

Though some parts of the Christian ethic are shared by other people,, the radical character of love and the love of enemies shown us by Christ and taught us in Holy Scripture are uniquely Christian and ought to be the behavior that sets Christians apart in the world.

“The Christian an Extremist”

Romans 12:9-21

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We are working our way into the ethical section of Romans, Paul’s description of the way of life that is consistent with and flows naturally from the grace of God and the redemption of Jesus Christ which were the subjects of the first 11 chapters of the letter.

Text Comment

v.9 It is interesting that the Bible never defines love. For example it defines sin: sin is lawlessness. It illustrates love in many ways and commends its practice but it never defines it. It assumes we know what love is: affection and commitment that act for the good of another. But we are also all familiar with counterfeit love, love that talks but does not act or love that acts only superficially and not sacrificially. That is why we are constrained here to love in a genuine way.

As often with the numerous ethical exhortations to love in the New Testament the question arises: are we being told to love our brothers and sisters in the church or to love all men. Verse 10 might suggest that he means only the love of the brethren. On the other hand, vv. 14-21 suggest that Paul here would have had in mind the love of unbelievers and even our enemies among them. As we learned in chapter 5, our Lord Jesus Christ loved his enemies and we are to love as he loved.

v.14 The similarity between this exhortation, together with those that follow, and the Lord’s teaching of the Christian life in his Sermon on the Mount is immediately obvious.

There is a somewhat important textual question here, viz. whether the “you” after “persecute” is original; that is, whether Paul wrote “bless those who persecute *you*” or “bless those who persecute.” It is quite likely, in fact, that the “you” is not original and that what Paul wrote is “bless those who persecute.” Then the question becomes: does that mean the same thing, now with the “you” simply understood; or is Paul saying the more radical thing, that we are to pray for and bless persecutors, even the persecutors of others? Paul’s radical ethic, in my view, favors the latter interpretation. Hard as it is to bless and pray for those who are persecuting *us*, at least in that case we have a personal interest in rising above hatred and imitating Jesus in his love for his enemies. It is harder still to have a care for those who are making life miserable for many others but whose persecution is not persecution in which we have any personal stake. In such cases we have to love and care about two groups of people we don’t know!

What we have in front of us is the kind of list of ethical injunctions that we find frequently in the New Testament. There does not seem to be a particular order to them. One of the finest commentators on Romans entitles his section covering vv. 9-21: "A Series of Loosely Connected Items of Exhortation." So what are we to think and to say about this string of commandments?

The question presses all the more because we Christians are hardly the only ones to recommend this kind of life and living. Everyone thinks that we ought to love others. It wasn't only Christians in the first century who spoke of brotherly love, such as is mentioned in v. 10. The same concept is found among the Jews and, indeed, among the pagans. We are less likely nowadays to hear *zeal* being recommended, but everyone talks about the importance of *passion*. We are all supposed to have passion in doing what we do. Both Jewish and pagan writers can be cited from the period in favor of rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. [Cranfield, ii, 642] In St. Louis a few days ago I drove by a Unitarian Church with a large banner hanging out front proclaiming that they were "Standing on the Side of Love." Who denies that we ought to love one another?

So what is uniquely Christian about this list? How ought we to live differently than the moral, upright unbeliever who lives next door?

1. Well, first, let's cheerfully admit that much of our ethics as Christians is shared by human beings generally. We happily admit that we are not the only ones who believe that we should love others or be honest or be patient. Indeed, we Christians are the ones, and I think the *only* ones, who have an explanation for why everyone thinks much the same way about what constitutes a good life. It is in the Bible that we learn that all human beings have been made in the image of God and have had his law written upon their hearts. It is no wonder that humanity largely shares an ethical commitment that seems to be eradicable. We all have been made by the same God and he has left the stamp of his character upon our natures. On the other hand, it is perfectly obvious that a great many more people talk about love than practice it, that love is often a synonym for selfishness or, at best, for little more than natural affection, and that its higher, holier forms such as Paul has described here are, sad to say, quite rare in their exercise and practice. So while many may agree with the biblical emphasis on love, only a tiny few actually put it into practice. Christians are to be among those who practice this way of life, not simply give lip service to it.
2. Second, there are some unique features of this list that distinguish it from an unbeliever's view of the good life. Take, for example, "serve the Lord" in v. 11, "be constant in prayer" in v. 12, and "contribute to the needs of the saints" in v. 13. The unbeliever would not describe the good life, the worthy life in such terms. There are uniquely Christian items here.
3. Third, and more to the point, remember what we emphasized earlier, that the entire ethical approach of the Apostle Paul is rooted in the Christian experience of God's grace and Christ's redemption. Every part and parcel of this exhortation is defined and deepened and clarified and radicalized when our love and our zeal and our hospitality and our sympathy and our patience and our refusal to repay evil for evil is intended to be a fit response to God's love *for us* in defiance of our sin and unworthiness and a fit response to Christ's death *for us* while we were still his enemies. The motive changes everything:

love and patience and generosity and sympathy are not the same things when they are the overflow of a spirit that knows itself to have been loved with a great love that it did not deserve. When in living this way we are attempting to do for others what Christ has done for us this way of life is transformed root and branch. In this respect Christian ethics, the good life as Christians understand it and strive to live it, will always be profoundly different in motivation and in character than any other moral vision of life taught by human beings. There is an utterly unique power and motive and understanding of true goodness taught in the Bible. Humility is not the same thing at all in a person who is trying not to act stuck-up on the one hand and, on the other, in a person who knows he or she is a sinner saved by God's grace.

4. Fourth, there is another distinctive to Paul's ethical exhortation as we find it in these verses. It is the radical demand of this ethic of love and grace. It is the extremity of it. Not love but *genuine* love. It is not enough to play at loving or, even worse, to talk of loving, if one is not actually treating others and caring for others with their best in view. In the same way, it is not doing what is good only, but *holding fast* to what is good. There is a commitment here, a level of determination about doing the good that is to mark a Christian. In the same way it is not enough simply to treat others with honor – as Christ has treated us, dignifying our unworthy lives with his love – but the Christian is called to *outdo others in showing this honor*. And so on. Everything is to the nth degree. Nothing in this life of love is adequate if it is only half-heartedly done, only done so as to satisfy the ordinary requirements of other people. No we are to be extreme in all these ways, refusing to content ourselves with anything less than the kind of love with which we have been loved by our heavenly Father and by Jesus Christ our redeemer.

And the proof of that is found in vv. 14-21. Here is the real uniqueness of the Christian view of the good life. Here is where its theological foundation crops out for all to see: a life that takes its particular shape from the Christian's experience and knowledge of God's grace, love and generosity to him or her. Christ's love for the unworthy, his dying for his enemies, *this and this alone* is the impulse and the spirit of a truly *Christian* love. This is its power. It is one thing to love, another thing altogether to love an enemy. It is one thing to remain silent under mistreatment – few manage even that – but it is another thing altogether to feed your enemy when he is hungry, to give him something to drink when he is thirsty, to serve him or her in other words; to treat his or her needs as your obligations. It is one thing, hard enough, not to call down evil upon our enemies; but to wish and to work for their good and their prosperity is another thing altogether. But this is the uniquely Christian way of life, that way of life that best reflects God's grace to us and Christ's sacrifice for us. It is this way of overcoming evil with good that is the uniquely Christian way of dealing with conflict, alienation, and hatred among human beings. It is only when we love our enemies in that selfless way that we can be sure that we love in the truly *Christian* way.

You have to know something about the 1st century to know how Paul's exhortations here must have sounded to people; how radical, strange and alien this must have seemed. Our world has been so profoundly shaped by the Christian faith it is hard for us to understand how utterly *unlike* anything they had ever heard like this paragraph would have been. The paganism of the Greco-roman world was profoundly selfish. The cardinal Christian virtues of love and humility did not appear in the classical catalogs of virtue. The very virtues that are the foundation of Paul's

understanding of true goodness did not appear in the pagan definition of true goodness, but it is these virtues especially that reflect the fundamental commitments of the Lord's own heart toward us his people. Jesus loved us and gave himself for us, the just for the unjust; he associated with the lowly – just what we are told to do here – he willingly abandoned himself for the sake of others who were not at all worthy of such a sacrifice.

Ambition, fame, the regard of others, it was for these things that the heroes of the classical world performed their exploits. They spoke warmly of friendship, but they readily admitted that it rested on a self-regarding basis. Friendship was thought to be possible only among persons of equal or similar rank in society. You made friends, in other words, with people like yourself. And when you love only people like yourself, you really just love yourself. The Roman did not aspire to love the stranger, the barbarian, or the enemy. Indeed, he thought it to his credit that he held such people in contempt. "We must offend those who offend us," said Aeschylus, the great Greek playwright. It would never have occurred to him to commend or to admire the love of enemies because he had no knowledge or experience of that love himself. But the Christians had. The best of the pagans had some sense of the virtue of clemency and forgiveness but there was nothing close to an ethic of the love of enemies as fundamental to true goodness. Caesar is famous in the first century B.C, at least among his colleagues and admirers, for his clemency to the enemy, though he was hardly always forgiving. But not to put too fine a point on it, Caesar murdered over 1 million people to advance his personal and political ambitions. He thought nothing of destroying people who posed not particular danger to him or to Rome for the sake of his own career. There were many writers of the time who openly admitted that the Roman world of Paul's day – and before it and after it – was a world bereft of a love of sufficient power to overcome the deeply engrained prejudices and self-regarding motivations of life.

Tertullian was not exaggerating when he famously wrote:

"That especially which love works among us, exposes us to many suspicions. 'Behold,' they say, 'how they love one another!' Yea, truly this must strike them; for *they* hate one another!' 'And how ready [the Christians] are to die for one another!' Yea, truly, for *they* are rather ready to kill one another. And even that we call each other 'brethren,' seems to them suspicious for no other reason, than that, among them, all expressions of kindred are only [pretense]." [*Apology*, xxxix]

The same is true today, of course, and as Christian influence wanes in the culture it is becoming more and more the case. The adversarial nature of public and private life is becoming its primary characteristic in the Western world. But we are less concerned to know how others may fail truly to love than to be reminded once again that it is our calling to love everyone, to love even our enemies because the love of enemies is the index, the true mark, of all true Christian love. That is how fundamental love is to the Christian life, how impossible it is to be truly good when we are not good in that very way in which God was good to us.

We all know, of course, how poorly we do this: love in this self-effacing and radical way. But it is also true, as Calvin finely put it [Cranfield, ii, 641]:

“Although there is hardly any one who has made such advance in the law of the Lord that he fulfils this precept, no one can boast that he is the child of God, or glory in the name of a Christian who has not partially undertaken this course, and does not struggle daily to resist the will to do the opposite.” [*Romans*, 274]

In other words, a true Christian *knows* that he ought to love his enemies, and a true Christian *wants* to love her enemies. But let us remember, you and I brothers and sisters, that our brethren have loved in this way throughout the ages, loved in ways that fulfill the calling Paul has set before us here. It is not impossible to do this by any means. You and I need their inspiration, to realize that this is not only what we *ought* to do, but what we *can* do, and have opportunity to do to the glory of God every day. Think of the pagan Lucian admitting in one of his works,

“It is incredible to see the ardor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator has put into their heads that they are all brethren.” [*De Morte Peregr.* 13]

It is our calling to make the pagans say such things again in our time and with regard to *our very own* daily lives. And not simply of our love for one another, but of our love *for them*. What glorious examples of this life of love, an enemy love, our spiritual forbears have left for us!

When in the third century the city of Carthage was besieged and plague raged through its population, the pagans threw their dead and sick into the streets for fear of being infected themselves. It was the Christians, inspired and encouraged by their pastors at worship, who buried the dead, cared for their sick, and saved the city from the fate it deserved. They were as susceptible to disease as the rest, but it was their calling to love even unto death and that is what they did.

As Tertullian, once again, described the situation in his day:

“You forget,” he says to his pagan readers, “that notwithstanding your persecution [of us], far from conspiring against you, as our numbers would perhaps furnish us with the means of doing, we pray for you and do good to you; that, if we give nothing to your gods, we do give [to] your poor, and that our charity spreads more [relief for the poor] in your streets than the offerings presented by your religion in your temples.”

Or spring forward two thousand years and think of Elizabeth Elliot or Steve Saint returning to work for the blessing, the present and the eternal blessing, of the people who had murdered her husband and his father.

But I have a better illustration of what life Paul means to call us to in the verses we have read this morning. I’m sure some of you have read Elias Chacour’s great book *Blood Brothers*. We American Christians are inclined to give virtually every benefit of the doubt to the Jews in Israel and to harbor suspicions about the Palestinians, even though we may know that they have been very unjustly and cruelly treated and even though we may know that many of them are Christians, indeed that there are many more Palestinian believers than there are Jewish Christians.

But, not to put too fine a point on it, Elias Chacour encountered the Jews coming to the new state of Israel, in the late 1940's and early 1950's, in many of the same ways the Jews had encountered the Germans after the rise of Adolph Hitler. He was a boy when they came to his poor village in Galilee where his family had lived for generations and where his father, devoted to peace among all men, owned and cared for a small orchard of fig trees. They were Melkite Christians, somewhere between Protestant, Orthodox and Roman Catholic. The Chacours were and are deeply devout Christians. They were friends with everyone: Christians, Muslims, and the Jews who had long lived nearby. They worshipped in a small church in the village which was in many ways the heart of their community. Then the Jews came, Jewish soldiers. They came ostensibly for just a few days and the Palestinian people of Biram extended hospitality to them, fed them, and put them up in their simple dwellings. But the soldiers didn't leave as promised. Then they drove the people of the village out to fend for themselves however they could. They were driven from their homes by armed men and told neither why nor what they were supposed to do to survive. For weeks they lived outdoors until they would find a place in another abandoned village nearby.

And then the Jews confiscated the land, including Mr. Chacour's fig orchard. In order to provide for his family Elias' father eventually went to work in the same fig orchard he had once owned for the Jewish man to whom it had been given without compensation to Mr. Chacour. He worked the land that had been stolen from him and had to get a work permit to be allowed on to his own property. The land, the village, the homes were simply stolen and the poor folk who lived and worked there as they had for generations were forgotten as they attempted to eke out a living somehow on the land that they loved. They were treated with contempt by the Jews, slandered as criminals and terrorists, though these simple people had never wanted anything but to live on as they had lived before. No longer the Galileans they had always been, they had, by the actions of others become Palestinians, non-persons, with no home or country, of no use or interest to anyone. Theirs was uncannily similar a fate to that of the Jews in 1930s Germany.

Eventually Elias' father appealed for redress and the return of his property to the Israeli Supreme Court and the court ruled in his favor. But the military ignored the ruling and the soldiers stayed. He appealed again and won again and this time the soldiers left, but in an act of pure spite they first destroyed the village – homes, church and all – before they left. The Chacours returned to their simple home to find it rubble, senselessly destroyed by men who had no use for it themselves.

In the face of the destruction of their home and village, their transformation from landowners to tenants, their being reduced to the state of non-persons, Elias' father replied to his children:

“Children, if someone hurts you, you can curse him. But this would be useless. Instead, you have to ask the Lord to bless the man who makes himself your enemy. And do you know what will happen? The Lord will bless you with inner peace – and perhaps your enemy will turn from his wickedness. If not, the Lord will deal with him.”

Elias grew up to be a Christian minister himself and gave himself to the ministry of reconciliation between peoples who were finding it easier and easier as the years passed to hate

one another. He began with his own congregation in a small Galilean village, a congregation that was embittered by all manner of petty hatreds, made all the worse by their declining circumstances. The town policeman was bitterly alienated from his own brothers. He had not even allowed his brothers into his home when their mother died in his house and the rest of the family had wanted to see her body before burial. The village was a community of enemies, people who hated one another and in some cases could not even remember why. Father Chacour through the first months of his ministry – this was in the 1960s – had preached to little effect. Few came to hear him. The Responsible, the man in the village who was in charge of the church building, absolutely hated him. So on Palm Sunday, one Sunday of the year when he could count on a full church he led the congregation through the service to its end. No one was paying much attention. But as everyone rose for the benediction Elias walked to the back of the church, shut the open doors, pulled a chain from his pocket, ran it through the door handles, and fastened it with a padlock. He walked back to the front of the church and began to speak:

“Sitting in this building does not make you a Christian. You are a people divided. You argue and hate each other – gossip and spread malicious lies. What do the Moslems and the unbelievers think when they see you? Surely that your religion is false. If you can’t love your brother that you see, how can you say you love God who is invisible? You have allowed the body of Christ to be disgraced.

“The congregation’s shock turned to anger. The Responsible trembled and seemed as though he was about to choke. [The policeman] tapped his foot angrily and turned red around the collar. In his eyes, though, I detected something besides anger.

“Plunging ahead my voice rose. “For many months, I’ve tried to unite you. I’ve failed, because I am only a man. But there is someone else who can bring you together in true unity. His name is Jesus Christ. He is the one who gives you power to forgive. So now I will be quiet and allow Him to give you that power. If you will not forgive, we will stay locked in here. You can kill each other and I’ll provide your funerals gratis.”

“Silence hung. Tight-lipped, fists clenched, everyone glared at me as if carved from stone. I waited. With agonizing slowness, the minutes passed. Three minutes...five...ten...I could hear, outside, a boy coaxing his donkey up the street and the slow *clop-clop* of his hooves. Still no one flinched. My breathing had become shallow and I swallowed hard. *Surely I’ve finished everything*, I chastised myself, *undone all these months of hard work with my* – then a sudden movement caught my eye.

“Someone was standing. Abu Mouhib [the policeman] rose and faced the congregation, his head bowed, remorse shining in his eyes. With his first words, I could scarcely believe that this was the same hard-bitten policeman who had treated me so brusquely. “I am sorry,” he faltered. All eyes were on him. “I am the worst one of all. I’ve hated my own brothers. Hated them so much that I wanted to kill them. More than any of you I need forgiveness.”

“And then he turned to me. ‘Can you forgive me, too, Abuna?’ I was amazed! *Abuna* means “our father” a term of affection and respect. I had been called other things since arriving in Ibillin, but nothing so warm. ‘Come here,’ I replied, motioning him to my side. He came, and we greeted

each other with the kiss of peace. ‘Of course I forgive you,’ I said. ‘Now go and greet your brothers.’

“Before he was halfway down the aisle, his three brothers had rushed to him. They held each other in a long embrace, each one asking forgiveness of the others. In an instant the church was a chaos of embracing and repentance. Cousins who had not spoken to one another in years wept together openly. Women asked forgiveness for malicious gossip. Men confessed to passing damaging lies about each other. ... This second church service – of love and reconciliation – went on for nearly a full hour. [176-179]

The village was transformed. But such love for such a reason could not be kept among friends alone, because Christ’s love had not been kept among friends alone. And so from that village the love of enemies began to spread as well and the necessity of Palestinian Christians loving Muslims and even more their Jewish persecutors became Elias Chacour’s challenge and that of his church and his people. He insists on Palestinians seeing the movie *The Diary of Anne Frank* so they will grow in their sympathy for the Jews. [This is by the way the Sunday of the year appointed for the remembrance of the holocaust.] He works to put the two peoples together as much as possible and is active in organizing events that display their willingness to love and to serve their Jewish neighbors, no matter the history of their persecution. Over the past generation this Christian minister from a small Galilean village has been one of the most powerful forces working toward Palestinian-Jewish reconciliation and all in the name of Jesus Christ, the King of love.

That is what Paul is talking about in setting before us such an extreme and demanding ethic. Nothing will make it possible, even comprehensible, *except for the love of Jesus Christ for us who were his enemies* and an ardent desire to honor that love, to adorn it before others, and to practice it in our own small way in gratitude to the Lord Jesus for his love for us. *This* is the love that ought to mark every Christian life in discernible ways and *this* is the love that alone can transform the life of the world.