

## *The Greatest of These*

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 12, 2022.

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality (Rom. 12:9–13).<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, what is the distinguishing mark of a Christian? Is it faith? Surely, that which God gives, and through which we are his, is the distinguishing mark? Or, is it hope? Surely, that which rests squarely on God’s provision in Christ, and in which we are to abound, is the distinguishing mark? But as essential as faith is and as important as hope is, shortly before the conclusion of his earthly ministry, Jesus said to his disciples, “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 13:34–35). Echoing Jesus’ command and reinforcing its distinction, Paul confirms, “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

It should not surprise us then to see this consistently repeated throughout the New Testament. For example, Paul reminds the Thessalonians to love one another as they had been taught (1 Thess. 4:9), and Peter emphasizes the importance of obedience in brotherly love, loving one another “earnestly from a pure heart” (1 Pet. 1:22). James emphasizes the ethic of “the royal law” (Jas. 2:8), and John returns to the theme of Christian love repeatedly in his first epistle. For John, love is the qualifying distinctive: “Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light” (1 John 2:9–10a). For John it’s a distinction between children of God and the devil (1 John 3:10), a distinction of abiding in eternal life or death (1 John 3:14–15), a distinction of receiving God’s love and knowing him personally, a distinction of genuine love: “whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:7–21).

There is then no debate about the distinguishing mark of love; the difficulty comes in the defining and doing. Of course, the difficulty comes not from Scripture but when we allow the world to define our terms. For example, the world tells us if we really love others, we will accept and even embrace their sin. In our own culture, “love” has come to mean social acceptance of personal debauchery. Sadly, some even quote Jesus to support what is an abomination to God. Basically, worldly love seems to mean calling what God calls evil good. In other words, the world would have us define love, even love within the church, not according to God’s Word but Satan’s ways. This is nothing more than an echo from Eden: Satan’s intent to undermine the Word of God and pervert genuine love.

This is why it is so important that we define our terms not from the world but the Word. What then is the definition of love? Scripture is quite clear: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). He is the standard; he defines love. John goes on to say, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12). In other words, genuine love, the love of God, is revealed in and through us, not perfectly and completely but as a distinguishing mark of who and whose we are. For this reason, Paul admonishes the church: “Let love be genuine,” without hypocrisy, authentic. And these two words, genuine love, serve like a heading for what follows, describing the nature, nurture, and need of the love of God in and through us.

### **The Nature of Love**

What then is the nature of this love that is to be exemplified in the church without hypocrisy? It is not a pretense, not an act, nor an emotion but a genuine reflection of God’s love. He who is love loved us first (1 John 4:19). From this love flows true love for one another: We love those whom God loves, like he loves them, like he loves us. We are the imperfect conduit through which the perfect love of God flows.

Yet, this can all sound a wee bit abstract for finite ears. Practically speaking, what are characteristics of this genuine love? Paul provides a balanced set: abhorring what is evil and holding fast to what is good. How contrary this is to the way of the world, isn’t it? Who would define love beginning with hating evil? Well, God does.

So, how are we to understand this abhorring-evil-and-holding-fast-to-good love? The verb translated “abhor” means to “hate exceedingly;”<sup>2</sup> it is similar to the noun abomination. To “hold fast” is to cling to in the sense of two things glued together. Love says, “Abhor evil and stick to what is good.” The genuine love Paul describes then is not a tepid or fleeting emotion but is volitional: away from evil and united with good. It is abhorring not what the world says but what God says specifically in his Word is evil. It is holding fast to not what the world says but what God says specifically in his Word is good.

As we submit to God’s definition of love, we grow in our understanding and perception, and interestingly enough we grow in our love for one another in the church. There is a connection between purity in the church and loving one another. In explaining what love is to the church at Corinth, Paul wrote, “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” (1 Cor. 13:4-6). What Paul describes is intentionally relational, because we aren’t merely fighting individually for the right definition of truth but living it out together, devoted to one another with the mutual love we share in Christ.

### **The Nurture of Love**

There is, of course, a potential cynical response to Paul’s description of genuine love. Some of us have encountered anything but love in the church, leading us to wonder why God would choose such an imperfect vessel for his love. But like everything else in this life, we can no more let exceptions define the rule than let our flesh define our faith. No, you can criticize the church all you want, but when you experience the love of Christ in it, there’s nothing else like it. It’s like the nurturing love of a real family.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 776.

And this is precisely the language Paul uses to describe it: “Love one another,” or “Be devoted to one another” (NET), “with brotherly affection,” or “with mutual love” (NET). This is familial language, a family bound not by blood but Spirit and united in fellowship one with another. It is a communion devoted to one another in Christ.

Blessed be the tie that binds  
Our hearts in Christian love;  
The fellowship of kindred minds  
Is like to that above.<sup>3</sup>

How is such genuine love evidenced then in the church? How may we see the love of Christ among us? Paul offers clear direction. First, “Outdo one another in showing honor.” Such love is not reluctant but proactive, requiring not only church attendance but attentiveness. To know you, and you me, we must know what is going on in one another’s lives. In knowing you, then I will diligently seek to honor you above me. This is neither a call for invasion of privacy or flattery but, as one commentator paraphrases it, “Don’t wait around for people to recognize your contributions and praise you. Instead, be alert to what they are contributing and honor them.”<sup>4</sup> We must “practice playing second fiddle” (MSG).

Second, zealously and fervently serve the Lord together. Life can wear you down, even in doing what is most important. And if we are to serve the Lord as we are called to do, not complacently but zealously, not in drudgery but fervently, then we need one another. This is yet another reason we need one another in the local church—that we might not lag or lose our enthusiasm in serving the Lord. In love we come alongside one another, helping each other fight the temptation to be a lazy loner, rescuing one another from the sloth of selfishness. To continue to serve the Lord fervently, our spirits need the encouragement of our Spirit-filled brothers and sisters. And as each of us are gifted uniquely, our service varies but our zeal and fervency shouldn’t. Together, we are one body in one Spirit serving one Lord.

What Paul is advocating and admonishing is not hubristic optimism (not apocalyptic pessimism either). He is not encouraging us to encourage one another with nothing more than a sunny outlook. On the contrary, the trials and tribulations of our sanctification await us. Genuine love never patronizes but points us to praise, perseverance, and prayer: “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Or, as one commentator puts it, “In so far as we have cause to hope, let us be joyful; in so far as we have cause of pain, let us hold out; in so far as the door of prayer is open to us, let us continue to use it.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the fundamental ways we love one another is reminding one another of the hope we have in Christ, a truth worth rejoicing in. In love, may I point you to Christ, his life, death, and

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<sup>3</sup> “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 359.

<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The New Humanity: Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 4:1599.

<sup>5</sup> Godet quoted in *Ibid.*, 1602.

resurrection: “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:2). We hope in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in hope, we await “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:13). In hope, we long for our transformation unto glory, for “what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). In these things we hope, and in love we encourage one another with them, rejoicing in the hope that is ours in Christ.

Likewise, we walk together through the valleys of tribulation, knowing that trials develop steadfastness, refining us and conforming us to Christ. But what we often forget is that we need not walk alone. Of course, walking through valleys or cresting mountain peaks together requires not only patience but wisdom as well. We must learn when and how to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh, learning to live this life together in the love of Christ.

All of this of course calls for consistent prayer, continuing intercession for one another. But consider also how praying for someone else other than yourself is an act of love. I must consider you personally, your wants and needs, in order to petition our Lord on your behalf. This is one of the beautiful things about asking one another for prayer, a request that connotes relationship, a response that conveys communion, a requisition that carries love, asking, seeking, knocking for one another.

### **The Need of Love**

Genuine love also includes tangible needs in the church. Loving the Lord includes our tithes and offerings; loving one another includes helping, contributing to “the needs of the saints.” The word translated “needs” refers specifically to material needs—food, shelter, and clothing. Similar to the second chapter of Acts (2:44-45), Paul directs our attention to knowing and meeting the true needs among us. And as we meet these needs in love as the body of Christ, we know “as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it [for Christ’s sake]” (Matt. 25:36).

Likewise, in love we open up our homes, seeking to show hospitality. We are sometimes reluctant to open up our homes, but Peter reminds us we are to do so “without grumbling” (1 Pet. 4:9). Hospitality is more than pushing through but opening up. As Rosaria Butterfield writes, “Radically ordinary hospitality shows this skeptical, post-Christian world what authentic Christianity looks like.” She goes on to say, “Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God’s gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged. They know that the gospel comes with a house key.”<sup>6</sup>

What we must remember then is that the world does not define love. God does. But the world sees love through the church, in our love for the Lord and for one another. So, let us “put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14), and “keep loving one

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<sup>6</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, “9 Notable Quotes from the Gospel Comes with a House Key,” accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/9-notable-quotes-from-the-gospel-comes-with-a-house-key/>.

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another earnestly” (1 Pet. 4:8). “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13), and “By this all people will know that [we] are [his] disciples, if [we] have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Amen.