

Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

Romans 12:09d

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

One of the most famous chapters of the Bible ends with, "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." [I Corinthians 13:13] The same emphasis of love is mentioned by our Creator in this book of Romans that we have been studying. After eleven chapters of describing his relationship with us, our God lays upon us the primary rule or commandment or recommendation that he has for our lives. He says, "Let love be genuine." The whole world has adopted that as the key to life. The world says, "Yes, what the world needs now is love, sweet love." Everybody agrees with that. Every professor, every teacher, every mom or dad, every president everybody says that what we need is more love. Yet the paradox is so few of us know what love really is.

So while the world is saying that what we all need is more love, husbands are crying, "My wife doesn't really love me." Or wives are crying, "But my husband doesn't really love me." Children are crying, "But my parents didn't really love me," and parents are crying, "But my children no longer love me." It is amazing that all of us human beings here agree that love is what we all need and yet we are all crying out the same thing--nobody loves us the way we need to be loved. And it is really because we have such a vague and unreal idea of what love is.

That is why last Sunday we tried to distinguish between genuine love and the hypocritical, pretend love that many of us regard as real love. We said that there are three elements that distinguish between genuine love and bluff love. One of them is found in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." The first element in real love is that it is giving and not taking. So the guy who has indulged in fornication this last week or the girl who has indulged in adultery this last week, when they said, "I love you" at the end of that act, they didn't mean "I love you," because love is giving. They meant "I lust for you" or "I take from you" or "I steal from you" or "I need you" or "I want to use you." That's what we shared last Sunday.

Love is giving, and anybody who takes from another person doesn't really love them. Anybody who steals from another person doesn't really love them because they aren't giving. Then you remember we said it is not just giving presents. We all know the joke about the wife who would say, "Things, things, things, that is all you give me." We know that giving things is not love. The point about John 3:16 is that God so love the world that he gave--a sky, a cloud, or a river? He gave a mountain? No. He gave one of his many sons? No, He gave his only begotten Son; He gave the most precious part of himself. He gave his very self to us. That is what love is.

So husbands, wives, roommates, friends, colleagues who give just parts of their body to each other and bits of themselves to each other and keep their innermost feelings and thoughts, their innermost hopes and fears, and their leisure time and give it to some colleagues at work instead of giving it wholly to the person they love, they are missing the full satisfaction of that relationship of love. Instead of laying before each other all their intellect and their ability and human strength and emotional warmth and saying, "Look, this is at your disposal. You can use this as you please." They are measuring out their love in a self-controlled way, and so it is an exercise for them rather than a spontaneous releasing of themselves to each other.

Loved ones, when two people lay themselves at each other's disposal and say, "My intellect is at

your disposal, it is for you. My human strength, it is for you. This is all of me; you can see through me, I'm transparent. I don't have hidden things that I share with the people at work. I don't have hidden things that I share with the boys back at school. This is all of me." Every-time you give all of yourself all of the time to someone, that is love. That is love whether it is marriage or whether it is you and me walking down the stairs. It is not just giving love to somebody you can trust, that is not love. You would never give love to anybody if that were the case. God gave himself to us even though he knew he couldn't trust us. No, love is giving all of yourself, all of the time to people. You say, "They will take advantage of me." Yes, they took advantage of Jesus, but he didn't come out badly and nor will you. God will protect you, God will raise you up from the dead if necessary, but God will save you. That is the only way to live our lives -- giving ourselves all the time to each other. Anything less than that and you miss life; it passes you by.

How many of you feel life is slipping by? I know I have quoted it before but it seems to express so much of us. "In headaches and in worry, vaguely life leaks away." [As I Walked Out One Evening, W. H. Auden, 1907 - 1973] How many of us feel life is slipping past us without us knowing it because we are holding back, protecting ourselves, saving ourselves, securing the defenses, instead of giving ourselves all the time to each other? Of course most of our marriages that is the problem. We don't give all of ourselves all of the time to each other. We give all of ourselves to ourselves.

That is what I'd like to talk about this morning -- the second element in genuine love. Some of us practice that first element: we give ourselves unreservedly all the time to other people. We give in churches, in organizations, in social situations, in domestic relationships, in school friendships and in business colleagues. Yet though we are touching the fringe of love, we never fall into it completely because we are giving to get.

In other words, there are a lot of us that appear to be giving ourselves unreservedly as far as our outward action and behavior are concerned, but as far as our motive life is concerned there is only one reason we are giving, and that is to get. So we are really still in control. We miss the whole joy and spontaneity and freedom of it because we are really giving to get. Many of us join churches for that reason. Maybe that is understandable at the beginning, but so many of us miss life because that continues to be the primary motive for belonging to the church. We appear to be giving ourselves but we are actually giving because we are expecting somebody to give back to us. Or we join organizations because we apparently are giving to it, but we are actually giving to get because somebody has told us, "Your life will be balanced only if you give yourself to other people." Our twisted little minds work and we say, "Only if I give, will I get what I need. Good, I'll give."

So our whole life turns into a miserable, perverted, selfish, love operation where we appear to give ourselves to organizations, we appear to give ourselves to other people on vacation or on days out together or on some project. But really, we are only giving to get, because we believe that if we do this thing, it will mean we live a balanced life, and we want to live a balanced life. So it is actually selfish love. Or, somebody tells us, "Now you will only fulfill your true potential if you really start giving yourself to other people." So, miserable little neurotics that we are, we decide, "OK, I will start giving to other people because that is the only way 'I', the great I, will fulfill my whole potential." Somebody else may say, "Listen, if you don't use your talents, they will wither on you," so you decide, "I'd better use these talents so that they won't wither on me; so that I won't lose them."

So, the husband kisses the wife. Why? To get her to kiss him back. The wife touches the husband. Why? To get him to touch her back. The person gives something to his friend. Why? Because he wants

the friend to like him. Loved ones, many of us miss the full liberty of real love because we appear to be giving ourselves unreservedly and fully to the other person all the time, but the motive is wrong. The motive is basically selfish; we are giving ourselves in order to get back from other people. Therefore, we never escape from ourselves. Everybody wonders, "Why aren't you absolutely fulfilled? You look like such a spontaneous, outgoing person." It is because deep, deep down there is a little self that is like the croupier at Vegas with the eyeshade on, trying to pull it in. There is a little self inside wanting to get in the admiration or the praise.

The other person knows it, of course. The object of our philanthropic works knows that that is exactly what they are. They know that they are an object upon which we are exercising our philanthropy. The wife knows it by your actions and by your eyes. She feels the demand inside you. People feel it even before you come to their door or call on their office or come into see them at work. The person knows this person is not a giver. This is a giver who is only pretending to give, but who actually takes.

Loved ones, the first element is to give yourself unreservedly, all the time to others. The second element is: love for their sakes, not for your sake. Don't take that as you can't do it. Loved ones, that is salvation. God has planned this so that we will be delivered from ourselves. Real, genuine love is loving the other person for their sake. It is putting your interests and your security and your safety aside, and it is putting all your attention on their security, their safety, their comfort and their happiness. It is forgetting your interests and substituting their interests.

Love is what we have said before -- putting yourself in the other person's place. It is getting outside of your own skin, standing in their shoes, walking in their moccasins; it is living their life. It is putting yourself into their minds and thinking what they are thinking. Have you ever done that? Can you imagine what a relief it would be if you could once get outside your own skin? You can see where all this TM is such a bluff thing by Satan. Satan knows that what we desperately need to do is to transcend ourselves. So he invents all kinds of counterfeits such as Transcendental Meditation to get us to experience that in order to prevent us entering into the key to life which is love, where you assume that you no longer exist and treat yourself as just a servant to benefit other people. That is the amazing way this world really does work. When you do that you break into life; you burst into life. I don't blame you for thinking, "Oh, that is strange!" But it is true. If you look after all the rest of us, God will look after you. You, of course, will enter into such a freedom from self-consciousness and anxiety and worry that you will not believe it.

Loved ones, this kind of thing blows a hole in the contemporary silliness which runs: "You can't love your neighbor as yourself, you can't love other people until you love yourself." I just want you to know that is five-year-old stupidity. The world has never known of that until we invented it. No expositor of scripture, no Greek translator believes for one minute that the Greek means that "love your neighbor as yourself" means "two spoonfuls of love for myself, one for you." It doesn't! That is not love. Love is a magnificent, spontaneous, free, liberated, unselfish, self-forgetful activity. It is not a philosophic, psychological system of keeping yourself and everybody else equal. If you once look at our dear Savior's own death, and if you look at his exposition of the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself," and you look at his follower's exposition of the commandments and then you look at contemporary examples of love, you will see that there is no place for loving yourself. The very heart of true love is that you put the other person in place of yourself.

Let me show you why that is true. Turn to II Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." Now that was the way Jesus loved himself. He looked at himself--holy and pure and clean--and he took all the evil thoughts and all the unclean feelings of the whole world and he put them into himself. He took all the dirtiest things that have ever been done and he put them into His own clean self. That is how he loved himself. He took his clean, unsullied conscience, like the conscience of a little child, and he put into it all the memories and guilt of all the murders and all the fornications and all the destruction that had ever taken place in the world. That is how he loved himself.

Now loved ones, is that love? If I had a little child here who was innocent and clean and I could heap into him all the evil and uncleanness of the world, would I be loving that little child? That is what Jesus did. He allowed himself to be made sin for all of us even though he knew no sin. Do you see that that is not loving himself, that is surely being cruel to himself? The fact is he didn't love himself; He loved you and me instead of himself. That is not loving himself, that is taking our place. That is dying for us. That is caring for us so much that he didn't want us to go to hell so He went to hell instead for us. That is what love is.

There is a word that I think some of us know that expresses it. It is "vicarious". It must be from "vicus" in Latin, because it means "turn"--taking your turn. Vicarious suffering means putting yourself in the place of the other person. That is what love is. Love is you trying to imagine what the person beside you is thinking and feeling at this moment. It is trying to think what your colleagues feel like when they come in the morning and then ministering to that. It is doing what you would like somebody else to do to you if you felt like that. Instead of treating yourself like that, you treat them like that. That is what it means to love your neighbor as yourself -- love your neighbor in place of yourself; love your neighbor the way you used to love yourself. Treat your neighbor the way you would tend to treat yourself as if you had no self. That is loving your neighbor as yourself. You can see it with Jesus. That is obviously what he did.

It is plain again in Paul's words in Romans 9:3. This is Paul loving himself: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race." Now if I say to Bill, "Curse you and I hope you go to hell", is that loving him? It isn't. Yet Paul says, "I would prefer that I myself were accursed so that my brethren might be saved." Do you see that real love is not loving yourself and then doling out some little love for the rest of us? Loving us as yourself is putting us in place of yourself. It is forgetting your interests, it is disregarding your safety and it is putting our interests and our safety in place of yours. Love is only love when your interests cross my interests and I put your interests first. Love is vicarious; it is wishing that you would go to hell so that other people could be saved.

Of course, once a person knows that you love them like that, there is such an energy from God comes into their life that nothing else can match it. You know that one of the reasons we are concerned about our welfare state experience is certainly fiscal, but don't you agree that one of the other reasons is that none of us like this "put-on" love? It doesn't need to be. I'm sure there can be social workers working in a welfare state situation who will truly love, but we know that this organized love is not real love. It is love as long as it doesn't hurt you and we know that it doesn't match real love. Real love hurts and this other kind of organized philanthropy doesn't appear to hurt anybody. In fact one of the great motives for it is that you don't need to break your stride. You can help people without bothering yourself for a moment. Do you see, loved ones, that is not real love? That is why our friendships are falling apart; that is why our marriages are falling apart; that is why our colleague relationships at work are falling apart. None of us are loving each

other truly and genuinely. Distrust develops within us because we all feel we are being less than real with each other and we are not truly putting each other first.

Once we begin to put each other first, life breaks out into abundant life. It is so with Jesus' own words in John 15:13: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Now when you lay down your life, are you loving yourself? If I take your life and lay it down, I put an end to it, I destroy it, I stop it, I stop your breathing, am I loving you? No, I'm murdering you; I'm hating you. Yet Jesus says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life"--that he murder himself, that he hate himself. That is what he has to do. Real love is when you disregard yourself. If necessary, loved ones (and I know you can make mincemeat out of it psychologically), but if necessary you even hate yourself in order to put everybody else first. The reason we are not bursting into abundant living is because we have these ridiculous ideas that we can somehow love other people and love ourselves as well. We can't.

Maybe we lost that by the fact that many of us have not come through the depression. We never had to stand in line in the soup kitchens. We never had to put up with that kind of suffering. In a way, we have had it reasonably easy and we have been able to play around with this idea of love. But brothers and sisters, love costs everything you have, because it is putting us all in place of you and treating us all the way you would tend to treat yourself. Loving another person is vicarious; it is putting them in place of yourself. It is laying at their disposal all the abilities of your personality that you have been taught to lay at your own disposal. The moment we begin to live in each other's stead (because that is what is meant; we don't have to die in each other's stead), that moment life begins to free and liberate and we begin to escape the narrow cell of self that imprisons us. At the moment, when the dear guy handed the safety ring to the other four in the Potomac River two weeks ago, at that very moment when he himself was dying, there was a power of energetic life from God that came into his dear heart. That is nothing as exhilarating and freeing as putting yourself last, losing yourself for others and losing yourself in others.

Loved ones, that is what God has called us to. I pray that each one of us here that is imprisoned in our own selfish minds will break out. Today after the benediction don't say "What am I going to do?" Say, "Lord, what is this person beside me? I wonder what they would like to do." I pray for each of us who live with each other, whether we are married or not; I pray that we will lift into life and escape from ourselves. Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for even the terrible plane crash. We thank you, Lord, you used it to plant again before a whole nation through the television cameras this whole truth which is at the base of the whole creation -- "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his for his friends." Lord, thank you that it is plain and obvious to anyone that love has no place for loving self. Loving your neighbor as yourself is loving your neighbor in place of yourself. It is being willing to die for that neighbor.

Lord, as we think of the loved ones we live with and work with through the week, Father, we would ask for forgiveness for our dreadful self centeredness. Lord, we can you have not been able to lay out much of your strength for us because we have been busy enough looking after ourselves. Lord, we would commit ourselves now to breaking into real love in our own lives and giving ourselves unreservedly to others for their sake -- so that they will be happy, comfortable and all the things that we want for ourselves. Lord Jesus, we know you will pour into us your mighty supernatural, divine love as we will ourselves into the direction you have set an example to follow. Thank you, Lord.

The grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of his dear Holy Spirit be with each one of us. Amen.