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Genuine Love
Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; ^[a] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, ^[b] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When Paul says we should have GENUINE love....

It might bring to mind all the things that are so fake in our world today...

Like touched up photos, social media trends, and designer bags
on the sidewalks of NYC!

You know the Louis Vuitton, instead of Louis Vitton....
but with an almost identical logo!

***Paul wants us to have REAL LOVE, GENUINE LOVE,
Nothing fake.***

We are not asked to just ***ACT*** like we love---
we are asked to ***ACTUALLY LOVE*** one another,
as beloved children of God.

Here's the problem—we live in a world of DIVISION and disagreements,

And it's HARD to love people with whom we disagreeright?

I mean, we might SAY we love them,

We might smile at them in church,

but deep down inside, it's anything but LOVE!

That's our society right now.

We VILIFY those who disagree with us—don't we?

We accuse people of being dumb, or worse---

We say they are EVIL!

And when we see others as the '**ENEMY**',

That only leads to more **division, hatred, and even—violence.**

Think about the mistrial of Lindsey Clancy this week,

After killing her children during a postpartum psychosis.

Even that mistrial divides people---

And pits different sides against each other.

For Christians, there is A BETTER WAY TO LIVE.

We can live in the world of genuine love.

Because genuine love is NOT A FEELING—it's a **DECISION.**

And all the commands in Romans 12 are PLURAL---

So, Paul is saying '*don't try this alone*'.

We need a community to support us in showing genuine love.

We **CAN'T** do it on our own.

And even though genuine love is an action,

Romans 12 is NOT A 'TO-DO' LIST.

Melissa Earley wisely calls it ***an 'ECOSYSTEM of love'***,

where all the different commands are interconnected,

and dependent on one another.

But they all have one foundation---***seeing one another as beloved children of God.***

Melissa Earley, *Christian Century*, August 23, 2026.

That sounds good in THEORY, but HOW CAN WE REALLY DO IT?

What if it all starts with realizing that God has already dealt with evil, on the cross.

Jesus defeated evil, sin, and death.

And because Jesus did not retaliate,

We can avoid revenge too.

Jesus was unjustly condemned,

As an innocent man.

He was arrested, beaten and crucified.

But he did **NOT RETALIATE**, or urge his disciples to seek revenge!

Can you even imagine anything like that happening today?

***We often believe that seeking JUSTICE
means seeking PUNISHMENT, though, right?***

But Paul is saying that we can demand JUSTICE,
But we should LEAVE THE PUNISHMENT AND WRATH to God!
Why?

Because God is the ONLY TRUE JUDGE---of all humanity!

Genuine love is possible with the POWER of God in us.

Helping us to be a blessing to others.

We can treat others, even our enemies, as beloved children of God.
We can honor the least of these, the forgotten, the marginalized,
And seek common ground—no matter what our differences.
We can ***AGREE TO DISAGREE***—
Which seems like something very rare and old fashioned, doesn't it?

This is why I LOVE our church and faith tradition.

We are what pastors refer to as ***a 'PURPLE' church***,
People who are right, left, red, blue, and everywhere in between.
And that's not bad—it's actually a blessing!
It gives us the opportunity to love and be loved, *even when it's difficult!*

We LEARN TO LOVE DIFFERENT PEOPLE---right here,

People who see things differently,
Who understand political and social issues from opposite points of view.
And that's ***good news!***
It means that we can ***find unity***---even in our differences!
We might be different, but we are united by our faith in Jesus Christ!

Which begs the question—

How do WE SEEK COMMON GROUND?

How do we ***agree to disagree***—inside and outside the church?

And are we willing to take this A STEP FURTHER?

By showing genuine love for those who have ***HURT us?***
This is what Jesus urges us to do in ***Matthew 5***—
to bless our enemies, pray for them, and turn the other cheek!

Does this mean WE just IGNORE EVIL?

Absolutely not!

We can call it out,

but we leave the punishment and wrath to God!

So, what does this look like in YOUR life?

How can we LIVE into THIS NEW REALITY?

Because repaying evil with evil, only escalates every conflict, right?

We've all seen that happen.

Someone hurts us, so we hurt them,

then they hit back again...and the *cycle continues...until someone stops it!*

What if that someone was US?

Showing genuine love, actually DISARMS people who have hurt us.

As my grandma used to say,

'you catch more bees with honey than vinegar'.

I was reading this week about Eric Liddell, an Olympic runner

Who was imprisoned by the Japanese army while serving as a missionary to China.

While in that Japanese prison camp,

he *"regularly read aloud ... from ... the Sermon on the Mount, focused on one passage: 'Love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Pray for them that despise you. Do good to them that hate you.*

In fact, he began urging other prisoners to pray for the camp guards.

Liddell said: *'I've begun to pray for the guards and it's changed my whole attitude toward them. When we hate them, we are self-centered.'*

Duncan Hamilton, *For the Glory*, Penguin Books, 2017

Living into a REALITY OF GENUINE LOVE,

And loving our enemies,

Takes courage and strength,

It means stepping outside what we want to do, what we're tempted to do,

And instead, we can ***FORGIVE*** when we are wronged.

Talk about revolutionary!

How is it really possible?

As followers of Jesus, forgiveness is always possible---it is *often a PROCESS*,

But it is also a *decision*.

And the reality is,
 No matter what happens to us,
 God can help us through it....and help us get beyond revenge...to forgiveness.

I remember the PAIN OF BEING HURT by someone,
 Over and over, year after year.
 And I had nightmares about dying at the hand of this person.
 But I kept praying for God to help me ***forgive***.
 Because we CAN forgive, even if there is never an apology.
 Even without repentance.

Forgiveness is something WE do, for US, to find freedom.
 It's like removing a chain around our heart.
 Sometimes, it can lead to reconciliation.
 Or in my case--a relationship—years later,
 even without an apology or an acknowledgement of any wrongdoing.

Now I can spend time with this person,
without hurt or anger,
 Or re-living all the pain.
 They will never apologize,
 But that's ok---because ***I AM FREE***.

Paul says: "*if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap **BURNING COALS** on their heads.*" Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
 He's quoting Proverbs 25.
 But what does it MEAN?

How are burning coals OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD?
 Isn't that just a form of revenge?
 It sounds that way,
 But what if this reference is foreign to us in 2026?
 There was an Egyptian practice at the time, of a ***penitent person***
 carrying hot coals in a basket on their head—
 as a sign of repentance and sorrow for wrongdoing.
 Preston Sharpe, *The Art of Preaching*, August 30, 2026.

***What if the idea of burning coals is less about VENGEANCE
and more about the PURIFYING POWER OF FIRE?***

The Biblical prophets, like Malachi, speak about the refiner's fire,
And how fire can bring purity, and new life.

***Theologian Karl Rahner warned that one of the biggest problems of evil
is that it often brings the VICTIM INTO THE CYCLE OF EVIL!***

We see this all the time ---someone's loved one is killed,
And the relatives say they will live for the day when the killer is put to death—
and only 'rest' when the perpetrator is dead.

Or someone is wronged in a family,

And a *cycle* of revenge starts,
And gets passed—from one generation to another.
Happens all the time.

Think about what the DESIRE FOR REVENGE DOES TO THE VICTIM.

After dreaming for years that the person who hurt me was killing me,
One morning I awoke after a *completely different dream*.
In the dream, the police asked me to testify against this person,
And I told them it was not necessary!
I woke up with a lighter spirit,
And after that, I was able to eventually spend time with this person,
Develop a new relationship,
And feel love for them.
I still keep boundaries, but I can show love.

***Pastor Preston Sharpe wisely says that
we have to LET GOD BRING PEOPLE TO THEIR SENSES.***

When he was recently hurt,
He went home and just sat with it, prayed about it,
And resisted the urge to seek revenge.
And that was the time the offender needed—to call and apologize.

By exercising PATIENCE, by taking time to pray,

We might be giving the offender the time they need to apologize.
And even if they don't,
we have more time to think about forgiveness.

Isn't this how GOD IS WITH US?

What if we took the time to wait on one another?
I mean, God is really the only one who can heal
and convict and transform people---NOT US.

What if the best way to genuinely love—

Is to PUT OURSELVES INTO THE SHOES OF SOMEONE ELSE?

Elizabeth Burget calls this '*embodied empathy*'.

She writes about helping a young mom with a screaming toddler
in a checkout line of an Aldi store.

So Elizabeth went up to this mom and said: "*Hi! I'm Elizabeth.
I have three kids and know what this feels like. How can I help?*"

The young mom started crying.

Elizabeth immediately started scanning and bagging her groceries.
Then a grandmother left a nearby line and came over
to gently rock the stroller, and quiet the baby,
before turning to the mom and telling her,
"*It's okay. I had four kids. You're gonna be all right.*"

EMPATHY.

What if that's the KEY TO GENUINE LOVE?

For those with whom we disagree, those who are different,
Those who have hurt us?

***While some Christians today warm about the DANGERS OF EMPATHY,
I can think of no more powerful tool in our faith!***

If we think about what causes someone to lash out,
If we try to understand their pain,
That might actually help us have the patience, and understanding,
and eventually the forgiveness we need---to ***stop the cycle*** of revenge.

When Paul says we are to laugh with those who laugh,

And mourn with those who mourn,

He is talking about ***EMPATHY***—

like the mom and grandma in the Aldi store!

Elizabeth Berget, "The Path of Love (Women Who Cry in Aldi), churchanew.org, 8-22-24.

Such empathy is part of the ECOSYSTEM OF LOVE

that Paul describes in Romans 12.

That's the world we need to live in—as followers of Jesus!

And it's NOT EASY.

Far easier to ***hate*** our enemies

and ***avoid*** people who see things differently.

But that's not the way of Jesus—it's not our calling.

Friends, hear the Good News of the Gospel:

We can genuinely love one another,

Even those with whom we disagree,

Even our enemies!

And we can do it—all by the power of God at work in us.

And for that, all God's people can say together, Amen.