

October 20, 2019

Title: The Real Thing

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Text: Romans 12:9-10

The Mark of a Christian

Love – Sincere!

100% pure Vermont maple syrup. No corn syrup with maple flavoring. Just the real thing. We Vermonters wouldn't have it any other way.

Paul says the same thing about God's love living in us. We are to seek the real thing: no substitutes. The word he uses for love – "agape" – refers to the kind of love that is self-giving and faithful, even when it hurts. This kind of love is not dependent upon feelings; it is rooted in an unwavering commitment to the other. The word *agape* is used to describe God's unfailing, covenant love for you and me. It's the word Paul uses when he writes:

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Romans 5:8 NIV

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

This kind of love overcomes all obstacles:

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Romans 8:38-39 NIV

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is what Paul means by Love – sincere! The real thing.

The mark of a Christian:

It is this same kind of love, living inside us that Jesus says is the true mark of a Christian:

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John 13:34-35 NIV

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

No longer would a specific set of religious rituals or dietary restrictions be the mark of the child of God. No longer would strict adherence to man-made rules determine who belonged to God's family. Now, it would be God's *agape* love residing in those who put their trust in Jesus. Their *agape* love would be the one thing that announced to the entire world that they were Jesus' disciples.

Love – sincere. The mark of a Christian.

Love in Action

#1: Faithful to God's Truth

Sincere love – God's love in action – is not a license to dumb down the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. Paul writes:

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Romans 12:9b NIV

Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

He uses the strongest word possible for "hate," a word that can be translated "abhor," or "detest." He isn't talking about hating other people! He is saying that genuine love abhors everything in this world that destroys people and dishonors God.

Instead, we are to *cling to what is good*. We're to be attached to the good, devoted to the good. We're to make it an integral part of ourselves.

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Every second of every day billions of immune cells patrol every nook and cranny of your body looking for things that shouldn't be there: virus particles, bacteria, parasites and other toxins. The instant that an immune cell finds an invader it either gobbles it up or sends out an alarm to mount a full-scale attack.

Immune cells do not compromise the essential difference between that which is Self and that which is Non-Self. The immune system abhors all that is Non-Self. Period. It clings to and protects all that belongs to our body.

Genuine love manifests itself in a similar way: it rejects any compromise between good and evil in our every thought and action. This does not mean that we have license to go out and try and straighten out everyone else. This is the work we do within ourselves as God transforms and renews our minds and hearts.

#2: Bonded as family

The second characteristic of genuine love is that it bonds us together as family. Paul writes:

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Romans 12:10a NIV

Be devoted to one another in love.

He uses words specific to the kind of love that family members have for each other. The word he uses for "love" is *philadelphia*, which means "brotherly or sisterly love." The word he uses for "be devoted" refers to love for parents and family.

Think again about what your immune system is doing. Not only is it hunting out invaders; it is also affirming the unity of your body. It checks every cell it comes in contact with and recognizes the body's cells as Self. Then it does everything in its power to protect the rest of the body from harm.

We're to do the same thing when it comes to our relationship with each other. Despite the fact that we have different gifts and backgrounds, we are all one in Christ. We are all part of His body. No place for attacking or

tearing down each other! No auto-immune disease, please! Instead, we are to love each other as members of the same Body.

#3: No Shame

The third characteristic of genuine love is that it chooses *honor* over *shame*.

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Romans 12:10b NIV

Honor one another above yourselves.

Human beings are hard-wired to seek higher status. Psychologists tell us that our brain is constantly monitoring our status in regards to those around us. Drive your car into the parking lot, and your brain will instinctively compare your car with the one you park next to. Or think about how you feel when your haircut doesn't turn out the way you wanted it to!

Paul's society was based upon honor vs. shame. It was a society with strict class divisions: Roman citizens, slaves, barbarians and other outsiders. When people gathered for dinner, they separated themselves according to their status. The way you demonstrated your power over others was by shaming them into submission.

But Paul says that class divisions and status-seeking have no place in God's family. Instead of seeking to *be honored*, we are to *honor one another above ourselves*. Again, this is how our bodies work. Every cell receives oxygen and nutrition, whether it's a brain cell or the skin on the bottom of your foot.

And that's how it is in Christ's Body. Love that is genuine seeks to honor others above oneself.

The Real Thing

Accept no substitutes!

Last summer I had to get the steering fixed on my truck in order for it to pass inspection. The first steering fluid pump didn't fit right. Power steering fluid sprayed all over the place whenever I made a turn. The second one didn't do any better. Finally, the mechanic put in one from the original manufacturer of the truck. It worked.

The other pumps were *almost* good enough, but in order to get the job done, I had to have the *real thing*.

And the same is true when it comes to living out that thing called *love*. There are a thousand knock offs to God's genuine love. They may work part of the time. They may feel good at the moment. But only the *real thing* will hold up through all of the tests and challenges of real life.

Accept no substitutes!

Remember the 3 marks of genuine love:

#1: No compromise with evil. Give the Holy Spirit carte blanche permission to point out every place in your thoughts and actions where you are tempted to cut corners. Again, the focus is to be on what is going on inside you. We are not commanded to be judge and jury of others. Jesus Himself said: "Judge not, that you not be judged."

It's all too easy to see someone else's faults and shortcomings. Jesus commanded us to work on ourselves first: "Take the log out of your own eye before you offer to take a splinter out of your friend's eye!"

#2: Love each other as family. Linus once said: "I love mankind; it's people I can't stand." We've all been there at one time or another. But the real test of genuine love is how we respond to the people we know the best: they are the ones we expect the most from, they are the ones who let us down.

Genuine love remembers that we're all family in Jesus.

#3: Upset the status pyramid! Every moment of the day our brains will seek to enhance our status. That's the way it works in a dog-eat-dog world. But in God's New Creation the exact opposite is true. In God's New Creation we follow the example of Jesus who humbled Himself to the death of a slave, so that we could be given the status of God's children.

I remember riding in a carpool to work with 3 other colleagues. One person drove, one rode in the front seat, and the other 2 got the back seat. We were supposed to take turns on who rode in the front seat. One of the guys in the carpool was a brash, take-charge sort of person. One afternoon he coopted the front seat out of turn, making me ride in the back. I was ticked off! My rights had been violated. It wasn't fair. You know the drill.

When I look back on that long-ago incident I now see it as a missed opportunity. It was a chance to learn and demonstrate genuine love toward another person.

The Real Thing:

In the end, it is the measure of your love that will be the measure of your life here on earth. Your integrity, your loyalty, your humility will be the things that people remember. These are the tools God uses to make His New Creation.

Where does God want to grow you today?