

When Love Gets Difficult. Part Six. How I See You
Romans 12.9a, 10

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Think of Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*. Think of Sydney Carton in *The Tale of Two Cities*.

At the heart of these two novels, two of the greatest novels of all time, is the story of a man whose life, like the life of every human being but for God's gracious touch, starts out bent in upon himself, with himself at the center, with thought only of himself.

And then that man encounters the transforming love of God through Jesus, and his life is opened up toward God, and it is opened out toward others, and it takes on a whole new character. Rather than a small life lived for himself, his life becomes a grand and glorious tale of costly self-giving for the sake of others.

And that impossible possible transformation – impossible for us to bring about in ourselves, but fully possible for God to bring about in us – is what our message is about today.

This fall we've been working our way through Romans 12.

We come this morning to the verse that is at the heart of Romans 12 and, in many ways, the heart of the Christian life as Jesus calls us to live it out.

For those of you who are still learning how to find your way around the Bible, Romans is in the New Testament, the part of the Bible that begins with and focuses on the coming of Jesus into our world, which is the last sixth or so of the Bible.

Once you get there, you come across the four biographies of Jesus, which are called the gospels, which means good news: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Then a short history of the early church, the Book of Acts, which we just finished walking through this summer.

And then you come to a bunch of letters written by church leaders. The very first one of those is the letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Rome. That's the letter we're looking at, focusing on the twelfth chapter. Romans chapter 12.

In this chapter, Paul shares a stacked jumble of thoughts about the ways we are called as followers of Jesus to interact with the Lord and also with various individuals whom

the Lord brings into our lives – with our fellow Christians, with those outside the faith, and with those who wrong us and are hostile toward us and our faith.

We are now in the section where Paul is discussing specifically how we are called relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are three aspects to this.

Last Sunday we explored the mindset I am called to have toward *myself* as I relate with you – which, as you may remember, is to have a humble rather than an inflated view of ourselves, letting God loom large so we don't need to

As Augustine said:

'If you ask me what is the most essential element in the teaching and morality of Jesus Christ, I would answer you: the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility.'"

That was Paul's message about how we should view ourselves.

This morning: we'll be focusing on the mindset I am called to have toward *you* as my brother or sister as I relate with you, the way I am to see you

Next Sunday: we'll be exploring the mindset I am to have toward *us together* as brothers and sisters who are part of the same church family locally and globally

So this morning we are zeroing in on how I as a follower of Christ am called to view *you* as a fellow follower of Christ, and we're looking at three short phrases found in verses 9 and 10 of Romans chapter 12. Paul writes:

Romans 12.9a and 10

Love must be sincere.
Be devoted to one another in love.
Honor one another above yourselves.

We'll spend the rest of our time looking at each of those, but the vast majority of our time will be focused on the first one, in which Paul says:

Romans 12.9a

Love must be sincere.

It could be argued that this verse is *the* underlying theme of all of Romans 12. Paul says: let love govern and shape all of your relationships: with your brothers and sisters in Christ, with strangers, and even with those who see you as their enemies.

From a biblical perspective, love is the essential hallmark of the Christian life.

Jesus says love sums up everything the Old Testament teaches: Matthew 22.37-40

He tells us that, of all the distinguishing marks that should set us apart as Christians, this is the most important: John 13.35

The writers of the New Testament tell us that this is the virtue above all virtues, and without it all of our ministry efforts are worthless: I Corinthians 13.1-3 and 13

They tell us this is the essential rule of law in the kingdom of God: the royal law of love: James 2.8

And so important is this virtue that that they tell us if love doesn't characterize our lives we have reason to wonder if our Christian faith is genuine: I John 4.8

When the biblical writers came to describe the love with which we are called to love each other, they had several different Greek words to choose from. The one they chose, *agape*, has at its root the idea of *preferring*.

In the secular world, it meant, "I prefer you over others." But the biblical writers turned the word ninety degrees and gave it a much richer meaning. Whenever they use it, it doesn't mean "I prefer you over others." It means "I prefer you over me." I put you first.

This isn't the first time Paul talks about *agape* love in his letter to the Romans. You might remember that Romans 12 begins with a verse that says this:

Romans 12.1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, *in view of God's mercy*, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice – that is, to live your lives not for yourselves but for him.

In view of God's mercies. Paul is saying that the only way we can make proper sense of what follows in chapter 12, including the verses we are looking at today, is if we keep in mind what Paul already said about the love of God earlier, especially in chapters 5 and 8.

That's where he first introduces the idea of *agape* love. It is striking to notice in the earlier passages where he talks about God's love for us the ideas that surround that word and are connected to it. Whenever he talks about *agape* love, he talks about giving in selfless and costly and sacrificial ways.

In Romans 5.5

God's **love** has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been **given** to us.

5.8

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

8.32-35

³² He who did not spare his own Son, but **gave** him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously **give** us all things? ... Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the **love** of Christ?

Together these passages give us a beautiful definition of biblical love: ***costly self-giving for the sake of the other.***

So in Romans 12.1, Paul is saying that there is no way for us to live out our call to love one another unless we always keep in view the mercies of God toward us.

You and I were on the receiving end of costly self-giving for our sakes, before we were ever called upon to demonstrate costly self-giving for the sake of others – a fact that we have to take to heart as the truest of all true things, and the foundation that stands under any call we have concerning each other.

As Bob Leiweke put it, you should

Define yourself radically as one beloved by God.

Only then can we live out the life of love to which God calls us, by *passing on* the costly self-giving love we've received – by relating to you not based on how you relate to me, but based on how God has related to me.

I am loved without any meriting or deserving on my part. And I have the privilege of loving others without any meriting or deserving on their part.

As Jesus says in Matthew 10.8:

Freely you have received; freely give.

We are called to love. And Paul says our love must be *sincere*. In Greek the word looks and sounds a whole lot like our word *unhypocritical*. It's a word that comes from the world of the theater.

In Greek and Roman plays, as you may know, the actors, who were called *hypokrites*, wore masks, like the comedy and tragedy masks that we associate with drama. They were molded into the fixed expression of a particular emotion, such as joy or sadness or anger or surprise.

This word for *sincere* means not being like an actor wearing a mask, whose face and actions are communicating one thing, but who may be feeling something completely different.

Instead, as you interact with others and show them interest or regard, what is going on with your words and your actions should line up with what is going on in your heart.

Let me just take a step back here.

Now, remember that as he came into this chapter Paul was talking about how God by his Spirit is at work in us to transform our mindset from the world's way of thinking to the Kingdom's way of thinking.

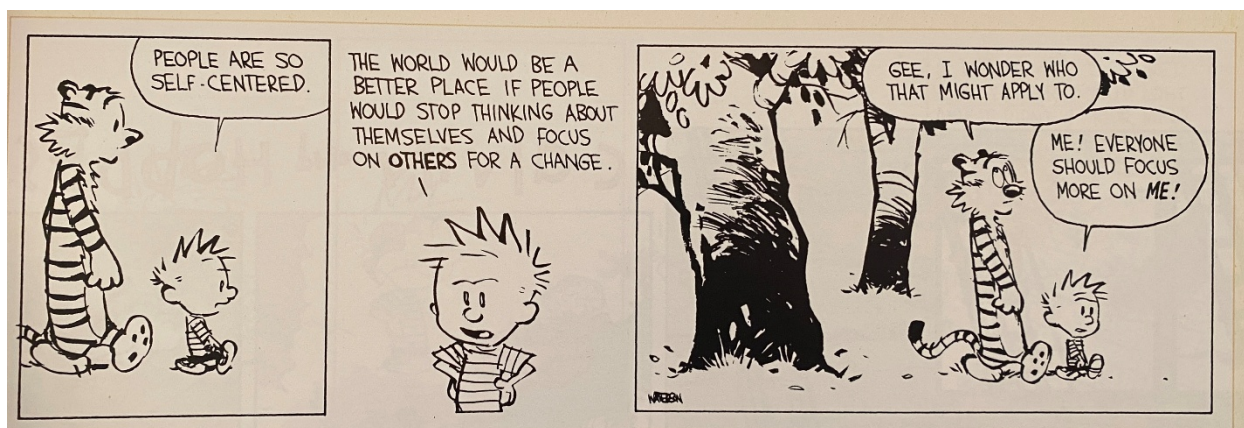
We saw this back to verse 2:

Romans 12.2

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mindset.

Paul understands that there are two spiritual realms, and every human being lives in one or the other. There is the kingdom of this world, from which God is excluded, which necessarily means that you and I slide into the center and take his place. In that world, it's all about *me*.

It's captured perfectly in a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip.



That perfectly captures the primary mindset of the kingdom of this world. It's all about me.

And then there is the Kingdom of God, where God is at the center, seated on his throne, and you and I are displaced from the center. In that kingdom, it's all about him.

Paul says that when we become followers of Jesus, we are brought from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of light, and we begin to live our lives from that point forward under the loving rule of Jesus our King.

And if I'm a citizen of the kingdom of God, and living under his rule, then God wants the way I see things to be consistent with that new realm that is my home. So he says:

Do not allow yourself to continue to be conformed to the old pattern of this world, which has the self at the center. but allow yourself to be transformed by the making-new of your mindset. Let the Spirit change your way of making sense of things.

So Romans 12, including the passages we're looking at today, is about the new mindsets that Jesus by his Spirit is actively forming in us as citizens of his kingdom, with which God desires our full cooperation.

And the mindset shift at the heart of this verse is perhaps the centermost change of outlook that has to take place in every follower of Christ. It's a change in the way I see you, my fellow human being, whom God brings into my life.

So how are we to understand the distinction Paul is getting at between sincere love and insincere love?

Well, we in our world tend to frame "love" in terms of feelings. I like you a lot and have affection for you, or I don't really connect with you and I don't really feel fond of you. In that way of thinking about love, as a feeling, insincere love would be something like "faking niceness."

But remember that, from the perspective of Scripture, love is not something we feel but something we *choose*, something we resolve to do. It's a way we have of seeing people. So there is something more to it than faking niceness, something playing out at a more fundamental level.

Based on how Paul has structured this passage, contrasting these two worlds and the mindsets that are most consistent with them, I think we should understand *insincere* love to describe how I will see you when I live in a world from which God is excluded and I follow my natural inclinations and I live life with me at the center.

So when we come together into a moment, I see you fundamentally as someone I can get something from: maybe desirable things, like friendship, affection, encouragement,

or maybe darker things, financial gain, social status, an inflated ego, access to power, physical pleasure, whatever. Bottom line: insincere love is about me getting, me taking, from you.

And by contrast, *sincere* love is how I will see you when God occupies his right place at the center of the world and at the center of my heart and therefore at the center of our relationship. When that happens, I am free to reflect toward you the same selfless and costly regard for your wellbeing that God has shown to me.

When my love is insincere, I am thinking about me. I see you as someone I can get something from, or take something from. But when my love for you is sincere, I am thinking about you. I see you as someone I can give to.

Think again of Jean Valjean and Sydney Carton. In playwriting and screenwriting writers talk about the motive that drives the actions of the main character. They call it the *driving force* or *compelling desire*.

When I am part of the kingdom of this world, from which God has been removed, my driving force is *getting*. But when I am part of the kingdom of God, God shifts things in my interior, and more and more I am being transformed by the renewing of my mindset and my driving force is *giving*.

Insincere love wants what's best for me. Sincere love wants the best for the other, even when it costs me.

You all know the passage that is called the Golden Rule. Matthew 7.12:

Do to others what you would have them do to you.

Jesus recognizes that every one of us is very tuned in to our own needs and desires and concerns and interests. He invites us to use our self-concern as the measure, the standard, of what our love for others will look like when we love them. Those things we want for ourselves will be what we seek for them.

But here's the golden rule in the kingdom of this world.

Do to others what will get from them what you would have them do to you.

That's the essence of insincere love. Turns out it's Fool's Gold.

In the 1800's an English poet named John Oxenham wrote these incredible lines that so perfectly capture the self-giving heart of sincere love:

Love ever gives, forgives, outlives,
And ever stands with open hands,
And while it lives, it gives.

For this is love's prerogative—
to give, and give, and give.

Before we go on, think for a moment about the interactions you have with people you interact with throughout the day: the people you eat lunch with at school, the kid waiting in line next to you to go down the slide on the playground, the colleague in the office next to yours, the neighbor next door, your spouse, the people who work out with you, the clerk at the grocery store, the nurse at the doctor's office, the new kid on the soccer team.

If you were pressed, and had to say, "The primary way I see those people is either giving or getting," which would you say characterizes your relationships most?

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Love must be sincere, marked by a heart to give and not get. That's Paul's first and most important challenge when it comes to the way we see one another.

Let me just touch briefly on the other two.

Romans 12.10a

Be devoted to one another in love.

We'll spend more time on this one next week, when we talk about how Paul tells us we should view *us together* as brothers and sisters when we relate.

Right now I just want to point out that in this verse Paul uses two words that come straight from the family home.

Literally this passage says something like: "Have for one another the fond affection that you would normally reserve for your family members, loving one another as if you were brothers and sisters – because you are."

I recently ran into woman who grew up in this church and then moved away. I still remember her as a girl. She said she moved back just so she could be closer to her family. "I love them so much," she said, "and I miss them and I just want to be near them and spend as much time with them as I can."

Paul says that's the kind of family affection that we should have for one another as followers of Jesus. And it's the kind of affection that expresses itself every Sunday morning as more and more of you linger longer simply to enjoy each other's delightful company.

What's the primary way you think about the church? An organization you're part of that does good things, like Rotary Club? A performance you attend, like a concert? A place

you visit for self-improvement, like the gym? Or do you see your church as your family, for whom you have a fondness and an affection?

More on that next week.

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Then Paul concludes by saying

Romans 12.10b

Honor one another above yourselves.

I mentioned earlier that the root idea of the word *agape* is the idea of preferring others over yourself.

This is really just elaborating on that idea.

If, as we said last Sunday, humility lets me think of *myself* when I'm with you as the less important city, the smaller tributary, the less shiny star, then honor has me seeing *you* as just the opposite, as the city more worth visiting, the river with greater views and scenery, the more noteworthy star in the sky.

Honoring someone is on the opposite end of the spectrum from taking them for granted or overlooking them because I am absorbed with my own needs or how I'd like things to go.

When I honor you it you means holding you in high esteem. When I honor you I happily expend time and thought anticipating what might be meaningful to you and then go out of my way to make that happen, seeing it as a privilege and not as an inconvenience to do so.

My friend Mark Labberton is a remarkably gifted man with a global reputation. He has served as the senior pastor of a large church, and as the president of an influential seminary. He has written a number of well respected books. And he was so generous to make time available to come be with us.

So, thinking about what he might find meaningful when he came to spend time with us, Elizabeth went out of her way to arrange for a beautiful place for him to stay, and I drove to the airport to pick him up and then again to take him back for his return flight, and Sharon served him a wonderful meal, and several friends in the Covenant family arranged for him to experience a Purdue basketball game with premier parking and premier seats. And we all found joy in honoring him in those way.

Paul says that should be our mindset with every one of our brothers and sisters all the time, and not just from time to time with the prominent few, and not just those few with

whom we happen to agree on everything: finding joy in going out of our way to communicate honor and esteem and value to one another regardless.

Think of your interactions with your brothers and sisters in the Covenant family. Think of the way you interact with them on social media, or speak about them on social media. As you think about your interactions with others, does that idea of holding your brothers and sisters in high esteem and going out of your way to honor them, does that seem familiar? Or unfamiliar? What might God be saying to you?

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Through Paul Jesus invites us as his subjects, brought out of the kingdom of this world and into the kingdom of light, to have a mindset toward one another that reflects the realm that is now our home. He says to us:

Romans 12.9a and 10

Love must be sincere.
Be devoted to one another in love.
Honor one another above yourselves.

Let me end with three invitations this morning.

First, some of you are here as nonChristians. You've been curious about the Christian faith and wanting to know more, and you've heard enough this morning and maybe over the past couple of Sundays to know that this is what you want. Jesus came to bring you home to God, and you're ready to take that step. To place yourself under the loving rule of Jesus, and to let him fold you into his loving arms for eternity.

If that describes you, I want to encourage you right now to pray and to give your life to Jesus by faith. Receive the gift of his love and forgiveness, receive the gift of a new family and new purpose, and from today on, live your life for him.

If that's a step that you make this morning, I encourage you to grab me or someone next to you and let them know you've made that decision. We'd love to celebrate with you and help you take the first few steps in your new life of faith.

Second, some of you are here exploring the Christian faith, but you still have lots of questions. If that's you, we love that you're here. I want to invite you to come join me this Wednesday night at 7 in the Hub for Conversations about Christianity, and share your questions and objections so we can explore them together.

There are lots of places here for followers of Jesus to study the Bible together and learn and grow, but this gathering is designed for those who are exploring what it might mean to become a follower of Jesus. It's a comfortable place to raise your questions and talk

them through. If that describes you, please come. If that describes someone you know, please invite them and bring them with you. Wednesday night at 7 in the Hub.

The last invitation is for all of us.

One of the things that becomes really clear as we spend time in Romans 12 is that Paul is calling us to do a bunch of things that we simply cannot do out of our own effort. I can't change my mindset from a getting mindset to a giving one.

But the very thing I am incapable of doing Jesus delights to do.

Remember Romans 5.5? It says,

God's love is being poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

So what can never be our experience through our own effort can become our experience through our invitation and cooperation, as we ask God to form these qualities in us.

I love this line from Dominic Barberi:

No matter what efforts I make, I cannot die to myself without His grace. I am like a frog which, no matter how high it leaps, always finishes up back in the mud. No matter how hard I try to escape from myself, I always come back to myself and my self-love. Draw me, then, O Lord, draw me after You, for unless you do, I cannot move even one step away from myself.

Let's turn Romans 12 into a prayer.

Lord, we plead with you, do in us what we are unable to do in ourselves
Give us a sincere, selfless, giving love, for one another.
Give us affection for our brothers and sisters in the family of faith.
And help us find joy in lifting each other up and putting each other first.
Lord, we pray, make it so.

Appendix: New Testament Verses on Love

Matthew 5:43-47

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

Mark 12:28-31

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Luke 6:35

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

John 13:34-35

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

John 15:12

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Romans 12:10

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

Romans 13:9-10

For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word:

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ...

1 Corinthians 13:4-8

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away.

1 Corinthians 16:14

Let all that you do be done in love.

Galatians 5:14

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Galatians 5:13

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Ephesians 4:2

With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

Ephesians 5:2

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Philippians 2:1-4

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Colossians 3:12-17

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

1 Thessalonians 3:12

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you,

1 Thessalonians 4:9

Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,

1 Peter 1:22

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,

1 Peter 4:8

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.

1 Peter 5:14

Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

James 2.8

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

1 John 3:14

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.

1 John 3:16

By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

1 John 3:18

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

1 John 4:7-8

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

1 John 4:10

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

1 John 4:11

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:12

No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4:16

So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

1 John 4:19-21

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.