



Love without Hypocrisy
Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28
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What's life all about? What's its purpose? We all seek meaning. We all want to be loved, respected, and included. We also appreciate reciprocity: I have a need for love and at the same time, to be fully human, I need to offer love. Same thing with respect and inclusion. It goes both ways. That's how we thrive.

Personal maturity (educational level and spiritual depth) and social environment (family and national history, personal and social engagement and/or traumatic experiences and pressures) shape the worldview that affect the human development of individuals.

Some people say that we live to work so we make enough money to buy the stuff we think we need to enjoy life. So, the more we own, the more we think we are missing out on things and the more we want. Some live as if success is demonstrated in the amount of stuff we accumulate: the one with more toys wins.

Others think that possessions can afford us even more than respect and belonging: possessions are resources that allow us to accumulate power by attracting the attention (and ambition) of people positioned at higher levels of the business and political worlds. The higher we go, we think, the better control we have on life. Many with access to means have been able to do a lot of good for society. It might bring one admiration, fame, and fortune.

However, it is also easy to see how this understanding and personal motivation might be rather vulnerable to self-serving goals. In the long run, if selfishness does take over, this endeavor will turn shallow and unsatisfactory. Consequently, it violates people, including oneself and the rest of creation: it may make life miserable and even break hearts, minds, and bodies as people and nature are regarded only from a transactional point of view. If this is the way you want to gain "life," watch out, Jesus seems to say, you will lose it. And signs of death are all around us.

It shouldn't be so for a follower of Christ. Jesus' disciples are called to love in the face of hatred, meanness, violence, and death. Through love alone, Jesus says, we will find life. Love frees us from the fear of death. God is love.

But loving, being kind, and caring sounds too much like weakness in Peter's ears. Jesus' way is a direct challenge to the ways of the world. Proclaiming justice, truth-telling, elevating those at the margins, and healing those who suffer bring Christ and his followers on a collision course with the world.

Before we are opposed and persecuted by the world, we face resistance and opposition within our own self: coming closer to God means bringing light to our darkness and exposing selfishness, jealousy, lust, greed, prejudices, hatred, and so on. A deep disconnect and dissonance become evident in us. That is what we are called to bring to the cross, be purified of and freed from. God is freedom. We can't escape it. Love does not abide in fear. And we long for love.

Peter (and the Church) doesn't want to hear of it. Too often when Jesus announces the cross, the church seeks safety and glory. Saying "no" to the way of Jesus will become a habit for the Church.

Yet, the fact that we choose to love does not mean that we become the abusers' doormat. Loving does not mean passivity in the presence of abuse. Justice demands a prophetic voice. My violated neighbor yearns to be seen and have his dignity restored. Those at the margins of society and barely living need Christians to stand by them. Offering the other cheek is an act of resistance and defiance.

There are those who pursue the common good, recognizing that to rob any person of dignity diminishes the dignity of every human being. And there are those who seek their own comforts, advantages, privileges at the cost of others' deprivation and misery.

The work of Christ, our work in Christ's name, is to liberate the captives from their captors and also to liberate the captors from themselves. This is the work of love. The work that eventually will usher in the kingdom.

Loving others also does not mean that our love will necessarily be reciprocated all the time with love. We do what is right. We do our part. We are solely responsible for ourselves. Bad things still happen to good people. The worst part is when evil happens as a choice of the self-described Christians.

How deep and how deceiving can evil be?

Sin-sick souls can be very educated, eloquent, and charismatic. And yet, very perverted. In the name of (a distorted understanding of) religion, some self-declared Christians still today go out of their way to crucify other people even in their own worship spaces,¹ have the misfortune of shopping while Black,² or dance while gay.³ News of hate crime makes my blood to boil.

It's tempting to become punitive and conclude that we could just eradicate the bad and be left only with the good. Yet, in Jesus' footsteps, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."⁴

In the section from the letter to the Romans assigned for today, Paul describes the life of the person who is in Christ, drawing upon common ethical teachings from the Jewish wisdom tradition and from Jesus. The admonitions are general maxims applicable to any Christian.

¹ [US Hate Crimes On the Rise — Including on Houses of Worship | Newsmax.com](#)

² [Jacksonville shooting's larger trend: Hate crimes rise across US \(usatoday.com\);](#)

³ [Anti-gay hate crimes on the rise, FBI says, and they likely undercount \(usatoday.com\)](#)

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches.

Up to this point, Paul has spoken of love in a theological sense.⁵ Here for the first time he speaks of love in a practical and an ethical sense. The love of which he speaks now is “agape,” a self-giving love that is modeled on divine love, the love of God shown forth in his sending of his Son. To Paul, love is the virtue above all others.⁶ All the admonitions in this section of Romans can be regarded as ways in which love can be expressed.

Love must be sincere, Paul says. A stricter translation from the Greek is “un-hypocritical.” In classical Greek, a hypocrite is an actor, someone who wears a mask and plays a part on a stage. The word is used here, and in the gospels,⁷ to speak of a “pretender,” giving a false appearance. I take Paul’s statement to mean that Christians ought to love everybody with no exceptions. Love cannot be selective if it is to be expressed in its purest sense. We might disagree on a number of arguments, but I am called to love all people.

Only pure and undivided love will prepare me to love even my worst enemies like those who do not have our best interest in mind, those who stab us in the back even as they claim to be our friends, those who antagonize us. Love without pretense loves them, too.

Paul is aware that love can be corrupted.⁸ Our love is not genuine when used to manipulate others. We do not use the gifts of the Spirit, including love, expecting others to return the favor. Our giving must come from the heart just because it is good to do so and not because we expect anything back. Practicing our faith and the gifts of God allows us to grow in spirit.

God is Love. Pure Love finds opposition because pure Love loves all, including those we’d rather hate, the unlovable, and the incapable of loving. Genuine Love brings hatred, selfishness, and greed to the cross. Honest Love brings light to our motivations and filters out our pretentiousness. Creative Love gives life.

We are so much loved. Wouldn’t we want to get closer to Love? Wouldn’t we want to become familiar with Love?

Let us let the love of God find fresh expressions in us. Amen.

⁵ Romans 5:5.8; 8:28.35.39

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Galatians 5:6; Philippians 1:9

⁷ Particularly in Matthew 6

⁸ 2 Cor 6:6