
Loving Christ Means Loving Others (Romans 12:9-21)
2/19/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



Brothers and sisters in Christ, I hope you had a great Valentine's Day. It can be a wonderful day, a day that reminds us to show our love to those closest to us, a day when we do something special for those who are special to us. In a sinful world like ours, sometimes we need that reminder. But today, our God encourages us to not let Valentine's Day be a unique day of the year. Instead, God wants acts of love to be our regular habit. As Christians, love defines our every moment. And, in fact, God teaches us that Loving Christ Means Loving Others.

We spoke during the past couple of weeks about how God has called us to be Christs to the world around us. God's plan for spreading his gospel message, God's plan to retake this world from the clutches of sin, death, and Satan comes down to this simple battle plan: God wants you and me to love people. Our love for others is to mirror the love our God has shown us. We love unconditionally just as our God loves us. We love by actions and not just words just like our God loves us. And we love everyone, even our enemies just like our God loves us.

Consider the love that God has shown to you. As a holy God, God cannot stand even the smallest of sins. As an omnipresent God, a God who is everywhere at once, God has witnessed everything we have ever done. As an all-knowing God, God knows even our secret sins, the ones we weren't aware of, the ones we thought no one saw, the ones we desperately may be trying to hide from others.

God knows just how sinful we are and his holiness cannot stand any of it. Every time I have hurt my neighbor, that is a personal offense against God. Every time I have said something that grieved my neighbor, God has been grieved all the more. Every sin from my past or even from my present that I now feel ashamed of, God is shamed all the more of those sins.

This is what the Bible means when it talks about sinners being enemies of God. Our every sin is an attack on God's holiness. It means that God takes personally every sin I commit against my neighbor. It means that every sin drives a wedge between us and God, every sin is a sinful effort to push God and his ways out of our lives.

We see why hell is a just punishment for our every action. If I, by my sin, want to separate myself so much from God, then it makes sense that God should finally give me what I want. It makes sense that God should completely separate himself from me, and that is what hell is after all. It is complete separation from God.

But in spite of what our sins deserved, in spite of the hostility we show against God, and in spite of our sinful desire for that separation from God's will and following his ways, God still did not want us walking that path of destruction. God still showed us love. He sent his Son to suffer hell, that separation from God. He sent Jesus to die the death that our sins deserved.

And he did that while we were still God's enemies. He did that while we were still sinners. He did that when we were still busy driving more and more wedges between us and himself. He didn't wait for us to change our ways. He didn't wait for us to repent. He paid for our sins while we were still God-haters.

This love from our God changes everything. It changes our ultimate destiny. Now we are bound for heaven instead of hell. It changes our worldview, our identity, the point of our every moment. But today, we will focus on how it changes how we love one another.

Today, as we dig into Romans 12:9-21, God through the words of the Apostle Paul calls us to a kind of love that is beyond what sinful people are capable of. But as we strive to live according to our God's Word, it shows us all the deeper what God's love for us means, and that gives us all the more divine power to show that kind of love to those around us.

Our God shares a lot with us in this section and I want to encourage you to reread these verses on your own and spend some time thinking about what that means for you because right now we won't have time to really talk about all these things. For right now, we will unfortunately miss out on a lot that's in here, but by God's grace we will consider a few highlights from this section.

Paul writes, "Love must be sincere." God does not love us with ulterior motives. God did not forgive our sins because he could then get something from us. In fact, any good work we do must come from God. He has to put his Spirit into us to do the works for us. And even if we could do some kind of good work on our own, what would that be to an almighty, all-knowing God? He doesn't need anything from us. We can't do anything for him that he cannot do himself. No, God did not save us for what we could do for him. God saved us only because he genuinely wants what is best for us. He wanted to show love to us. And this is the love that we are privileged to show to the world around us.

Paul says that, as saints, we hate what is evil and cling to the good. Ever heard the phrase, "You are what you eat"? In a lot of ways, it's the same with your mind. You become what you continue to see. You become what you keep thinking about. You become what you continue to do.

God tells us to hate evil. Avoid spiritual junk food! Our thoughts and our actions have a powerful effect on us. If we allow sinful thoughts into our minds, if we allow ourselves to keep selfish or hateful thoughts, that will more and more become who we are. If we allow sinful actions to continue in our habits, if we keep living selfishly or unlovingly, those actions will become part of who we are. But our God has freed us from those sins, and therefore we are able to hate those sins and kick them out of ourselves by God's power. It is God's power that allows us to hate sin of every kind; not only the sinful actions of the society we live in, but also the sinful pride that makes us feel like we are better than that same sinful society. Instead, our godly hatred of evil leads us more and more to love our neighbor, even those caught in evil sin.

Paul encourages us furthermore to grab on to what is good and hold on tight to it! Feed your mind good things! How do we do that? We think on what God's Word says. We take time to compare God's Word with how we are living. When God puts good works into our lives, we grab onto those and continue doing them so that those good works might become more and more who we are.

You've heard the phrase, "Fake it till you make it." That's actually one of the best ways we grow. Ever notice how much children love to play pretend? As babies, they babble on and on pretending to speak until they get it. Children will pretend to hunt until they learn to really go hunting. Kids will pretend to do chores just like mommy and daddy until they learn to do them for real. That's just natural for how we learn and it works that way spiritually too. As God's children, we imitate our God's love, even though we don't have it down. We learn to show kindness to our neighbor, even when we may not feel that love at the moment. But the repeated action helps us to learn to be like our Heavenly Father.

One more way we hold onto what is good is by spending time with people who will strengthen our faith. That is one of the reasons that it is so important for us to come to church, because here we can be with other Christians. Here we can see the examples of our fellow believers. Here, we can see what God has done for others. Here, we see in much more concrete ways what power God is showing in people's lives. As a family of faith, I encourage you to get to know each other more and more.

If you take a single burning coal from a grill and put it by itself, what happens to it? It's heat burns away quickly. But if you keep that burning coal with the others, the whole group can stay burning much hotter for much longer. It's the same with our walk with God. We will burn much more strongly and much longer as we walk with God together. Do not miss that opportunity for growth! Get to know you fellow Christians here. Strike up a conversation with a fellow member you haven't talked to before. Invite each other over. Make connections with each other. God has chosen his church to spread his Word to the world. Don't miss out on that by trying to make your faith a "just you and Jesus" endeavor. Our walk with God was never meant to be a purely personal journey, but a group effort. That's just one more reason why God puts such an emphasis on our loving one another.

In Romans 12:11-12, Paul says, "Never be lacking in zeal, keep your spiritual fervor... Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." So many people today are just going through the motions of life because they have no purpose, but you are so different. As we read through the Scriptures, we find people, ordinary people, in whom God worked incredible things, in whom God worked exactly these attributes that Paul writes to us about. Some of those Christians faced torture and prison with joy and singing. Some willingly went to their own deaths without fear. Some tirelessly worked their entire lives, facing all kinds of obstacles and opposition, without every stopping, without every giving up, all so they could spread God's kingdom.

Sometimes we look at these believers as inhuman, as though they had something that we just don't have. But most of these people were not anything special. The only reason they could do these heroic actions was because they had received the message of the gospel. The only reason they did those things was because God created faith in them, because God made his home in their hearts. God has given you the gospel message. God has created faith in you. God has made his home in your heart. You have the same exact divine power that they had. Look to your God for those good deeds. Pray to him for his power to love as God loves and to live as God has made others to live. Look to God's Word and to God's people for those examples and pray for strength from your God to live that way too.

We have little time left, but Paul's last words to us today are: "Overcome evil with good." We are in a battle every day, the battle of good versus evil. All of us used to be on the side of evil, but by God's grace, we are on the side of good. When people wrong us, our natural desire is to wrong them back, to get even. But when we pay back evil for evil, that's fighting on the side of evil. Getting revenge is not fighting on the side of good, and it's not fighting on God's side. Recognize that battle raging in your life and fight where God has put you. God has put us on his side; the side of good, and we fight that battle by loving those around us, by loving even our enemies.

We started our sermon talking about how God calls us to be Christs to the world around us. But our God gives us another way to view the people around us. God tells us that every loving act we perform for another person is a loving act we perform for God. Therefore, let us love one another as though we were showing that love directly to Christ himself. When you have opportunity to help someone in need, help them as though it were Christ himself who needed your help. When you have been wronged by someone, forgive them as though it were Christ himself who was asking you to forgive. Love those around you as though you were showing your love directly to Christ himself. Because in the end, Loving Christ Means Loving Others. Amen.