

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ *Be devoted to one another in brotherly 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 God'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. Do not be conceited.*

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

²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)*

Love Must be Sincere

Have you ever seen *Fiddler on the Roof*? In that musical, the main character, Tevye, was married to his wife Golda in an arranged marriage. The first time they meant was on their wedding day. There's a scene in which Tevye asks his wife, "Do you love me?" After a duet about their lives together, Golda concludes that for 25 years she's lived with him, fought with him, starved with him and had five children with him. She asks, "If that's not love, what is?" Now, there can and should be more than one kind of love between a husband and wife. And that love is different from the love we have for our children or for close friends or for each other here at church. But Golda's practical answer to Tevye's question does illustrate that in the real world love has to be more than an emotion. Today, St. Paul talks us about love. He isn't talking about romantic love or specifically about love in a marriage or a family. He's talking about Christian love. It's a topic that God has been talking about since the Garden of Eden. All of our Christian life really comes down to a command by God to love him and to love each other. God is not really commanding an emotion. He's commanding a way of life. Paul summarizes all that love means with the very first words of our text today: **Love must be sincere.**

I.

That seems kind of obvious, doesn't it? If I tell my wife or my children or my fellow Christians that I love them, and I don't mean it, what good is it? But St. Paul's point is more than just truthfulness. Sincere love is love that works in our lives and changes them. My friends, **love must be sincere. Love God.**

When we love God, we will love each other if for no other reason than God wants us to. Think about a stepfather. That stepparent loves his new spouse. But if that new wife sees the stepfather being cruel to her children, how is she going to react? If the stepfather loves his new wife, in most cases, isn't he going to try and love her children? I realize that in many blended family situations it doesn't work out that way. But in many it does. However imperfect we may be at this, God is perfect. God loves each and every one of us as his children. He hates it when people mistreat us – when they don't treat us with love. And he expects us to treat every other human being, with love, because he is the Father of all mankind.

St. Paul says, **"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."** Do you see what real love is like? It does things. And true, God-pleasing, Christian love is not the same as the personal loyalty we sometimes associate with love. Even in Christian schools, kids feel pressure not to "rat out" other kids. But Paul says that real love hates what is evil and it clings to what is good. Now, that doesn't mean that tattling is necessarily God's will. But it does mean that love is committed to what is right in God's eyes. It doesn't cover for sin. It doesn't join in on sin. It doesn't plunge into temptation and wickedness. Love hates sin and it loves everything that leads people to follow what God says is right. So Paul calls us to not be lacking in zeal, to be patient in affliction and to be faithful in prayer. And he winds up our text by saying, **"Do not be overcome by**

evil, but overcome evil with good.” That’s the way of love. The Christian life in this world is a war with sin and evil and the devil. Don’t be conquered by evil. Conquer evil with good. Good is God’s love. Good is the gospel. That is how we love God.

II.

And it’s also how we love each other. We cannot truly love each other unless we love God. We cannot truly love each other unless we wage war on evil in this life. My friends, **love must be sincere. Love your fellow believers.**

Again, Paul’s first thought is not emotions. Now, there’s nothing wrong with emotions. They’re gifts of God. When we feel love for one another, that’s a blessing. But the feelings mean nothing if we don’t act on them. And even if we are not overcome by feelings, we still love sincerely when we live our faith for each other. Paul says, **“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”** A huge part of Christian love is commitment. Paul says, **“Honor one another above yourselves.”** I wonder how often we realize how much true humility is essential for real love? The essence of love is sacrificing myself for someone else. Isn’t that what we parents do? Think how much money we could have and how many toys we could’ve bought and trips we could’ve taken if we had chosen not to have kids. But in love, we devote all those resources to our children and we’re glad we did. Do we have that same attitude toward each other here? Or are we selfish about our time and our commitment? Do we think that the people here should be more committed to us? That they should honor us more? Do we love them?

Paul says, **“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”** In reality, those two things are the same. In the ancient world, motels and hotels didn’t exist. Inns could be very scary places – often dirty and frequented by thieves and prostitutes. People who were traveling were vulnerable. Paul was commanding that we help those in our congregation who are vulnerable and those who are in need. Now, we’ve been pretty blessed here at Peace. Most of our members have not been deep in need. When someone suffers a terrible disease or their house burns down or they lose their job, it’s not sincere love to say, “That sure is a shame” and then do nothing. Love shares what we have with those who are in need.

Of course, pride opposes that, right? That stuff is mine. If I share it, I won’t have it anymore. Which attitude prevails among us? Are we a congregation that shares and loves and honors and is devoted to each other? Or are we a congregation of strangers? Do we come and go without ever touching each other’s lives? I fear that there is too much of that sinful pride among us. I hope that I’m wrong about that. But even if we are no worse than any other congregation, it strikes me how often God tells us these things. St. Paul did not write a single letter to unbelievers. He wrote only to Christians like us. And he spends an enormous amount of time telling us to love one another in attitude and in actions. Would he do that if it weren’t a problem? In every age, there is a powerful temptation for us to fail to treasure the people God gives us here, because in every age, God’s people are still sinners. It’s too easy for us to leave without even trying to connect. It’s too easy for us to avoid eye contact. It’s too easy to never learn to know the lives of the people God has brought together here. That’s not love. It’s pride. Or it’s fear, which is still pride at its heart. It’s sin.

You know how God feels about that pride and sin and what it deserves on Judgment Day. But remember that Jesus died and paid even for our failure to love. He knew how to love. Every day of his life on this earth, he showed true, devoted, sincere love in every word he spoke and every deed he did. That perfect commitment to God and to God’s people is part of his gift to us. God gives us credit for Jesus’ love. And God sent Jesus to die for all the times and all the ways that we failed to love each other here. Jesus died for our failure to share with those who are in need or even to notice them. Jesus died and paid for our pride and our lack of devotion to each other. Jesus died for all the sin in our hearts and in our lives. And he paid for it all. Then he rose. He rose and God said that our sin is gone. He rose and God said that you and I are perfect in love. On Judgment Day, God is going to find that every single day of our lives here, we loved him and we loved his people without fail. How can that be? Because Jesus lived and died and rose for us.

Now, God calls us to love. In his love for us we have the source of our love for him. In Christ’s love for us, we have the power to love one another, to commit our lives to each other, to conquer evil with good and to share all that we have with one another. Live that love!

III.

And don't just live it in here. Live it out there. The rest of Paul's words for us today are about loving people out there – even people who aren't believers. In fact, Paul follows Christ in making one of the hardest statements in the Bible. **Love must be sincere. Love your enemies.**

This, of course, is where it's clearest that God is not commanding an emotion. I can't feel affection for people who hurt me, especially if they do it on purpose. But I can love them. I can put their needs ahead of my own. I can make sacrifices for their good. I can reflect the work of Christ for me to them. Paul says, **“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”** God tells us to try to live in peace with other people. At the bare minimum, don't be the cause of conflict. That's hard to do. I hate it when people do things that are rude to me. I often have to bite my lip to avoid saying what I really want to say. God tells us to live in peace with the world, if we can.

In fact, he says, **“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”** This is the opposite of the world's attitude. How many times on TV or in a movie have you seen the hero defy and curse the villain? But God tells us to bless those who persecute us. God tells us never to take revenge. Leave that to him. He alone is able to be just and to give our enemies what is right. He tells us to treat them with love. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him a drink. If Paul had said those things in modern terms, he might have said, “If your enemy has a flat tire, help him change it. If he loses his job, tell him about opportunities in your company. If he's sick and can't take care of his lawn, mow it for him.” Why? Paul quoted Jesus and the Old Testament and said, **“In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”** Now, he doesn't mean you'll be able to smile and be smug about how good you are while he feels bad. Paul means that you will drive him to repentance. His sin will torment him and he will finally have to fall before Jesus and beg for forgiveness. In other words, he will come to faith.

Can we live like this? The sinful pride in our hearts says, “When someone hurts me, they deserve to suffer. I want to see them suffer.” Again, that attitude is the total opposite of love. It's sin that should send us to hell. But again, Christ has taken even that sin away. Think how much God loves you. He sent a Savior to pay for all the sins of all the world, a Savior who even paid for the hardness and pride of your heart. He sent a Savior who takes away the guilt of our longing for revenge. He sent a Savior who has set us free from the hurts we've suffered in the past. And that Savior teaches us to love our enemies, because we were all God's enemy once. Now we are his friends. Treat your enemy as a friend, even if he or she doesn't want to be that. Treat them with love.

That's a pretty tall order, isn't it? Love God. Love our congregation. Love our enemies. Do it all sincerely, not just with words but with actions and in truth. Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. On our own, we could never do any of these things. But we are not on our own. When we became believers, God put a new man in our hearts and that new man does want to live this way. Strengthen him by hearing the gospel and commit yourself to living as he wants to live. And recognize that Christ lives in your heart by faith. The Holy Spirit works in you through the gospel. God the Father is with you every day of your life. That Father, Son and Holy Spirit will pick you every time you fall and start you over again on the path of love. Love God. Love your fellow believers. Love your enemies, all because you know the love God has for you. That is sincere love. And with God's grace, you will do it. Amen.