

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-five
Sunday, November 17th, 2019 - 5:30 p.m. - Teaching #2171
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

GENUINE SPIRITUALITY AND HOW TO KNOW IF YOU HAVE IT

Romans 12:9 - "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good."

If righteousness fails, the reasons for its failure are in this verse.

There is a sense in which this verse, and indeed the rest of chapter twelve, form a kind of *test*. The last twelve verses of this chapter (and even on into the next four chapters) are Paul's way of applying the teaching of **Romans 12:1-8**. Do we really understand the depth to which the Spirit of God works to *renew our minds* and *transform our lives*?

This is the issue here. How will the teaching of **Romans 12:1-8** reveal itself in people who really *get it*? If God, by His Spirit, gets deep inside our skins, and if He then *gifts* us for service in His Body, the church, what will such a spirituality look like? We know what spirituality looks like in the Bible *text*. We can *see* the instructions and the doctrines. But if this actually *reaches our lives* how will we then live?

That's what Paul starts to deal with in our text. He's talking about the activity of a genuinely *spiritual character*. And we instantly see that the Christian life is *too big to be contained in one experience*. It has a *beginning* point, to be sure, even if that actual point is sometimes hard to identify on a calendar. But you can't *squeeze* all of the spiritual life into a single moment. It is simply too big for that. The Holy Spirit, as He works in the renewing of our minds, *shapes an ongoing existence - a pattern of character*. And Paul now begins to unfold what that existence looks like.

It may well be that there are no verses more important than this one in terms of *boiling genuine spirituality down to its bare essentials*. There are only *fourteen words* here, but they scrape away everything peripheral to a pure and holy heart. They form the absolute essentials to having, what Jesus called, the *inside* of the cup just as clean as the *outside*.

I think if someone came to me and said, "Please give me the essence of genuine spirituality in a nutshell," I would recommend this verse. "If I want to check my heart - if I want to keep my soul on track - what do I need to remember?" This ninth verse is what we *all* need to remember.

1) **EVERYTHING IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE BEGINS WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF DEEP, INWARD LOVE**

"*Let love be genuine*"(9) - Paul deals with both love for *God* and love for *others* in his instruction. He includes *both* in this command. He starts here because he knew *Jesus* started here: **Matthew 22:37-40** - "...**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. [38] This is the great and first commandment. [39] And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [40] On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.**"

"*Everything* hinges on this kind of love," says Jesus. And that's exactly what Paul is saying. Spiritual life starts with *love for God*. There is nothing whatsoever without this. The Christian life doesn't begin with *mechanics*. It's not just a list of rules. Paul centers on the ultimate test of the spiritual heart. *Why* do I do the things I do? Am I just keeping a list? Do I pray and study and give and go to church because I *have* to? Is there nothing else behind it all?

There is simply no issue more important than this. When Paul begins to boil the spiritual character down to its essentials he puts love first. And he puts it first because that's what genuine love does. *It always pushes and motivates and shapes everything else*. Love is always *totalitarian*. True love *claims* the heart. It can't be silenced. Whatever you love will *dominate* you. Genuine love - *whatever* you love - takes all the reservation out of your heart. It covers everything else and focuses our attention. You *give yourself* to the object of your love.

So here is the only starting place for the spiritual life. There is a hunger for God. There is a manifesting of the same kind of love God showed to *us* - a *merciful, sacrificial, consuming* love. You can't live the spiritual life by *wrote* or by *instruction manual* or by *upbringing* or by *memory*. The driving force is *love*.

2) **WE MUST CONTINUALLY FOLLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT INTO GENUINENESS AND AUTHENTICITY IN OUR WALK WITH JESUS**

That's why even this instruction on love isn't quite enough. Notice what else Paul says. "*Let love be genuine....*"(9). The reason Paul adds this caution is he knows not only can we deceive *others* about the state of

our heart, but we can deceive *ourselves*.

There are things that *feel* like love for Jesus that are just that - *feelings*. You can have the right music and sing the right worship song and *feel* like you love God. But then the meeting ends and you're not with church people and the pull of the world fascinates and enralls.

Compromise can become a way of life even while a person *feels* like he or she loves God during worship. This is surely what John cautions against in **1 John 2:15** - "**Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.**" These are powerful, striking words. You can't just trance out and sway to the music and call it love for God.

Or look at **1 John 5:3-4** - "**For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. [4] For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith.**"

Love for God needs to be specifically *identified*. That's what John means when he says "**For this is the love of God....**" That means other things *aren't* love for God. Pin-point it in your mind. When the dictionary of your mind looks up the meaning of "**love for God**" make sure this is the definition you get.

So Paul cautions the church about *pretending* love for God or for others. Refuse to *fake* spirituality. Constantly look for the *inner reality* of love for God and others. Let love be *genuine*. Don't fall into the habit of pretending to love God simply to *please others*. That will leave you heart empty and vulnerable to temptation when those others aren't around. That isn't the *real you* loving the *real God*. That's an act, a pretending. Let love be *genuine*.

3) **LOVE IS ONLY PURE WHEN IT IS THE DECLARED ENEMY OF ALL THAT IS EVIL**

"**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good**"(9). For the sake of outline I've made this a second thought, but there's a sense in which it's really just an *expansion* and *explanation* of the first idea of *love being genuine*.

Perhaps it is right at this point that we should back up in Romans chapter 12. We need to drill down to the bottom of **Romans 12:1-2** - "**I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**"

I said earlier that these two verses set the stage for everything else Paul will say in his letter to the Romans. There's a sense in which we are still dealing with the meat of these two verses even though we've moved on through others in terms of actual sequence. We have never really left the *content* of these two verses.

For instance, Paul's words in our text today about *abhorring what is evil and holding fast to what is good* (9), tell us a great deal about what he meant in **Romans 12:2a** - "**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind....**" Verse 9 reveals to what extent Paul desires *non-conformity* to the world. He isn't just saying we mustn't lie like the world or commit adultery like the world or steal like the world. That's all true enough, I suppose, but a bit of a no-brainer.

The problem is, those ideas don't drill down nearly deep enough into Paul's thought. Verse 9 reveals something distinctly Christian about the concept of *love* - the *love of God* in particular. And to see how vastly different the Christian view of genuine love is we need to pull some of the basic thoughts out of this verse. Just read it again, very carefully and slowly - **Romans 12:9** - "**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**"

Here are the earmarks of the kind of *renewed perception* the Holy Spirit wants to bring into *renewed minds*:

- a) ***Absolute evil and absolute good really exist. And they exist independently of our own subjective opinions and values.***

This just follows from the text. We don't *create* good and evil. We either *recognize* them or we don't, but they exist as absolute standards whether anyone *endorses* them or not. When I say we don't *create* the standards of good and evil I mean something doesn't *become* good simply because I or we *like* it. And something doesn't *become* evil simply because I or we *reject* it. Being *pleased* with something doesn't make it good. And being *upset* by something doesn't make it evil.

And the reason this is so is spelled out in God's Word. Good and evil really exist because **God** really exists. In fact, you can see how this all shapes up in **Romans 12:2** - "**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**"

God's will - the real will of the real God who exists - is what makes good and evil evident and objectively measurable. His will, says Paul, is "**good and acceptable and perfect.**" That means the things that **He** says are good really are good and the things that **He** says are evil really are evil.

It will take a renewing of the mind by the Spirit of God to fix this truth in our heart. And we have no idea how low we will sink apart from a radical change in our relativistic age. **Dinesh D'Souza** quotes atheist **Peter Singer** in a recent Christianity Today article entitled "**Staring Into the Abyss.**" **Singer** is an a bioethicist out of Princeton University and says this: "**My colleague Helga Kuhse and I suggest that a period of 28 days after birth might be allowed before an infant is accepted as having the same right to life as others.**"

D'Souza continues: "**Singer argues that even pigs, chickens, and fish have more signs of consciousness and rationality - and, consequently, a greater claim to rights - than do fetuses, newborn infants, and people with mental disabilities.**"

Then **Singer** states it flat out: "**Rats are indisputably more aware of their surroundings, and more able to respond in purposeful and complex ways to things they like or dislike, than a fetus at 10 - or even 32 - weeks of gestation....The calf, the pig, and the much-derided chicken come out well ahead of the fetus at any stage of pregnancy**"

Now it's perfectly Scriptural to **abhor** that kind of thinking. But if we're all **surprised** by it, then shame on us. There should be absolutely **nothing** surprising about that whatsoever. The mind-set of this world is **unrenewed** by the Holy Spirit. It considers good and evil in terms of what is established by human opinion and surveys and polls and laws. And what that **means** is as human opinion is **changed** by argument, persuasion, or even mere advertizing, so are the categories of good and evil.

In other words, as the media in particular changes our **sensibilities** toward any issue, be it homosexuality, or abortion, or infidelity - as our **sense of either acceptance or outrage** is modified, so are the standards of good and evil.

And Christian, God wants to **renew our minds** deeply enough so that even when this world makes God's will feel **socially unacceptable** we will still abhor what is evil and hold fast to what is good. In fact, this is **exactly** the kind of transformation Paul describes in **Romans 12:2** - "**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.**"

b) **Surprisingly, it is not enough merely to do what is good and not do what is evil.**

I think we should all find that a bit shocking. You would think that **would** be enough. But Paul (and the Holy Spirit) is dogmatic - **Romans 12:9b** - "**.... Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**" Read those words carefully. Paul **doesn't** require exactly the same **kind** of response to evil as to good. The response to good is **outward**. Just **hold on to it**. Continue in it. Keep doing it. Don't be swayed from it.

But the response to evil is entirely different. Technically, Paul doesn't even tell us the obvious - that we shouldn't **do** evil. His command isn't directed at our **actions** at all. It's directed at our **attitude**. We are to "**abhor**" evil. We are to be **revolted** at it. We are to **feel repulsed** by it. It's supposed to make us inwardly **sick** and **agitated**.

This is so important. Sin and evil isn't just a **list** of "**don'ts**" to the renewed mind. The **heart** has been changed toward evil. Sin isn't just a list of things I remember not to do. I can't be **detached** from sin and evil emotionally.

Again, this is what the **renewed mind** does. This is how it **reacts** to evil and sin. And it's miles apart from the **world's viewpoint**. This is one more area where we are not to be **conformed** to this world (**12:2**).

Make no mistake about it. The world applies no pressure whatsoever to turn us all into axe murderers. But

it applies relentless pressure to erase the Holy Spirit's work of birthing an **abhorrence** toward sin. It is urgent and committed to removing any **absolutes**. It seeks to turn **abhorrence** into **apathy** into **acceptance**.

Let me be as plain as I can be. The **first** goal of Satan isn't that we **do** evil. The **first** goal of Satan is that we **accept** evil. And the tool of choice to accomplish this is the **religious devotion of our media and politics to indiscriminating tolerance**. It is now the unchallenged doctrine and dogma of our age. We are made to feel **small** if we cling to abhorring what this world accepts. And Christians usually **collapse** under that kind of pressure.

That's why Paul would scream out these words to today's church - "If love - love for God, or love for your neighbor - is to be **genuine**, then it can't shrivel up into mere **tolerance**. Tolerance of evil **isn't** loving. Tolerance of evil is lazy and destructive and uncaring.

- c) **The reason Paul calls for this inward passionate abhorrence of evil is tied to his understanding of genuine love.**

Romans 12:9 - "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good."

So we've seen that the abhorring of evil is tied to the genuineness of love - both love for **God** and love for **others**, including **this fallen world**. Why isn't it enough just to **do** good and **avoid** evil? Because evil doesn't just hurt **me**. Even when **I'm** the one **doing** the evil, others are **encouraged** in it. That's precisely why Paul, in his great treatise on love says something most people just gloss quickly over: **1 Corinthians 13:6** - "....love does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth."

Your goal isn't to merely teach your children not to **do** evil. That's a good accomplishment, but it's not enough. Temptation gains ground in all our lives by millimeters. The only heart that is safe is the one that not only resists **doing** evil, but resists **tolerating** it. Your job is to teach your children to **abhor** evil. In this way you will preserve **their** lives and the lives of the **friends they influence**.

- 4) **IT'S NOT ENOUGH JUST TO DO GOOD. WE MUST "HOLD FAST" TO IT**

Romans 12:9 - "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good."

Let me finish this up quickly. If you're doing something that is **good** you only have half the job done. Press this into your memory. The spirit of this age seeks to **pry the good from your grip**. You can't have a **mild commitment** to your pursuit of the good and the righteous.

Those words Paul uses - "**hold fast**" - are the very same word he uses to describe the sexual union between a man and a woman in **1 Corinthians 6:16** - "Or do you not know that he who is **joined [to "hold fast"] to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two will become one flesh.'**"

I know that's a graphic image, but it makes Paul's point. If you're doing something good and righteous - if you're helping the poor, or visiting the sick, or reading your Bible, or praying, or faithfully ministering in your local church - whatever it is that's really **good** that you're doing - **keep at it!** Never **stop** doing good. Don't be pulled away from it by lesser things.

You don't have to **change your mind** about what is good to **give up** on what is good. In fact, that is rarely the cause for the death of good. Lesser things simply **crowd out** the good. **That's** what Paul is addressing here. Don't just **do** what is good. **Embrace** doing what is good. Be **stubbornly** committed to doing good. Resist all the petty, puny voices that nag you away from it. Resist fads. "**Hold fast**" to the good until Jesus comes again.