

## Love Wins

It's September already. For most of us, September is almost like another January in that schools start back, new calendars are filling up with new groups and meetings. In church we are electing new Elders and starting new study books. You have just called me as your new covenant pastor. I have started checking my planning calendar so I can let you all know what the larger church is working towards in case you want to participate.

In Jesus' world, the disciples are getting restless. Jesus has been sharing many stories and facts about his ministry and what he expects from this group that has been learning literally at his feet. Peter has professed that Jesus is the Messiah and son of the living God. Exciting stuff BUT, Jesus has also told them NOT to share much of this information with the people. Now he's talking about all of them heading to Jerusalem. That's exciting too and scary. . . will they be forming an army to invade or will they sneak in during the night and continue to share quietly one to one. Then Jesus really scared them. He's saying he's going to scuffle with the Pharisees and Scribes and they are going to win and he, Jesus, is going to die, be buried, and on the third day he will rise from the dead. Uh ... Wait. . . What? Needless to say, the questions are flying around with no answers in sight.

Peter is outraged. He tries to keep his composure so he pulls Jesus off to the side and scolds him. The nerve some people find with they've been given a title. Peter, the Rock, feels it's his job to set Jesus straight and get this group back on the correct path. No way are they ready to take on the big guys of Jerusalem. Boy, did Jesus set Peter on his ear! He retorts: "Get BEHIND me, SATAN!" (surprise twist- Peter feels lower than low)

The rules are being revealed. The way you are to show you know Jesus and are actually following him:

If you want to be my followers, you must deny yourselves and take up a cross.

What will it profit for you to gain the world if you lose your soul?

Or What will you give for your life?

Wait . . . What?

Later in the letter to the Romans some more details are provided:

“Let love be genuine,” Paul says (Romans 12:9). But then he goes on to say, “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” Pastor *Carl Wilton* says Paul’s assuming, here, that true love is honorable and fair at its very core. It seeks out and holds up all that is good. It singles out and spurns all that is evil. —*Carl Wilton*

You may never have thought of your love relationships as greenhouses in which fair behavior is nurtured, but that’s exactly how the Bible sees them.. When a bride walks down the church aisle to meet her beloved, not many people think of the two of them establishing a basic unit of Christian mission. But that’s exactly what’s going on (or what’s meant to). When a family gathers around a dinner table to talk with each other and share news of the day, few would identify that gathering as a school of virtue. But, again, that’s how God views it. Those love relationships in which we find ourselves all have a higher purpose in the Christian understanding. God has given those special people to us so that — *together* — we may “hate what is evil, and hold fast to what is good.” *Carl Wilton*

Times like these are when I get to use the Greek we learned in seminary

*Homiletics Online* tells us the Greek word Paul uses here for “hate” is a very strong one. It means something like “utterly despise and shun.” In a similar way, the word for “holding fast” to the good comes from a root that means “to glue together.” God has given us marriages, families, friendships and the larger fellowship of Christians for a **purpose** (emphasis mine): that, collectively, we may send evil packing out the back door, even as we greet good coming in the front. “Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.”

Paul also advises, “love one another with mutual affection” (12:10). Let’s spend a moment looking at the verbs he uses, because they’re important.

Meister Eckhart: Some people want to love God in the same way as they love a cow. You love it for the milk and the cheese and for your own profit. So do those who love God for the sake of outward riches or inward consolation. But they do not love God correctly, for they merely love their own advantage.

You've probably heard that the Greek language has three principal words for "love." *Agape* is the highest form of love. It's the utterly self-giving, sacrificial, altruistic sort of love, such as Christ showed on the cross. There's also *eros*, the magnetic attraction of one person to another, which accounts for both the high-school crush and the 50th-anniversary couple. Then there's *phileo*, the love of brother or sister for each other. *Phileo* is sometimes rendered as *philadelphia*. *Adelphos* means "brother," so *philadelphia* — *phileo* plus *adelphos* — is a compound word meaning "brother love" or "sister love." It's how the city of Philadelphia got its name — not the one in Pennsylvania, but an ancient Greek city in present-day Turkey, whose founders must have had a dream that everyone there would get along. Our American Philadelphia was named for that one.

Paul begins this passage speaking of *agape* love, but when he says, "let love be genuine," he shifts to brother or sister love. In using these terms interchangeably, he's trying to say they're all cut from the same cloth. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we're bold to aspire, in our finest moments, to transform all our significant relationships into communities of self-giving and self-sacrifice.

"Have brother or sister love for one another, with mutual affection." That's a command. It's not some translucent, flimsy hope that we may someday love someone — or if we've managed to love an enemy, that this love will last. It's an order: *just do it*. "Love one another with mutual affection."

We're bound to certain other people throughout our lives. These include our blood brothers or sisters, if we have any, but also adoptive siblings, stepbrothers or stepsisters. Paul seems to be adding another category of people to that list: *all* fellow Christians, whom he considers brothers and sisters in Christ. Whenever the church gathers around the table of the Lord, it's as though it were a huge family dinner table — the circle of brotherly and sisterly love drawn ever wider.

Practicing "brotherly or sisterly love toward one another with mutual affection" is a **decision**, not an emotional state. The simple, seemingly paradoxical truth is that the way to find the love we want in a committed relationship is to begin by practicing loving behaviors.

We may not choose our feelings, but we do choose our behaviors.

East or West, success in relationships don't just happen. You have to work at it.

The final part of verse 10 suggests the form this work should take. It's a simple rule of behavior, God's rule for making love last: "Outdo one another in showing honor."

*Outdo one another.* Paul thinks love is a competition ... who would have thought it? Yet unlike other forms of competition that can be so destructive, this competition adds strength, rather than sapping it. "Spell 'us' with a capital 'You'," a wise person has declared. (And, by the way, the "You" is spelled y-o-u.)

The poet and essayist Kathleen Norris wrote about this phenomenon. "Young people grow up understanding that love means possessing and being possessed. It is a consumer model of love, and "If I can't have her, nobody will" psychology that all too often turns deadly. Nearly half the murders in North Dakota, for example, are "domestic" in origin. It seems that many men, and some women, cannot give up the illusion of possessing another person. The idea of that person — and "idea" is related etymologically to the word "idol" — becomes more important, more potent, than the actual living creature. It is much safer to love an idol than a real person who is capable of surprising you, loving you and demanding love in return, and maybe one day leaving you. People who have murdered their spouses often talk about how much they love them, and they mean it. In order to keep the idol intact, in order to keep on loving *it*, they had to do away with *him* or *her*.<sup>2</sup>"

The antidote to this kind of twisted thinking is to follow the simple, but profound advice of Romans 12:10: "outdo one another in showing honor." It's often said that marriage is not a 50-50 proposition; it's a 100-100 proposition. In potent and significant family relationships like marriage, the goal is not to meet each other halfway. Rather, it's for each one to go as far

as possible in praising and honoring the other, even if it means passing one another on the way to doing the other a kindness.

That means placing our partners at home and at church high on our priority lists. It means asking their opinion, and **really wanting to hear it**. It means spending time together, and doing the little things that bring joy. It means publicly praising our partners. (When was the last time you bragged about your spouse or family member (church family too) to someone else, so the person being praised could hear you?)

Some therapists recommend that each one in the relationship practice the “Triple-A” technique: *apologize* for something in the past, *appreciate* something in the present and *anticipate* with joy something in the future. *Apologize, appreciate, anticipate*. If each person strives diligently to practice these three things, their relationship is certain to grow stronger.

“Outdo one another in showing honor.” It’s the race you can’t lose because, if you do it right, Love wins which means it’s a win-win situation!

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1. Peterson, Karen S., “The good in a bad marriage: Studies say many can be salvaged,” *USA Today*, June 21, 2001.
2. Norris, Kathleen. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 89-90.

## Romans 12:9-21

### New International Version

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

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

**17** Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay,"<sup>[b]</sup> says the Lord. **20** On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."<sup>[c]</sup>

**21** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

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## Matthew 16:21-28 New International Version

**21** From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

**22** Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

**23** Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

**24** Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25** For whoever wants to save their life<sup>[a]</sup> will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. **26** What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

**27** For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

**28** "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."