

“Loving Evil”
Romans 12:9-21; Proverbs 25:21-22

I had never really thought about this issue until we were visiting my parents a number of years ago and apparently the discussion turned to my children’s curfews and my mother stated to my children, “Well, you know your dad never had a curfew.”

You can imagine the howls of protest this revelation elicited. And I had forgotten, never even thought about the fact that I didn’t have a curfew. My father simply said, “You know when to be home.” And I did.

So, my mother’s statement got me thinking about my parent’s childrearing techniques, something I had never really examined. And all of a sudden I realized I grew up in a house with very few rules.

Now, it didn’t seem that way at the time. I didn’t smoke, drink, or chew or fool around with girls that do, as we used to say. Yet, I don’t recall my parents ever administering a lecture on smoking or drinking. No one sat me down for the birds and bees talk followed by a list of do’s and don’ts.

Now, I don’t want you to think I didn’t have vices, none of which I am willing to discuss here today. But as I look back I realize my parents created an atmosphere, an expectation, of who our family was. This structure was given context by our church. But instead of a rigid list of prohibitions backed by threatened punishments, they attempted to develop within me a desire to do what was right, a love of God, my family, and myself that gave texture to my decision making. Instead of rules, I was ingrained with expectations. I wasn’t afraid of getting caught, or even what my parents would do. Rather, I didn’t want to embarrass my family or violate my Christian faith. When I messed up, it wasn’t about punishment, but disappointment.

Now, I’m not attempting to provide childrearing advice this morning. When I was in high school, no one I knew took drugs, and premarital sex occurred primarily in the minds of adolescent boys. On the other hand, my children had curfews and until recently continued to endure their share of drug, alcohol and sex lectures. The world is different and demands extra vigilance.

But I believe the principle of how to foster appropriate behavior remains legitimate. We, nor our children, will live faithful Christian lives out of fear, but only out of a love for God and one another.

The theme of our sermon is that love makes the world go around, both in our hearts and in our communities.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection;...”

Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul suffered the same criticism from their contemporaries. Jesus was continually confronted by the scribes and Pharisees, whereas Paul was admonished by the early Christians. Both groups claimed Jesus and Paul were too lax. “Where are the rules?” they demanded. “Everyone knows God demands rules by which we are to live. How do you expect to keep people in line, get them to live godly lives? There must be specific rules and definite punishments,” they argued. “People need a little fear if they are going to act right.”

And yet, Jesus and Paul continually countered these arguments with the concept of grace. God isn't looking to punish us, they said. God loves us, wants to forgive us, welcomes us into His good graces.

Paul spends the first eleven chapters of his Letter to the Romans talking about this divine love and forgiveness. And yet, all through the Christian centuries, right up to today, we still struggle to accept that it works this way. Oh no, we protest, we need these strict, absolute rules. People must know they will be punished, that God will not tolerate their miscues. Without fear, what will motivate people to do good? This rule by law, dictating behavior through legality has appeal to us. It looks concise, fair, easily understood.

But Paul says that's not the way God works. And for good reason, because none of us is good enough. As the Jews discovered, no one can keep the letter of the law. We are all sinners. Why, just thinking you are not a sinner shows you are filled with the sin of pride and an over inflated ego! God has chosen a different method by which to save us. God offers His love and forgiveness to each and every one of us. It is a free, unrestricted gift, impossible to earn, offered by a gracious and loving God. Therefore, we don't do good out of fear God will punish us, but out of our love for God and gratitude for God's gift of forgiveness.

Think of it this way. Do you want your children to do what is right, be obedient, because they fear you or the punishment you will administer? Or do you want them to live righteous lives because they love you, want to please you, wish to not disappoint you? Fear works for awhile. But there comes a time, such as the day they leave for college, if not before, when fear will lose all its power.

Think of your own life. Does a fear of God cause you to tithe, refrain from hitting on the new secretary, or being a good father or mother? Or is it your love of God, spouse and family that motivates your responses?

The Apostle Paul says love is to govern our actions. Love of God and one another will lead us to act and live as God desires. St. Augustine once said, "Love God and do what you want." He was relating the biblical truth that if we truly love God, we will act in godly ways. The central biblical concept of grace, God's love and forgiveness, is not a free pass to licentious living. Rather, it is the Bible's way of saying, "Those who truly love God will act in ways that please God."

A second grader came home from school and said to her mother, "Mom, guess what? We learned how to make babies today." The mother's stomach began to churn, but trying to keep her cool she responded, "That's interesting. How do you make babies?" "It's simple," replied the little girl rather disdainfully, "You change 'y' to 'I' and add 'es!'"

The concept of grace, God's love and forgiveness, is so simple that we often immediately try to complicate it. But God forgives us, and grateful for that forgiveness we act out of love for God and other people.

So, in this passage, Paul reminds us that love will be the motivating force in the Christian's daily life. But in verses 14-21, Paul informs us this love not only motivates how we relate to God, but also how we live with one another. The love of God carries with it not only a personal responsibility, but a corporate one.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another;... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

We reside in an egocentric Christian culture. Go to any bookstore and look at the so called Christian books. How many of them carry a theme of personal growth, salvation, proper living versus how we live together as a church, as a world? Books, tapes, television programs are almost entirely oriented toward what the Christian faith does for me — how to improve *my* relationship to God, how *I* can loose weight through scripture, how to improve *my* spouse, how to raise *my* children, how to achieve *my* personal salvation.

But in the New Testament, Jesus and the Apostle Paul are far more concerned with how our Christian faith directs our living with one another. Now, of course, the Christian must seek to build his own spiritual life. This is where it all begins. But in the Christian faith it is only a beginning, the very beginning. When this becomes the dominant theme, as it now is in American Christianity, then our faith deteriorates into a personal idolatry whose sole purpose is to make things better for ourselves and get us into heaven.

Neither Jesus, nor Paul, knows a faith such as this. True faith is lived out and exemplified through our relationships with others. Consequently, we receive this general description from Paul on how Christians will live. “Bless those who persecute you...Live in harmony with one another...Do not repay evil for evil...if your enemies are hungry, feed them...”

When you read verses 9-21, you realize they sound a whole lot like Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. And what is so interesting, and riveting, about this passage is that Paul is not only discussing how we are to relate to fellow Christians, but to all people. The Christian isn’t just “Christian” to his own, but to everyone. The purpose of this passage is not to construct another list of do’s and don’ts. Rather, they provide a general description of how a Christian will live in the world. And at their heart, Paul’s words remind us that instead of a list of rules, the Christian will allow love to dictate all he or she says and does.

Hillel Silverman tells a true story from when the Old and New Cities of Jerusalem were reunited in 1967. A recently widowed Arab woman, who had been living in Old Jerusalem since 1948, wanted to see once more the house in which she formerly lived. Now that the city was one, she searched for and found her old home. She knocked on the door of the apartment, and a Jewish widow came to the door and greeted her. The Arab woman explained that she had lived there until 1948 and wanted to look around. She was invited in and offered coffee. The Arab woman said, “When I lived here, I hid some valuables. If they are still here, I will share them with you half and half.”

The Jewish woman refused. “If they belonged to you and are still here, they are yours.” After much discussion back and forth, they entered the bathroom, loosened the floor planks, and found a hoard of gold coins. The Jewish woman said, “I shall ask the government to let you keep them.” She did and permission was granted.

The two widows visited each other again and again, and one day the Arab woman told her, “You know, in the 1948 fighting here, my husband and I were so frightened that we ran away to escape. We grabbed our belongings, took the children, and each fled

separately. We had a three-month-old son. I thought my husband had taken him, and he thought I had. Imagine our grief when we were reunited in Old Jerusalem to find that neither of us had taken the child.”

The Jewish woman turned pale, and asked the exact date. The Arab woman named the date and the hour, and the Jewish widow told her: “My husband was one of the Israeli troops that entered Jerusalem. He came into this house and found a baby on the floor. He asked if he could keep the house and the baby, too.”

At that moment, a twenty-year-old Israeli soldier in uniform walked into the room, and the Jewish woman broke down in tears. “This is your son,” she cried.

What happened? The two women liked each other so much that the Jewish widow asked the Arab mother: “Look, we are both widows living alone. Our children are grown up. This house has brought you luck. You have found your son, or our son. Why don’t we live together?” And they do.

Love makes our enemies our friends.

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How do we deal with evil? We love it to death. Verse twenty-one says: “Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.” That is a tall order. And yet, that is how God deals with the sin and evil in our lives. Through the love and forgiveness, the grace, God offers to us, He loves the sin right out of us. And, God expects us to treat others exactly how He relates to us.

That is really difficult. First of all, it’s difficult to believe God really loves us so much. And second, everything within us cries out for revenge, vengeance, retaliation, punishment. But the Christian loves others as God loves him.

This morning, as we struggle to live out our Christian faith in the midst of the evil seeking to envelope us, as we partake of the sacrament, let us decide to allow love to dictate our thoughts, words, and actions — believing that God’s way of saving us will become our way of loving others.

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