

## Love - Selfish and Unselfish

Romans 12:09c

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

If you looked at the title of the study in the bulletin this morning you might have thought it sounds like nonsense to talk about “Love—selfish and unselfish.” Surely love cannot be called love and be selfish. Surely love by definition must be unselfish. Yet, loved ones, the realism of that title really follows along God’s own word, if you look at Romans 12:9 and you see it is God that says it: “Let love be genuine.” You might say, “Surely love can’t be selfish. Love can’t be anything but genuine.” Obviously God is saying, “Yes, there is a lot of love that isn’t genuine and it is still called love, whether rightly or wrongly.”

This verse can be translated “Let love be without dissimulation,” and you might say, “Love can’t be with dissimulation, can it?” Obviously our Creator says, “Yes, there is a lot of love around that is with plenty of dissimulation.” Another translation says, “Let love be without hypocrisy.” You and I tend in our theoretical, philosophical way to say, “Surely love can’t be anything else but unhypocritical.” Obviously our Creator says, “Yes, there is a lot of hypocritical love around. There is love that is feigned, that is dissembled, that is a put-on thing.” That is why our Creator says, “Look, I want your love to be genuine and real.”

Now loved ones, the fact is, everything we see around us—including the spring flowers, the snow, our bodies, our hair, our jobs and the stars in the sky—are all acts of love from our Creator to us. So the basis of our whole life is actually the love of our Creator for us. All of that is, in a way, a giving of himself to us. The very life here on earth continues because of love. Even that old grizzly bear will sacrifice herself for her babies because of that same principle of love. It is incredible, but the most immoral human being will give itself with great care and continuous thoughtfulness and kindness to preserve the most vulnerable of little baby animals such as a human being. That is true even the most immoral woman will sacrifice so much in order to keep the little baby alive. The whole world of nature is filled with all kinds of instances of animals or organisms giving themselves and putting their own immediate interests last and being prepared to sacrifice themselves so that their babies, their peers or their fellows will survive. So there is evidence throughout this whole world of all kinds of love. Even the discoveries that are made of new lands or new mechanical inventions or new cures for diseases, all evidence a tremendous indifference to self’s own immediate best interests in order to give ourselves completely to improve the life around us.

Many of us are kind of hard-nosed about it and we say, “Now wait a minute. A lot of these animals that you are talking about—even a lot of these people—certainly give of themselves, but it is with the idea in the back of their mind that they would make some eventual gains for their own interests. So I don’t think you can talk about Einstein being motivated by absolutely unselfish love when he gave himself to the studies that led up to the theory of relativity. I don’t think you can say that the people who discovered America were motivated just by absolute love.” Yet it is interesting, our Creator in a very pragmatic way sees that all the actions that have preserved or developed the world partake in some way of the energy of this principle of love that first made him make the universe. Really, it is true, loved ones.

It is interesting to watch Wall Street, isn't it? Reagan sneezes and Wall Street has influenza. It is jittery in many ways. Yet, Wall Street is one great activity of faith and often an activity of love. Often Wall Street will pour all kinds of money in to wilderness areas hoping eventually to derive some benefit, but it is incredible how they will give and give and how businessmen will even give themselves in order to develop this world. In the sense that love is a giving of yourself, our Maker calls all those things love, but he points out that there is a difference. "There is a love that makes you do things for yourself and there is a love that makes you do things for others. I want you to see that there is a distinction. Let your love be genuine." He defines genuine love very clearly.

I just mention that verse that we looked at before and then a few others that will emphasize it. John 15:12: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." Then Jesus defines genuine love: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." That is real love—that you give yourself for another person or you put the other person in place of yourself. That is what Moses did. Exodus 32:32 is what real love is. "But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou has written." That is real love. I just always remember when my dad would come in when I would be in bed with a cold and say, "I would rather I had it than you." He was one guy you believed when he said that. You don't love the other person along with yourself, you don't play around with that old verbal trickery we are so fond of today where we say, "Oh, I must love myself and then I can love everybody else." This is loving the others instead of yourself—"If not, blot me, I pray thee..." Not "Get me into heaven and get them too," but "Look, I don't want to go to heaven if you can't get them in."

Then you find in Romans 9:3 the same expression of genuine love coming from Paul again on behalf of the Israelites. "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race." That is genuine love. You are ready to put them in place of yourself the way Jesus did with us; you are ready to put the other person before yourself. You want them to be happy even if it means your own misery. That is genuine love.

The last is in Ephesians 5:25: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her." That is what love does, it gives itself up for the other person. Our Creator is saying to each one of us today, "Look, I want you to allow genuine love to govern all your attitudes and all your actions, and to be the basis of your whole life. If you do that you will free yourself in your own personality, and your relationship with me will be fulfilled and your whole life will come into a new level of liberty and spontaneity."

Now genuine love -- maybe one of the clearest examples of counterfeit love in our society is the man who has intercourse or indulges in the foreplay that leads up to and prepares the body for intercourse with a woman to whom he is not married. Then to try to justify himself to his own conscience you know what he says. He says, "I love you." That is one of the clearest, classic examples of our absolute misconception of love in our present society. The dear girl wants to believe it because she thinks how wonderful it would be if it were true. He says it partly because he knows she wants to hear it and partly because he hopes it will open an opportunity for him to be intimate with her again. But probably the big reason he says it is he is so morally blind and spiritually dead that the dear guy doesn't see any distinction between wanting his own physical and emotional needs fulfilled, and love. He thinks that when he says, "I love you," it means the same as "I need you" or "I lust for you" or "I want you" or "I want to make use of you." In no way does he really mean "I love you." He just means "At this moment in my life and your life this relationship can give us something that we want."

Actually that very basic, counterfeit, classic example lacks even the first of the three elements that make up genuine love. The first of the three elements that make up genuine love is what we have already mentioned—giving yourself. Genuine love at least means that you give yourself. In fact that is what causes the girl some uneasiness in that situation. She has an instinctive feeling that she has opened herself to this guy and made herself absolutely vulnerable, and she has an intuitive feeling that he ought to have given himself some way, too. Yet she realizes that he hasn't given himself. He hasn't given his future and his security to her, in the way she has done at that moment. He hasn't given to her his whole self in the sense of his career and his protection and his company for the rest of their life together, and she knows it. She senses there is something not quite right. Surely in some way love means giving yourself. It does, loved ones. Love means giving yourself.

Of course, the tragedy is that this classic example is played over again in all kinds of other situations. There are all kinds of dear husbands in our society who have never really given themselves to their wives. We gave them a little piece of ourselves early on to fulfill their maternal instincts and to satisfy our own physical and emotional needs, but ever since then we have stopped giving ourselves to them. That is, we don't give our inner thoughts to them, we don't give our dearest hopes and fears to them, we don't give them the insights and the understandings that we have about things, we don't give them any knowledge of where we work or what we think of the people we work with, we just give them a little piece of our bodies. We don't give ourselves to them.

So after twenty years, when the children are grown up and we have both passed the puppy stage of love, usually the guy by that time is dead inside or he has already set up a habit of giving himself to his colleagues or the guys he goes bowling or hunting with, and so he never actually gives his whole self to the dear girl he married. It is true with the wives, too. I think you often give just enough to hold the guy at bay and keep him happy and just enough to produce and create children that you then give yourself to for the next twenty years. When the children are grown you have gotten used to doing that and there is no sense in which you have got used to sharing your hopes and fears, your innermost thoughts, with the man you married. Many marriages perish on that fact that the husbands are giving themselves in all kinds of ways to the people they work with, the wives are giving themselves in all kinds of ways to the people they have coffee with, but the two people are not really giving themselves to each other in any sense. So, often the marriage perishes on that.

Loved ones, that is why we talk about giving ourselves. Giving yourself is not giving things, to people; it is not giving time to people -- it is giving your whole being to another person. It is allowing another person to see and know you the way you know yourself, the way you see yourself. Genuine love is not selfish; genuine love is the very opposite of selfishness. Genuine love is not being willing to give a person all kinds of presents, but not to give yourself. That is what Paul says in I Corinthians 13:1-3. "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned but have not love, I gain nothing." Love is giving yourself. Because husbands so often don't give themselves to their wives and wives so often fail to give themselves to their husbands, on the one hand the husband lacks the experience of that gentle kindness that is part of the nourishment of love, because that goes so much to the children. Similarly the wife so often lacks the experience of that strong and interested protectiveness that the husband can give to her that expresses a sheltering love for her. Giving things is generosity and kindness, but giving yourself is what love is.

I think many of us, when we think of love, think it is just something you control. It is not. C.S. Lewis says no human being, however uncivilized they are or however pagan or primitive they are, believes that selfishness is right. It is just that many different tribes and nations differ on whom to be selfish to. Some say we should be selfish to this person, some say we should be unselfish to our family, some say we should be unselfish to our tribe, some say we should be unselfish to the nation, some say we should be unselfish to the world. Now it is the same with love. Love is not giving yourself in a controlled way; love is giving yourself all the time. Love is not deciding “I’ll give so much of myself to this person and then I’ll give so much of myself to that person. Or I’ll lay myself out so much for my wife or my husband or my son or my daughter and I’ll lay myself out in such a way for my colleagues at work or my friends or my roommates here.” That kind of love is a controlled love and a selfish love. It is the attitude of a god who wants to control his world. But really, genuine love is not only giving yourself but giving yourself all the time, laying yourself out for others all the time. That is the kind of love that is full of spontaneity and freedom and liberty. It is the kind of love that brings you into a new level of living.

Because we live in this society, maybe it is good to mention Wordsworth’s sonnet. “The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.” I would like to point out love is giving yourself, it is not getting. I think it is easy for you to hear me say, “Love is giving your whole self” and it is easy to get the idea, “Oh, yes, just let it all hang out. That is what it is. Just shower the other person with all your fears and hopes and trouble and anger and all your irritability and all your inhibitions.” No! That is splattering your great, messy self all over the world like a jellyfish. That is not giving, that is getting. That is “Poor me! I want to share a few things with you”—and the poor soul is crippled after the conversation is over. No. Giving yourself is what it says. It is giving your physical strength and all your abilities to another person. If I take this pen and give it to you, it is yours. You can use it as you want. You can throw it away if you want, or you can use it to write. But once I give it to you it is yours for you to use. That is what love means—giving yourself.

It means you give your physical strength to another person for them to use as they want, to misuse if they want. That is what we see with Jesus hanging on the cross. That is the only thing that has broken our hard hearts. We see that He is giving himself to us even for us to crucify him. Now love is giving yourself to another person, giving your strength, your intellectual insight and discernment to them. Some of us have real ability intellectually—it is giving that, laying that at their feet and saying, “There, you can use it.” It is giving your emotional warmth and sensitivity, all your abilities, your aptitudes, your skills, to the other person. That is what it means to give yourself.

Now I mention that because our society is so chaotic that at times we almost have to define what it means to give ourselves. If I could list all the attributes you have on this piece of paper—your physical strength, your good appearance, your good voice, your good eyesight, your intellect and your knowledge of business—and then I said, “Now, this is what we are going to give this person”—that is giving yourself. It is laying that at their feet and at their disposal. It is putting yourself at the disposal of another.

In other words, it is really forgetting yourself completely. It is ceasing to use your abilities for yourself and using them completely for another person or for other people. When you do that, others sense it. Nobody’s in any doubt about love. There is a magic thing that happens. It unlocks all their closed-in selfishness and releases them and they burst forth in love too. That is what it

does. If it doesn't, you will be crucified. But then that is not so bad as we have seen because there is a dear God who looks after you. Even if it is real crucifixion, he will raise you up and give you a whole new life. If it is only partial crucifixion—the finances, the car, the house or the marriage—he will raise you up if you do what he says—let your love be genuine. Give yourself to other people all the time without reservation and lay your abilities at their disposal. Loved ones, it is a free life. It is the only life that will free others.

There are two other vital elements in genuine love and I hope we will discuss those these next two weeks. But at least we should all consider starting here. What about you and your roommate? What about you and your husband? What about you and your friends? What about you and your colleagues at work? Do you love them? Do you give yourself to them? Do you lay your abilities at their disposal? Real love risks being hurt. That is what real love is.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we rarely look into your face but we realize what closed in, shrunken and withered creatures we are. We realize how protective of ourselves and how defensive we are. It is no longer a wonder to us that we don't seem able to make life go right. Father, we ask for your forgiveness. Lord, we see all that we have here is the result of a loving heart that has given freely gifts that we can destroy. Father, we see that love has brought about our existence and that is what enables it to continue. We can see clearly that love is what will enable our own personal lives to expand and develop and eventually burst into freedom. So, Lord, we would give ourselves anew to you. Thank you, Lord, for showing us how selfishly what we call love. We ask you now to give us a light and a view of how we are to love without dissimulation to love as you love.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of the Heavenly Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each of us throughout this week. Amen.