

Defining Love

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Preacher: Cory Brock

[0 : 00] Let's now get to Romans 9. Four weeks we're going to have in August to look together at the section we just read. Four whole weeks to slow down and really think about it.

And that's good because this is a very important section, this back half of Romans 12. It's all about love. And that makes it very important. So we're going to spend four weeks looking at defining love, love of our city, love of the church, and love for the ministry that we've been given.

So each week we're going to look at one of those things. So this Sunday we think about defining love. And the reason for that is in verse 9, when Paul says, let your love be genuine, he is assuming that you have an idea of what love is.

So in order for him to give that command, let your love be genuine, you have to say, I know what love is. And so this morning we get to say in the words of foreigner, I want to know what love is.

I want you to show me. And that's exactly what we get to say to Paul and to God here through his word. And he's going to do that. He's going to teach us three things, three lessons.

[1 : 09] First, the primacy of love. And then secondly, the nature of love. And then finally, how to get it, how to get love in your life. So let's look at that. The primacy of love, the nature of love, and then how to get it.

So first, the primacy of love. Very brief on this point. He's saying to us, we're only looking at verse nine today. That's all. He's saying to us in verse nine, that love is primary.

That love is so central that love really is the secret of the meaning of the universe. And the way that you can see that, even though it's not explicit, is that if you just glance back at what Derek's been teaching on the last few Sundays in verses three to eight, he's been talking in verses three to eight about gifts.

He said in verses three to eight, every single person who comes to faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit, gives a gift for ministry. And so he's been talking about giftedness, that we're not all the same in the way we've been gifted.

And then immediately turns in verse nine and says, now love. Let your love be genuine. Now, if you're a Bible reader, and if you've read much of Paul, you might remember that this is exactly the same thing Paul does in that very famous passage, First Corinthians 13, the great wedding passage that always gets read.

[2 : 29] In First Corinthians 12, he does a whole series about gifts, about the different types of gifts that you can have in ministry. And then all of a sudden, First Corinthians 13 verse one, he says, look, you can have the ability to speak in the extraordinary gift of tongues.

But if you don't have love in your heart, that is nothing but noise. And he said, you can have the gift of prophecy. And if you don't have love, you are nothing.

That's what Paul says. Now, this is what he says. You can have the gift of mercy all the way to the point, First Corinthians 13, of giving away everything you have. And he says, even giving away your body to death, being a martyr.

And he says, but if you don't have love, that is nothing. Whoa. He says, you can be a martyr for the gospel. And if you don't have love, it's wasted.

It's nothing. That's what he says in First Corinthians 13. We'll come back to that in just a minute. But you see the point, First Corinthians 12 to 13, gifts, love. Romans 12, three to eight, gifts, nine to 21, love.

[3 : 36] It's the same sequence. He does it one other time in First Corinthians. And the point is that love is the gatekeeper to the gifts. Love is like the gatekeeper.

And it doesn't let the gifts pass through and be used truly unless you really have love in your heart. And that means that love, love is the soil in which giftedness can grow and truly be used for the sake of ministry.

And so you can be gifted. You can be gifted for work. You can be gifted for parenting. Of course, he's talking here about being gifted for ministry, gifted for anything.

And without love, these gifts are not being used correctly. They're being wasted, actually. And so you see the primacy of love. He's saying, love is everything. We've got to have it. All we need is love.

All we need is love. Love is all we need, right? Right, but sort of. We have to then go to the next point, which is to say that Paul is saying, love is all we need, but we have to think more carefully here about the nature of love.

[4 : 42] So there's a primacy to love, but then we've got to get it right by thinking about the nature of love. And that's really the heartbeat of what Paul's first doing in verse nine. So Paul teaches us here, love is primary.

All we need is love. Love is the Christian life. It's the sum of the Christian life. Love is the meaning of everything. But, but you know, as a modern person living in 2023, that we do not all mean the same thing by the word love in the modern Western world.

That love gets defined in lots of different ways. And so you can't really talk about love without being really clear about the definition of love. And that's what Paul first gives us here. Paul says, love is the ticket, but in verse nine, he's assuming that you have an answer to the nature of love, what love is.

And so he both assumes the definition of love in verse nine, but he also gives it to us as well implicitly. So let me show you that. And you can see that by looking just at four quick ways to understand love.

Paul gives us four quick ways, I think, to understand love here in verse nine. And the first thing he does is he says, when he says, let your love be genuine.

[5 : 57] The very first thing he teaches us about the nature of love is that you aren't loving. We aren't loving. I'm not loving. We humans are not loving. And here in Romans 12, he's talking about Christians.

And ah, he's saying something to us. He says, fundamentally, we Christians are not truly lovers. Not in the way that we're meant to be. And here's how you can see that.

Because when he says in verse nine, let your love be genuine, it comes across as a positive command, but in the Greek text, just underneath this English text, it's actually a negative command.

So he uses this very important word. He says, let your love be anu pocretes. And you can hear probably what that word is by switching just one letter, because what it says is anu pocretes.

So you hear that? He says, let your love be non-hypocritical or without hypocrisy. That's literally the word that's being translated here, genuine. So the ESV has flipped it into a positive command, but actually it's a negative command.

[7 : 04] And he's saying, do not love hypocritically. That's what he actually says here. And so the very first thing he says to us is let your love be without hypocrisy.

And there's a reason for that. There's a reason he has to start the sequence on love by first saying, do not let your love be hypocritical. And that's because our love is hypocritical.

You know, the very first thing he tells us is that we're not loving in the way that we were made to be. Even Christians, we don't have true love deep in our depths in the ways that God has intended for us.

And the reason he uses the word hypocrite, the word hypocrite is a famous word in our modern English, but it comes from a very specific context in the ancient world, in the Greek world.

In the Greco-Roman world, a hypocrite is a play actor. It wasn't a negative term really like it is for us today at first, it's just a play actor. So in the first century and before, there are all these stage plays happening in the streets, in these cities.

[8 : 08] And the hypocrite is the one who comes out and puts a mask over their face. You know, you've seen the old parties where people hold masks over their face. Well, you might have a single actor performance and they're putting all these masks up like this while they're enacting these great Greek tragedies or comedies or whatever it may be, that's the hypocrite.

And you see what a hypocrite is? It's a person who appears one way on the outside because of a mask, but you can't see what's really going on underneath.

And so Paul's saying that in our attempts to love, there is a division between what we see on the outside and loving deeds and what's really going on in the heart, what's going on underneath that.

And he's saying if you don't have both aspects, as fundamentally loving, then you don't have real love. And so another way to say this, let your love be non-hypocritical is just to simply say, Paul is saying, do not be fake, be real.

Don't love in a fake way, you've got to love in a real way. And that's incredibly difficult. And the reason he gives us this command to start with is because that's not us, that's not me, that's not who we are fundamentally.

[9 : 21] We do not love rightly by nature of who we have become in our rebellion against God. And so that's the very first thing. He's saying you've got to figure out a way to root out the hypocrisy that's underneath your love, your attempt to love.

All right, so the second thing, let's go deeper in now. He first tells us that we're fundamentally hypocritical in the way we love. The second thing he tells us is you've got to go deeper in by seeing what makes your love hypocritical.

So in order to root out this problem, we've got to see exactly what is making our love this way, hypocritical. Now remember the division, the hypocrite, the play actor, there's two sides to that person.

There's what you see, the masked side, and what you can't see, what's underneath. In other words, Paul is saying when it comes to love, there are two sides.

There's the objective act of love, and there's the subjective heart that's doing the loving. So there's the person underneath the heart that does the loving, but then there's the loving thing the person does.

[10 : 29] There's an objective and a subjective. There's a loving deed, and there's a heart underneath that deed. And he's saying what creates hypocritical love is when those two things aren't an agreement, that you might can love on the outside, but you're not really loving deep down in the heart.

So let's think about that. Let's focus on both sides for just a moment. First, for just one or two minutes, the subjective side, the heart side. He's saying to us, very simple, he's giving us this simple definition.

In order to love properly, you need the right kind of heart. You've got to be motivated in the right types of ways. The reasoning Paul is implicitly giving us is that true love is fundamentally selfless, that the heart is fundamentally not self-interested in any act of love on the outside, that that's the condition the heart has to be in for there to be true love, real love.

Now, that's abstract. Let's make it concrete. Here's some examples. You can do the loving thing of telling somebody the truth.

It's hard sometimes to tell people the truth, but you can do the loving thing to tell somebody the truth. But in the midst of that, maybe you take inward pleasure in their pain.

[11 : 47] You take a little bit of pleasure in knowing that you're doing a little bit better than them in life. We call that, we use the old German term for that shot in Freud, taking pleasure in other people's pain.

You do the loving act of telling the truth, but underneath it, you're actually taking a little bit of pleasure in their suffering. You see, there's an objective deed that is good and loving, but internally, there's something very self-interested.

How about this, you do the loving thing of telling somebody, on the other hand, they're great. You praise them. But secretly in your heart, you're doing it because you want them to praise you in return.

And we call that the sin of flattery. That's when you do an objectively loving thing on the outside, but subjectively, it's totally self-interested.

How about this one? You tell somebody in pain around you, maybe here in St. C's, man, I'm so sorry that's happening to you. I'm going to pray for you.

[12 : 51] And you know subjectively that your prayer life is in shambles. And you know that the past 45 times you've said that to somebody, you never went and prayed for them.

And recently, I heard one pastor in the States, Joe Novens, and say, I realized at one point in my life, I lie most often when I tell people I will pray for them. And you see, ultimately, there's a good deed on the outside.

You're comforting. You're saying something so good, ministry driven. I will pray for you, but in your heart. There's total self-interest. Why? Because you want to be known as a person who is known for praying for other people.

Right? How about this one? This one's a little more complex. We could go on for a long time. This is just me diagnosing myself. This one's a little more complex. You're a parent, you're a parent who gives yourself away to your kids.

You give and you give and you give. You're always giving yourself away to your children. But subjectively, deep down in the recesses of your heart, the real desire at the bottom is that what's important to you is actually being known as a successful parent, being known as a person who has kids who have it all together, being known and having your identity wrapped up, your self-satisfaction completely wrapped up in the fact that your family looks good on the outside.

[14 : 21] You're constantly giving yourself away. You're serving like crazy. You're loving objectively like crazy. But deep down in your heart, your reason for that is complete self-interest. Now, maybe I covered one of yours.

Maybe I didn't, but we all have them. And C.S. Lewis puts it this way. He says, love has many faces, many masks, that it was the great English poet John Dunn.

He says, let not our loving kill us. And what does he mean by that? He's saying, there is a way to love objectively that actually makes you more self-interested, that drives you in deeper into your idolatry of self-interest because your loving, your deeds are actually all about being known more and more as a good person, as this kind of person, a religious person, a great parent, somebody who prays for people, whatever it may be.

And so there's a division between the subjective and object of there. And so here's the point, simply this, we'll move on. Hypocritical love, says Paul, on the subjective side, is just idolatry. Ultimately, it's just saying that we do good deeds, but really what we're doing in our love is worshiping ourselves, wanting to be known as people who do great things, who do good things.

It's self, we have self-centered reasons. It's ultimately about me, not you, even in the loving things I do. So here's the first aspect of Paul's definition of love. Very simple. True love is selfless giving, selfless.

[15 : 48] Not self-interested, but selfless. Self-sacrificial giving, where the motivation really is the other person. All right, that's the subjective. The third thing, now, the object of Paul tells us, first, we're not truly loving.

We have a hypocrisy problem. Secondly, to root that out, we've got to see that subjectively, we've got to lean into selflessness as our motivation.

The third thing he teaches us here is that love, love is love, eh, love is love, when it is truly connected to what is good.

All right, so it's not just the subjective motivation that has to be there, but now we've got to think, just for a moment, about the object of two. And that's exactly what he says. You see it in verse nine, B.

So he tells us first, let your love be non-hypocritical. Hate what is evil. Literally run away from what is evil. Glue yourself to what is good. Hold fast to what is good.

[16 : 43] The verb is glue yourself. Stick yourself like glue to what is good. So he connects love here to the idea of goodness. And when he does that, he's turning to the objective side of love.

And fundamentally, he's saying something very simple, and it's only this, that real love pursues what is truly good for people. That to really love somebody objectively, you have to do for them, serve them, love on them in a way that is actually good for them, that actually corresponds to what is good, according to the way that God has defined what is good.

Now, do you see how important it is to say that in 2023? This is probably the most important little point to emphasize today, because this idea that true love only happens when you seek what is objectively good for another person as God has defined it, stands against every instinct that we have in the Western world.

You know, in the Western world, we say things like love is love. And what we mean by that is love equals simply my personal feelings of desire for someone or something, my infatuation for someone or something.

And that means when we say love is love in the modern West, it means simply that if you desire something, if you desire someone, nobody else has the right to question that, or to stand against that.

[18 : 17] That means that love fundamentally defined in the modern West is simply feeling. It's simply feeling deeply, wanting deeply, having cravings. That's all that love really means in the modern Western world.

And that means that love simply defined today in modern Edinburgh is largely just infatuation. It's just simple desire. It's emotionally driven. Now, you see the problem with that?

The problem with that is it's defining love merely subjectively. Subjectively, not objectively. The modern world says love is anything that you want.

A feeling, a craving, a desire, that's love, a deep down infatuation. You see it saying that you can say that love is nothing but your subjectivity. It's nothing but your self-interest. It's nothing but feeling your feelings.

Love is simply subjective, never objective. And Paul comes along and says, no, you don't have love no matter what you want in this life, no matter what you crave in this life.

[19 : 18] It is not really loving unless you're seeking what is actually good objectively. Unless you're pursuing for yourself or for somebody else what is truly good as God has defined it.

Now, don't think that just for a moment, don't think that this is just about sexuality. You could say something like this, I love my country.

I'm a patriot, I love my country all the way to my bones. I have deep, deep desire and craving to be in my country, my homeland, you could say something like that. And you could say, I'll do anything for her.

I'll do anything for my country. To the neglect of every other country, I will fight, I will live, I will do anything in service for my country. This is what the recent film by Christopher Nolan, Oppenheimer is exploring.

Maybe you've seen a trailer or something for it, Oppenheimer about the father of the atomic bomb, the US scientist, Oppenheimer, Robert Oppenheimer, that created the first atomic bomb and it's a film exploring this question.

[20 : 25] Do my feelings, my subjective feelings of affection for my home country mean that I have the right to drop a weapon of mass destruction on another country?

It's very complex. I don't want to give an answer to it today, but you see, it can be about anything. And anytime you take mere subjective desire and you say, I love what I love, I want what I want, infatuation, that's love, that's all we're talking about.

It can be sexuality, it can be patriotism, it can be anything, you can take anything you want in that way and turn your subjective desires into a God. And Paul is saying, if you do that, you don't have love because love is fundamentally grounded only when you have selfless giving on the one hand, the subjective, and objectively you are pursuing what is truly good.

So he says, let your love be non-hypocritical, hate evil, glue yourself to what is good. If you're not gluing yourself to the good, you don't actually have love.

You just have infatuation. You just have something, some craving that you've made into your own little God. Let me give you one example we'll move on.

[21 : 39] Verse 9b, love is not love unless it seeks what is good. Let me make that concrete for you. A wonderful example I saw last week. The Colombian president, maybe you saw this in the news, the Colombian president last week, Gustavo Petro, his son was arrested, his son.

And his son was charged with multiple accounts of narco trafficking, money laundering, and a number of other very serious crimes. And so the Colombian president's son is now facing significant prison time.

And the president was publicly asked about this, and this is what he said. He said, I want what's best for my son. And I pray that this experience will strengthen his character.

Now, the modern West wants to say, Gustavo, don't you love your son? You're the president. You can pardon him. You can let him go. You have the power to do that.

And Gustavo Petro, I don't know what he believes in, but he gets it, that you don't actually have love unless you are pursuing what is objectively good. And you see what he says? He says, I love my son so much that I want him to walk through the trial, the fiery trial of justice that he deserves, why so that his character may be refined.

[23 : 00] That's love. It's subject and object come together. Selfless giving of his father, pursuing what is truly good objectively for his son. You see, that's real love. That's what Paul means here.

All right, finally, and we'll move on to the last point. Love, therefore, is selfless affection for the ultimate good of another. And then the last thing Paul teaches us here about the definition of love.

Lastly, love is not for love's sake. All right, very, very quick. This Western idea of love, this Western idea of love, desire, it's Disney-fied.

We say that the highest joy in life is getting that feeling, that feeling of love. All I want is love. I want to know love, show me what love is.

I want to feel love. I want to find that special person that can finally bring love into my life. We actually pursue love, love, the feeling as God.

[24 : 00] And Paul comes here to say that if love is God for you, then all you've done is taken the feeling of infatuation, a very temporary moment, and made it into your idol.

And instead, he wants you, the very last point is, he wants you to remember the whole of Romans 12 as you look at this one little verse about love. And here's the whole of Romans 12, back to 12, verse one.

Remember what he said? He says, the whole of Romans 12 is all about how to live the Christian life. And here's how you do it. He says, live out of or from the mercy of God.

And he has already defined the mercy of God in Romans 12. If you go back, sorry, Romans, Romans five, verse eight, he says it like this, God showed his love toward you, his mercy in that while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you.

Now, we'll close on that point in just a moment. But you see what he's saying? He's saying the whole mission of the Christian life is to live entirely founded on the fact that you have been loved, that you've experienced the mercy of God in your life.

[25 : 09] And that means when he says, let your love be non-hypocritical, he's saying something so important. He's saying that you don't truly have love unless you are loving for God's sake, not love's sake.

Now, if you're loving things for your sake, it's not love. If you're loving things for another person's sake, it's not truly love. If you're loving things for love's sake, it is not really love. That true love is selfless giving for the ultimate good of another person for God's sake.

That it has to be actually directed towards the fact that you are loving because you want to honor God. All right, look, three components to have true love.

Do you have true love? Have you found true love? You need the subjective motivation of selfless, self-sacrificial giving.

That's your heart. You need the objective pursuit of the true good for another person. And you need to do it all to honor God who first loved you.

[26 : 13] That's what Paul says, love is. Hypocritical love says, me first, the need to be seen as moral in the eyes of others, to present as a virtuous person, but underneath there's really vice, that's hypocritical love.

True love, selfless motivation, the good of other truly, all for the sake of God. Now, if you're like me, you look at all three of those components and you say, who will save me from this heart of death?

Do you love like that? Self-sacrificially motivated, always desiring the most good for the person that you're looking at, whoever that might be, completely motivated deeply by the fact that you want to honor God because he first loved you.

Who loves like that? Who's going to save us? Now, let's close with this. Lastly, how can you find this kind of love? How can you love like this?

Do you have it? Do you have this kind of love? Now, we're going to spend the next three weeks unpacking the ways to love like this in detail. Love of the city, love of the church, love of ministry, and all the little things that come underneath that.

[27 : 31] So all I want to do is close with just two quick things. Do you have this love? And the first thing you need today, this morning, to know that you have this love is that to have true love, to become a loving person, you've got to first see your neediness.

So if there's anything you want to do today, the most important thing to do is to desperately see your neediness. Now, C.S. Lewis, let me take two minutes with C.S. Lewis to make this clear. C.S. Lewis, when he writes on love, he tells us that we've got to think about two types of love.

We've been talking about one type of love. The very important word that Paul uses here is agape. Let your agape, a type of love, God's love, gift-giving love, be sincere, be genuine, be non-hypocritical.

But Lewis points out that in order to become a loving person like God is loving, gift-giving, sacrificial, you need to have another type of love in your life.

And Lewis calls it need, need love. So hang with me for just a moment, need love. Let me make it concrete.

[28 : 41] Need love is when you have your little child in front of you and they are desperately scared and they run to you and jump up in your arms and cling to you desperately.

They have a real need in that moment to be loved, to know that you are saying to them as you hug them, I love you and I'll protect you.

And need love, maybe let's make an adult version, need love looks like this, you are scared to death to confess your sin to a person in your life that you care about, something you've done against them perhaps.

And the reason that you're scared is because you're afraid that if you tell somebody who you really are and what you've really done, that they might not love you. You know, if we're all afraid as human beings, because our deepest desire is to be known all the way to the depths of who we really are, even the things we've done that we regret the most and at the same time to be loved right through it.

To be known to the depths and yet loved all the way to the sky. That's the greatest human need, that's need love. God doesn't have that love at all. God has no need love.

[30 : 01] He doesn't need our love, but we have it. We have it, we need it so badly. You know, it's so apparent, people say that if you, you know, the reason if you've had a baby in the past few years, you know that the doctors really emphasize skin to skin contact as soon as the baby is born.

And there's been all these studies done that if a baby is fed clothes, but not regularly touched, that very likely that they could even die from something like that.

And we have desperate need to be shown even when we can't speak or hear properly that we're loved. That's who we really are. Now, Lewis says this, you can never grow into a person that is truly loving like God is loving, gift giving, self-sacrificial, seeking the good of other people, all in the name of God, you can never grow into that.

And less your need love is fully and truly fulfilled. We long to be known all the way to the depths and loved all the way to the sky.

Remember Romans 5, 8. Live out of the mercies of God. Remember Romans 5, 8. Here is the love of God for you, that Jesus Christ came to die for a sinner like you.

[31 : 17] Not like you, even you in fact. You see what it's saying? Jesus Christ came into the world because he knew you to the depths. He knew everything, he knows everything.

He knows your secret sins and misdeeds dark and yet he loves you to the sky. Your need love is fully fulfilled only, only. There's no other place, no philosophy, no religion, no person, not your spouse, nobody that can fulfill your need love like God can.

And so if you have that need love fulfilled, if you've experienced that only then has the condition been met that you can become a truly loving person. The type of love that God gives.

True agape. Some of you were loved well as a child, some of you were not. Some of you are loved well as adults and some of you are not. But no one knows you like God does, no one can love you like God does, no one loves you like God does.

Nobody can fulfill the need like Jesus Christ has. Have you experienced that love? Last thing, let me just ask you three questions and we'll close. Three diagnostics.

[32 : 26] If you've experienced that need based love, here's three quick questions to ask, well, am I growing in love? And this is just a little diagnostic test as we step into the next three weeks to really think about the ways we're failing to be loving or growing in love.

Here they are, very fast. Are your sins, since the time that you came to faith, you saw your need love fulfilled in Jesus Christ, are your sins getting bigger to you?

More heinous, more significant to you while the mercy of God is getting bigger to you proportionally as well. In other words, if you're growing in love, it means that you're growing in the recognition of how much you've been loved in the midst of your unloveliness.

And if that's happening to you, if you are constantly realizing how significant the mercy of God, God's love is to you, then one of the things that will happen to you over time is the sins of your past will be uglier and the mercy of God will be all the more sweet.

Both of those things will grow proportionally. That's the first test. Are you seeing the mercy of God, the love of God for your need-based love more and more and more sweetly than when you first came to faith?

[33 : 47] All right, second test. Do you find then joy in giving up your time, your money, your resources, using your gifts, losing things in this life for the sake of the objective good of other people?

Do you find more and more over time that your joy increases the more you love people objectively, seeking their good? All right, if you find that, then that means that you're probably growing in God-given agape, God-like love over time.

All right, third and finally. Do you find yourself over time growing in compassion and care for those in need around you, those least like you and those people who regard themselves as your enemy?

Last thing is this. Love, remember, is the selfless affection for the ultimate good of another person, all for the sake of God, because he's loved you, right?

And when you've experienced the love of God, one of the things it has to do is destroy your pride. It has to create a person who says, I can never look down on other people.

[35 : 01] I know how much I've been loved. It helps you to break through and love people that aren't like you, love people that even count themselves as your enemy. You have the power, Christianity is the only religion, I think that truly gives you the power to love every type of person, simply because you know how much you've been loved.

And when you get this, you can hold two things together. The last word here, you can love everyone, no matter who they are or what they've done, no matter how heinous, you can truly love them because they are made in the image of God.

You can love every kind of person on the one hand. And on the other hand, you can at the same time say to that person or say to the world, the modern West, I love people so much that I want for them what's truly good.

And that means sometimes I have to say no to the things they're chasing after. You can hold those things together at the same time. Do you want to grow and love? One pastor said it like this, love is something you do only if it's first someone that you've met.

Have you really seen the love of God in your life, the love of God in Christ for you? That's the secret as we seek to grow and love in this next month. Let's pray together. Father, we ask that you would teach us to love.

[36 : 20] And we ask today for somebody here that they would experience the love of God, the love of Jesus Christ, that we would be able to say today, Lord, more than ever, our sins, there are many, your mercy is more.

So show us the depths of who we really are, that our sins would be bigger so that we can all the more say that your love is big. So make your love so real to us today, we ask, so that we might become lovers of people and lovers of the city and lovers of ministry and all these things.

So we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.