

When Love Gets Difficult
Part One: Brought Into God's Love
Romans 5.1-11

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Beginning this morning we round the corner into the fall and begin a new sermon series that will have us focusing in on chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Roman church.

Before we go there, let me pause and step back with you and reflect on where we are and how we got here. For those of you who are newer to the church this may provide some helpful background.

Those of you who have been with us for awhile will remember that about six years ago Covenant's leaders were walking through a discernment process that led us to reframe our understanding of what God was calling us to.

What came through to us clearly in the process was that God was calling us to learn together what it would look like to live a life of love.

Why? Because Jesus tells us that love will be the thing, *the* thing, that reveals to the world that we belong to him.

John 13.35

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Every New Testament writer echoes the same theme. For example:

John

This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. I John 3.23

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. I John 4.7-8

Peter

Love one another deeply, from the heart. I Peter 1.22

James

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. James 2.8

And Paul:

If I ... have no love, I achieve precisely nothing. I Corinthians 13.3
Do everything in love. I Corinthians 16.14

And the passage from which we took our new statement of calling:

Live a life of love. Ephesians 5.2

So for the last five or six years, that's what we've been focusing on: Living a life of love. Loving Jesus, loving his people, and pouring out his love on the world.

And it has been so beautiful watching you, the Covenant family, my brothers and sisters, growing in learning how to live a life of love, and it has been a privilege for me to be learning right along with you – and often from you.

As we have been seeking to follow God's lead in fulfilling this calling, I have increasingly had the sense that God is calling us to take a next step. And that is a step into riskier, costlier, more sacrificial love.

- With one another.
- With our neighbors.
- With the people God places in our lives from the world around us.
- With the people in our community who look different from us, and who come from different backgrounds from us, and who face different struggles than we do.

There are so many different ways of thinking about love, so many different ways our culture defines it. What is love? What do we mean when we talk about love?

Well, in the New Testament we are introduced to a brand new kind of love called *agape* love. *Agape* love isn't centered in our feelings. It is centered in the will. It has to do with the way we see others and the choices we make related to them. The other thing that makes *agape* love unique is that it always has inherent to it a *sacrificial* quality.

This is the most biblically faithful way I can think to define the sort of love to which we are called.

Love is seeking God's best for you . . . even when it costs me.

Loving is putting your concerns ahead of my own in a sacrificial way. I listen in a sacrificial way. I make time for you in a sacrificial way. I respond to your needs in a sacrificial way. I share what I have in a sacrificial way. And I love you through difficulties in a sacrificial way.

All of which is summed up in one of the most challenging statements in the entire Bible. I John 3.16 says:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

Sacrifice is at the heart of any way we might consider what love looks like.

In praying about how to shepherd us into wrestling with this deeper and costlier dimension of love, I've felt led by the Spirit to have us spend time this fall in Romans chapter 12.

When we turn there, this is what we will encounter: a difficult call. It's a call to love people when they are in difficult circumstances. It's a call to love people when we are in difficult circumstances. And it's a call to people who are difficult for us to love.

Our series is called *When Love Gets Difficult*. Think about that with me for a moment. What makes love difficult?

Well, consider what makes love easy.

- When I enjoy or respect or trust those I am seeking to love
- When what I am doing to show love is enjoyable or pleasant for me, when it is not costly and doesn't put me out
- When the person I am seeking to love is similar to me
- When what I do is appreciated by them
- When who I am is respected and valued
- When I am loved in return - when my love is reciprocated.

What makes love difficult, then? The opposite, isn't it?

- When I don't enjoy or respect the one I am seeking to love
- When what I am doing to show love is not enjoyable for me, when it is inconvenient and costly
- When the person I am seeking to love is different from me
- When what I do to show love goes unappreciated
- And when my efforts to love are not reciprocated, when I am slighted or overlooked or ignored or taken for granted
- And especially when I am treated with disrespect, when I am wronged or hurt

And that's what Romans 12 is about. Loving others when it gets difficult.

Listen to the costly way chapter 12 begins!

Verse 1 says:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God*—this is your true and proper worship.

How do we ever live out that kind of love?!

This is what I believe is true about Romans 12. It is a wonderful path that will lead us straight into a sense of discouragement and failure and resentment . . . unless . . . unless the source of our love for others is not something we try to muster up in ourselves, but is something that comes from outside of ourselves.

If we're trying to love difficult people, or love people in difficult circumstances, out of our own strength and our own love, we will come to the end of ourselves in about eighteen minutes.

But notice what comes just before that costly call. Paul says:

Therefore, I urge you

In other words, in the light of all that I've laid out up to this point, all the biblical truths, all the spiritual realities

And what are those truths? He goes on in verse one to give us a five-word summary of what he has just spent eleven chapters spelling out.

Therefore ... in view of God's mercy

Mercy refers to God's heart of compassion that moves him to step toward us and to take tangible steps to relieve us in our misery.

God has a heart of mercy and compassion. He is moved by our need to step toward us. Do you think of God that way?

So Paul's "therefore" and his "in view of God's mercy" at the start of Romans 12 tell us that there is an outside source to which he is pointing, to which we can turn, and from which we can draw as we seek to lean into our costly call to live a life of love when love gets difficult.

We find that source spelled out for us in a number of different places in the earlier chapters of Romans, but nowhere more clearly than in Romans chapter 5, the first 11 verses, which will be our focus for the rest of the morning.

And just to give it away, here's what makes that portion of scripture so helpful for us when loving others gets difficult. That's where we read about how God responded when we made love difficult for him. And that same love with which he loved us is available to us as we seek to love others.

So let's turn to Romans chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, and see what we can learn there.

Romans 5.1-2

Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

The thing we notice immediately as we come into these verses is that there is a spiritual condition Paul is describing of our having *peace with God* that hasn't always been the case for us, and isn't automatically the case for us or for anybody else.

Paul's use of the word "since" points to the before and after implied in this passage. There was a time when we were not at peace with God, and now we are.

Which raises an interesting question. . . What *is* the state of our relationship with the God who created us? Some people have the idea that things between us and the Big Guy in the Sky are just fine. Always have been. Always will be.

On his deathbed, someone asked Henry David Thoreau if he had made peace with God. He said, "Made peace? I wasn't aware that we had quarreled."

What would your response be to that idea that there are some people who have peace with God, and other people who don't? Do you?

As we poke around in these couple of verses we learn more about what that peace entails and who and what brought it about.

The phrase "peace with God" is an expression that looks back over our shoulder to the Old Testament idea of *shalom*, which is an understanding of peace that is much more robust than merely not being at odds with someone. The word implies something rich and fulsome, a flourishing, a prospering, experiencing the fullness of something, things being the best possible version of themselves.

Paul says that's what we have with God right now. We are experiencing the best possible version of a relationship with God, full and free and overflowing access.

Paul uses a synonym for the same idea in the next line when he talks about our having gained access into a place of *standing* with God. We once were far and God was out of reach; now we are near. God is in our grasp, and we are in his. And just so we don't miss the connection between the two ideas, Paul makes a pun in the Greek, using almost identical sounding words for the two ideas: *hescheykamen* and *esteykamen*.

Isn't it fun to picture people in the church in Rome hearing this letter and groaning when they hear yet another of Paul's puns?

So Paul describes a door being opened and our being ushered into a hitherto unknown depth of relationship with God.

Then twice he tells us who brought that about for us, who opened that door and led us into the fullness of God's presence. It was "the Lord Jesus Christ," or "Jesus our Lord and King."

And then Paul describes the way it came about. The way we stepped through that door into full access to God was through "faith," as Paul tells us twice in these verses.

The word faith is the opposite of our own effort, it means trust or confidence in someone else. Giving your allegiance to another instead of relying on your own resources. It wasn't through something we did on our own that earned us that place of grace. It was through putting our confidence in someone else, in Jesus, who brought this about for us.

So, right off the bat, here's this incredible spiritual reality we are blessed to experience: a place of right standing with God, of full access to God, of deep intimacy with God, made possible by Jesus, given to us as gift. Hold that thought.

Romans 5.2-4

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Here Paul picks up this thread of the idea of hope, and goes into a bit of an aside about how we have reason to hope even when we are suffering. It's an important passage, but it is a bit of a side road from the idea that Paul is unfolding for us in these verses.

So let me pick back up in verse 5, where we come to this line.

Romans 5.5

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

This is such a powerful passage.

Paul says the Spirit pours the love of God into our hearts. The love of the Father who created us to be in relationship with himself. And the love of the Son who came to make that love known, and who died to make that relationship possible. It is the Spirit who brings the love of the Father and the Son to life for us.

As John Stott paraphrases this passage: The Holy Spirit makes us deeply and refreshingly aware that God loves us.

This word for *pour out* has at the opposite end from carefully measuring something out. It brings to mind a picture of a sloshing, splashing, spilling over. The word connotes abundance, extravagance, profusion.

I remember once years ago in Cincinnati, after playing tennis for a couple of hours in the hot sun, being really thirsty, so I ordered a large milk shake at one of those classic ice cream shops that uses those old time mixers with the huge metal mixing cups.

Once the girl was done putting in the ice cream and milk and syrup and then blending it all, she went to pour out the shake into my cup, and she had only emptied about half of the contents into the paper cup when the paper cup was full. She looked down into the metal cup, and then at the paper cup, and then back at the metal cup. She thought for a moment. Then she went and grabbed two straws, stuck one in each cup, and set them both down in front of me.

That's the sort of exuberant abundance this word brings to mind. Nothing held back. God's love has been lavishly poured out upon us through the Holy Spirit. Love in abundance, poured over us, poured through us.

Now comes the plot twist. You and I were utterly undeserving of that abundant love. Utterly.

Romans 5.6-8

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

At just the right time - that is, "at the very moment when" - *at the very moment when we were still powerless*

The NLT version says "When we were utterly helpless." That captures it perfectly. When we were in a state of total incapacity, when we were utterly stuck, with no ability to dig ourselves out of the mess we'd dug ourselves into.

But Paul says we weren't just helpless, we were *undeserving* of help.

He says we were *ungodly*. This is a really pejorative term for Paul. It is the opposite of fearing or revering God, of hallowing God's name. It means lacking reverence for God, lacking respect for the things of God, having a callous indifference toward God.

At that very moment, when we were both *asthenon* and *asebon*, another of Paul's puns, helpless and godless, at that very moment . . .

Christ, the King, died for us. What?!

The King died for the very ones who thumbed their noses at God, who turned their backs on God, who wanted nothing to do with God. That doesn't make sense. It's unheard of.

Paul elaborates.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die.

But get this!

Verse 8

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Here's the heart of the passage:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this. He demonstrates it, he exhibits it, he puts it on display, showing us exactly what it looks like.

Just as he did with Moses. He demonstrates *his own compassionate love*

The phrase "his own" is in the position of emphasis, he demonstrates his unlike-anybody-else's love, in this:

While we were still sinners,

While we were wrongdoers, falling short of the mark, not just ones who have done a sin, but ones who do sin, who are *sinners*, wrong doers

Christ, the King died for us.

For us. For us. He endured the cross *for us*.

One person dying for another – this is the pinnacle of human love, as Jesus says in John 15.13 the night before he lays down his life on the cross:

No one has greater love than the person who lays down his life for his friends.

I'm sure many of you were deeply touched as I was by the stories of heroism among the kids who came under attack in Minneapolis. One that was especially moving was the story of a fifth grader named Victor, who laid on top of his third grade friend Weston under a church pew so to try to protect him from getting shot. Victor was hit by a shotgun blast but kept his friend from getting hit. Victor will recover, but he was willing to die for his friend.

But look at who Jesus calls his friends. Look at who Jesus laid down his life for. Undeserving us.

I love how John Stott sums up the significance of Jesus' death.

The degree of love is measured partly by the costliness of the gift to the giver, and partly by the worthiness or unworthiness of the beneficiary. The more the gift costs the giver, and the less the recipient deserves it, the greater the love is seen to be. Measured by these standards, God's love in Christ is absolutely unique. For in sending his Son to die for sinners, he was giving everything, his very self, to those who deserved nothing from him except judgment. (*Romans*, 144)

When we come in a few weeks to consider the cost of loving others, especially when it is difficult to love them, this is what Paul wants us to keep in mind.

Paul in Romans 12 will say, therefore, in view of God's mercy, in view of the way Jesus laid down his life for *you* when *you* were utterly undeserving of the gift, and offered his life as a living sacrifice . . . live a life of love just like Jesus did.

Now Paul spells out what this sacrificial death really means.

Romans 5.9-10

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

There are three words that leap out from these verses.

The first two are jarring: *God's wrath* and *God's enemies*.

First about this word *wrath*. This is one of those words, like the word *slave*, that has such negative connotations in English that it is almost impossible to use the word and to have its meaning properly understood.

What comes to mind when you hear the word *wrath*? Well, if it's used to describe a person, it is usually used to describe someone who is overcome by their feelings: losing their temper, lashing out, throwing things, saying things they'll regret.

The biblical idea of *wrath* couldn't be more different. Some distinctions to be aware of:

Wrath, like joy in the New Testament, like hope, like love, is not primarily a feeling-based word.

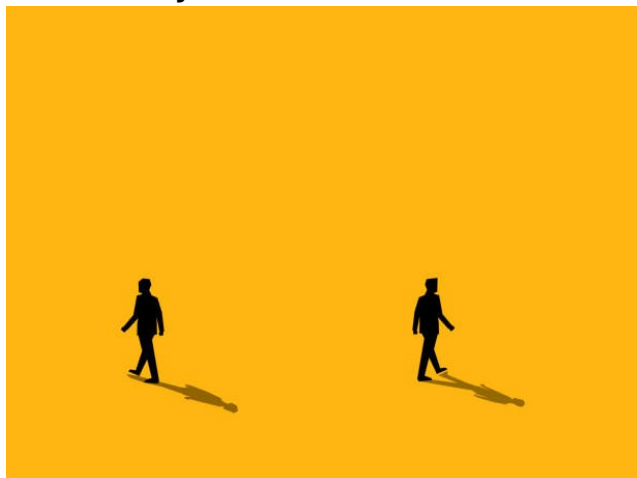
Wrath is ultimately about the *holiness* of God, which is his inherent love for what is good and his inherent unwillingness to abide what is evil. At the heart of *wrath* is the response of a holy God to an unholy person and his or her unholy way of being. It's not about breaking a rule so much as it is about breaking the heart of a holy God.

If you are a dog owner, and you have carefully trained your dog to be gentle towards other people, and your dog bites a neighbor, how do you view your dog's behavior? With indignation. You will still love your dog, but your dog's behavior is counter in every way to how you relate to others, and to what you value, and to how you have taught that dog to behave. God grieves the way our unholiness misrepresents his holy heart.

Wrath is not unjust. It is not God losing his temper with humanity. No. *Wrath* is the fair and just and proportionate judgment of God against behavior that fails to reflect his holy character. We reject God; he separates from us. Our sins justly earn his judgment.

And last, *wrath* and love are not opposites, and they are not mutually exclusive, any more than the holiness and the love of God are mutually exclusive. They both reside alongside each other in the heart of God.

What Enmity Looks Like



So when it says in these verses that we were *enemies* of God, it means that we were objects of God's wrath rightly understood. That is, a holy God experienced indignation and opposition toward our unholy way of living and being.

And yet. Now comes that surprising, miraculous, inexplicable, grace-filled third word, *reconciliation*, repeated three times in these final two verses – a word that takes us back to the beginning of the chapter and the idea in verse 1 of our having peace with God, standing with God, access to the fullness of God. Same thing.

Verse 10

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were *reconciled* to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been *reconciled*, shall we be saved through his life!

And verse 11

Romans 5.11

Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reconciliation means two individuals who were once friends but then became enemies have now become friends again.

And here is the wonder.

We were enemies of God why? Because we were ungodly, our hearts were turned from God and our unholy lives were an offense to him.

And we became friends of God how? Not because of anything we did to make it right. But because God was gracious. He never stopped loving us, even when we made it exceedingly difficult for him to love us because our hearts were turned away from him.

At the very moment when we were not only helpless but also utterly undeserving of his help, he delighted to demonstrate his love for us in this: he came to us, and he made his life a living sacrifice for us, to bring us into the love he has for us.

I know this sounds heretical, but Jesus didn't die for our sins. Yes, of course he did. It says so in the Bible. But not ultimately. That's not at the ultimate reason why he came and died. He died *to reconcile us to God*, and our sin was what stood in the way of that. Jesus came and died to bring us back into relationship with the God who created us in love – the relationship for which we were made.

Listen to 1 Peter 3.18 NLT

Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners *to bring you safely home to God*. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

What Love Looks Like



This is what love looks like. A child wrapped up in the loving arms of her father, their gaze of love on one another.

And that is what the Father made possible, that is what the Father brought about, when God, who so loved this world, sent his only son.

Implications

So as we turn over the next few months to considering how it is that we could possibly love our fellow human beings when they take us for granted or mistreat us, this is the starting point that Paul urges us to keep in mind.

We made it difficult for God to love us.

We opposed him, rebelled against him, wronged him, pushed him out of our lives, rejected him . . . We made it difficult for him. And still . . . he loved us. He loved us in the costliest way that one person can love another. He laid down his life for us, undeserving though we were.

Why? Because he wanted to be in relationship with us. And he wasn't willing to let our being undeserving of his love prevent him from loving us.

So, before I ever seek to love God by loving a difficult person, I need to remember that I am a difficult person who is loved by God.

* * *

Two questions naturally arise from studying this passage:

To what extent does what Paul describes in chapter 5 describe your experience? Realizing your helplessness, realizing your godlessness, realizing Jesus stepped in and laid down his life to bring you home to God, undeserving though you were, receiving the gift of that sacrifice, putting your confidence in him, giving him your allegiance, letting him bring you home to God?

That's what people mean when they refer to the idea of becoming a Christian – transferring the weight of their lives onto him. Have you? If not, what would prevent you from taking that step this morning?

And, to what extent does what Paul describes in chapter 5 inform the way you relate to others when it gets difficult?

I am loved, God is with me, and I have full access to him. He pours out his love on me in part so that I might pour it out on those God places around me. Undeserved love poured out on undeserving others. We love because he first loved us (1 John 4).

That's what it means to live the Christian life, biblically understood. Not me living my life for him, out of my own strength, but me opening my life to him, and his living his life through me. Him loving others through me.

Either way, his invitation this morning is for us to draw nearer to him. Respond to God as our worship team comes us and leads us in our song of response.

Closing song

I am thine Oh Lord
I have heard your voice
And it told Your love to me
But I long to rise in the arms of faith
And be closer drawn to Thee

Draw me nearer
To the cross where thou hast died
Draw me nearer
To your precious bleeding side

There are great depths of love that I cannot know
'Till I cross that narrow sea
There are heights of joy that I cannot reach
'Till I rest in peace with thee

Draw me nearer
To the cross where thou hast died
Draw me nearer
To your precious bleeding side

You draw me with Your mercy
You draw with Your love
You draw me with forgiveness by Your blood

You draw me with compassion
You draw me as a bride
You draw me closer to your precious side