



Moulding our Love

Romans 12:9-10

We've seen over the past few weeks in the evening that as a church God is moulding us if we let Him so that we live and move in God's will. But what does the transformed life look like? We saw that God had made us interdependent – dependent upon Him and upon one another if we are to grow and develop in our faith. So what should our relationships be like? It's kind of obvious – they should reflect the fact that God has made us interdependent on one another – so we should be building relationships of mutual trust and respect. It's probably better to let God's word speak rather than my way of putting it. I'd like to focus on two verses in Romans 12 which form the basis of our relationships: *9 Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. 10 Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters, and be eager to show respect for one another.*

9 Love must be completely sincere. We are to have a love that is honest, sincere and genuine. It seems a strange thing to say. Why shouldn't it be? Because it's easy to pollute God's view of love with the world's view. The word here is agape. It's the NT word for love. It describes God's love for us and what our love should be for one another and for others. It's a love that places the needs of others above ours. The problem is that it's easy to put a pale post-modern substitute in for it.

And what is that substitution? It's the notion that to love somebody you have to accommodate them at all costs. Now, there's nothing wrong with making love your goal in dealing with people. To the world love is caring for people (nothing wrong with that), putting their needs above your own (nothing wrong with that either), showing them honour and respect (nothing wrong there either) – the problem comes when we start to say we must never do things to offend people, we must never point out what they are doing is wrong. The main difference between a God of love and the world's view of love is that God never operates outside His own righteousness. So respect, yes; accommodate, yes; care, yes; embrace sin – no.

God is a God of love and He wants our love to be genuine – and if our love is genuine, then we always encourage and lead people in ways of righteousness. That's why the latter part of verse 9 says *Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good.* It's an obvious phrase which means what it means. We are allowed to hate as Christians. We hate what is evil. Interestingly, the sense is not hating people, but hating the type of deeds that they do. We always hold on to what is good.

It is an important notion when we come to make sure our love is genuine. If we really love someone it often means hard choices. It's one thing to respect, care, accommodate people; but when it comes to sin we can't accommodate that. We can't or shouldn't ignore it either. The most loving action is them to help to understand their sin, bring them to the Saviour and help them to walk free in Christ.

It's like the parent who shows their love by punishing their child when it does wrong. Why? Because it corrects them. We live in a world where we are encouraged to go soft on morals not to offend – to act in a "loving manner." But where do we draw the line? We have a God whose love and righteousness are both clear. Love without righteousness isn't love. Mark Copeland suggests that the sort of love we should have is one that can hate. What he means is that our love should mean that in our loving of people, we hate what is evil and cling to what is good. I think the old phrase "hate the sin, love the sinner is relevant" here. It's just that we need to make it work in sometimes difficult situations.

I once knew someone in her 60s who used to care for her very compositis but bullying mother in her 80s. My friend wanted to show her Christian love and care and honour her mother but always came home from her mother's in tears because her cleaning wasn't good enough or there was something wrong with the shopping she did, or there was something wrong with her husband or children – and the rest. Her mother was just plain rude to her. She just sat there and took it, trying to be a loving daughter. Was it loving and honouring as a daughter not to correct her mother? Mother should have known better.

There's another aspect to letting your love be genuine. That our love should be genuinely putting the needs of others before ourselves. It's easy to be hypocritical. We talk and sing a lot about love as Christians; but do our lives actually show it? The proof of our words is in our living of them. The real value of agape is always revealed when we do things with no self-interest in them. It is often difficult to separate self-interest from our dealings with others isn't it?

As we meditate perhaps on how we should deal with someone we love, but whose sin we know keeps them from having a full relationship with Christ, or someone who has walked away from God or from fellow believers, or someone who still doesn't know Jesus, then to help us deal with the issue of love and righteousness, Amy Carmichael, missionary to India gave us this little ditty

*"If I am afraid to speak the truth because I might lose
someone's love, or am concerned someone should say,
"You do not understand",
Or because I fear to lose my reputation for kindness;
If I put my own good name before the other's highest good,
then I know nothing of Calvary love.*

*If I am content to heal a hurt slightly, saying peace,
peace, where there is no peace;
If I forget the poignant words, "Let love be without
hypocrisy" and blunt the edge of truth,
speaking not right things but smooth things,
Then I know nothing of Calvary love.*

Verse 10 continues in this vein 10 Love one another warmly as Christian brothers and sisters, and be eager to show respect for one another. I like the NRSV take on this one: *10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.* A church is not just another worldly club where we have acquaintances, an interest in what the club is about and something which interests us. Paul doesn't use the word *agape* in this verse. He uses *philostorgos* which means to love someone as family. It's a new family where there should be love and care for one another. Today has been Father's Day and we have thought of what it means to be Father and family. The wonderful thing about our Father is that He's the perfect picture of parenthood. He wants His ideal love and care to be characteristic of being part of His family.

But we know from our own human families, it's easy to become dysfunctional. Yet God calls us to treat one another like family, properly functional family. Brother, sister are words that trip off the tongue when we come to talk about church, and that is our relationship in Christ. If God has made us His children, then we are all kin!

But just as families can become dysfunctional, so do churches. But that isn't what Father wants. So if we are showing true love towards one another in God's family then, rather trying to promote ourselves we promote one another. We're called to outdo one another in showing each other honour. That's agape!

But how different that is to what many churches are. The gossiping, the speaking behind one another's backs, the criticism, the self-promotion and self-importance of individuals. It's destroyed churches in the past and doubtless will do so in the future. We have built good relationships within our present fellowship. That's good but all of us know that in the past there has been dysfunction. You can't go through 200 years without some drama. Satan makes sure of that.

Yet our challenge is to ensure that we show one another love, genuine love, love that makes us honour others more than ourselves and builds us up. After all our Father has already shown us the perfect way. Mark Copeland puts it like this: A love that is affectionate and delights in showing honour, as God has done toward His children who obey Him! If we are in Christ, is this the kind of love we display?

As we come to communion this evening, let's remind ourselves afresh of the love God has shown us in Christ and remember that this should be the love we show one another. If we've failed in that, we have that opportunity to come before our God in repentance and commit ourselves again to Him and one another.