

# “Redefining Love”

Rev. Dr. Steve Woodworth

**Series:** *Romans*

**Bible Text:** Romans 12:9-21

**Preached on:** March 22, 2026

## **Christ Presbyterian Church**

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Hey, like Don, I recognize that there's a handful of unfamiliar faces here today, so let me just catch you up real quick. It is our practice here at CPC, what we do week in and week out as we come together, we believe that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, that our God has revealed Himself to us and that we, as a people, come because we want to hear from Him, not from me. And so we have been working our way, as we typically do, we take one book from the Bible week after week, and we take a passage of Scripture, and one of us then brings the Word of God to you. We just work our way through it and apply it to our lives.

And so for the last few months, for some of us it feels like the last few years, we have been in the book of Romans, which is actually a letter. It's a letter written by a man named Paul, who was a persecutor of the church and came to Christ and becomes an evangelist and a missionary. And he's writing this letter as a missionary who is in chains from a prison cell. And we've said from the very, very beginning of this that as a letter, you can look at those verses, those chapters that are there in your Scriptures. Those weren't there in the original. This is one long thought of Paul. This is one extended letter. And so we want to pick up where we were last week, and we have called this from the very beginning, we've said this is a polemic. It's a big, fancy word, meaning that we don't know that he had a specific audience in mind, but he has an audience in his mind as he's writing. So every time he shares something with us, it's as if he's going to answer the question he believes whoever is reading this is going to have. And it's very systematic. So it's become not only one of the most important books for the church, but for the world. People study this, read this as this incredible piece of literature because of its wisdom and its thoroughness. And so last week, we ended in a passage where Hobie had reminded us, and Paul had written, *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. And today, he's going to continue that call to us, the church, to be a very particular kind of people, a people who live as citizens of a different kingdom. And it's bold, and it is counter-cultural, and it is extreme at parts as we get ready to read this. And in some ways, especially for the watching world, you can look at the passage today and say, that makes absolutely no sense to live like that. And if we're honest with ourselves as we read it today, I think we're going to find that sometimes it doesn't make any sense to us either. It's that radical.

In fact, after talking about it together, the other pastors and I, we gather each week to talk about the sermon ahead, and one of them just said flat out, the Christian life is impossible. It feels that way. And I would say indeed it is, if we hear these passages as a long list of demands, if that's all it is, it's just a long list of demands, do it, do it, do it, rather than the marks of those who are already redeemed. Let's read these verses together today, not only as bold challenges, but what they are really is hopeful reminders, that the one who called you, the one who redeemed you, this is the work that he is doing in your life. He is the author. He is the perfecter. He is conforming us to the image of Christ. And so we are in Romans chapter 12, verses 9 to 21. You can hear me read it. You can follow along in the scriptures there in your bulletin. Paul writes this,

- 9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.
- 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.
- 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.
- 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
- 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.
- 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 haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.
- 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.
- 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
- 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
- 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."
- 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's go ahead and pray.

*Father, as I spent time in this passage over the last week meditating, reflecting, reading it, studying it, praying through it, Lord God, I have recognized both your unbelievable mercy in my life and I have seen the depth of my own sin, Lord. Father, today I recognize standing in this pulpit, I need to decrease, you need to increase. Father, if I say anything today that is untrue, just erase it, Lord, erase it from our minds, let it fall away, Father. But what is true, Lord, let this be more than just a theological exercise or just a speech or a talk, Lord, let it be your very voice speaking into our lives, Lord, that it might move from our head to our hearts, where it would plant seeds that would sprout and grow and that we as a people would rush through these doors to give this message of hope and love of a Savior to a world in desperate need of it. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Many of you probably know that a couple of weeks ago I returned home to New England to attend a family funeral. Some of you might now even already recognize that *I ain't from round here*, that's what I've been told a few times, right? This was the funny experience I had when I went home.

I hadn't been back in two or three years, there was lots of family obviously that I hadn't seen for quite a while, and I couldn't believe how many times throughout those four or five or days when somebody would interrupt me and would start laughing because they said, they loved my southern accent, and that they could not understand me because of my southern twang.

People who live in the same exact country, using in many ways the same exact words, but because of a small change in just accent, dialect, we're only separated by maybe a thousand miles, but it makes it almost unable for us to even communicate to each other. Never mind the whole host of words and phrases and idioms that just don't translate from one place to another unless you know the person, the context, the situation, right? And so language is a funny thing.

And I had that fresh in my mind, that whole experience of coming back when I started to study and read this passage and came to Paul's very first line, very first word that we're going to talk about here because he opens this section of his letter with the word *love*.

*Let your love be genuine.*

Perhaps no word in the entire English language is more open to interpretation than the word love, right? I mean, we say we love people and we love food and we love hobbies and we love sports teams and we love our pets, right? Love is the subject of film and art and literature. I say that I love my wife and I love my sons and I love my daughter-in-law, but my daughter-in-law will tell you that, she and I, we love thrift shopping, right? And we love cheese.

How can that same word mean the same thing across all different contexts, right? We use the word love to describe our affections towards things that are as important and as sacred as our deeply held beliefs about God and to describe to somebody how we feel about our favorite coffee shop. We are told that love is a decision and love is an emotion, that love is an action, that love is a choice. We are told by our culture that love always wins and that love means love. We are sometimes told that love means never having to say you're sorry. The late Martin Luther King called it "*that strong and powerful element*".

And in my research this week I found, and you will discover unless you already knew this, that there is actually something called the love consortium. It's headed up by Dr. Sarah Algo. It's in Chapel Hill. It's actually a scientific think tank. All sorts of money going towards the scientific study of love and this consortium together has given us finally once and for all a definition. They say that love is an other-focused, pleasantly experienced, self-transcendent, motivational state. How about that for a pickup line? Very romantic.

Friends in our world today the word love simultaneously means everything, and it means absolutely nothing. And so it's no small thing when Paul exhorts us in this section of the letter to *let your love be genuine*, which is precisely why he's going to go to lengths. Everything that we just read, that whole long laundry list to explain exactly what he means by the word love.

Genuine love, when he begins with that word, genuine love is love without hypocrisy. It's not fraudulent. It is sincere love. It is love without any kind of pretense. In other words, Paul is giving us a litmus test here of the depth and genuineness of our own faith. Because God is love, God is love.

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*Those who have believed and received his love now demonstrate that love to others.*

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And it must be sincere because God's love for us is so sincere. You'll hopefully see as we work through this list that it has many echoes of what Jesus himself said on the Sermon on the Mount. And in that same exact way, it's why we talked about it from the Heidelberg Catechism this morning, that when we pray your will be done, your kingdom come, right, that what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is not describing a list of things that we must do to get into the kingdom, but he's describing for us what life in the kingdom looks like for those who have been redeemed, for those that are followers of Christ, this is what their lives look like.

And so it is for Paul today, that he says for those that have this genuine love, you know they are marked out as the people who have received genuine love. If you're a genuine follower of Christ, here is how, two things; you cultivate this love, and second, how you demonstrate it. That's how we're going to look at this passage today that Paul's going to give us some pointers. This genuine love. This is the practices. These are the things that are going on in your life if you have received genuine love. And then this is how you're going to demonstrate it to others.

***So first, how you cultivate it.***

He says, abhor what is evil. *Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.*

You know what Christians are often very good at? Abhorring what is evil in the world. Christians are often known more for what we are against than what we are for. We are fixated on what is wrong in this world. We have an opinion for every single issue out there. And when you take stock of your own thoughts, and I did this a number of times this week, right? In the last 24 hours only, right? Bring them into the light. And you can think about the things that were on your mind, the things that were weighing on your heart. How many of those things were focused on evil? On thinking about what is wrong? What is broken? What your most worried about or fear the most? The relationship that's giving you the most pain perhaps? The problem you can't seem to fix? Maybe it was on the next mass shooting or the next war that will destroy us. Maybe it's the next technological advance that is going to finally once and for all wipe out humanity. It's the next Supreme Court ruling that will end our democracy or the next election that will either save us or bring our civilization crashing down.

That's where our mind goes. You know, as one technology expert explained it, he said Internet companies tasked algorithms with the goal of user engagement, right? Meaning that it was neutral at the beginning. When this whole idea of giving us the Internet and 24-hour news cycles and this creation of algorithms, those algorithms were, they were just neutral, right? All they cared about is get the most eyes, get the most people, get the most people using our thing. That's all we wanted to do. And then he says, then they discovered that outrage, fear, hatred, and greed are the easiest ways to engage people. Which means you can keep arguing about big tech and the horrible things you and your family are bombarded with every day.

But here's what he was saying. The algorithm is just giving you what you want. It's just giving you what you want. The news that grips us, the stories that interest us, the information that captures our imagination most, are things that push on that fight or flight button that's inside of every single one of our brains. As news companies have known for well over a century, right? If it bleeds, it leads.

Your overwhelming sense of fear for your friends or your family or your children or your grandchildren, it's not coming from God's Word, people. That's not what we find there. It repeats over and over again. *Be anxious about nothing. Do not fear. Do not worry, that we are more than conquerors in Christ Jesus because God has overcome the world, and that He is in control. And so Paul tells us, hold fast to what is good.*

And he expounds on that earlier in a letter. He's talking to the church at Philippi, and he says to them, *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

That's what it means when he said earlier in the letter that do not, *do not as a people be conformed to this world, have your mind transformed.*

It takes intentionality on our part. And if that means deleting apps or turning off your phone or tuning out the 24-hour news cycle, and consuming the Word of God, then my exhortation to you and Paul's would say, then do it. **Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.**

You are being disciplined by a world that knows nothing of the hope of the gospel, nothing of the sovereignty of God, nothing of what it means to love genuinely, people.

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*If you are what you eat, then do not be confused if you find that your mind is full of whatever it is that you are feeding it.*

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And second, he tells us if you want to cultivate love, then *do not be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord.*

And for each one of these practices, he's going to explain in the next verse, the very next verse is going to parallel each one of those things with something for us to do very tangibly.

He says, *rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

So when we ask the question, how do you protect yourself from getting spiritually lazy? That's what he says. *Don't be slothful in our zeal.* Spiritually lazy. He says, *rejoice in hope.* That's the solution. Practice, gratitude. Look with spiritual eyes on what the Lord is doing instead of constantly fixating on what he is not doing, what hasn't been accomplished, and certainly what's not been accomplished in my timeline.

How do you be fervent in spirit? Fervent means excited. It means enthusiastic. It's the idea. It's a word picture in the Greek of something boiling over. It's like a picture of the waves coming in and coming in close and crashing up and boiling up over the rocks. That's the word picture. It's the opposite of apathy. That spiritual dryness, it comes upon us sometimes when our relationship with the Lord, it grows cold, right? When it feels like our prayers aren't being heard anymore. When we stop reading the Word of God, we stop praying. When we pull back from community, we'd rather sleep in and play then come to worship with the people of God.

It's really the experience that probably many of us have had when all of a sudden, you've gone a certain time with the Lord and all of a sudden the Christian life to you becomes a chore and a bore rather than a source of hope in life. And he says the solution to that for us is to *be patient in tribulation.*

Be patient in our tribulation. He recognizes nothing, absolutely nothing in the Christian life is going to crush you and crush your spirit like trials and sufferings. Because those are the moments, those are the times, we were just talking about this morning, Brian was talking about in our Sunday school class, those are the times in which oftentimes we discover, maybe for the first time, we really did believe that our relationship with God would just be a never-ending path of ascent. Always higher, always better, no limits. Just keep going, constantly climbing higher without any setbacks, any losses, any grieving, any suffering. And like the seeds sown in Jesus' parable, those cares and concerns he said are going to come up and they are going to choke the life out of us. He says be patient in your tribulation.

And finally, Paul says if you want to cultivate genuine love in your life, *serve the Lord.*

Serve the Lord. And one of the primary means he gives us to do that is he says *be constant in prayer.* I don't know if that strikes you as odd. I mean oftentimes we say it around here that prayer is simultaneously the least and the most that we can do. Not in the half-hearted way we sometimes say, hey, I'll pray for you, right? But genuinely crying out on behalf of our brothers and sisters in their time of need. So that is one of the ways you serve the Lord most effectively.

You know, I can't even count in my own life how many times over the past decades serving this church where in my darkest times and our family's darkest moments, our hardest seasons of life that it was a phone call, that it was a text message from one of you saying quite simply you were on my heart this morning. I prayed for you, I prayed for your wife, I prayed for your kids. It's unbelievable the kind of ministry that has in very tangible ways in one another's life. It's no small thing.

I've mentioned before the book "God on mute" by Pete Greig. He tells the story in there. He runs an international ministry on prayer, and his wife gets gravely ill with a severe form of epilepsy. And night after night she has these seizures and it nearly kills her. And so they're at a hospital one night just trying to find some answers. And he writes in his book, he says one evening a group of strangers drove two hours from London to pray all night in the hospital chapel just for my wife. And that was the first night she slept peacefully without pills. He says the following morning when we found out about this covert prayer vigil, we recognized the love of God in action. That the love of God can be a theoretical idea for us. But somehow, some way within the body of Christ, that when someone with flesh on their bones says, listen, yesterday morning, last night in the middle of the day for five minutes, ten minutes, thirty seconds, you were on my heart, and I cried out to God on your behalf. There is something about that it is so incredibly confirming about the love of God for us.

And continuing in that theme Paul says serving the Lord means *contributing to the needs of the saints and seeking to show hospitality*. To not be selfish, to not be stingy, to practice generosity, to look for tangible needs right here in our own community among your neighbors, among your coworkers, your friends and be creative in the ways you can meet them. And he says one of the most practical things of all very similar to prayer is hospitality. It's the gift of hospitality. The simplicity of it, how easy it is, how accessible it is for each one of us to open your home and do exactly what you are already going to do anyways. Eat, break bread, share a meal, listen to each other's story. It's not rocket science. It takes intentionality. Absolutely it does. And it takes a desire to practice in most common of ways. Paul would say that is what genuine love looks like.

And if these are the ways for us to cultivate love, Paul moves to help us to understand what are the results. Somebody who is doing these practices, serving the Lord, showing hospitality, encouraging one another, praying without ceasing, what does it look like? What does a disciple who has experienced that kind of genuine love from God then look like to the watching world.

***So, point two, demonstrating it.***

He says we're going to love one another with brotherly affection. That we are going to outdo one another in showing honor. We don't use the term brotherly affection very often. And I think just like love, this word honor, right, it gets a thousand different points of view depending on who's using it in our culture today. And so as I was reading through this this week, it was much more helpful me to think about the opposite of these two things because I had categories for them that were much more clear.

I think we all have been in communities before where there's been a lot of sibling rivalry. And we all know what shame is. The opposite of what Paul was calling it in our communities. If you have multiple children, you know what sibling rivalry is. If you have a sibling or you ever had a sibling, you know what sibling rivalry is. It's a competition between brothers, sisters, brothers and brothers, sisters and sisters for a resource that seems to have a limited supply, whether it does or not, right? Competition for their parents' attention or affection and praise. It can be competition for approval or popularity, desire to shift blame so only somebody gets the majority of discipline. It's our competition for praise and for glory. Recognition. Who gets the best grades we want to know, right? Who's the best looking? Who's the most talented? Who is the most gifted artistically, musically?

Which is why it's so closely connected to showing honor to one another. Because the primary way we are going to try to make ourselves look better, the primary way we have always tried to make ourselves look better ever since kindergarten, is by tearing other people down.

We love gossip, friends. We do. We love to hear bad news about a family that seems to have it all together, don't we? I think we're socially mature enough now to have figured out that we're not ever supposed to say it out loud but secretly, sometimes we celebrate when someone doesn't get the promotion, when their dream vacation becomes a disaster, or someone else's kid gets in trouble at school. Paul says it is a symptom of people who are so covered up in their own shame. The only way they can feel any sense of validation is for the lives of everyone else to come crumbling down around them.

I mean, this is why, and we have known this and the Internet knows it as well, right, our nation loves reality television. We love it, right? Because it's a few hours every single week when we have the option to feel a little bit better about our own lives because of the train wreck of someone else's. That's what we love about it. Instead, he says like a healthy family, we belong to one another. We protect one another. We are loyal to one another. We can count on one another.

You know, as a father to three sons, I know a few things about sibling rivalry, but I also can tell you that our three adult sons, they would run through a brick wall for one another. And I don't know if it was good parenting. Most of the time I have to begin every single sentence like that. I don't know if what I was doing was good parenting or not, but I will tell you what we did. I spent a lot of time reminding my boys in the middle of their conflicts that someday they were going to look around the family table, and mom and dad weren't going to be there anymore and that the person to their right and to their left were going to be all they had left in this world. That friends were going to come, that friends were going to go, but throughout the entirety of their lives, I wanted them to know beyond a shadow of a doubt they had two other men that were going to walk with them constantly. That they could count on one another.

And God has given us this profound metaphor of a sibling to remind us that the people of God are not to interact as acquaintances. It doesn't even use the word friends. We're certainly not coworkers. We are brothers and sisters.

One of the chief ways we love one another, he says in verse 15, *rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep*. Your story becomes my story. Your joys become my joys. The unity among the family of God that Christ envisioned was so committed that your deepest sorrows become my sorrows too. I feel them. Not in some sort of crazy codependency dysfunctional rightness. But in a way that your hardships are not, they're not embarrassments. This is key, right? The way that Paul envisions the community of God for us to interact as siblings is that the very thing that you are most ashamed of is not the thing that separates you from community. It's actually what draws you close. They don't cause you to distance yourself. They are the very thing you share because we all have it in common, right? That this Paul envisions is the safest place on earth.

And as we do, our shame is replaced by honor. That's what he says, that boasting of our brothers and sisters constantly, highlighting what is most beautiful and encouraging the work of God on display in their lives. That's what he anticipates. And he goes so far as to say, it's not an option. He says, but if there's going to be sibling rivalry, if there's going to be any sense of competition, he says, this is what I want it to be for. I want you to outdo one another in showing honor.

Have you heard about such and such? Here's this amazing story.

Have you heard about the person who served in this way?

Or did you hear what this person did this week?

Have you seen the amazing work that's going on in this family or that marriage or that kid?

Have you heard this great thing?

That we're constantly trying to outdo one another in showing honor. And Paul says in the kingdom of God, you'll know the followers of Christ because they will be pointing attention away from themselves. You know, that's the old definition all the time of humility, right? Is that we don't think less of ourselves. We think of ourselves less. That we don't have to be the smartest person in the room. Or as my boys say, you don't have to act like the star of your own movie.

But then Paul's going to cut deeper. Perhaps the deepest of all here. If we have not felt pushed enough, Paul isn't going to pull his final punch. He says, those who have genuine love will bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them.

Seventeen. He says, *we pay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all*. Verse 19. *Beloved, never avenge yourself. But leave it to the wrath of God for it has written vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord*. Do not curse those who persecute you. Repay no one evil for evil. Never avenge yourself.

*To the contrary, he said. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. For by doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Just let those words sink in, friends. Because I have poured over these all week long and come to recognize that the real struggle with a passage like this for us is its simplicity and its clarity. Not a lot of wiggle room here. Not a lot of room for interpretation. Not a lot of, but what about, but what about this? Except in this situation, right? Friends, you don't need an advanced degree in Greek and Hebrew to understand this passage. You don't need to know biblical theology or historical theology or systematic theology. Now we'd even wager to bet you don't even need a high school diploma to understand exactly what Paul is saying here because the problem is not an intellectual one. We don't need more information. The problem is with our affections. We don't want to do this. So when I say we, I don't mean just the people in this room. I mean we, the human race, does not want to do this.

Here Paul is quoting Christ from the Sermon on the Mount, and I saw this cartoon this week of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is up on a hillside, and he's got the valley down below him and hundreds of people are there, and Jesus is up on the top saying, *love your enemies, do good to those who hate you*. And one of the thought bubbles off in the distance said, certainly he doesn't mean the Romans. And the person next to him says, I certainly hope not.

Because our days friends are no different. The days in which Jesus first spoke these words. Sometimes we think it is. It's certainly no different than the day Paul wrote them down from the corner of his prison cell awaiting execution, right? That somehow, we've got different enemies. We've got different struggles. We've got different things that we're facing. No matter how persecuted you might feel. No matter how marginalized or overlooked, no matter how many times you've been mistreated or betrayed, it doesn't hold a candle friend. It doesn't hold a candle to what these two men who are calling us to this lifestyle had to face themselves. These aren't empty words. These aren't from the ivory tower.

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*We today live in a world in which revenge, retribution and retaliation are just the waters we swim in every single day.*

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It's all around us. So did Paul and so did Christ.

People who disagree with you don't just have a different opinion, do they? We are told that they are dangerous enemies who are evil. They're bent on destroying your life. That's the kind of language we use. We throw it around all the time. If you have a different philosophy on educating your kid or how to discipline your kids or if you have different political views or different stance on a specific policy or whatever cultural war issue we're supposed to care the most about today, we just cancel you. We just cancel you. I don't have to put up with this. I relegate you. You are in the class of others now. You're over there. You're those people. We dehumanize one another, right? And we do it for the purpose of justifying our response. If you are not someone who also bears in yourself the image of God, I'm fully justified to treat you however I want to.

And why? Because you and I, all of us in this room, are being taught to view every single situation in our life as an existential question. Everything is life or death. Everything is black and white. Everything is win or lose. Every single person is either a friend or an enemy, nothing in between, full stop. And we do it in politics and we do it in the workplace. We do it in our neighborhoods. Friends, we know, we do it in the church. We do it in our own families. Because let's be honest, when some of you hear the word enemy in this passage today, you might think about a political leader. You might think about a people group. But you are just as likely to be thinking about your pastor, or maybe your spouse. I'm not so naive to assume that when some of you hear the word enemy, you might be thinking about me.

Paul does not want us thinking in abstractions here. This is not a wish dream for him. Of some utopian paradise or some sort of Pollyanna vision of, oh, oh, wouldn't it be nice if it could be like this? These are not suggestions.

Do not curse those who persecute you.  
Repay no one evil for evil.  
Never avenge yourself.

Do not, no one, never. Again, the problem is not a lack of understanding what Paul is saying. It's the application, isn't it?

Friends, if the gospel is not true, then everything that the world is telling us makes total sense. Have at it, friends. If all we are left is this Darwinian vision of survival of the fittest, by all means, go ahead. You avenge yourself, friends. Constantly curse those that curse you. Punish those who persecute you. The only thing that can matter to any of us then is just raw power, brute force, survival. The strong eat the weak.

I don't think that's Paul's intention here, it's just to give us a list of rules for him to say, just do it now. Just go and do it. Because he knows that's our default. We will always go back. Always go back to what our heart wants most. He says instead, this is a litmus test. This is a litmus test. That is the way we should read this. That is the way that we should study this. This is the way that we should look through this. Again, this week, probably a number of times, just immerse yourself in this passage. This is a litmus test. Paul would say, if you repay evil for evil, avenge yourself, and curse those who persecute. Your love is a fraud. And you do not know the gospel. It's that clear to Paul. This is a litmus test.

Examine yourself. Bring this before the Lord. How well do you understand the gospel? Paul was saying that those that have received the genuine love of Christ, this is what their lives look like. They get it. Because what it demonstrates is you have never seen yourself as God once saw you. Paul did. Paul was a persecutor, if you didn't know it. We talked about his story much earlier in this series. Paul was the enemy of God. Paul was the murderous avenger who thought arresting, torturing, beating Christians. He actually thought he was doing the will of God in those things.

And then he was confronted on the Damascus Road by the severe mercy of God. He saw the face of Christ before him. And Christ comes to him and he says, Paul, why are you persecuting me? Paul was a recipient. Paul was the enemy. Paul was the persecutor. Paul was the avenger. And Christ came to him to forgive, to redeem.

Friends, if you are consumed daily by what is wrong with the world, keeping a list of who is your enemy, plotting ways to hold on to power and control, you have believed the ultimate lie that what is most broken about this world is somehow out there. When what Paul believes and what Paul calls us to and what the rest of the Bible affirms again and again and again, the biggest problem we have, friends, you and me, is right here. (points to the heart) This is the problem.

You were born, I was born, shaking our fist at God. We were born with a fire raging in our souls and by the grace of God, the creator of the universe, Paul reminds us, chose to redeem us rather than destroy us, to forgive us rather than to condemn us, to show mercy instead of judgment. And you and I both deserved it, friends. You were enemies of God and then he made us into his children. Grasping that truth with every fiber of our being is the only way you and I can ever possess genuine love. The only way we'll ever come close to receiving the kingdom of life that Paul offers to us here.

And so let me just give you one very practical story. Someone who helped me to understand this principle this year. I'll conclude with this. I was given permission to share this story. Over the course of this last year, I've worked with four different families that have experienced the betrayal of adultery in their marriage. Not all of those families have made it. Not all of them it was possible to reconcile, but one family in particular has. It's a beautiful thing to see and so I've met almost every single week with the husband, and so last week I asked him, I said, hey, help me understand that in this process, right, because not everybody has made it but you are one of the stories it has, what has made the difference? Help me understand as I continue to work with families that find themselves in this situation, I want to give them the good stuff. What was it that helped you move towards reconciliation and back towards your wife instead of divorce? And he told me this.

He said, you know, the first ten weeks of counseling we were in together I was angry, and every single time I would go in, and I just wanted to know the same exact thing, over and over again. Why? Why did she do it? Why did she do it? And he said, and finally, their counselor, not me, another counselor said, hey, this is what I want you to do from now on. Every single time in your mind the question 'why' comes up, I want you to replace it with the word 'how'.

How did I contribute to the problems in this marriage today?

And so this man sitting in a coffee shop telling this again just begins to weep and confesses his sin, talks about repentance, talks about all the dramatic ways that that one question began to fundamentally change the way he saw his wife. Not that it excused her sin, not that it was some sort of justification, but man, the compassion that he had because the very thing he wanted to do most was to forgive her.

And it wasn't until he could sit and radically understand how much forgiveness he was already given that he could move towards her. It was not until he could see himself as an adulterer to God that he could finally forgive his adulterous wife. Caused him to not turn away but turn towards her in reconciliation. Friends, like that wise counselor,

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*the only way for us to truly love others, even our enemies, is to grasp the death by which we have been loved first.*

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This is exactly why Paul closes this entire section of his letter with this final encouragement. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* because that is precisely what Christ has already done, that at every turn in redemptive history evil, darkness, sin was pushing itself into every corner of God's creation, it is corrupting every aspect of our world. And the great culmination of injustice is that the king of the world who longed to save his people, he is murdered by the very people he came to save. And in that moment of unspeakable evil, the prophet Isaiah tells us *he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities and with his wounds we are healed.*

Friends that is genuine love. That's what Paul has been trying to tell us the entire time, the true followers of Christ don't have the burden of trying to define love on our own terms because Christ already has.

And friends, if you want it, it is yours for the taking, it is on offer today. And if you've already received it, don't hoard it Paul says, don't hide it, don't ignore it, take up your cross and follow him who so loved the world that he gave of his only begotten son that we might become the children of God. That my friends is genuine love and if you have received it, he says go forth into the world and give it away. Let us pray.

*Father there is so much depth, so much depth to these words today, far more than we could even cover in 30, 40 minutes Lord God, it's just a taste today. Father I pray that the most important thing would settle down into our hearts Lord. That central truth, that thing that you want us to take home and continue to chew on, meditate on, the very thing where you want to meet us in that place Lord and do the work of sanctification in our life. Father would you let that remain today. Father we want to be a community that not only has received genuine love but shows it to one another. We want to be that peculiar kind of place Lord that folks from the outside would look in and say I want to be a part of that. Father your word tells us that as we love one another in this way, the world will know that the gospel is true. Let it be so for CPC. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

\*\*Portion of scripture read before sermon—Proverbs 24:10-14