

**Intro.** Jesus replied to a questioner that everything he teaches can be summed up in love God with your whole being and love people as yourself. He further states that the world will know that you are his follower by the distinctive characteristic of your love for other Christ followers. John makes the seemingly absurd claim that the person who does not love people does not even know God because God cannot be disconnected from love in any way. These are simply representative of the message of the Bible that love is a major marker when assessing anyone's claim to knowing God or growing in obedience to God.

Yet, it does not take a rocket scientist to observe that a genuine love for people is not as consistent a characteristic as we might hope for either in our personal lives or our community of faith.

We come today to the third of four metrics found in Romans 12 that define essential characteristics of the growing follower of Christ.

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| 1. Personal transformation. | 12:1-2   |
| 2. Community participation. | 12:3-8   |
| 3. Love for people.         | 12:9-13  |
| 4. Conflict management.     | 12:14-21 |

**Personal transformation** . . . the mercies of God transform a person specifically in a growing devotion to God and a new and changing way of thinking. Conformity to the surrounding values and way of life of the world is a shrinking thing of the past.

**Community Participation** . . . this second metric taught in Romans 12:3-8 simply establishes that your effective and humble participation in a community of believers is evidence of gospel empowered growth in your life. God is at work in you if you are becoming more and more fascinated by and committed to participation in gospel ministry with other believers. You have been united with others by the Lord, given diverse gifts to serve others by the Lord and intentionally connected to each other to display the Lord's glory. Are you effectively serving and relationally connected to a community of believers?

**Love for people** . . . 12:9-13 is a description of the genuine, discriminating love that grows out of the work of God's mercies in a person's life. The core command is that our love is to be genuine, not counterfeit or simply play acting a role because it is expected. This genuine love is described with nine nouns in these verses. Before we examine the characteristics of genuine love, we need to establish a foundation for our assessment of genuine love by understanding where love comes from and how is love developed in our lives.

A roadmap for our time in God's word this morning looks like this . . .

1. Love comes from God.
2. Love is developed in community.
3. Love is to be expressed genuinely.

**Love comes from God.** First, in order to adequately assess our love for others we need to understand where love comes from and what that love looks like. The Bible teaches that the basis for our love for others is God's love for us.

One of the clearest statements of this truth is found in 1John 4:7-12. P.1023

3 thoughts summarize this foundational passage:

- God is the source and standard for our love of others. 7-8
- Christ and the cross provide both the standard and the evidence of God's love. 9-10
- Loving others displays the love of the unseen God. 11-12

These core truths are supported and explained in Romans 12:1 with the appeal to God's mercies. Also 5:5-8 and 8:31-39 teach that love begins with God and is manifested or revealed in generous self-sacrifice for the good of the one loved.

This truth is taught throughout the argument of Ephesians. 1:4-5; 2:4-5; 3:14-21; 5:1-2, 25.

Illus with Eph. 3:17 'rooted and grounded in love'      God's love as the soil; as the foundation.

**Love is developed in community.** This second concept is too often overlooked in our rush to assess and grow our love for others. It is a huge and costly oversight. The truth simply stated is that God designed for our understanding of his love and the application of that love to others to grow in committed relationships with each other. Your concept of love, experience of loving and being loved and your practice of loving others is developed in the context of local church life. Love is learned. It is best learned by being seen, received and shared.

Where do you learn and receive constant encouragement about God's love for you? Where is your heart and conscience stretched as you see others wrestle with the love of God for them through suffering, adversity and sin? Where do you learn the essential functionality of loving others both through success and failure? Where are you consistently exhorted and encouraged to see Christ, the lover of your soul? The answer to all of these is 'a healthy local church.'

Psalm 42:4 – The psalmist wrestles with depression by remembering/longing for the fellowship of worshippers 'back home' where he both received and was reminded of God's steadfast love (8).

1Thess. 4:9 – The Apostle points out that these believers excelled in love for one another by means of being 'God-taught.' The presence of the Spirit in their lives had resulted in a love for one another that became quite obvious and was developed in some rather personal and challenging ways (11-12).

Eph. 3:18 – 'strength to comprehend with all the saints' is the phrase to consider. Not only is love to be expressed in community, but it is experienced and developed in community. The strength to understand God's love comes from God through his word, by his Spirit and from his people. The dimensions of his love are seen and learned as we observe and participate with one another in all the dimensions of our lives.

Lord, Love Others through Me  
Love comes from God.  
Love is developed in community.

**Love is to be expressed genuinely.**

Romans 12:9-13

What appears to be a command in 12:9 is simply a statement – ‘sincere love’ – that is then explained by a series of participial phrases/nouns. The truth developed is that which we have been describing. The life transformed by the mercies of God is thoughtfully and intelligently lived out in community as members one of another. This life is a life of love. God’s love is displayed through us to each other and the watching world. It is an essential and observable result of the message of the gospel.

Our minds new constant renewal regarding the source, meaning, expression and experience of God’s love. Our tendency is to be conformed to the world on this topic.

Genuine love simply is love that is not a pretense, an outward display only or a shallow emotion. It is the real thing, rooted in the nature and action of God, who is love. Love’s sincerity is not seen as much in the strength of feelings but in its pursuit of what pleases God. Real love does not love everything. Counterfeit, unreal love is unconcerned with what is wrong and what is right. 12:9 qualifies genuine love as discriminating against what God hates and clinging to what God loves.

Loving each other sincerely is described in 4 dimensions:

a. Sincere love is devoted to honoring others. 12:10

This is an amazing description of the heartfelt and consistent concern that God’s love generates for others. This description of genuine love is built around two concepts.

Devotion to each other like a healthy family relationship.

Recognition of each other to honor and appreciate each other.

b. Sincere love is enthusiastic about serving others. 12:11

Again, the soil of God’s love produces an awareness of others that motivates responses of service or ministry toward them. This ‘serving the Lord’ by serving people is characterized by:

Diligence – God’s love instructs us against idleness, laziness and complacency especially regarding the needs of our church family.

Enthusiasm – a ‘fervent’ spirit is a heart/life that is boiling over with the love of God as the Spirit of God continues to refresh our hearts with his love (Rom.5:5). The Spirit of God takes the love of God and energizes our service to each other with it.

c. Sincere love is diligent in encouraging others. 12:12

The foundation of God’s love for you is strong and deep enough that you are able to actually regard others concerns and cares as more important than your own. Three powerful ways that God’s love is poured out through you into others are:

- a. Sincere love is devoted to honoring others.
- b. Sincere love is enthusiastic about serving others.
- c. Sincere love is diligent in encouraging others.

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Three powerful ways that God's love is poured out through you into others are:

Celebrating hope – encouraging others to grow confidence in God's promises

Preaching patience – encouraging others to patiently learn God's love in trials

Constantly praying – encouraging others to depend on God's love in prayer

- d. Sincere love is generous in meeting the needs of others.      12:13

God's love is so comprehensive in your life that it pushes you out of your comfort zone to participate in the lives of those who are struggling or in need. This is seen in two specific ways . . .

Participating in their needs – contributing to meet each other's needs in a multitude of ways.

Pursuing hospitality – establishing a reputation for caring for the needs of strangers/travelers.

### Summary/Take Aways

1. Pray for strength to know God's love in all its dimensions.
2. Pray for strength to love and learn love in community with both easy to love and hard to love people.
3. Renew your commitment to loving genuinely in this community of believers.

Honoring others      Serving others      Encouraging others      Meeting others needs

4. Thank God for his patient love for you revealed to you in the mercies of Christ Jesus.

### Study Questions

1. Read Romans 12 together. What are the major themes addressed and how are they related/connected to verse 1 'by the mercies of God?'
2. What observations, questions or concerns were raised in your thinking from today's sermon?
3. Share a story from your spiritual journey about personal transformation. When God saved you . . . what did he change quickly, what did he change recently, what has changed slowly, what still needs severe changing? Testify to your fellow body members of the power of gospel transformation.
4. Discuss, apply and encourage each other with the metaphors of Eph. 3:17 – 'rooted and grounded in love.' How is it connected to the admonition found later in 5:1-2 (hint: 'beloved').
5. Read/review the World magazine article excerpt below. What do you think? Why?

6. What have you learned about God's love by watching and living in community with each other? Tell stories of how you have been loved by God through the expressed love of fellow believers. Share a time in recent memory when you did not feel loved, perhaps even overlooked by your faith community.
7. Which of the four descriptions of genuine love are the hardest for you to grasp? Review the four and share which one you think is generally the hardest to do consistently. Why?
8. Pray together for strength to learn and love in community.
9. Have some kind of religious ceremony with candles and costumes to thank God for his love and renew your commitment to grow in your genuine love for each other. Would you struggle telling your group you love them? Why or why not?

An excerpt from World mag article by J Cheaney

"It's not good for a man to be alone," God says, and He should know. A being of consummate unity, three in one, makes a creature in His own image, intended for relationship. Relationship with God, ultimately, but flesh and blood does not readily combine with Spirit unless tempered by the give and take of close community. Cultivating earthly relationships helps make us fit for heaven.

But withdrawing into self leads to hell. Each human being is already a sovereign nation with well-patrolled borders. No one can truly enter the experience of another: Like bricks, our flat sides are only marginally permeable, our edges are sharp. Most of us are too protective to venture radically out—we have respect to demand, positions to defend. Left to ourselves, few abandon the fortress for more than brief interludes, usually to fall in love.

Loose bricks litter the landscape. The mortar of shared goals and mutual responsibility has crumbled. Here's the young man who retreats into a literal fantasy world of computer games and drugs. There's the teenage mother who drags her kids from boyfriend to boyfriend. Here's a student who's decided that somebody else is responsible for his debts. Endless distraction, state subsidies, and co-dependent enabling disguise the problem, which is simply that single bricks are pointless. If they won't be used they'll crumble, whether alone or in a random heap.

Of course, nobody wants to be "just another brick in the wall." Take it from Pink Floyd: Walls are bad. They're made for keeping out, or holding in.

But foundations are good—they provide a base for shelter, a platform for achievement. The bonds of marriage, parenthood, church, and community build civilization. When the primary bonds fail, they all fail. When people can't commit to a single partner, they can't ultimately commit to anything, and as the mortar crumbles around them they will fall.

Nobody seems very optimistic about 2012, but what worries me about the New Year is the same thing that worried me about the old year: all these falling bricks. The good news is, while we are tearing down, God is building up. It is our nature to lapse, His to restore. Quietly, away from TV cameras and hand-wringing pundits, loose bricks are being picked up and fitted together. Splits and scandals capture headlines, but love abides.

It is a love we can only know in community, comprehending "with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth ... to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." It's too big for one person alone; we experience it through and with each other. One brother knows something of the depth, a sister has scaled the height, an older couple have walked the length. Together, we come to know what we can't know by ourselves.

Ephesians 3:14-21 is a prayer for strength, almost to the point of redundancy: that we be strengthened with power to have strength to comprehend. Whatever else God does in 2012, He'll be connecting people to each other and His church. Whatever happens in the world, we can make ourselves a little more vulnerable to each other. Supernatural power is what it takes to be mortared together by the love of Christ, but He provides.