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WATCHING MY LITTLE PONY

Romans 12:9-11

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago Laurie and I were taking our son in law, Michael, to the airport. He had to fly to Atlanta to continue training to fly the Airbus 320 class of planes, the third aircraft for him in the 4 years he has worked for Delta. Michael was driving their car, and we were going to drive it home. Michael is a world class pilot. If you ever happen to have him as a pilot on a flight you should be thankful, because he is as good as it gets. He is also an excellent driver. As we were passing La Jolla on I-5 suddenly the woman driving the car in the lane to our right decided she wanted to be in our lane. Without even glancing she rather quickly jerked her car over into our lane. Michael seems to have almost a sixth sense. He said before the woman did anything he got a sense that she was going to try to move into our lane. It’s possible that just that split second premonition was enough because almost as she started moving, Michael jerked our car to the left to get away from her and hit the horn. Startled, she pulled back in her lane, and then, to our amazement, gave us the infamous one finger salute as though Michael had done something wrong. The woman’s stupidity and hubris were a thing to behold.

It occurred to me that there was a reminder for all of us in that incident. When we are driving we can do everything right, and still find ourselves in bad situations because we are depending on other people to do everything right as well. Grace Turner last month was driving down a busy 4 lane street in Oregon when another driver pulled across all the lanes of traffic right in front of her. Grace told us that the thought that popped into her mind as she hit the brakes was, “There shouldn’t be a car there. Why is there a car there?” The collision totaled their car and left her with a broken wrist. She had no control over the bad decision of that other driver, but that decision had a big effect on her nonetheless.

Sadly, not only might people do dumb things, they can be jerks about it in the process like that woman on the freeway. As we go through life, we all seek to do what we think is right, but there are people around us, and there is no telling what they’re going to do. People are essential to our ability to experience life to the fullest. They are a huge and necessary component to joy in life. However, they are also one of the biggest sources of stress, disappointment and frustration we will all experience. We can’t live with them and we can’t live without them. Sadly, people will disappoint us. They will frustrate us. Some of them will be extremely difficult. As much as we love people and need them, we are also going to take some wounds from them. And Jesus has commanded us to love them all!

How are we supposed to handle it when we interact with people generally, knowing they are going to try our patience, frustrate us, annoy us and let us down at times? Laurie and I have been watching the television show *The Chosen*, which is a terrific depiction of the life of Jesus. In the first episode of season 2 Jesus and his disciples are in Samaria. There was terrible animosity between the Samaritans and the Jews, so it was both surprising and unsettling for the disciples to go there with Jesus. In one scene Jesus is standing with James and John, both of whom have some serious prejudice against the Samaritans. A group of passing Samaritans angrily tell the 3 Jews they are not welcome there, that they should go away. Then one of them actually spits on James. He and John are instantly ready to fight. Jesus holds them back, but as the Samaritans were leaving the two brothers ask Jesus if he wants them to ask God to send fire from heaven to burn them all out. They are furious at the way they’d been insulted. Jesus tells them they are there to plant seeds for the kingdom of God, then says, “And you want to burn them all out with fire from heaven?” John says, “Well, it sounds worse when you say it that way.”

Their natural inclination, the natural human way of responding to unpleasant or difficult people, was not the way a follower of Jesus should react to the difficulties represented by other people. Let’s look at Romans 12:9-11 and see what Paul has to say about how we are to relate to people, especially when they are difficult.

Romans 12:9-11 says, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.”

EXPOSITION

LOVE SINCERELY

1. Paul the church to be unified. This is, according to Jesus, one of the most powerful evidences of the truth of the gospel because people generally are divided and at war. It takes a miracle for people to actually live in unity. In Jesus’ final prayer before he was arrested, he asked that his followers might be one as he and the Father are one. Paul said a key component to us living in harmony with each other is loving each other. But there are a lot of things we try to pass off as love. To have unity we need real love. Paul literally wrote that we must love each other without hypocrisy.
2. I usually think of hypocrisy in relation to religion. The cliché is to criticize all those hypocrites in the church. Yeah, the church is full of self-righteous people who judge others, when they are worse than the people they condemn. Perhaps there is some truth to that blanket generalization. If so, then the church seems like the perfect place for human beings, because we all do that. That includes the person who condemns those people in the church because they condemn some people. Anyway, I don’t typically think about hypocrisy as a problem having to do with love. What does it mean to love hypocritically?
3. There are few words in the English language as pejorative as hypocrite. There is no context in which being a hypocrite is a good thing. Call someone a hypocrite and you will be certain to get a negative reaction. No one says, “Yes, I’m a hypocrite and proud of it.”
4. Oddly the Greek word, *hupocrites*, did not have an invariably negative meaning. It was used of a person playing a role in a drama, one who would wear a mask on stage. The person pretended to be something or someone other than what he was. In short, he was an actor.
5. Technically all those people in Hollywood who are famous, and all those people who are waiting tables and parking cars there while hoping to finally get their big break in movies or television, are all hypocrites. They aspire to be actors, people pretending to be something other than who they actually are, which is the definition of a hypocrite.
6. The term eventually was used of a person in real life who does the same thing. This is a person who pretends to be something other than what he or she actually is. They put a mask on and act like something other than what they are.
7. Loving hypocritically, then, means to put on a mask and act like you love someone without actually loving the person. How might we do that? I can think of a couple of ways.
8. One way we might love hypocritically is to talk about loving, but to not actually love another person. We might say we love them, but when the chips are down, we don’t actually love.
9. The problem with love is it is always costly. There is no such thing as love without sacrifice. Way back in the 1960’s there was a movement that promulgated “free love.” It was a movement of hypocritical love, for it was actually a masquerade for selfishness. It was about just doing whatever feels good *for me*. Love is never free. Love, real love, always costs something, and it is usually very costly.
10. What is love? It is choosing to put another person before yourself. It is a commitment to seek that person’s good no matter what. It means seeking that individual’s good *above your own good*. By definition, love is inherently sacrificial. It means giving up yourself.
11. Last year Toby and Anna, our son and daughter in law, sold their house in San Clemente and moved back to this area. They wanted to save money by moving themselves, which meant they needed some help. Before they identified the date of the move I told them, “Hey, I love you guys, and I really want to help, but I’ve got a commitment that day and I won’t be able to participate in your move.” They said, “But we haven’t told you the date.” I said, “I know, but I’m busy that day.” I was kidding. I hate moving. But I do love them, so I said, “I’ll help, whatever you need.” It turned out to be the longest moving project I’ve ever been a part of. You can ask Michael, or Jerry, or Laurie because they all helped too. We all helped because saying, “I love you, but I’m not going to help you with that because moving is just too horrible,” is loving hypocritically.
12. The husband who tells his wife he loves her, but puts his job or his hobbies or anything else before actually caring for her, is loving hypocritically. The wife who will only love her husband by meeting his needs in ways that she feels like doing is loving hypocritically.
13. There is a second way we might love hypocritically. It is loving a person but with the focus of getting something for myself. In other words, having an ulterior motive. This is hypocritical because the person who does this appears to be caring for the other person, but the real goal is to get something for self. The point ultimately is not to give, but to get. That means that the actor, the supposed lover, is not truly loving the other person, but using them for some personal gain.
14. Many years ago Laurie and I were feeling like we would never be able to buy a home in this area. We didn’t have a big chunk of money for a down payment, and prices were, as usual, forbidding. We suspected, though we did not say anything to anyone, at some point we’d have to leave this area because we couldn’t afford to live here. At one point some friends told us they might have a solution for us. They wanted to help us because they loved us. They were part of a group of people who invested in real estate. They thought that their group might be willing to put up some money for the down payment and go in with us on buying a house. We’d be responsible for mortgage payments, but they would put enough down to make this possible. We were excited! This seemed like a great solution. We began looking for possible houses to buy. Then our friends presented details of the plan to us. It became obvious that the plan was structured so that their group would make a profit, but that the most likely outcome for us was that we would put a lot of money in as payments, but would come out with nothing. We had some other friends who were savvy business people look at it, and they said it was a bad deal for us. We would be better off continuing to rent. Our friends had a business, and as such they had a right to try to make a profit. What wasn’t kosher was trying to tell us they loved us and that they were trying to help us. They loved us in the sense that they had positive feelings toward us, and they genuinely wanted to see us be able to get a house. But the deal was all about them making a profit. The part about loving us and wanting to help us was hypocritical. They should have just left it in the arena of a possible business deal that would help their group make money.
15. If the goal is anything other than giving to the other person, seeking their good and nothing else, then there is an ulterior motive at work and the “love” is hypocritical. It is really about getting something for oneself.
16. This is why Paul went on to say, “abhor what is evil and cling to what is good.” He knew that there is some evil floating around inside every one of us. The fact is, our motives are never 100% pure. I have found that there are times when my motives are mostly pure, but I see something in there that isn’t and it bothers me. I don’t want it to be there, but it is there nonetheless. So Paul tells us to abhor, to reject, those tainted desires and motives, and choose to hold tight to the good.

DEVOTE YOURSELF

1. I puzzled over the words of verse 10 as I considered these verses. Verse 10 literally says, “With brotherly love toward one another having family affection.” How do you command people to have affection for one another? Isn’t that kind of a feeling thing, and either you have it or you don’t? You don’t choose affection for someone. You just have it for some people, and some you don’t.
2. I believe we get an indication of what Paul intended by those words from the second part of the verse, where he said, “Honor one another above yourselves.” How do we honor people above ourselves? This is another way of saying what Paul expressed in Philippians 2:3, “In humility, value others above yourselves.” Some translations put that, “consider others more important than yourselves.”
3. This is not about rating people and deciding who matters and who doesn’t, and deciding that I am lower than worm castings, of no importance whatsoever. This is not about beating myself up and thinking I am worthless. It is about choosing to consider what another person wants and needs to be more important than what I want and need. Isn’t that what love does? Doesn’t love commit to seek the good of another person instead of living for what I want?
4. So Paul said in both Philippians 2:3 and Romans 12:10 that we should love others in that sometimes difficult way. We should think it is more important that I meet the other person’s needs, that I seek what is good for the other person, than that I meet my needs and seek what I think will be good for me.
5. Loving someone will mean we willingly, even eagerly do some things we might not otherwise do. Our granddaughters were at our house some time back. They wanted to watch television. They wanted to watch the My Little Pony show. Ella has now learned how to wield a remote so she was able to get the show on TV. That’s where the test came. Ella then fervently requested that I watch the show with them. I know that you will be surprised to learn this, but My Little Pony is not in my library of must watch television. I’m sure it’s fine for pre-school girls, but for me, I would go to some lengths to not have to watch it. But my granddaughters wanted me to watch the show. I watched the show. I did something I would not naturally do, in fact I would avoid doing, because I loved them. Surprisingly, I really got into the show. Actually that didn’t happen. I endured it. I didn’t enjoy it. There has never been a moment when I wanted to watch the My Little Pony show. We may be tired and just wanting to watch something on television and finding nothing that is appealing to us. There has never been and I do not believe there ever will be a moment when I see My Little Pony as an option and say, “Oh, hey, let’s watch that.” But I watched it because I love Ella and Cara. I could say, “No, we’re not watching that dreck. We’re going to watch something that will improve your minds, like a baseball game.” But if I love them I choose to do what will serve them.
6. Paul wants us to make decisions of the will, to choose to care more about others than we do even about ourselves. That’s not an emotional, feeling thing. It is a deliberate choice we decide to make. I think that gives more the sense that he was driving at in the first part of the verse than to think he’s talking about feeling something for other people.
7. This idea is bolstered by noticing two key words Paul used in verse 10. One is kind of familiar to us. It is the Greek word *Philadelphia*, which means brotherly love. The other is *philastorgos*, which primarily meant family affection. So both of these words could be translated “love,” and both had a connection to family.
8. So let’s think about family for a moment. You don’t choose your family. Family is kind of a fact of life. You don’t choose parents, siblings or children. They are given to you. In some cases, you may not even have a lot of natural affinity for them. That happens sometimes. Yet they are still your family. They will be connected to you in ways and to an extent that other people never will be.
9. Laurie and I are exceedingly thankful for our many friends. But we have noticed that over the years, friends kind of come and go. We have some friends that we have known for 40 years, but we have many that we were close to for years, but who have now faded out of our lives. We don’t have broken relationships with them. Perhaps they have moved away, or just moved on to other things in their lives. We are still friends in a way, but we aren’t close to them and really have no relationship with them. In other words, friends come and go.
10. But I have one brother. He has been there my entire life. For the majority of our adult years he lived in a different city far away from me. But he never stopped being my brother. Not once in my many years of life has he not been my brother. Friends come and go, but family stays. At the end family will still be there, while friends may or may not be.
11. I know people who have families that are really a mess. I look at them and think, “Why would you want to have anything to do with those people? They’re self-absorbed, irrational and demanding. Every time you interact with them you end up hurt, frustrated and angry. Who needs that?” What surprises me is how so often those people keep trying with their family. Over and over they have these messy and painful interactions, but they keep trying to have a relationship with them. Why do they do that? Because they are their family. That is the only reason, but it is all the reason they need.
12. I believe that Paul was telling us that we need to regard our “brothers and sisters” in Christ in that same way. We need to be as connected to them as we are to family. What if a family member treats you in a way you don’t like, or is difficult? They are still family, and while you may find it difficult to love them, you still consider them family.
13. Paul was giving us a picture of how we are to deal with people, especially when they are difficult to get along with.
14. You may have heard that the Greek language had 4 different words for love, which was helpful, because we mean a lot of different things when we use that word. It can be confusing. Paul used 3 of the 4 Greek words for love in verses 9-10. The only one he didn’t use was *eros*, which would have been irrelevant in this context.
15. The first word he used for love in verse 9 was *agape*, which you have heard about before. The writers of the Bible elevated it to the highest and purest form of love. It is selfless love. It is the epitome of love, sacrificing self for the good of another person. It is the love Christ showed us by sacrificing himself to rescue us.
16. Paul was giving us another picture of that kind of love in verse 10. That is what he is calling us to. This is the way to deal with the people who bring stress into your life because they are so prickly, so self absorbed, so unkind. Love them with that unconditional love, treat them like they are family, people you don’t write off because you find them hard to deal with.
17. These verses challenge us to be a band of brothers. Historian Stephen Ambrose wrote of that kind of bond in his book, *Band of Brothers*, which recounts the history of Easy Company, 506th Parachute Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. They experienced some of the fiercest combat in the European theater. He summed up what he learned from those men. “They thought the Army was boring, unfeeling, and chicken, and they hated it. The found combat to be ugliness, destruction and death, and they hated it. Anything was better than the blood and carnage, the grime and filth, the impossible demands made on the body—anything, that is, except letting down their buddies. They found in combat the closest brotherhood they ever knew. They found selflessness. They found they could love the other guy in their foxhole more than themselves. They found that in war, men who loved life would give their lives for them.” Those men had many differences and disagreements. They did not have natural affinity for each other. Yet they formed a bond of selflessness and sacrifice for each other. That’s what God calls us to.
18. In his book, *From Guilt To Glory*, the late Ray Stedman wrote that we need to love and accept weak, fallible people. He said, “People come hear the great words of the New Testament about love and peace and joy and expect to find them exhibited, but instead they find all the world’s attitudes – rejection, prejudice, and even contempt. Christians cut them off and set them aside, not wanting to have anything to do with them because they don’t meet a certain standard of performance.”
19. Paul is challenging us to not be like the world, but to be like Christ. This is setting the bar awfully high. It is really hard to love people and to keep loving them when they seem to do everything they can to make it hard for you. It is so much easier just to walk away, to write them off. Or even better, to blow them away. But what if God had done that with us? We give him reasons continually, every day, to just write us off, or to blow us away. Yet he continues to love us and call us his children, his family. Paul told us in Ephesians 5:1 to be imitators of God. That’s what he’s calling us to do in these verses.
20. We aren’t going to be able to muscle up that kind of love by gritting our teeth and trying harder. People are just too hard to deal with for that. What we need is to be living continually in God’s grace. We need to be so filled with and overwhelmed by his grace for us, that it begins to fill our hearts. When it fills our hearts, when we are jarred by others, what will spill out onto them is God’s grace. In his book, *Connecting*, Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, “Nothing is stronger than grace. Satan doesn’t have any. God is defined by it.” Nothing is stronger than grace. The more of it we have in us, the more we will be able to do what Paul instructs. But that leads us to the last thing he tells us in these verses.

SERVE THE LORD

1. Verse 11 says, “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” In other words, be enthusiastic, eager, diligent, passionate about loving others. That’s kind of hard. Aren’t we going to get tired sometimes? Aren’t people sometimes like a black hole that sucks everything into them so that we end up totally drained?
2. Yes, that can happen. But the last part of that verse is crucial. It tells us to continually be serving the Lord. Serving our Lord proves to be an essential factor in being able to be devoted to people.
3. I find it pretty easy to serve my wife, Laurie. Part of the reason for that is that she is such a joy to be around. She fills our house with laughter and with life. When I was preparing this sermon one day we ate lunch together and she said something that really didn’t make a lot of sense. I just repeated back to her what she had said, and when she heard it, she started laughing. She got into one of those laughing fits where she could hardly breathe because she was laughing so hard, and she just kept on laughing. Do you know how much fun it is to be around someone who laughs like that?
4. One day we were going to go to the grocery store. Laurie wanted to travel light. She said, “I’m just going to bring this wallet because I don’t want to have to bring my whole, entire, freaking purse.” I said, “Okay, but don’t forget your whole, entire, freaking mask.” Once again she began laughing hysterically. I could easily think I might be the funniest person on the planet because Laurie laughs so much at some of the silly things I say and do. I love that about her.
5. But there’s a lot more than that. I see on a daily basis how she loves our kids, our grandkids, other people, and how deeply she loves me. Daily I see her doing everything she can to make me happy, to serve me, to love me. Recently she bought an article of clothing. She asked me what I thought of it. Fortunately she didn’t ask if I think it makes her look fat, because that’s a minefield of a question. It’s not so bad for me because nothing makes her look fat. But I knew she really liked this item she had purchased. I wasn’t crazy about it. I wanted to be honest so I said, “Well, it’s not my favorite, but I guess it’s okay.” She said, “I’m going to take it back then.” I said, “No, it’s fine. I know you like it. If you like it you should keep it.” She said, “No, I’m taking it back. I only want it if you really like it.” What drives her is what will make me happy. How could you not want to love and serve a person who is like that?
6. Our God has loved us, and continues to love us, in ways and to degrees that we will never, ever comprehend. He delights in us. He gives to us unstintingly. He never wavers in his devotion to us. He is a joy to be with because he loves to just listen to us as we pour our hearts out to him. That makes it easy to love him back, and to want to serve him as much as we can with all our heart.
7. Sometimes being devoted to people, loving them as Paul instructed in these verses, is not something we would naturally do. In fact, in many cases we might even want to avoid dealing with some people. But serving the Lord means we will do it, not so much for the person, as for the Lord. If we can think of loving another as a way of serving our God who loves us and showers us with grace, then we will find ourselves more able to carry out Paul’s instruction here.
8. A few months back a conversation about times we’ve had together as a family caused me to think back on some memorable holidays we have had. I have always loved our Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays when our family can all be together. We’ve had some riotously joyful times opening presents and having holiday dinners together. I recalled one Christmas when our kids were still single that our house was filled with our family and some of their friends. We had people sleeping in beds everywhere and several guys downstairs sleeping on the sofa or on cushions on the floor. They were there because they were our kids’ friends. One was a guy we had never met before. I can’t even remember his name, but I remember he was a curious guy who was very talkative. He wasn’t one of their best friends, really more of an acquaintance. Yet they wanted to care for him. So we included him. We cared for him. We didn’t do it because we had such love and affection for him. We did it because we loved our kids. Loving him was a way of loving them. And that is how we can love people whom we might not have natural affinity for. We love God through them. By loving them we express love to Him.
9. When you find yourself really annoyed by someone, completely out of patience with them, wanting to either write them off or blow them off, say to yourself, “I’m watching My Little Pony.” It is a way I can love this person. But even more, it is a way I can love Jesus. The Lord has asked you to watch My Little Pony, meaning to love this person. So watch the show, not because it is easy and fun and you enjoy it, but because you love the one who has asked you to watch it.