



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Love

### Romans 12:9

Fr. William Klock

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It's been several weeks since we were last in St. Paul's letter to the Romans. We've moved into Chapter 12 and here Paul begins to take what he's been saying about the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus, about the grace poured out by Jesus at the cross, and he applies in practical ways to the Church—to how we live not just as Christians—because there's no such thing as a loner Christian—but he applies it to how we live *together*. He wrote that as Jesus has sacrificed himself for us, we are called to offer ourselves to him as a living sacrifice. And, he wrote, we are the body of the Messiah—one body, but like our own physical bodies, made up of different parts with different functions and different gifts and abilities, dependent on each other. I pointed out then how Paul's description of the body is very different from the way we typically think about ourselves. The thought and philosophy of our culture is centred on the individual. Even when we think of ourselves as a part of something, like the Church, our natural inclination is to think first of ourselves as individuals and *then* to think of ourselves as individuals who are part of something bigger. But Paul puts it the other way round. Paul starts with the body and then talks of the arms and legs and hearts and lungs and eyes and ears. The body comes first, the parts come second as we think about the body's different functions. When we think of it from that perspective it should change how we think of ourselves and the Church and how we relate to each other. For one of us to leave or to not use our gifts or not fulfil our calling in the body is as absurd as a foot refusing to step or a lung refusing to breathe.

So Paul wrote that as we think of our place in the body of the Messiah it ought to foster an attitude of humility towards each other as we recognise, first, our interdependence and, second, as we realise that we are here because of grace and only because of grace.

Now, in Romans 12:9, Paul moves from the subject of spiritual gifts to the subject of love. This isn't the only place he makes the same connection between the body, spiritual gifts, and love. He follows a very similar thread in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 and we'll look at that in a bit. Here's what he writes in Romans 12:9:

**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**

As I read this I couldn't help thinking about the homily preached last month by the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church at Prince Harry's wedding. He waxed eloquent on the subject of love. And that got me thinking about a much older sermon on the subject of love that, in its day, became very famous and was widely printed. In 1883 a Scottish preacher named Henry Drummond delivered a lecture—it wasn't technically a sermon—at an African mission station. His text was 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "Love Chapter", as it's often called. Like Bishop Curry of the Episcopal Church, Drummond was more of a humanist than he was an Evangelical. There was little of the cross of Jesus in his lecture just as Bishop Curry pointed to the young couple as his example of love and spoke only of the cross as an example to follow rather than a place of gracious atonement. *Our* love rather than the redeeming love of Jesus, they both argued, will set the world to rights. But both of them were right at least in the sense that when it comes to the Christian life and, particularly to our life together as the Church, love comes first. It's the most important thing and if we get that right, the other Christian virtues will follow. Think of Jesus, when we said in the Sermon on

the Mount, that love of God and love of neighbour sum up all the law and the prophets.

Here's what Drummond said back in 1883:

Take any of the commandments. "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." If a man love God, you will not require to tell him that. Love is the fulfilling of that law. "Take not His name in vain." Would he ever dream of taking His name in vain if he loved Him? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Would he not be too glad to have one day in seven to dedicate more exclusively to the object of his affection? Love would fulfil all these laws regarding God. And so, if he loved Man, you would never think of telling him to honour his father and mother. He could not do anything else. It would be preposterous to tell him not to kill. You could only insult him if you suggested that he should not steal - .how could he steal from those he loved? It would be superfluous to beg him not to bear false witness against his neighbour. If he loved him it would be the last thing he would do. And you would never dream of urging him not to covet what his neighbours had. He would rather they possessed it than himself. In this way "Love is the fulfilling of the law." It is the rule for fulfilling all rules, the new commandment for keeping all the old commandments, Christ's one secret of the Christian life.<sup>1</sup>

Do see his point? If we put love first, all of these other things fall naturally into place. We could make a similar list and show how if you love your neighbour, if you love your wife, if you love your children—even if you love your enemy—all of the right behaviours follow naturally.

And yet we need to be careful. Drummond (and Bp. Curry) were right in saying that love is preeminent, but

<sup>1</sup>  
<http://henrydrummond.wwwhubs.com/greatest.htm>

it's easy to go off the rails if we don't understand what love is. It's easier to hold up flawed human examples of love as the ideal rather than the love of God as we see it revealed in Jesus. It's very tempting to say love is the greatest thing in the world, both men did, but then to think of love in sentimental or mushy terms or permissive terms.

Here's what I mean. We have some shirttail relatives who decided that they were going to raise their kids using a philosophy of "natural consequences". Rather than discipline their kids, they felt that the way to love their kids was to let them do what they want and learn from their mistakes. Their two boys got into lots of trouble. One of them decided to stick his leg into the spin cycle on the washing machine to see what would happen. In a similar way a guy I used to work with told me how he'd had "The Conversation" with his thirteen-year-old son. For him "The Conversation" wasn't about warning his son about the dangers of having sex before marriage. No, it was about how to have "safe sex" before marriage—as if the only danger involved in premarital sex is disease. Or I think of our friends who said that, because they love their children, they weren't going to baptise them as children. They would leave it up to the kids to decide what faith—if any—they would follow. This is how our culture has come to define love. If you love something you set it free, even if setting it free means it gets badly hurt physically, emotionally, or spiritually.

Paul takes a very different tack in defining love. In fact, interestingly enough, Paul doesn't give us a theological or philosophical definition of love. Both here and in 1 Corinthians, he defines love by telling us what it does and does not do.

The first thing he says is that love is genuine. The Greek word that Paul uses for "genuine" is *anupokritos*. It

originated in the theatre. Ancient Greek actors wore masks to represent the roles they played and this word originally meant "without a mask". The word "hypocritical" comes from the same root. And the idea Paul is getting at is that love isn't about playing a role. Love is genuine. It's real. And that's not easy. In his commentary on this verse, John Calvin wrote, "It is indeed difficult to express how ingenious almost all men are to pretend a love which they really have not, for they not only deceive others, but impose also on themselves, while they persuade themselves that those are not loved amiss by them, whom they not only neglect, but really slight."<sup>2</sup> I think Calvin hits on the reason we so often fail to grasp what real love is. We fail to grasp it, because we spend so much time pretending at love.

Again, we need to make sure we're modelling our love on the right thing. There are all sorts of things that the world calls "love" that are really cheap imitations. The Greeks had four different words for love and the one Paul uses here is one that you've heard before—*agape*—and that is used throughout the New Testament to refer specifically to God's love. It's the love we see that God has for his sinful and rebellious creatures. It's the love we see in the Incarnation as God humbles himself and takes on our flesh. It's the love we see at the cross, where Jesus died for his enemies. It's the love cultivated in the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit. It's God's love and it's the furthest thing we will ever find from hypocrisy or play-acting. Brothers and Sisters, if you ever question whether something is truly loving, hold it up and compare it to the standard of love we see in Jesus at the cross.

So, first, love is genuine. Next Paul writes of love saying, "abhor or hate

was is evil". Here's where God's definition of love stands in such contrast to the world's. Loving involves hating. Real love doesn't love everything. It hates what is evil and embraces what is good. John tells us that God is love. But God hates too. He hates what is evil with a righteous hatred. Think of proverbs: Seven things the Lord hates: "haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers" (6:16-19). Or think of the rebuke the Lord spoke to Israel through Isaiah. The people spoke of their love for God. They went through the external rituals, but their hearts were far from them. That's the sort of false love Paul is warning against. Through the prophet the Lord said:

**"When you come to appear before me,  
who has required of you  
this trampling of my courts?  
Bring no more vain offerings;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and Sabbath and the  
calling of convocations—  
I cannot endure iniquity and  
solemn assembly.  
Your new moons and your  
appointed feasts  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me;  
I am weary of bearing them.  
When you spread out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from  
you;  
even though you make many  
prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.  
(Isaiah 1:12-15)**

To love as God loves is not to love indiscriminately. It's also to hate what God hates. It's to hate what is evil. We will hate sin wherever we see it, whether in others or in ourselves. We will hate violence and oppression

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<sup>2</sup> *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p. 464.

wherever we see it. We will hate dishonesty wherever we see it. And we will pursue holiness, humility, peace, justice, and truth. And, like our Saviour, we will *also* love those who do violence and who are dishonest as we pray for them and proclaim to them the good news of Jesus and his redeeming cross.

This is love. Love hates evil just as it holds fast to what is good. That's the third phrase in verse 9: love "holds fast to what is good". The Greek word Paul uses for "hold fast" literally means to glue two things together, binding them together into one. Think of Super Glue. We should hate what is evil while binding ourselves to what is good as if we were super-glued to it.

If you're following along in your Bibles, turn to 1 Corinthians 13 now. As I said, Paul follows a very similar outline there and I think it's good to look at the fuller description of love there. Here's what he writes:

**If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

**Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I**

**thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.**

**So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)**

Paul starts out stressing the supremacy of love over all other things. The greatest faith in the world and even miraculous gifting is nothing if love isn't there first. And he finished with that grand statement that when everything else has passed away, love will remain. But it's the middle paragraph that's particularly important to us here. Again, Paul doesn't give us a theology of love. He simply tells us what love does and does not do. He tells us what real, godly love looks like.

It's patient. And it's patient because it knows that God has been patient with us. He did not reject us. We rejected him. We rejected his goodness, his wisdom, and his life. We made ourselves his enemies, but his love for us has been supremely patient. He spared not his own son to reconcile us to himself.

Love is also kind. John reminds us that God sent his Son into the world not to condemn sinners, but to redeem us. God reaches out to the desperate and dying and if we are to love like him, so must we.

Now Paul tells us what love does *not* do and he begins saying that love does not envy. And love does not envy because love knows God's goodness and is content with what God has given. Love lives by faith.

Love does not boast. Love does not boast because love knows that it is what is and has what it has only by the grace of God. Love does not boast, because:

Love is not arrogant. Love is not arrogant, because godly love is displayed in humility, because godly love is summed up in the words, "God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son". Godly love does not assert its own right when offended, but seeks first to restore the offender.

Love is not rude. Love is not rude—the Greek word means "disgraceful" or "indecent"—because love puts the well-being of others first.

Love is not self-seeking. Love is not self-seeking because—unlike the world—it does not think of itself first. Love thinks first of the one it loves and we see this embodied in Jesus who "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

Love is not irritable. If love is both patient and kind, it can never be irritable and unrighteously angry.

Love is not resentful. Love does not keep a tally of offenses, because it embodies the love of God who has removed our transgressions from as far as the east is from the west. If God, in Jesus, has forgiven us, we who are in Jesus must forgive each other.

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. The redeemed who know the love of God do not seek out the sin from which they have been redeemed, but out of love for their Redeemer, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness.

Love rejoices with the truth. Love knows Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life and rejoices to see him known and to make him known.

Love bears all things. The word Paul uses here has the sense of throwing a cloak of silence over what is displeasing in another person.

Sometimes sin has to be addressed, but the Christian who knows the love of God and knows his or her own sins, is never quick to take offense.

Love believes all things. Love never loses faith for it has experienced the covenant faithfulness of God revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Love hopes all things. Love never ceases to hope, for the resurrection of Jesus has lifted the veil on the kingdom of God and we know with certainty what lies ahead.

Love endures all things. Love endures all things for no hardship, no offense, no trial can rob us of the life we have received from Jesus and nothing can steal from us the vision of God's kingdom that the Spirit has shown us.

Brothers and Sisters, this is true love. We live in a world that is cynical towards love. Everyone's looking for it. Most who don't know Jesus will tell us that such a thing can never be found—maybe that it doesn't even exist. And that highlights that this is the love we proclaim when we announce the good news to the world around us. The good news is that exactly this love has come into the world in Jesus. He has given us his Spirit, removing our hearts of stone and giving us loving hearts of flesh, filling us with a love for God—the long-awaited covenant renewal he promised to his people in the Old Testament. It has come in Jesus. And we who know it firsthand have been given the task of proclaiming it and living it. St. John tells us that “God is love”. He also tells us that God's love was made known in the death of Jesus for sinners. Later he tells us that no one has ever seen God, but also gives us the profound exhortation: “If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4). Brothers and Sisters, the world around us may not be able to see God, but you and I make him manifest when we live as the Church, when we live as the people of God, the body of Christ,

showing this kind of godly love to each other and to the people around us.

In the first centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the pagans couldn't help but see Christians living this kind of life together. According to the Third Century writer, Tertullian, the pagans were astounded and said, “Behold how these Christians love one another, even how they are ready to die for each other!”<sup>3</sup> Their godly love manifested the love of God in Jesus in stark contrast to the world around them. Through the love of the Church, those pagans saw God and eventually an empire knelt in faith before the Lord Jesus. If we will be faithful to love each other and to be the church as they did, Brothers and Sisters, there is no reason to doubt it will happen again.

Let us pray: O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

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<sup>3</sup> *Apologeticus* 39.7