others. By that time, you have a deep sense of the grace you've received, and a deep sense of how hard it is to change your heart. So you don't approach the sins of society as a righteous demagogue who has all the answers; you come as a broken sinner saved by grace. You come with compassion, humility, patience. It's only in Romans 14 that Paul broaches the subject of judging others, and then in chapters 14 and 15 he goes through great pains to make sure those judgements are generous. "Bear with the failings of the weak." "Accept one another." "Don't pass judgment on disputable matters." Are we as Christians sometimes called to confront the sins of others? Of course we are. Are we called to sometimes confront the sins of society? Of course we are. But if our battle against evil starts with the condemnation of others instead of our own hearts and our own failures, we will do great harm.

So Paul suggests where the battle line is drawn; he also suggests how the battle is fought. It's all about the shaping of our loves. "Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good." *Hate* and *cling* are very strong words in the original Greek. Hate is a kind of visceral dislike for something. And the word cling is a wholehearted engagement. In fact, the word cling is a marriage word. You get a sense of that in the King James Version which says, "Cleave to what is good." That's a

marriage word. “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife.” Real change is about what you love. It’s about what you cling to, what you cleave to. This battle between good and evil is about the shape of our loves.

When I was a boy I was supposed to learn piano. My parents paid for lots of piano lessons. “It’s good for you,” they said. “Music will make you a more rounded person.” And so they got me piano lessons and they had a rule that I had to practice a half hour every day. My Mom would set the timer on the stove and I would sit and play my pieces and play my scales. It was always the longest half hour of my day. I would go back to the stove to look at the timer to see when it would be done so I could go out and play road hockey. I may have occasionally advanced the timer so that a half hour was more like 20 minutes. I didn’t love the piano.

So, my mind agreed with my parent’s laws. You should learn piano! You should practice a half hour a day! It is the right thing to do. But knowing the law was no help because I had no love for it. Without a heart for piano, the law was powerless to produce good results. As a result, after all those lessons, I don’t play. By contrast, when my daughter started her music on violin, she fell in love with her instrument. You did not have to tell her to practice. You didn’t have to set a timer. In High School she would practice for hours and we would have to say please stop! It’s about the heart. Hating what is evil and cleaving to what is good is conforming your heart till it loves what God loves.

The problem is that the heart is a hard thing to change. You may say yes! Peter! I want to have this kind of heart! But if I’m honest, I’m half-hearted. Sometimes I love the things of God, but other times my heart craves other things. How can I change this heart?

Well, the short answer is, you don’t do anything. Romans 7 is basically Paul’s version of my piano story. Paul complains that he knows all the rules, but he can’t seem to do them, and he recognizes that the problem is in his heart! The problem is with his loves! “I do not do what I want to do! I desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...Who will rescue me from his body of death? Thanks be to God he gives me the victory through Jesus Christ my Lord.” The change of Paul’s heart and the change of his love doesn’t come from Paul, it comes from God. Through the death of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, God is changing our heart. He plants a heart of love in us. When you belong to Jesus, the Spirit is at work inside of you, renewing your heart, slowly teaching you to love the right things.

It’s the Spirit’s work, but when we cooperate with the Spirit, we are changed. I’m reminded of a story Fred Craddock tells. Fred Craddock was a great southern preacher. He tells a story about how he remembers sitting in church as a child and being overwhelmingly bored. It was the longest hour of my week, he said. The preacher droned on and on. He would draw pictures on the offering envelopes, he would poke his brother. Beg his mom for another peppermint. But he kept going to church. He kept doing the things of God with God’s people, so the Holy Spirit kept working on him and changing his heart even when he didn’t realize it was happening. Years later when he was still quite young he was sitting in church when he found himself sitting behind a young couple who were obviously in love. “They could not leave each other alone! They whispered in each other’s ears and nuzzled each other the whole service.” Craddock said, “I wanted to take a hymnal and bang them over the head in the name of Jesus. They were being disrespectful in the most important hour of my week!”

What happened there? The Spirit changed his heart. He cooperated a little. Only a very little. He just showed up. But the Spirit changed his heart. He didn’t know it, but every time he was with God’s people doing God’s things, God was tapping away at his heart, not with a sledgehammer, but with a ball peen hammer, changing his loves. Changing his life.

We are not doing this alone. This is not our making, this heart, this church, this kingdom is not of our making. That's good. Because, God help us if the future of the church depends on people. God help us if discerning the right depends on the power of our brains. God help us if the power of righteousness depends on the strength of our will. Thankfully God did help us. He sent his Son and His Spirit, and the church belongs to him.

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