

Last week we studied what Paul meant when he said, “**Let love be without hypocrisy.**” He was talking to the Christian church about how its members should treat each other. After all, if you claim to worship the God who is love, your institution should reflect that virtue. This week we’re going to continue that study, but with a twist: Paul went on to explain that we must love not only our brothers and sisters in Christ but unbelievers too. We’re going to talk about what this means for our walk with God and with one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

### ROMANS 12:14-17

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. <sup>17</sup> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.**

Last week we dug into the five truths or maxims which Paul used to explain what it means to love without hypocrisy in the Body of Christ. Those five truths are, first, “**Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.**” Second, “**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor.**” Third, “**not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.**” Fourth, “**rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.**” And fifth, “**contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality**” (Romans 12:9-13).

It’s impossible to say enough about the importance of healthy relationships in the Body of Christ. We ourselves have witnessed the damage broken relationships do to the church. And this is not lost on the world. If we’re not treating one another with love and respect, the world sees that.

But Paul didn’t stop with relationships in the church. He went on to describe our relationships with people who are not believers to even greater length.

Paul’s first maxim about these relationships is, “**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse**” (v.14). I’m reminded of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on

the Mount, **“whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. <sup>40</sup> If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. <sup>41</sup> Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matthew 5:39-41).**

In the early church, believers were physically persecuted for their walk with God. But even if they escaped the sword, they were often ostracized by their friends and families. Today, in Christian-minority countries, churches are still burned, and people lose their lives for their Christianity. And you yourself may’ve experienced ostracization from coworkers, classmates, or even from your family for what you believe. These words from Jesus and Paul are a true call to faith and trust in God.

But there’s also a sense of hope here. For Jesus himself was ostracized by his community and he was physically persecuted. But we remember him on the Cross and his prayer, **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”** Stephen, the first Christian martyr, gave witness to this hope when he prayed the same prayer as he was being stoned to death. **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”** Please say it with me: **“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”**

A couple of weeks ago, I buried my cousin, Roy Ross. Nowadays a family often wants to show a slideshow as a memorial to the life of their beloved in the middle or at the end of the ceremony or maybe during the reception.

However, my cousin’s wife decided to show her slideshow of Roy’s life before the ceremony began. From baby to adult to cancer victim; pictures with parents and children, with siblings and grandchildren; vacation photos in the mountains, on a cruise in Alaska, on a bike in the Grand Canyon. For 15-minutes we all sobbed our eyes out, and the funeral hadn’t even begun!

After that experience, I created a new rule for funerals: Thou shall not show heartbreaking slideshows until the end of the ceremony! I was a wreck.

When a friend loses a loved one, you feel their pain. When your children are sick, you feel it yourself. One of the things that makes us human is our ability to emotionally and physically relate with each other, to empathize.

That’s what Paul was telling us to do when he wrote the next truth, **“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (v.15).** He was telling us to

empathize with everyone, especially unbelievers. We easily relate to family members and our pals in the church, but how much harder is it to do with those with whom we have so little in common, with people who might even despise us and our faith? But Paul wants us to reach out to everyone without constraint.

Again, I'm reminded of Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount: **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."** (Matthew 5:4).

This is a state of mind. It's a gift from the Spirit of God that we would put aside our anger and distrust of the world for long enough that we would be able to relate to the individual who stands in front of us. When a person is filled with grief and sorrow, regardless their earlier pretensions, they may be open to a kind word from you.

Paul's next truism for how to love without hypocrisy is to **"Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation"** (v.16).

Having **"the same mind"** means that us Christians must agree on our mission to the world. We don't have to think in the same way, but we do have to come to the same conclusion. This is how Pastor Cano and I work. We came into the ministry on very different paths. However, we have a common goal: to bring people to Christ and to make them into his disciples. This goal binds us together.

But having the same goal is not enough. Our attitude towards people who are not like us must be changed too. If we use our economic means, our race, or our culture to measure someone else's value to God, it won't matter how much food we give away; we'll never make it out of the starting gate of outreach.

Paul wrote, **"be of the same mind,"** and then he said, **"do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation"** (v.16).

I grew up in the Pacific Northwest. My schools were always integrated racially and economically, black and white, rich and poor. I don't remember ever experiencing even a little bit of bigotry. Well, maybe just a tiny smidgen, for maybe just one group: the Native Americans. Negative feelings towards Indians back home are not unusual.

I went to a Christian college in Seattle. Before summer break one year, a professor challenged my class to do something while on vacation which would be a growing experience. He said, "Instead of getting a job immediately, why don't you take a week or two to confront a fear or a resentment that's interfering with your discipleship under Christ."

I took my professor's challenge to heart, and I volunteered to teach Vacation Bible School in the Northwest Territories to Indian children for a month. My team lived among the people and they accepted us; they loved us, they provided for our every need, and they entrusted their children to us. Being with the people, getting to know people, being loved up by the people changes us. And that experience pretty much took care of everything in here (in my heart). God used the Indian people themselves to change me from the inside-out.

Paul's final maxim for this section is, "**Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men**" (v.17). This begs the question: That is, "**what is right in the sight of all men**"? Is there one thing we can all agree on as human beings, believers and unbelievers? I know it's not the speed limit in Southern California. What is that thing?

I remember the prophet, Micah. He wrote a famous line which I've heard quoted by all kinds of people, by Christians, agnostics, Buddhists, and Hindus. I think this verse captures the essence of a mindset held by many people in this world who long for a love that is without hypocrisy. Micah wrote, "**what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**" (Micah 6:8)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the foundation of our faith is our redemption by through the Cross of Christ, but the fruit of this redemption, the outward evidence of God's presence in our hearts, our doorway into the hearts of unbelievers is the justice, the kindness, the humility Micah calls us to live by. If we can do this, we are truly God's emissaries to our neighbors.

This week let us ask the Lord to show us what it means to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with him, that we might be his ambassadors to a hurting world.

This week let us consider the relationships we have outside the community of faith, the person who always says hi to us at the gym, the checker at the supermarket, our doctor or nurse. And let us ask God to guide us in our conversation.

And this week let us take the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.