

LOVE FOR FAMILY AND FOE

Romans 12:9-21
Phil de Martimprey

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SINCERE LOVE SHOULD DEFINE AND DIRECT US (12:9)

Paul has been writing about the importance of understanding that our identity is bound up in the church family, with God given gifts that we are to use properly within that family. He then makes a sharp transition to love. This is the exact same thing Paul does in 1 Corinthians 12-13. It would seem that in all the talk about unity, the body of Christ, gifts and service, that Paul wants to make sure that believers don't lose the most important and foundational aspect of this new, spiritual family; Love. Not just any love, but "genuine agape" love. The kind of love that seeks the good of another person, with sincerity. Those with this love despise evil practices, and unite themselves with what is good. It isn't just some action ones does, but it is who they are and what they are led by. "What is good" takes us back to 12:2 where Paul describes God's will for us as "what is good". This Love that Paul is about to unpack for us, should be a defining characteristic of our lives, and will only direct us into the will of God.

SINCERE LOVE TOWARD OUR FAMILY (12:10-13)

It is no surprise that Paul begins with the church family as he unpacks what this sincere love looks like. As we saw in 12:3-8, for the believer, our new identity in Christ is found in the church family, and this is the starting place for sincere love. Paul fires off 8 commands about love. These are things that need to define our relationships within the church. He begins with the idea of "brotherly love" to heighten the level of commitment we should have toward one another, to the level of an actual family. He uses this image of family because there is no higher level of commitment among earthly relationships. These commands are not optional, these are necessary. We need to be actively looking and praying for how we can love those in our church family, not passively sitting around, *possibly* responding if a need comes up. As we place ourselves before this passage of scripture, it is full of convicting and challenging truths for each of our lives. That will continue to be true as Paul moves from having a sincere love toward our family, to a sincere love toward our oppressors.

SINCERE LOVE TOWARD OUR OPPRESSORS (12:14-20)

This is not unique to Paul by any means. We will hear the very words of Jesus echoing here.

Matthew 5:44 *"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"*

Luke 6:27-28 *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you"*

This command by Jesus and echoed here by Paul is unprecedented in the world. To love those in your family or religious group isn't out of the ordinary, but this radical call to love our oppressors is almost unimaginable. Paul continues by illustrating for us what this may look like. Rejoicing and mourning with them. This radical behavior requires that we don't think of ourselves as better than those who are oppressing us, rather we give ourselves to the humble task of loving those who seek our harm. This requires that we elevate this way of Godly thinking above our own natural wisdom, which would ALWAYS lead us the opposite direction, into bitterness, slander, hate, and vengeance. Paul closes out this section by weaving in a couple powerful encouragements. First, he has in mind that people around us will see this radical love. "In the sight of *all*" (17) "live peaceably with *all*" (18). People are watching how we respond to the world around us, and nothing is more striking than one who would love in response to evil. We don't have guarantees about how people may respond, but there are countless stories of how God has used this type of sincere love to bring about His purposes and His glory. Secondly, Paul makes it

clear that God sees what is going on, and He will make it right and “repay” the evil done. This idea of releasing vengeance and punishment to God is at the heart of what it means to forgive. The most dramatic picture we have of this is Jesus on the cross as He looks at those who have mercilessly mocked, beat and are killing Him, and He cries out to God “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34) Paul doesn’t just leave it at forgiveness, but once again calls for loving action toward them. If you see that your oppressor has a physical need, meet it. In doing so, you will fulfill God’s will, and Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22, saying you will also “heap burning coals on his head”. This odd phrase seems to mean, that our actions of love toward those who do us evil will bring them to be ashamed of their evil towards us. Obviously this is no guarantee they will repent, in fact it is possible it may make their behavior more antagonistic. Regardless of the outcome, Paul is clear here, we are not to take a passive turtling approach to those who do us wrong, we are to turn, in loving response, and seek to actively love them. I cannot think of a more difficult command to obey, nor one that would more obviously reveal the power and glory of God in our lives. This is the kind of love that not only brings God glory, but also conquers evil.

SINCERE LOVE CONQUERS EVIL (12:21)

Paul bookends this section (12:9-21) with a mention of good and evil. Not only are we to be defined and directed by this sincere love for our church family, as well as our persecutors, but as we practice this love we actually conquer evil. Not only do we conquer it by keeping evil from gaining a foothold in our lives and leading us away from God’s will, but we also conquer it by putting on display the miraculous work of God in our lives, particularly in relationship to how we respond to those who do us wrong. Evil in its various forms seeks to overcome us, and make us conform to a worldly and evil pattern of thinking and living (12:2) This is defined by selfishness not love, both in our church families and in the world around us. How we seek to love our fellow brothers and sisters will either reveal that we are defined and directed by God’s radical call to sincere love in our lives, OR it will reveal that we have become conformed to the world and have been overcome by evil in our lives. Paul doesn’t leave a middle ground grey area. We are either people who, though imperfectly, are desiring to express sincere love in these ways and actively doing so, or we are not walking according to God’s will, having been overcome by a self centered, evil, and worldly way of thinking and behaving.

Let each of us humbly approach this section of scripture, asking the precious Holy Spirit to open our hearts and minds to where we need to grow in our sincere love for either our church family, or for those who would/are doing us wrong. For both types of love are only doable by the Holy Spirit’s power and direction in our lives.