

## The Heart of Love

Romans 12:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

We have just completed a detailed study of the definitive explanation of reality that is available in our world. I say it is the definitive explanation because it was given not by Aristotle or by Plato but by the Creator himself who made us. I say it is a detailed study, because we have spent more than 11 years studying these 11 chapters of Romans in this collection of history books known as the Bible, and it is only after that prolonged explanation of His relationship to us that our Creator turns in the twelfth chapter to the practical application of those beliefs to our life here on earth. You remember in this twelfth chapter the first thing He says to us is, "In the light of all that I have given you and of the fact that I have made you, I ask you first of all to give your life to me so that I can achieve through you the purpose that I had in mind in making you."

Secondly, he details the gifts that he has given to every one of us to bring our particular part of the world into submission to his will. Thirdly, he turns to the attitude that alone makes sense of life. It is the attitude that dominates his own heart and prompted him to make us in the first place. It is the only attitude that will make sense of our life here on earth. It is the only feeling or attitude or dominating passion that we can allow to become the ruling feeling and motivation throughout our whole lives. Romans 12:9: "Let love be genuine."

One half of the world repudiates that, the half presumably that runs dictatorships.

One half of our world repudiates love as the working attitude and the ruling passion of life and simply substitutes force and hate. The other half of the world -- probably that is the half that most of us belong to -- substitutes its own attitude which it calls love. I think that is what many of us suffer under. We have an attitude and a feeling that we call love that is actually counterfeit love. That is why many of us have real trouble in our families or our marriages or our relationships with our friends. We think, "We are loving, why is it not working?" The fact is, it isn't working because we are not really loving. We are practising this counterfeit thing our society has created as a substitute for real love. Loved ones, this morning I would ask you to come with me now and study what our Creator means when he talks about genuine love as opposed to this bluff counterfeit love that we so often glibly talk about.

Now Jesus defined this genuine love not only in his own words but by his own life. It is very plain and simple. He was talking to the disciples in John 15:12. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Then he defines it. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Now that is love. In other words, a man gives his life up presumably so that his friends can live. That is what love is. Love is giving up your right to live so that the other person can live; love is giving up your rights so that the other person can have their rights; love is giving up the things that you feel you should have so that the other person should have them instead. That is what love is. It is giving up your life for your friends; it is giving up the things that you ought rightfully to have so that they can have them; it is putting their life before yours.

Now that exposes the ridiculous, bluff invalidity of the normal, conventional folk wisdom about what love is. You know that one: "What is loving others? Loving your neighbor as yourself. It is loving yourself first and then it is loving your neighbor." Do you see how silly that is in the light of

Jesus' definition? He says love is giving up your life for your friends.

On Thursday you remember what happened in the Potomac River? They came down with the helicopter and threw the ring on the end of the rope out to one of the passengers of the Air Florida jet that had crashed. One man caught it and then handed it on to the other four. The guys in the helicopter wanted him to take it, but he didn't take it, and the four were pulled to safety. When the men went back, of course he was gone. Now that is love. He didn't say, "No, first of all I'll love myself and then I'll love these other people." That isn't love. Love is loving the other person before yourself, instead of yourself, in place of yourself. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." That is what love is. If you decide to love yourself and then love them too, you will end up tossing a penny to see who dies, because you are loving each other equally. But that is not the love that Jesus talks about; it is not genuine love. Genuine love has no room for this. Really it is philosophizing, it is scholasticism, it is cavilling, it is playing at intellectualism, this love that says, "Now, unless I love myself first, I can't love them." You can only love them if you put them in the place of yourself. That is what it means to love. Love means you love them instead of yourself. Where other people love themselves, you love other people instead of yourself. You forget yourself completely and put their rights and their happiness first.

Now you remember that is the kind of love that Moses talked about. Remember there was a time when the Israelites had rebelled against God and God condemned them, and then Moses spoke. It is in Exodus 32:31,32. "So Moses returned to the Lord and said, 'Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin--and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.'" It wasn't Moses saying, "Lord, save me and save them too." It was Moses saying, "I know this is the destiny for which we were all created, to live with you eternally, but Lord, blot me out of the book, destroy me, take away my chance of heaven if you are not going to save them." That is what love is.

Actually Moses couldn't go to hell for them, but in fact that is what Jesus did. He took all the dirtiest part of you and me, the most contaminated part, and He took that into his own heart. When he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He was crying what you and I would have had to cry, because the power of God's holiness would have come and burned us up if we had to go through death with the dirt and uncleanness we have accumulated through life. But Jesus took that into himself and he went to hell instead of us. It is not seeing things truly to say he was just pretending. No, at that moment of self-limitation all he could see when he cried, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" was eternal darkness and hell yawning before him, not because of his own sin, but because he was made sin for us, he who knew no sin.

That is what love is. It is suffering something that somebody else should suffer so that they won't have to suffer; it is putting yourself in the place of the other person. That is what God himself did, because God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. That is why God is called love. You and I have made such a mess of our personalities, so confused with guilt, so wrought up with our own impaired minds and unbalanced, miserable emotions that God himself saw us and put our interests before His own and took all that stuff out of each of us, and in His own Son He burned it to destruction. He gave up the right of His own Son and himself continuing their peaceful, calm relationship. He did it so that you and I could enter into that relationship. That is what love is. Love is giving up your interests so that the other person's interests will prevail; giving up your rights so that the other person's rights will be preserved.

That is what you and I are called to do here. Genuine love for each one of us is that. It is not

identifying others' interests with yours. It is not saying, "I have a right to happiness and security and I have the right to friendship, and so all the rest of these people must have it too." It is not that. It is identifying others' interests as yours. It is regarding yourself as having no rights and no interests and putting their interests and their rights in place of yours. Where other people look out for themselves, you look out for other people. That is what love is.

Loved ones, do you see there is no room there then for thinking of yourself and how you are doing? In fact, the freedom of perfect love is forgetting yourself and putting other people first.

What does it mean in practical terms? Well, at the lowest level it means what we tell the children. If there is a sweet roll or a French pastry that is the nicest one on the plate when it comes around, loving other people means you think of which one they would like, and you leave that on the plate. Now I know that sounds very simple, but it seems to me that we in our society have got so used to gratifying ourselves first that we will almost take the best sweet roll and make a joke of our sheer selfishness. Loved ones, at the lowest level it is first of all letting the other person have the best thing on the plate.

Then if you extend it a little further, it is letting the other person have the best chair in the room. It is thinking, "If I were them what would I like?" It is letting them have the best chair in the room or the best seat in the car. Then it is letting them choose where they would like to go that evening. It is letting your wife or your colleague at work or your roommate or your dear friend choose where they would like to go that evening. It is holding back even if you have the whole thing organized and know what you would both really enjoy, and let them choose where to go that evening or where to spend the weekend. Then it gets in where it hurts: where to go on vacation. It means letting the other person have the choice. Do you realize that if there are a group of you living in an apartment and you all have different ideas of where to spend vacation, do you know that you will have a greater vacation if you let them choose? Do you know that you won't have nearly as good a vacation if you say, "I want to go here and you had all better go where I go!" Love is putting the other person's interests and preferences first.

But all that is just the simple, unselfish behavior that even pagan philosophers and humanists produce. Even civilized pagans practice that. Genuine love is putting yourself in the other's shoes; it is knowing the other person's heart and thoughts. With due respect to us men, I think we often say the ladies don't speak out. Well, they shouldn't have to speak out. If that is true of husband/wife relationships, how much truer is it of roommates or colleagues or friends relationships! Those of us who babble a lot say, "Why don't they express what they think?" They shouldn't need to if we love them. Love is knowing the other person's heart and thoughts, knowing what they are thinking and imagining what they are feeling. Walking in their moccasins, standing in their shoes, looking at things through their eyes, seeing things from their viewpoint and understanding what they need most, and then applying God's dear love and provision to that in such a way that the best thing happens to them that can possibly happen. That is what love is, brothers and sisters.

I spend so much time saying these simple things because I think we have a ridiculous view of love. The freedom of love is forgetting yourself. The freedom of love is not "I love myself first and then I love them." The freedom of love is putting them in place of yourself. That is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. It means love your neighbor instead of yourself. That is what it meant for Jesus. It meant loving us instead of Himself. It meant putting Himself in the place of death instead of us. I think many of us make heavy weather of not only our marriages, but our

friendships and our relationships at work and at school because we haven't even touched the heart of love, which is regarding yourself as not even in existence and looking out for the other person and protecting them. You wouldn't believe it, but that is freedom, that is liberty. You say, "What will happen to me?" You only have the greatest King and Lord in the whole universe to look after you, and He will; He will protect you.

So would you think a little about it? Especially those of us who live together. Do you really put the other person before yourself? Do you really regard their interests as the only ones that exist -- or are you trying to do it 50/50? Fifty percent you get your way, fifty percent I get my way. That is the way it works. We say it is 50/50 but it isn't. If you even have to do the dividing you always end up with 80 and they end up with 20. There is only one way to love, and that is to forget yourself and look upon them as if they are yourself. As you begin to do that, a miraculous power begins to work in their life, and their hearts begin to broaden and their lives begin to be transformed and you begin to come into peace. You begin to touch the fringe of life, the fringe of love and then you find yourself touching the hem of His garment.