

## To Love in Deed Is True Love Indeed!

A sermon based on Romans 12:9-21

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

How far are you willing to go for the one you truly love? I'm sure husbands and wives, anyone of you with significant others were put to that test last week as you tried to determine what could be the best expression of your love to that special someone on Valentine's Day.

People are willing to go to some pretty far extremes for true love. I think of the mythical tales of Troy, you know, the Trojan horse, but all that, the battle between the Trojans and the Spartans started because of love...because of Helen of Troy, "the face that launched a thousand ships," according to legend. One man and his entire country, willing to die for one woman. Now that's true love.

But what about the flip-side? It's easy to show true love to the people in your life whom you care about the most. But what about all the others? How far would you be willing to go for your enemy?

The Apostle Paul had seen how far God was willing to go for one of his because Paul was the living example of that enemy. Paul's early history wasn't exactly what you would expect from a follower of Jesus, actually, quite far from it, what with his persecuting Christians, putting them to death, doing whatever it took to show his hatred for Jesus.

But God wanted him, God wanted to put Paul's sinful past behind him, God loved him, and so God in his grace, his underserved love, turned Paul from an enemy and made him one of his own children.

So, when Paul starts off our section this morning, "Love must be sincere"...love must be genuine, he had to have had God's incredible love in mind. After all, he did just spend the first 11 chapters of Romans leading up to this section, testifying to that good news of God's eternal love, giving reassurance again and again of how all mankind, us included, WERE enemies of God, but how he loves us so much, how through Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, we're no longer his enemies. We're not even just his friends. We are his. We are his children. We are the loves of his life.

Paul sets up our verses this morning with the beautiful message of the gospel and now here, begins to draw application of how you and I can respond in love, how we love because he, God, first loved us. Yeah, God's done his work. Now it's our turn. Paul writes at the beginning of chapter 12, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy (his grace, his unending love), [I urge you] to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God." That's every day, you and I offering up our entire lives to live for God, sacrificing our evil and selfish wants and desires to do what God desires.

And what would that be? Love in deed is true love indeed. "Love must be sincere...be devoted to one another in brotherly love," Paul writes. Our verses today are almost like a checklist Paul puts together to show what sincere and genuine love looks like. You notice how it doesn't include me? True love is not about me. It's all about others, showing love to others, first here, specifically to brothers and sisters in Christ, to fellow believers. So, let's work through that checklist.

There's honoring one another above yourselves. Meaning, thinking about other members, not about what I want or what's best for me here. It's always being selfless, not selfish. Can you check it off?

There's having that zeal, keeping your spiritual fervor to serve the Lord. Or, as Jesus would say, "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me." It's being concerned about serving others here and serving with others here for the good of Christ's kingdom. Can you check it off?

There's being joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Amongst believers, do you let your joy and happiness shine forth, do you practice patience in your dealings with them, or are you quick to snap and get angry and wear your frustrations for all to see? Do you include your siblings in Christ in your prayers? Can you check these off?

There's sharing with God's people who are in need, practicing hospitality. That means not giving others the cold shoulder, being genuinely concerned about their needs, doing what you can to care for them, being a gracious host at God's house. Can you check that off?

If you were able to mentally check off every item on that list, I applaud you. But let's be honest. To let our deeds, our actions, show a sincere and genuine and true love for brothers and sisters in Christ, not just some of the time, but all the time, seems to me to be impossible. That's not an excuse. It's just the reality. None of the virtues urged by Paul here are particularly easy for us Christians. The problem is we continue to be hampered by our old Adam, that evil nature, which clings to us children of God all lifelong.

There are times when, I will confess, I haven't shown genuine love for you in my deeds. Always being selfless, full of zeal for you, joyful, patient, praying for you, showing you hospitality, I haven't always done it. And I know there are instances where every one of you would have to say the same.

Yeah, loving our brothers and sisters in Christ and caring for their needs, it certainly makes sense. It certainly ought to be easy. But when the opportunities to display true love arise, it's hard.

Which makes what Paul writes in the following verses, starting with verse 14, even harder. Let's hear again what he has to say. **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay evil for evil...Do not take revenge."**

Just like Jesus, in our gospel, who said, **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,"** Paul goes further here, too. Believers don't just let love guide their actions and their interactions with other believers. True love goes beyond to our deeds to those who we would consider to be enemies.

And for us, who are saints yet sinners, that's hard. "You mean those neighbor down the street who are so rude, who know we go to church on Sunday mornings, but the things they say when the drive past, how they blast their music to the late hours of Saturday night, Sunday morning, I'm supposed to pray for them instead of talking behind their backs or showing the same rudeness to them? Why would I want to do that?"

"You mean those kids at school who bash me for going to church, for being into Jesus, who bully me, or maybe it's co-workers who do the same, I'm not supposed to take revenge or secretly delight in their misfortunes but instead do good to them and try to always live at peace with them? Why would I want to do that?"

"You mean here at church, when someone and I don't see eye-to-eye on a lot of topics, it's frustrating, and I don't think he respects me, I'm not supposed to hold a grudge, as our verses from Exodus tell us?"

I'm still supposed to show love and respect to him, even if it's not going both ways? Why would I want to do that?"

"Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." And oh, how the sinful nature bristles at these words because it's so much easier for me to be mad at my enemy and let that affect our relationship, our interactions, how I act towards him. I want to hold on to the frustrations. I want that anger to dictate how I deal with him.

That attitude's not surprising. Earlier in Romans, Paul had to say this about every one of us, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so." We want to talk about our enemies, how we want to not show true love in deed to them, but let's look at ourselves. Even more of a rivalry than what goes on between me and that person who just always rubs me the wrong way or who I don't really care for or who I just plain don't like, even worse than that is the relationship between my sinful nature and God.

That sinful nature, who controls me more times than I'd like, it's hostile towards God. It hates God. It's God's enemy. It makes me God's enemy. And when true love in deed is not being shown to everyone in my life, including my enemies, then true love isn't being shown to my God either. And if there's someone who doesn't deserve to have God's true love shown to them, it's me. It's you. It's every single one of us.

And when we were hateful enemies of God, the Bible simply says, "**Christ died for us.**" Again, it says, "**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world...**" When he could have turned his back on us, or even worse, treated us like the enemies we really are and just destroyed us, he didn't. To love in deed is true love indeed. God loved us, and sent his Son.

To his enemies, God went out of his way to give his most precious gift, Jesus. You want to see how Jesus treated his enemies? Like, the Pharisees, who were always trying to trip him up and get him to sin. Jesus showed love by not sinning, and by lovingly, and sometimes sternly, preaching law and gospel to them because he cared about their souls.

Or how about when Jesus was on the cross? His enemies had betrayed him, beat him, nailed him to a cross, and "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." He prayed for their forgiveness as he was dying!

And as great as that was, "**greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends**" ...and even his enemies. Jesus' prayer on the cross, superseded by his work on the cross, the true act of love. Jesus didn't just pray for us. He died for us, the greatest sacrifice for his enemies. In love, Jesus died to take away our sins and to give us his perfect life, his righteousness in exchange. That's true love indeed!

But his love took him one step further. Jesus rose, because he wasn't just concerned about our safety from sin here in this life, but he also cares about our eternal safety. So he rose, and his resurrection guarantees our resurrection to heaven one day as well.

You and I, we're no longer enemies of God. Because of Jesus and his true love, we are friends. We are God's children. We are eternal heirs! And now, God provides us with opportunities to show that same kind of genuine, sincere, true love to everyone, friends and enemies alike.

How can we do that? Now, maybe you've heard the phrase, "Kill them with kindness." I think Paul's got a better way of saying it, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good...if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

All we need to concern ourselves about, all we get to concern ourselves about is overcoming evil with good, showing true love in all of our deeds, knowing this. There is a just and holy God in charge even when evil people do evil things. Us Christians are not called upon to set everything right in the world. We're not to repay the evildoers in kind or to take revenge. That will all eventually work itself out in God's eternal court of justice. We just get to show love.

So, how far would you go for the one you love? How about your enemy? Trick question, right? If we want to live the way God wants us to, tells us too, we won't look at others as enemies. They're no different from us, sinners, yes, but also souls for whom Jesus died, souls whom God wants with him in heaven. And if God wants them, so do we. So friends, I pray God works, I know God will work through you to love in your deeds with all people because that's true love indeed! Amen.