

“When We Love as God Loves: We are Third”

Romans 12:9-16

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Today is our last message in a series on how the Bible looks at relationships. We have considered patience, forgiveness, gentleness, and faithfulness. Today we consider love.

The text we hear this morning is part of Paul’s important letter to the church at Rome. In this part of the letter, Paul tells Roman Christians how they should love. It is a pretty gutsy thing for Paul to have done, since he did not even know these people! He had not even been a part of forming the church in Rome. Paul may have written these things because there were many house churches, and when there is more than one group, you know there was competition and arguments. Paul oversteps his boundaries because he was so convicted by what God did for us, and he was so sure how God wanted us to respond. This part of the letter is a real lesson in how to live in Christian love. In the message today, we will step into the shoes of a first century Roman citizen who encounters Paul’s message.

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

I am Marcus Augustus. I am a god-fearing Roman. I make my sacrifices to the usual gods. I follow the rituals. I am just trying to live my life, make ends meet, and get ahead. It’s not easy. The harder I work the further I fall behind. My back aches by mid-afternoon, lifting one brick after another. My skills are not as fine as those guys coming in from Corinth or Ephesus. There is so much competition now; so many new people moving into Rome.

Our apartment is next to a tottering ruin. We live right next door to a death trap. The building manager props it up with slender poles. I am trying to get us out of the flimsy house we are in and into a better area of town, but that takes money *and* connections.

I'd love to live where there are no fears in the dark of night. Last night, I smelled fire and heard a neighbor cry out for water as he struggled to save his belongings. Smoke poured out from the third story as flames moved upwards, but the poor guy who lives at the top with the leaking roof and roosting birds is oblivious to the danger, and sure to burn. I froze. I couldn't help this guy too, could I? I did nothing.

The only way to get ahead is to look out for myself. I know it's mean and competitive, but I have to play the game. My religion is nothing to me---it's just another way to play the game. If you don't do it, you are disgraced, but if you do what they tell you to do, they leave you alone.

It's all about what other people think. It's not what's inside that counts. Bragging in the bathhouses, making yourself look good. . . The guy with the glib tongue gets ahead even if most of what he says isn't true. Your reputation is *everything*. What people think about you determines whether or not they will listen to you at the Forum, whether your wife can find good food for the table. We certainly aren't there yet, but with really hard work and a dominant attitude, I hope to get us there.¹

Still, there are times (like last night, watching the fire burn next door) when I feel all this striving is eating me alive. I wonder if there isn't more to life than just watching out for #1.

"Hey, Marcus! Yo! Meet me at the bath house this afternoon. I need to talk to you. It's important!"

"Wonder what Cecil is up to now. What hare-brained scheme in his head this time? He's a good friend, but I wonder about his judgment. Still, I could use a little time relaxing my sore muscles."

So we go to the baths and sit in the steaming room, enjoying the water and the quiet. It's really quiet today. Usually Cecil would be chattering away, but today he is oddly silent. Finally I can't stand it anymore, so I ask. "What is it?"

"You've heard about these Christ-followers?"

"Yes. . .what's up, Cecil? I don't really want to talk about them. They are trouble-makers. You know, the Republic is leaning hard on them. I'd heard down at the Forum that they're going to be banned from meeting. And besides, they're stirring people up with false hope, especially the poor. Their

¹ Sources: www.pbs.org (Ancient Rome), Raymond E. Brown, [An Introduction to the New Testament](http://www.roman-empire.net), www.roman-empire.net

teachings are crazy: life after death, love your enemies, put others first. Putting God first, can you even imagine? On top of that, I hear they're cannibals!"²

"No, no, no. It's nothing like that. Well, at least not the cannibal part. But yes, they are talking about loving your enemies and loving God first."

"What good is that going to do? How is that going to help me and my family get ahead?"

Cecil looked at me like I was the crazy one. Funny thing, usually Cecil is so hyper, off the wall anxious, but today he sat there like a satisfied cat, with a small smile on his face. Was this really Cecil?

"Ok, ok, tell me about it. You've piqued my curiosity."

"I had been hanging out with this group of people in my neighborhood after work---they invited me to come and listen to a speaker. We went into this nice home. There were about twenty or thirty of them. They sang, they talked; they read a letter from one of their leaders based in Corinth. I don't remember the guy's name, but something in the letter really hit me hard. It was so different from the way we've been living, Marcus."

"He said something like, 'honor each other above yourself.' It didn't make sense, and yet in a strange way, it made all the sense in the world. We shared a meal. Everyone was at the table, poor and rich alike! People who didn't have much were given the leftovers, and some of the wealthier people were giving money and clothes to those who were really destitute. Nice clothes. A lot of money. I've never seen anything like it."

Cecil was right. It didn't make sense. But I looked at Cecil, and I saw something in his eyes I had never seen before. Maybe there was something to this.

He continued. . . "I've been going back, Marcus. There's something about these people---something about their God--- that is completely different. They aren't family, but they treat each other like blood relatives, and I mean that in a good way. Nobody seems to care if someone is a slave or a major land-owner. They talk about this Christ as though he's some type of god, but he's nothing like any of the gods we know. To begin with, he was poor, really poor! He didn't own anything; he wasn't married. For that matter I don't think he even had a job! He was executed by the authorities and died a shameful death. But what he did, and what he said. . . Stuff like, 'Love your enemies, give away your cloak as well as your coat, take no thought of tomorrow.'"

² Early Christians were accused of cannibalism because of their participation in the Lord's Supper.

"I am tired of trying to do everything on my own. It's not working, Marcus. I am putting my lot in with these Christ-followers. Because you know, things here aren't going to change that much for me. I am never going to strike it rich. I am not going to move out of the lousy house I'm living in. It's not in the cards for me.

What I am seeing is the cards are just an illusion, Marcus. This house of cards is not what matters. What matters is love, devotion, and honor. But what **matters more is the object of that**. You know what they said? God and Christ have to be first. Others have to be second. I am third."

"Cecil, this is completely upside down! Have you totally lost your mind? You are third??? How are you going to get ahead with that mentality?"

"No, Marcus, I feel I have finally found my mind. You have no idea how things have changed for me since I have let go of trying to be #1 all the time. Things are actually going so much better at home---my wife wonders if I am the same man! I tell her I'm not, not really."

"I know it's not going to be easy, but I find myself slowly letting go of my will to fight for more stuff, more money, to put everyone else down, to step over people as though they don't matter. I know I can't do it on my own; I need these people to help me. . . I need their Christ to help me. . ."

"When you act like you love someone because you want something from them, it doesn't work. I finally get it. All this stuff they've been telling us from the time we were old enough to listen. It's false! It's like there's this outside façade and it looks pretty good, polished and poised and well spoken. But inside? Inside it's empty. Inside there's this scared, anxious, money-grubbing person who does whatever it takes to get ahead and that even includes doing stuff that isn't right. For me, that included lying and cheating and ignoring anybody who didn't serve **my** purposes. I even treated my family that way sometimes."

"That's what I am talking about, Marcus. I can't live that way anymore, and it's such a relief! I like being third. I don't have to be so important. I can be flexible and forgiving, and it doesn't have to be about me."

"I am finally honest with myself, first, and then I find the courage to be honest with my friends, my boss, even my kids. I can talk to them face-to-face and not be afraid anymore, not worry about remembering whatever I was telling them last week."

They have a word for this, Marcus. They call it grace. It's a gift. It comes to us from God, undeserved, unearned, and it's so amazing. It doesn't get used up; in fact it grows. It grows, and love grows along with it.