

**Romans**  
**The Heart of the Christian Life (Part 4)**  
**Romans 12:9-21**  
**May 03, 2020**  
*Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher*  
*Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas*

Well, I invite you to take your copy of God's Word and turn with me this morning back to Romans, chapter 12; Romans, chapter 12. Last week, we considered exactly how genuine love for God and for others demonstrates itself in our responses to our circumstances. But I think, if we're honest with ourselves, a far greater test of our love, of our genuine, without hypocrisy love, as Paul puts it, comes not from our circumstances, but rather from people. The greatest temptations, invariably, come from our interaction with others.

Today, as we come to the next part of Romans, chapter 12, Paul specifically addresses how we should respond to the people around us. Let's read the passage again, Romans, chapter 12, you follow along. Romans, chapter 12, beginning in verse 9:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Let's stop there for our reading this morning.

Now, as you look at this passage, this paragraph that begins in verse 9 and runs to the end of chapter 12, the beginning of verse 9, is really the heading for the rest of the chapter. This entire paragraph reminds us that, first and foremost, the greatest priority of a Christian is to love God and to love others. Biblical love, is what we're learning, is the heart of the Christian life; biblical love is the heart of the Christian life. It should be of your Christian life and experience as well.

Now, as this section unfolds, we looked first of all at the greatest priority of a Christian there at the beginning of verse 9. “Let love be without hypocrisy,” love and love genuinely from your heart. Then, in the rest of this chapter, Paul shows how our love for God and our love for one another should express itself; the practical expressions of love, beginning in the middle of verse 9 and running all the way the end of chapter 12.

Now, so far, we've seen how love demonstrates itself in three ways. We've seen that love demonstrates itself in our response to God's Word. That's the second half of verse 9. We abhor evil and we cling to what's good, based on what we learn from the Word of God. We've seen that our love expresses itself in our response with some key biblical attitudes in verses 10 and 11. Last time, we looked at verses 12 and 13 and saw that our love expresses itself in our response to difficult circumstances, both our own and the circumstances of others as well.

Now, today, we come to verses 14 to 16, and here we learn how our love for God and others should respond, or how it expresses itself in our response to people, our response to people. Look again at verses 14 to 16.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Now, in Greek as in English, as we can see it here, the form or the structure of the clauses in these verses is different from the verses we've examined so far. And that change in syntax, in structure, signals a new paragraph of thought, the introduction of a new sub theme. We're still talking about exhibiting genuine love, love for God and others, but in verses 14 to 16, it's no longer about our response to various circumstances that come into our lives and into the lives of others. Rather, in these verses, we learn how we are to respond to the people themselves, how we should respond to unbelievers, the expression about persecution is clearly a reference to unbelievers.

At the same time, there's a reference here that's clearly to how we respond to believers, “Be of the same mind toward one another,” that's talking about our response to other Christians. The

rest of the commands in these three verses are to all, that is, how we should express our love to all, how we should respond to all. And Paul identifies here five separate categories of people, five separate categories of people and he tells us then, having identified those categories, how we should respond to each group, to each one if we truly love God and if we truly love other.

First of all, notice he considers how we should respond to a category that is outside of the Christian community. We should manifest, number one, forgiving love to those who persecute, forgiving love to those who persecute. Look at verse 14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

Now, we have not had to think a lot about persecution in our country; so, let me first make sure we understand the meaning of persecution. What exactly are we talking about? The Greek word translated ‘persecute’ here means ‘to harass someone,’ especially because of their beliefs, ‘to harass someone especially because of their beliefs.’

Jesus talks about being persecuted for His sake, that's what we're talking about here. And that persecution, that harassing, can take numbers of different forms. For example, in Matthew 5, verse 11, Jesus says this, “Blessed are you when people insult you, (When they insult you; they question your intelligence for believing what you believe; they insult you because of your faith.) and persecute you, (That's probably a reference to physical persecution, which sadly, some believers in our world today are experiencing.) and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.” In Luke, chapter 6, verse 22, Jesus adds a couple of more expressions of persecution. He says, “Blessed are you when men hate you, (When they ostracize you, that is when they discourage or try to eliminate altogether other people's contact with you and interaction with you and when they) scorn your name as evil for... (My) sake.”

Now, that's not a complete and entire list of the forms persecution can take, but that's a pretty broad list of the forms it takes, and what I want you to notice is that most persecution is not physical violence. Rather, according to our Lord Himself, most persecution that comes against us for His namesake is exactly what He endured; attitudes about us, verbal attacks against us either in our presence or to others, and social distancing of the spiritual variety. As Kent

Hughes says, “Most persecution against believers is quite civilized.” The word Paul uses in Romans, chapter 12, includes all of those different forms of persecution. That's what it means to be persecuted.

I want you to consider the certainty of persecution because it's going to happen. 2 Timothy, chapter 3, verse 12 says, “...all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, if you're committed to obey Him, if you're committed to try to be like Him in all of the contexts in which you live, in your family and in your workplace and your school and wherever else you find yourself, all of the activities of life, if you try to be consistent in living out your faith for Jesus Christ, you will face persecution in one of those forms. You have if you're a follower of Jesus Christ. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says that all who belong to His spiritual kingdom will experience persecution. Again, it's rarely physical violence; the most common expressions are attitudinal and verbal, but it's certain.

Why does this happen? I want you to consider the reasons for persecution; why do people persecute Christians? Well, sadly, sometimes Christians bring it on themselves; they're persecuted for being hypocrites, for lacking integrity; they say one thing and they live a different way, having unattractive, sour personalities that simply aren't desirable to be around, being rude, insensitive, thoughtless, displaying a sort of false super piety. We've all been around people like that, being proud and judgmental or being lazy and irresponsible in our daily tasks. Sometimes, Christians are persecuted for using unwise, foolish, even offensive methods in order to try to tell other people about the faith they have embraced and the Lord they claim.

But usually, while all of those things, sadly, do happen, usually Christians are persecuted for the reasons that Jesus outlined in John 15, verses 18 to 21. I'm not going to take you there, but let me just give you the little list that He identifies there, and you can look at it as you have opportunity.

First of all, we are persecuted because we are identified with Jesus Christ and they hate Jesus Christ. He said, “If they hated Me, they're going to hate you.” We are persecuted because we're simply not one of them; we don't fit with them anymore. “We are not of the world,” as

Jesus puts it John 15. We just don't belong anymore, and people usually ostracize and even attack those who aren't part of their group; that's part of the fallen human condition.

He adds there in John 15, that we are often persecuted because simply they don't know God; they are enemies of God, they're rebels against God, they resent His Creatorship, they resent His ownership, they resent His Law written on their hearts, they rebel against Him in every conceivable way, and so we are identified with Him; and because they don't know Him, they hate us as well as Him. So, how do we respond, what is the response to persecution?

Well, that's exactly what Paul tells us here in Romans, chapter 12, verse 14. He says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." The word 'bless' means 'to ask for a bestowal of special favor,' especially calling down God's grace upon that person, "God bless them." You see, God alone is the one who possesses and dispenses every blessing; and so for us to ask for blessing to be on our enemies, for us to bless our persecutors, is really to say, "We are going to ask God to give them blessing, to show them favor."

That is an absolutely revolutionary idea; it was completely revolutionary in the first century among both the Jewish people and the Greeks. In fact, before Christ, nowhere in Greek literature is blessing a response to cursing and attacks. But, you and I are followers of Jesus Christ and as followers of Christ, we must not only refuse to retaliate, certainly we must do that; we must not only refuse to seek revenge, to verbally attack that person, to harbor anger and bitterness, although we must do all of those things; as followers of Jesus Christ, Paul says we have to go beyond that, we have to do something that's much harder, we have to seek their good.

Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, points out that to bless our persecutors is to do several things. First of all, it is to speak well of them. Secondly, it is to speak respectfully to them. Thirdly, it is to desire good for them in our hearts. And fourthly, if we desire good for them in our hearts, then we must offer that desire in prayer to God. "Bless those who persecute you!"

Notice, Paul goes on in verse 14, he says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” In other words, don't ask God to bring disaster or spiritual ruin to that person. Instead, ask God to bless them to do them good. This is exactly what our Lord taught; in fact, Paul is likely borrowing from what our Lord taught. Look at Matthew, chapter 5; Matthew, chapter 5, verse 44. In verse 43, he says, you know the rabbis have said, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR (That's what the Scripture teaches, but they added this.) and hate your enemy.” He says:

But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; (Think about how God acts toward His enemies.) ...He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Look at Luke, chapter 6; Luke, chapter 6, and verse 27, similar point our Lord makes here, Luke 6:27.

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

This is our responsibility. We're to maintain the right attitude toward these people. If we're going to do this, we have to think rightly about ourselves, about them, and about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

In fact, look at Titus, chapter 3. I think this is a key text to having the right attitude toward those who attack us, those who are our enemies, especially those who persecute us. Titus, chapter 3, and notice verse 1.

Remind (Believers, He says to Titus.) to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, (And watch this.) showing every consideration for all men. (Showing every courtesy is the idea for all men. Why?) For (because) we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. But (then) the kindness of God our Savior ...appeared, (in Christ and by His mercy) He saved us.

You see, we can only respond rightly to the hating and the hateful when we remember a couple of things. When we remember, first of all, verse 3, that we used to be enslaved to sin just like they are. We were hateful and hating; we may not have expressed it the same way, but it was in our hearts. We can have the right spirit toward others when we remember that we used to be just like them. And then we also need to remind ourselves that God showed us mercy, verses 4 and 5, or we would still be just like them in our own way. We have to remind ourselves of who we were and who we would be apart from divine grace, and that gives us the ability to show courtesy, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every courtesy for all men, even those who are hateful and hating one another.

Look at 1 Peter; 1Peter, chapter 2; 1 Peter 2, verse 21, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” Here's the example, He “COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT...IN HIS MOUTH.” Jesus committed no sin. What he’s saying here is, as a believer, you're going to face the evil response of others even when you don't deserve it, and here's how you respond just as He did, verse 23, “...and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.” Chapter 3, of 1 Peter, verse 9, don't return “...evil for evil or insult for insult, but (give) a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherent the blessing.”

So how exactly then, is it possible to have this forgiving spirit toward those who persecute us? How can we bless them? Well, it ultimately comes from that kind of a forgiving heart, the heart that Jesus manifested on the cross. The reason He could pray for God's blessing on those people is He had already exercised a forgiving heart toward them. Luke 23:34, “...Jesus was saying, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’” He already had a spirit of forgiveness toward them, and that enabled Him to pray for their good, to pray for God's blessing, forgive them.

You see the same pattern in Stephen is his stoning in Acts 7, verse 60, “...falling on his knees, (Stephen) cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’” So our ability to respond rightly to those who are persecuting us begins with a forgiving spirit in our hearts

toward them, and that's because we remember as Titus 3 says, we would be just like them, we were just like them and God showed us mercy, and that allows us to, in turn, pray that God would show them mercy.

Now, I want you to apply this for just a moment, and I understand that we don't usually think of ourselves as persecuted, but when you think about the attitude issue, and the words behind our back and to our face, about our faith, you understand we are, all of us are. I want you to think, for a moment, about those who have persecuted you for your faith. Maybe it's a family member; maybe it was a close friend who resented your coming to Christ; maybe it's a boss who passes you over for promotion because he or she resents what you stand for; maybe it's a coworker; maybe, if you're in school, it's a professor or teacher or even a fellow student; let me ask you, "Have you forgiven them, do you have a forgiving spirit toward them, and have you sought their good? Have you intentionally prayed for God to bless them, to fill their lives with good here that would lead them to repentance and then ultimately to bring them to faith in Jesus Christ?" That's how you can express your love for God and for them; a forgiving love even toward those who persecute.

Now, back in Romans, chapter 12, Paul, secondly, demands that we respond with empathizing love, with empathizing love, to those who rejoice or weep. Verse 15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." That one brief statement validates non-sinful human emotion, and it also validates appropriate emotional responses to all of life's circumstances. Scripture tells us that we will experience emotion, but it addresses how we should respond to our own emotion biblically. James, chapter 5, verse 13, says, "Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing (psalms)." Two opposite emotions, suffering and therefore sorrowful, we're to pray. If we're cheerful, if we're filled with joy, then we're to sing praises to God.

You see, ultimately our emotions should drive us to God, one way or the other. But emotions themselves, if they're not sinful emotions, are legitimate, a legitimate part of our humanness and how we are created. In fact, the Psalms are filled with the record of godly men responding biblically to their emotions.

Here, in Romans, chapter 12, Paul tells us that we must also respond biblically to the emotions of others. Obviously, he's not saying that we should do this if those emotions are sinful. There are sinful joys because they were able to accomplish some sinful pursuit or desire, or if their sorrowing when they shouldn't be biblically. But he goes on to say it this way, verse 15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice."

John Chrysostom, one of the earliest expositors of the church, points out that it's possible that Paul begins here with rejoicing with those who rejoice because it is much harder than weeping with those who weep. It's easy for us, just as human beings, to empathize with another's sorrow, but it's much more difficult to celebrate their success. True love, however, Paul tells us here, will respond to the joy of others, not with envy, not with bitterness, "I wanted that, I wish I had that; I resent the fact that they do," but rather with genuine joy.

He goes on in verse 15 to say, "...and (to) weep with those who weep." In the same way, true love will also genuinely care for the one who is hurting so that we hurt with them. It's like the psalmist, in Psalm 35, verses 13 and 14, it says:

When (my enemies) were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting, And my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother; I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother.

Clearly, the psalmist would've done that, as he said, for those who were part of his family, for those who were close to him, but he even did so for his enemies. And, I think that's what Paul is saying here. He's saying, regardless of who this is, be they fellow Christians, be they members of your family, or be they enemies or outside of the Christian faith, even those who persecute you, respond to the emotions of others with sincere concern. As one author puts it, "Love never stands aloof from other people's joys or pains. Love identifies with them, sings with them, and suffers with them. Love enters deeply into their experiences and their emotions; their laughter and their tears, and feel solidarity with them whatever their mood."

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who (are weeping).” Why is that? Why is it that Christians respond like this? Well, when it comes to believers, we respond like this because we’re all members of the same body. I love the way Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “...if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.” He’s, of course, using the analogy of the human body and referring to the Body of Christ. If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. Hurt your thumb, and it's like your entire body is suffering with it. The same thing is true as we are part of the Body of Christ.

And then he adds, “If one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.” That's true for your human body; it's also true for the Body of Christ. So, we rejoice and weep with those who are rejoicing and weeping because we’re members of the same body. We also do because we’ve been changed; we’ve been changed by regeneration so that we’re no longer hateful and hating one another, as we saw in Titus 3, but now we have a heart of compassion. Colossians, chapter 3, verse 12, “...as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion,” genuine concern for others.

We’re followers of Christ, and, therefore, we are imitators of Him. And, Jesus rejoiced with those who rejoiced. You see it again and again in the Gospels, “And He also wept with those who wept,” those who had a cause for weeping...with unbelievers, in Luke, chapter 19, as He wept over the city of Jerusalem, and with believers in John 11, as he wept at the gravesite of Lazarus. We also respond with joy and with tears to the rejoicing and the sorrows of others because we are our Father's children, and therefore imitators of Him. When we rejoice with those who rejoice, we are imitating our Father.

Psalm 35:27, “...let them say continually, ‘The LORD...delights in the prosperity of His servant.’” When we weep with those who weep, again, we are doing what God Himself does. Isaiah 63:9, “In all their affliction He was afflicted, And the angel of His presence saved them; In His love and...mercy he redeemed them, And He lifted them and carried them all the days of old.” This is what it means to be a Christian; it's to have this love that enters into the joys and the sorrows of others.

In his classic commentary, Charles Hodge puts it this way; he says, “Love produces a general sympathy in the joys and sorrows of our fellow men, with all of our fellow men, and especially of our fellow Christians.” And he goes on to talk about that. He says, “The disposition here enjoined is the very opposite of a selfish indifference to any interest but our own.” There’s the opposite of what Paul is encouraging, a selfish indifference to any interest but our own. He goes on to say, “The gospel requires that we should feel and act under the impression that all men are brethren, that we have a common nature, a common Father, and a common destiny. How much like Christ is the man who feels the sorrows and joys of others as though they were his own.”

Now, I want you again to think about this with me as I've had to apply this truth to my own life this week. Let me ask you this, think about the people in your life; do you truly celebrate their joys and successes with your own genuine joy? Or, is there, within your heart, some measure of envy, some measure of bitterness that it wasn't yours? And, do you truly, from the heart, weep with their sorrows? If we love God and if we love people, we're not going to be cold, callous, calculating, disconnected, from the experiences of others; instead, we're going to respond to their joy or their sorrow with empathizing love.

Thirdly, Paul explains how we are to respond with unifying love to those who are our fellow Christians, unifying love to those who are our fellow Christians. Look at verse 16. He says, “Be of the same mind toward one another.” Literally, think the same toward one another. It means ‘to have the same way of thinking about each other and about other things.’ We’re not talking about uniformity; we’re not saying that we all have to be in lockstep, we have to be eye to eye on everything, have the same opinions about everything. We can’t all agree with each other like that. I don’t always agree with myself. The best way to translate this phrase is, “Set your minds on the same thing.” That is, have the same mindset. In other places, it's translated, “be like-minded.”

Look at Romans, chapter 15; Romans, chapter 15, verse 5:

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So, we are of the same mind, not on every absolute opinion in detail, but on those things that are essential, those things that matter. In 2 Corinthians, chapter 13, verse 11, it says, "...be like-minded." In 1 Peter, chapter 3, verse 8, he says, "...be harmonious."

But I think the passage that unlocks our understanding of this command is really Philippians, chapter 2. Turn there with me, Philippians, chapter 2, and verse 1. Notice what Paul writes, "Therefore if there be any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if (there's) any affection and compassion," and he's saying all of those things exist, all those things are true. If those things are true, verse 2, "make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."

Now, in Greek, the structure makes it clear that the main concern Paul has here is not his own joy, but rather that we as believers would be of the same mind. And then the three phrases in verse 2, that follow that, actually define what it means to be of the same mind. They fill out our understanding of what being of the same mind actually is. Notice the next phrase there in verse 2, "...maintaining the same love." That's what it means to be of the same mind, to be one-minded, to love the other person as you love yourself. The commitment to love one another is the soil in which unity grows.

And then he goes on to explain what this means. He says in verse 2, "united in spirit." Just one Greek word, the only place it's used in the New Testament is right here. It literally means, 'together in soul,' together in soul; 'to think and to act as one person, to live in selfless harmony' with other believers. What does that look like? Well, the closest thing that I can get to illustrating what it means to be one-minded is comparing it to a healthy marriage. It's what Sheila and I enjoy. We feel the same way about things, we think similarly about many, even most issues, we often finish each other's sentences, we even act a bit alike, we are together in soul, we're soulmates. That's what we're to be with other Christians. If we're mature Christians, we're together, united in spirit; we won't allow unimportant differences to divide us.

And, then the third explanation he gives here what it means to be of the same mind, there in Philippians 2:2, is, “We are intent on one purpose.” That is, we’re directed toward a single goal, Christ and the gospel according to Philippians, chapter 1, verse 27.

So, the essence of our unity then, is having the same mindset and what that means is that we are committed to love one another, we remember that we are united to one another, we’re one soul, and we pursue the same cause, Jesus Christ and His gospel. So, let me ask you, very practically, do you actively seek to be one-minded in that way with your fellow believers? Does it matter to you? Or, are your relationships with fellow believers marked by conflict and discord? It demonstrates your love for Christ and your love for others when you are noted by, marked by, unifying love with your fellow believers.

Back to our text in Romans, chapter 12, a fourth response that we must have is accepting love to those of differing social status, accepting love to those of differing social status. Look at Romans 12, the second half of verse 16, “...do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.” Now, let me just be honest with you, there is some difficulty in translating this expression; but the most natural way and the way the predominant number of translators and scholars take it, is the way it’s translated here in the New American Standard. “To be haughty,” it says, “Don’t be haughty in mind.” This word ‘haughty’ means ‘to cherish proud thoughts. to feel proud.’ This word is used back in chapter 11, verse 20, of the attitude the Jews had toward the Gentiles. It’s used in 1 Timothy 6:17, of the attitude that the rich can be tempted to have toward the poor.

Now, here in verse 16, the phrase that immediately follows this expression talks about hanging around those of low social status. So when you put all of that together, when he says, “Don’t be haughty in mind,” he means, ‘don’t be proud in those you choose to connect with, don’t always be trying to get connected to, or to stay connected to,’ those who are in a higher social position than others. In other words, don’t just associate with and hang around with the rich, the powerful, the influential, or the cool. Instead, verse 16 says, “...associate with the lowly.”

The word 'but' there is a strong adversative in the Greek. They have several words for 'but' in Greek and this one means, 'on the other hand, instead of that, do this,' associate with the lowly. The word 'associate' is an interesting word, a very picturesque word. It literally means, 'to be led by, or carried away with.' It's even translated that way a couple times in the New Testament, 'to be carried away by or with something.' We are to let the lowly carry us away with them. In other words, we're to join their company, we are to associate with them, to accept them freely and gladly.

So, who are the lowly? Well, this word is used of several different strata; it's used of those who were outcasts at the very bottom of society. It's used of those who maybe weren't outcasts, but they were at the lowest of the low in terms of acceptability, a low social status. It's used of those who are just insignificant, who are unknown, never made a mark in the world. It's used often of those who are simply ordinary, normal human beings. We are to be carried away with, to associate with, those who are outcasts, those who are of low social status, those who are rated by the world as insignificant, unknowns, nobodies, as well as those who are just normal, ordinary folk. This is the pattern of believers; it's the pattern even of Old Testament believers.

The Psalmist in Psalm 119, verse 63, says, "I am a companion of all those who fear You." There are no other discriminating factors; "I am a companion of all those who fear You, And of those who keep Your precepts."

It's interesting when you come to the ministry of Christ; He described Himself this way in Matthew, chapter 11, verse 29, He says, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and (same word, lowly)." I am humble, lowly in heart, and because that's who Jesus was, He was perfectly comfortable associating with them; He was comfortable associating with the rich and the powerful, and did at times, but He was equally comfortable associating with the lowly and the unknown.

Matthew, chapter 9, verse 10, says, "...that as Jesus was reclining at the table in the house, (of Matthew, His new disciple) behold, many tax collectors and sinners (The word 'sinners' is a

Greek word which means, ‘irreligious, un-practicing Jews.’) came and were dining with Jesus and His disciples.” And of course, He was attacked for it by the Pharisees.

Matthew 11, verse 19, they called Jesus “...a friend of tax collectors and sinners,” that is of irreligious Jews; you're just a friend of the worst of the worst. The same spirit, where those class distinctions, those social differences, didn't make a difference in the interaction of people marked the early church. Turn back to Acts; Acts, chapter 2, verse 44; Acts 2:44:

And all those who had believed (Remember now, we're talking about more than 3,000 who were part of the church in Jerusalem, all of those who had believed.) were together and (they) had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple...breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

This is not teaching communism; everyone still had their own possessions. In fact, Peter makes that point in chapter 5, in the early verses there, “Before it was sold, was it not your own?” So, this isn't communism; instead, if you take that perspective, you've missed the whole point. The point is, in the early church, there were really wealthy people who had lots of resources and there were poor people who were desperately in need and guess what? That didn't matter; they hung out together, they were “continuing with one mind in the temple...breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” Whatever social differences there may have been, they were erased in the new church, the body of Christ.

Look at Galatians, chapter 3. Paul really makes the same point here in a different way.

Galatians, chapter 3, verse 26, he says:

For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were e  
(immersed) into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

You're all connected to Christ and, therefore, you're all spiritually equal. Verse 28; verse 28, by the way, is not saying there aren't any distinctions, that they don't exist, obviously there are still

males and there're still females. But, he says, in the church, those distinctions don't affect how we treat each other or how God treats us.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, (Ethnic distinctions don't matter.) there is neither slave nor free man, (In the church, it doesn't matter if you're a slave or you're not; we're all worshipping alike.) there is neither male nor female; (Those distinctions don't affect; they exist, but they shouldn't affect our fellowship and our relationship with other believers.) for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Those distinctions don't affect our spiritual equality, and Paul is saying they shouldn't affect our fellowship and with whom we have relationship.

So, let me ask you again on a very practical note, “Are you always seeking the company of those who are at the high-end of acceptability, you always looking to hang out with the best, the smartest, the coolest, the best dressed, the wealthiest? Or, like Christ, are you equally comfortable with embracing and accepting those of differing social status?”

By the way, let me just say, this applies the other way as well; it's equally wrong if you are simply an ordinary salt of the earth man or woman and proud of it, it is equally wrong for you to refuse to associate with those to whom the Lord has given business and financial success. That is just as much prejudice as the other way. Jesus hung out with both.

Lloyd-Jones puts it this way, “When you meet people, your only interest should be this, are they children of God, are they heirs of eternity, are they spiritually-minded? They are the people to talk to, they are the people with whom you want to mix.” Is that the only question you ask? Are they children of God? Or are there a lot of other factors that go into whom you hang out with, whom you associate with? If we love God and others, then we will have an accepting love even for those in a different social status.

A fifth response if we love God and others will be this, self-effacing love to those who disagree on issues not clear in Scripture, self-effacing love to those who disagree on issues that the Scripture doesn't clearly address. Look at verse 16, it ends this way, “Do not be wise in your own estimation.” Literally, “Don't be wise with yourselves.” That means, in your own eyes, or

as it's translated here, "in your own estimation." It's interesting, look at Romans, chapter 11, verse 25; the same expression is used, 11:25, "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery (And he's talking about the future for Israel.) so that you will not be wise in your own estimation."

I think that's fascinating because it's so true, isn't it, that it's often the uninformed who think their informed who are wise in their own eyes? We shouldn't be. Proverbs, chapter 3, verse 7, says, "Do not be wise in your own eyes." Proverbs 26:12, "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him." Wow! So, how do you know? How can you and I know if we are wise in our own estimation? Well, I've thought about that this week, and let me just give you a little test as I've had to give it to myself. You are wise in your own eyes, in your own estimation, if you often find yourself thinking you're right and everyone else is wrong, if you don't seek or listen to counsel, if you're opinionated and dogmatic on issues that are not clear in Scripture, if you're opinionated and definitive on issues that you don't have all the data necessary to form that conclusion.

Now, let me just say, and I want to say this graciously lovingly, we are all tempted to do this, but with Christians, this happens all the time, especially on the Internet in certain categories. Christians are especially tempted to pontificate on the Internet like they were the voice of knowledge when it comes to political issues. The Internet's filled with Christians who are the experts on what's going on right now in our country. It's filled with Christians pontificating about current news stories, or medical issues is another big one. It's kind of sad when you think about it; they should be in their homes behind their computers, they read their news from slanted news sources, they read only the blogs they agree with, and then they conclude they're experts, and they post their views as if there sure of it is the gospel itself.

Listen, folks, it's okay to have opinions, we all do. But it's not okay to be proud and convinced you're right and that all who disagree with you are stupid. Have a humble love, have a self-effacing love for those with whom you disagree on issues that are not clear in Scripture. How do you do that? Well, acknowledge that you could be wrong, acknowledge that you don't always have all the facts, acknowledge that there may actually be some merit in the opposing

view, acknowledge that you can learn from others even those who disagree with you. Paul is saying, “Listen, if you love others, you won't consistently think yourself wiser and smarter when you disagree.”

Paul says in this amazing passage, if we have genuine love for God and for others, we will respond with forgiving love to those who persecute, empathizing love to those who rejoice or weep, unifying love to those who are fellow Christians, accepting love to those who are of differing social status, and self-effacing love to those who disagree on issues not clear in Scripture. There's a lot there to digest, a lot there to repent of, and a lot of a path to pursue to be like our God, to be like our Lord.

Let's pray together. Father, thank you for these wonderful truths. We confess to you that we are so sinful in these categories. Lord, this is contrary to our flesh, contrary to the remnants of our fallenness that still are a part of us. And yet, there is within our redeemed hearts, a longing to be this, to do this, to respond in these ways. Lord, help us to have repentant hearts and give us the resolve to pursue these things even as we have been instructed.

Lord, don't let us have looked in the mirror of your Word today and then walk away and forget what kind of person we are, not making any changes, any adjustments. But, Father, help us instead to be those who see ourselves in the mirror of your Word and do something with it, do something about it, for the glory of Christ, whose image we are supposed to wear. We pray this in Jesus's name, Amen.