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THE COSTCO EFFECT

Romans 12:9-10

Laurie and I recently went to Costco because we thought we needed to renew our membership and we wanted to buy some peaches there. But you know how Costco is. Somehow we ended up with $150 worth of stuff without renewing our membership, which, it turned out, wasn’t yet due for renewal. Laurie read that Costco purposely designs their stores to get you to wander around and do the thing where you say, “Hey, we could use that. Let’s buy it.” That reminded me of an excursion to that store we had once in the past. Laurie and I both wear contact lenses, and Costco generally has good prices on contact lens solution. We were running out, so we decided to go to Costco to get some lens solution. We had that typical Costco outing where we ended up with a shopping cart full of stuff. It seemed like we encountered lots of stuff we needed. You probably know where this is going. It was only on the way home that it we realized we had forgotten to get lens solution. We got all kinds of things, but forgot the one thing we went there to buy.

I know, write it down on a list. Good idea. Except we didn’t think we needed a list because we weren’t going there to buy a whole list of things, we were just going to get one. Do you need a list to remember one thing? Apparently we do. Sadly, the same kind of thing can happen to us in life. Life offers us an array of options that is infinitely greater and more distracting that Costco even dreams of. And unfortunately we can experience the Costco effect in life. We can get caught up in pursuing all the interesting things that cross our paths, and somehow fail to do something that should be at the top of our list, the one thing we here to do. The verses we look at today will remind us of this one thing. If we forget to do this one thing we will have failed at life. Let’s look at Romans 12:9-10.

LOVE EACH OTHER GENUINELY

Romans has taught us that the message of grace from God through Jesus Christ is revolutionary. It gives us an identity, freedom, security, peace and hope. But what does it look like in practice? How does it affect the way we should live? These verses give us a crucial part of the answer to that question. “Love must be sincere.” Loving others is a big part of what we are to do. Next to serving God, this is the most important thing we can do. It is always the right thing to do.

As he explained what real righteousness is, Jesus said in Matthew 5:43-44, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Love is always the priority, even with those who hurt us, who are our enemies. In John 13:34-35, the last night before his execution, Jesus said to his followers, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” This command was new in that Jesus was telling his followers to love the way he loved them, which was at a level never known before. **Love like Jesus’ love is the distinguishing mark of a follower of Jesus.**

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 that whatever we do, it is all empty and meaningless if it is done without love. In Galatians 5:6 Paul wrote, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” In Galatians 5:14 Paul wrote, “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: love your neighbor as yourself.” Read Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy and note all the laws. There are a ton of them. They all boil down to one thing. Love. That’s it.

Here is your place in the world. Love other people. That’s one of the main reasons you are here. If you’re marriage, love your spouse. With your kids, love them. Love your parents. In your neighborhood, love your neighbors. In your social group and your church, love your friends. In your nation, love your countrymen, even those who oppose everything you believe in. God wants you to be the person who loves people, every single one of them, the way Jesus loves. The one thing you are to be known for is you love.

This should not be news to anyone who has been a believer in Jesus for more than a minute. In fact, everyone knows that believers in Jesus should be marked by love. A couple of weeks ago Laurie and I were at a buffet brunch following church. Waffles were among the options on the buffet, and Laurie loves waffles. Along with a number of other food choices she had a waffle on her plate. There was an area for toppings to put on waffles. Laurie decided to put a healthy serving of the whipped butter she saw there on her waffle along with plenty of syrup. She had an interesting reaction when she took her first bite of waffle. After a moment her face contorted into an expression of disgust. It was clear she was not happy with her waffle. She finally had to just spit it out. She explained, “That wasn’t butter. It was horseradish!” Yeah, syrup and horseradish definitely would not make my list of favorite toppings for a waffle. Expecting butter and getting horseradish is a real shock, and encountering a person who claims to be a follower of Jesus, but who isn’t characterized by love is just as shocking and as unpleasant.

Why is love so important? It is because God is love. Our highest calling is to make God known. We make him known not only by our words but by our lives. When we don’t love, we are saying that God does not love. But another reason love is so important is there is an unlimited amount of hurt, pain, brokenness and conflict among people in the world. The only thing that can heal all of that pain, all those broken relationships, is love.

Paul throws a wrinkle at us in verse 9 when he says, “Love must be sincere.” The grammar of Paul’s original wording in Greek is interesting. There is no verb in the first phrase. It literally says, “The love unhypocritical.” I think the smoothest translation might be “The genuine love.” What follows is a series of present tense participles. Paul intended them to be a series of staccato commands. It is like a rapid series of punches, one right after the other. I think the first phrase serves almost like a heading, the topic of the following verses. These verses are about genuine love, and they tell us what that love is like and what it does.

The first question this raises in my mind is why would Paul think he needed to qualify that love needs to be genuine. The obvious response would be that there is a lot of love floating around that is not genuine. In what ways might love be hypocritical or not genuine? Love isn’t genuine when a person claims to love, but that love is only words with no real substance behind them. Our family had a wonderful family event on the 4th of July this year. Michael and Carissa invited all of us to a barbecue at their house. It was kind of a coming out party for little Hunter, their newborn son. Nearly our whole extended family was there. There was a point when most of the adults were sitting around the large patio table talking. They were having a wonderful time. Little Wesley wasn’t interested in sitting at the table. He was off playing in another part of the yard, and he wanted Bapaw to join him. I tell Wesley I love him every time I see him. I was faced with a choice. I wanted to participate in the fun adult conversation going on around the table. Would I love Wesley, or would I love myself and do what I wanted to do? I chose to hang with Wesley. It wasn’t a big sacrifice because I delight in being with my grandkids. But there was a test of whether my claims to love my grandson were real, or just words.

Another way we can love hypocritically is when we have an ulterior motive. We “love” someone because we want to get something from them. There is the obvious cliché of the man who claims to love a woman because what he really wants is sex, but there are many more subtle ways this hypocritical love can show up. Laurie and I have had several friends who had some celebrity for a time because they were in the sports world. We observed that they had to deal with many people seeking to get close to them, wanting to be their friends. Generally people kind of flocked around them. But they knew that many, maybe most, of those people were there because of their fame. The people wanted something from them. They got some sort of share of importance, in their minds, by being a friend of the famous person.

There is one more way we can be hypocritical in our love, and it may be the most common. It is related to the previous one about ulterior motives. It is to regard love as a transaction. It is making a deal. I will love you and give you what you want, as long as You give me what I want. We all do this to some extent. Have you ever gotten to know some people and thought you really hit it off with them, thought you could have a great friendship, but eventually you noticed that all the effort was one-sided? You made lots of efforts to spend time with them, to communicate with them, but there was little coming back the other way. What happens? Likely at some point you gave up on that relationship. You want it to be a two way street. That’s not horrible and it is certainly understandable, but the truth is that you wanted a deal with them. You would get out of it at least something of what you put into it. The problem with this is you’re not loving people to care for them and give to them. You’re loving them to get something from them, which means you are actually using them for your own personal ends. That is hypocritical love.

DESPISE EVIL

As his first punch on how to love genuinely Paul says we must hate evil, and glue ourselves to what is good. This is often interpreted to mean that while we love people, we must not condone the evil they do. We must love the person, but hate the evil in them. Love the sinner, but hate the sin. We can make the case for why that is the right thing to do because evil is always destructive. The evil in them is hurting them, and if we love them we want good for them, not harm. So we hate the evil that is hurting them.

That sounds all right in theory, but the practice of that is really tricky. Generally if you identify some evil in a person and you hate that, all they’re going to sense is the hate. It is really hard to convince someone you love them if you hate something that is in them. But there’s something else that calls that understanding into question. What was Paul’s concern in these verses? It was love being genuine, not hypocritical. How are we going to know whether our love is hypocritical? It’s not by identifying evil in other people. It is by identifying evil in ourselves. I submit that Paul is telling us that we should hate the evil in ourselves and choose good in ourselves, not in other people.

Paul is calling on us to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves. Ray Stedman wrote that it is hard for us to see when we are unloving. “It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking we have love for people we actually neglect.” I would strengthen that statement and say it is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking we love people we actually are rejecting or opposing.

Being a pastor means I have had opportunities to mediate conflicts between people in my church. There was one that occurred not long before I was invited by my church at the time to minister somewhere else. There was a man who had a problem with a staff member. He accused him of being a liar, which was not true. This staff member was a person of honesty and integrity. I pointed out to the man that this staff member had not lied, but had said what he thought was the truth, and the real issue was they disagreed about what was true. I made no headway there because he somehow could not see what was actually fairly obvious. Finally, I said to him, “Part of the reason you are having such a tough time seeing this is that you are so angry at this man.” He said, “I’m not angry at him. I love him, because that’s what God tells me to do.” As he said this, veins were standing out in his neck and his knuckles were white. Somehow, he could not see the obvious. He convinced himself that he was loving the other man, but couldn’t see the obvious problem he had.

In their book, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)*, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson addressed our deeply entrenched human need to justify ourselves. They wrote, “Most of us find it difficult, if not impossible, to say, ‘I was wrong; I made a terrible mistake.” They went on to say, “Most people, when directly confronted with proof they are wrong, do not change their point of view…but justify it even more tenaciously.

One neuroscientist named Drew Westen did a study in which they used an MRI to monitor people’s brains while they were confronted with dissonant information about something they believed. They found that the reasoning areas of the brain virtually shut down when participants were confronted with the dissonant information. In other words, when we want to believe that we love people even though we actually do not, our brains shut down their reasoning circuits so we can maintain our belief and thus justify ourselves.

This is why Paul told us to despise what is evil and cling the good. He wants us to hate the evil in ourselves. We need to take a look at ourselves and be honest, to refuse to deceive ourselves and justify our tendency to disguise our self interest as love. There will be times when it is hard for us to love someone. Maybe their choices or their lifestyle will be abhorrent to us. Maybe they have done something that has hurt us. We don’t feel all warm and fuzzy toward them. That is time to hate what is evil and cling to what is good in us. The kind of love Paul calls us to is not a feeling. It is to love unconditionally. It is to seek the good of a person regardless of what they are like. It is to love like Jesus did when he was on the cross in inconceivable pain, nearing death. He didn’t look at the pompous, hypocritical phonies who were responsible for putting him there and think, “I have such warm affection for those people. I really feel blessed to have known them, and I love them so.” And yet he chose to love them. Even as he was dying he asked his Father to forgive them. We can choose to admit the evil in ourselves, hate it, and choose the good by seeking to do good to others in love, even though we may have the opposite of warm fuzzy feelings toward them.

BE DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER

The NIV translation of verse 10 is heavily interpreted. It doesn’t really say “be devoted.” There are two nouns used in this verse. The first is Philadelphia, which does not refer to the city in Pennsylvania. That’s good given that the denizens of that fine city once booed Santa Claus at a football game. The city of brotherly love is known for having particularly merciless fans. Maybe they need to hate the evil and cling to what is good. The Greek word literally meant brotherly love. The other noun meant affection that would exist in a family.

So Paul is telling believers we should have brotherly affection for each other. The New Living Translation puts it, “Love each other with genuine affection.” The English Standard Version translates it, “Love one another with brotherly affection.” In other words, Paul is telling us love that is without hypocrisy is the kind of affectionate love one would find in a family. It’s not just a hard fact, but seems to involve some feeling.

This presents me with a problem. People feel what they feel. It does no good to command someone to feel something. They either feel it or they don’t. Have you ever had someone tell you, “Don’t feel bad”? Does that help? Does it fix whatever you’re feeling bad about? When you are seriously stressed about something and someone says, “Don’t worry about it,” does that fix the problem? You feel what you feel, and you can’t command those feelings. Yet Paul here seems to command us to have affection for one another.

How are we to understand this? In part I think Paul did not want us to have cold blooded love for each other. Yeah, I really don’t like you and want nothing to do with you, but I’m choosing to seek your good even though you don’t deserve it and I despise you. He wanted more warmth in the relationship than that. But I also think he used these terms because he wanted us to see our relationships, especially with other believers, as being like the relationships in a family where affection is typically found. He’s pointing out that there’s something different about family relationships.

There are two people still on the planet now who have known me since the day I made my debut in this world at St. Luke’s hospital in Pasadena. One is my mother, the other is my brother. My big brother, Jerry, has been there every day of my life. In some ways he got a better deal than I did. He has always been bigger than me, stronger than me, a better athlete than me, more disciplined than me and had more hair. In his position as the bigger, older brother there were times when he did whatever he could do irritate me. I remember a time when he kept repeating every word I said, just to annoy me. It worked. There were times when he would make up a name for me that I didn’t like and call me that, just to get under my skin. For instance, one day, for no reason I could discern, he started calling me Beaker. He kept at it because he saw I didn’t like it. What really irked me is I would try the same things on him, and he didn’t care. It didn’t bother him, and that annoyed me even more.

So I was the classic case of the persecuted younger brother. But the thing is, I have always loved him. I always will. He’s my only brother and that makes him different than anyone else on the planet. I have brotherly affection for him, meaning I regard that relationship as different than any other relationship. I have known people who have siblings or even parents that have been terrible. Were they anyone else, that person would have nothing more to do with them. But somehow, because they are family, they always long for a better relationship. They still wish they could be close, because family is just different.

Paul is telling us to see our relationships with others in the body of Christ as being like that. There is a bond there that cannot be severed. He’s telling us that the basis of our concern for each other is not that we enjoy each other, that we get along well with each other. The bond is that we are actually related to each other in a very real way, we are bound to each other. There is to be that powerful desire for good relationships with each other that motivate us to do everything we can to have that, regardless of what others do.

A way we can do that is focus on honoring others. Paul literally tells us to lead in honoring other people. In other words, take the initiative to tell people how much you value them and appreciate them. Look for ways to point out something good about them. This helps us to have a positive attitude toward them, even affection, and will certainly enable them to have a positive attitude toward us.

APPLICATION

WHAT ARE SOME PRACTICAL WAYS WE CAN LOVE?

In October of 2011 Jessica Buchanan, a young American woman who was in Africa doing aid work, was taken hostage along with a Danish colleague, by Somalian pirates. Attempts were made to obtain a release for the two aid workers, including a large ransom offer, but to no avail. When all other possibilities were exhausted, early on January 25, 2012, a team of Navy Seals from Seal Team 6 parachuted into the area, landing 2 miles from the location of the hostages. They hiked to the pirate base, attacked and killed all the pirates and freed the 2 hostages. Jessica described what happened at the end of that raid. “At one point…this group of men who had risked their lives for me already, asked me to lie down on the ground, because they were concerned there might be more armed terrorists out there. They made a circle around me then they lay down around and on top of me to protect me. We lay like that until the helicopters came. To the Seals, it was another day’s work. It’s what they do, because it is who they have become.”

We will likely never do anything exactly like that. But we are asked in these verses to do something a little like it. We are to lay down our lives, our obsession and pre-occupation and devotion to self, to love others. We are called to put our lives on the line and love heroically. That might mean choosing to serve them at cost to ourselves. It might mean giving up our time to help them when they are in need. It might mean taking time to listen to them when they are troubled. It certainly will mean forgiving them when they have hurt us. It will mean giving them grace when they are flawed and failing.

In 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 Paul wrote the classic description of love. In think it interesting that he begins that with “Love is patient.” We can be patient with people when they seem to be taking forever to do whatever it is we’re waiting for them to do. He ends his description with, “It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, love never fails.” Love is patient. It trusts people, it hopes, it believes in them, and it keeps believing in them, persevering in patience with them no matter what they do.

I have a memory of a lesson about love that happened years ago when our kids were young. I’d had a long tiring day and so had Laurie. After dinner the kitchen presented a daunting challenge. There were some dishes from earlier in the day, but it also seemed like Laurie had used every pot and pan, and every dish we own in making dinner. The kitchen mess was kind of overwhelming. The kids had homework to do, but I figured Laurie and I could tackle the mess together and finish before the week was over. Laurie had to go to the restroom, but I dived in. I cleaned like a mad man. I kind of wanted to make enough headway before she came back so that she’d be encouraged at my progress and would be thankful. I worked, expecting at any moment she’d show up to pitch in and help. As time passed I started getting a little frustrated because she never came back. I knew she couldn’t be in the bathroom that long unless she was having a serious problem. I began to get annoyed that she apparently had decided to just leave me to clean up the mess all alone. She was probably upstairs watching TV or reading and relaxing. I should have known better than that. I did know better. I had learned from being married to her for years that Laurie is neither selfish nor lazy. But, hey, where was she? After what seemed like hours I finally finished with the kitchen. I wearily went upstairs ready to ask why she didn’t seem to think she ought to help. But when I found her, she wasn’t relaxing. The next day was Halloween. She had been working all day on costumes for our kids, and there she was, hard at work trying to finish those costumes. I realized how long and hard she had been working on those things, and I felt like both a jerk and a grade A idiot. I wished I had loved her by believing the best, because in the case of Laurie, the best usually doesn’t actually come close to describing how amazing she is.

A key way we can love others is by affirming and encouraging them. People are dying for encouragement. That’s part of why Paul mentioned honoring others. They long to hear affirmation. Our words have the possibility of giving life to them. They are more powerful than we usually imagine. In my younger days, like many boys I was an athletic wannabe. I wanted to be a terrific athlete, but I just wasn’t. I never was a star player, nor even a successful player. I got lots of messages that I just was not good enough. I did not get lots of affirmation. But I can remember 4 specific occasions when I did. Once was in junior high when Mr. Denton, the boys P.E. teacher singled me out as being the best pass receiver in the school, once was when a coach praised me as his best hitter when I was a junior in high school, then a similar incident when I was a senior in high school, and finally when a teammate on my college team praised me to other teammates. It has been a long, long time since those events. But I can remember them as clear as day. They were like water to a person dying of thirst.

John Gottman is a psychologist who has tremendous insight into what makes for a successful marriage. He says that successful marriages are characterized by a minimum of 5 positive interactions, 5 affirmations, for every negative interaction.

We can love people by giving them grace, forgiving them when they fail, letting them be themselves and still loving them.

WHAT CAN HELP US LOVE OTHERS?

Remember how important it is. I felt pretty stupid when we went to Costco to buy contact lens solution and then forgot to buy lens solution. That was a trivial thing, but what would not be trivial would be to go through life with one thing being important above all else, and fail to do that.

We know this is true. At the end of life, we’re not going to find that we regret that we didn’t more spend time at work. We aren’t going to regret that we didn’t have more money. We won’t regret that we didn’t do everything on our bucket list or visit all the places on our must see list. What we will regret is that we didn’t love people more. I recently read an article about a woman who cares for dying people. She has kept track of what they say they regret. She says the number one regret is not spending more time with loved ones, not being better at loving people. This is what matters. Keep in the forefront of your brain that if you fail at loving, you fail at living, but if you succeed at loving you will succeed at living.

Live in God’s love and grace. We cannot give people what we don’t have. When my son, Toby, was in high school playing baseball, he asked me to take him to a batting cage for some hitting practice one day. I gladly did that. I noticed that he was having trouble hitting pitches that were on the outside part of the plate. I told him to think about hitting that pitch away, but it didn’t help. So I suggested a change in his stance, one that I knew would make him step toward pitches like that. It worked like a charm. He started crushing those pitches. But some time later he asked me for some help with something else. He batted lefthanded, and he found that if there was a lefthanded pitcher he couldn’t hit the curve at all. Unfortunately, I couldn’t help him. That’s because I couldn’t hit a curve to save my life in my playing days. I watch the Padres and at times get frustrated when I see them swing at breaking balls that are way out of the strike zone. Then I remember a specific at bat I had against UC Riverside. I had two strikes and the pitcher threw me a nasty curve. I swung and missed, striking out. The thing is, that pitched bounced a good foot in front of home plate. I was totally fooled by it. Curves gave me fits. I understood the theory about how to do it. But so did Toby. I couldn’t help him because I could not give him what I did not have.

If we are not loved, filled with love, we’re not going to be able to love others genuinely. We will be hindered, even blocked, by our own personal need for love. All we’ll be able to do is make deals with them. We will love them if they love us, and we will insist the equation balance. But as we saw, that’s not love, that’s deal making so that we can get something for ourselves that we want. That’s using people. To love genuinely, we need to have our hearts full of love. We get that from God, who has infinite love, who loves us unconditionally in Christ. He wants us to know nothing will ever separate us from his love, that he will pour it into our hearts every day through Christ. We don’t have to earn it. We don’t have to deserve it, we don’t have to fear losing it, and this is crucial because we don’t deserve it. The truth about love is it is never deserved, it is just received freely. Our relationship with God is based 100% on grace and unconditional love, and as we live in the truth of that every day, it fills us. That enables us to give to others what we have received from God.

Express gratitude. One of the most important things we can do is continually thank God. Thank him for loving us. Thank him for his kindness and grace. Thank him for the people in our lives who love us. Gratitude is powerful in putting our minds and hearts in the right place so that we can love.