

Be Devoted to One Another, Honour One Another

Living The One Another Life Series

We have already covered a lot of the "one another" verses of the New Testament in this series. And the risk is now that preachers start "repeating one another"; to the extent, this is normal, as all these "one anothers" are part of the same goal that God has for us. This evening, I will come back to a passage we have already heard about, Romans 12:9-13, because it holds two keys to understanding all the "one anothers". If you like, it provides the general context of all these orders.

⁹ Love must be without hypocrisy. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

We have a lot to learn and apply from these "one another" verses. But we may fail to appreciate properly the position of these commandments in the letters, or the epistles. They never come at the start; they always come after quite a lengthy discussion of Christian doctrine; in Romans, this takes roughly two thirds of the letter. It is not in order to be saved that we have to obey, but such commandments are the consequence of salvation. This passage comes after the one where Paul expresses his own inadequacy regarding sin (Romans 7:14-25). God knows he is working with imperfect people, us.

I. *Love must be without hypocrisy*

The first element I would like us to think about is this small sentence, Love must be without hypocrisy, or love must be sincere, genuine, not counterfeit. Hypocrisy, something we all hate when we suffer from it, and practice when it suits us. But we'll come back to that in a moment.

The problem Westerners have in the 21st century (my apologies to our African and Asian brothers and sisters present) is that we define love completely wrongly. It is therefore quite difficult to put this verse into practice. We all know that love in the biblical sense is a wonderful feeling, as it is written "*for God so loved the world ... that he felt butterflies in his stomach and that he spent some centuries dreaming about how beautiful the world is*".

You may be shocked at the way I reconstructed this verse, which really says that God has loved the world enough to give His only son (John 3:16). But is not my tampering with this verse openly; it is how many people and books actually describe love in the biblical sense as a feeling and not a prompting for action (see Eph 5:1-2; 1 John 3:18). Describing love as a feeling is misleading and will in the end compel Christians to be hypocrites. We all know that even among Christians there are people we do not get along with very well. We are not always feeling love to one another. In some cases, we actually feel many other things. If we think love is a feeling and want to obey Jesus' commandment of loving one another and still feel something else, we are either bound for hypocrisy or will just stop loving altogether. If we tell people –including ourselves– that we have to feel some sort of benevolence towards all Christians, we create the best breeding ground for hypocrisy.

We must not confuse being in love and loving. Before he became a Christian, Saint Augustine had been quite a womanizer. When he became a Christian, he realised that he had loved being in love, but had had no clue about loving. Quite a profound difference that many overlook; in love stories, confusing loving and being in love, can also have dire consequences.

Love must be without hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the sin that made Jesus really angry; not murder, not adultery, not theft, not extortion, hypocrisy. Not that he liked the others, but he had a special loathing for hypocrisy. During his time on earth, he met many people of different walks of life, theologies and nationalities, but only the Pharisees got consistently rebuked. He sometimes even insulted them outright, most often because of their hypocrisy (Mat 15:7, 22:18; 23:13,15,23,25,27,9; Mark 7:6; Luke 12:56, 13:15).

That should make us pause for a moment: the Pharisees were definitely not the kind of so-called sinners we would at first think deserve to be called "full of rot" (which is a less politically correct but nevertheless accurate description of whitewashed tombs, Mat 23:27). They were very religious people, very serious in upholding their standards before God. As good Christians, we are at risk of hypocrisy too.

How does hypocrisy the Pharisean way work? It is easy: first, you define standards that will allow you to judge whether you are good or not. According to Jesus, it works better if you choose indicators of holiness that are easy to measure and quite visible (Luke 18:11-12). Let's give some examples: not sleeping with your neighbour's wife or not stabbing the same neighbour in the throat or heart. As this is quite negative, you can toss in some positive actions, such as tithing from your money, fasting regularly and even making long prayers. Of course, if people see you doing this, it's even better (Mat 23:5).

Then, you still need to judge all people by the standards we have defined. Unless you are exceptionally bad at this game, you will have chosen standards that you can attain, but a lot of people will not even try to attain the same. So you can quite confidently look down upon them, secure in your own betterness (Luke 18:9).

Hypocrisy kills. It kills those who are hurt by hypocrites; it kills the hypocrites themselves. Anyone relying on their own standards does not need God any more, and will reject anything that disturbs their own peace and quiet. In the gospels, we see how the Pharisees even manoeuvred to kill Jesus who was spoiling their little game. We don't have time to go further on this, but read Luke 18:9-14 to see the terrible assessment of the Pharisee's situation in Jesus' eyes. The hypocrite is in danger of not being saved, much more actually than the open sinner who repents. God is not fooled by outward activities, he sees right through us (1 Samuel 16:7b).

Love must be without hypocrisy; if it is tainted, we may run into a formalist system that has all the appearances of true spirituality, but is dead and rotten inside. Again, love in the biblical sense is not a feeling and 'faking it' because this is what we have to do will not help. And remember, hypocrisy feeds on our own standards.

II. Honour one another **above yourselves**

The second element, which is very linked to this question, is the notion of honouring one another **above ourselves**. ... This commandment challenges our heart, because we all know in our heart of hearts that we are better than others, at least than some others. We also tend to congregate with people who are like us, of 'our set', because this is what human beings do; such a mechanism can transform as vibrant church into a club very quickly.

Should you need some inspiration, here is a short list of standards that will allow each of you to compare –positively– to others and to identify others who are like you. Pick and chose those that suit you best:

- Better spirituality (pray longer / more / better, read the Bible more / better / longer, never miss a service, attend the best home group, tithing, etc.)
- We speak words with God's power (we know so much more than the rest of the world)
- We carry God's Word around with us (so precious to be Christians)
- Nicer spouse (with apologies to singles, but many people would think a spouse is a sign of worth), better at cooking, keeping a house tidy, managing career and family

- Children cleverer, better behaved, better at sports, etc.
- Better off (in case you have less money, just say you're not as greedy)
- Higher education, higher culture, seen more places
- (in case you cannot compare positively in any of the above, which is already difficult) not as proud

It's all a question of price. How much do we value ourselves and others? And how do we estimate the price? The world teaches us to estimate fellow human beings, with finite numbers. How much would your family or employer pay to rescue you from a kidnapping? Let's be realistic, it's not 'all the money in the world'...

I'd like to tell you two short stories; let's call this a *tale of two donkies*.

First donkey. Once upon a time, there was a donkey. It was living with a man and both had spent years together and days wandering around. The man was a prophet and one day he set off on his donkey to meet someone important. That day, the donkey started to act strangely, leaving the road to walk in the fields, or pressing close to a wall scratching the prophet's foot in the process. In the end, the donkey simply lay down on the ground and refused to move. Its master, by then quite angry, started to beat the animal, whom he thought deserved a serious reminder of who is the master. To his surprise, the donkey answered back; so angry was the master that at first he argued with the donkey not realising that these animals do usually not speak their minds to humans. Then he realised that it was speaking because of God's power.

Second donkey, a colt actually. It was living in a small village, and one day strange men came and took it from its home. This was all a very weird things for the young animal. For the time in its life, someone was actually riding on it. And a big crowd was around cheering and chanting. That was certainly the experience of a lifetime for our colt, being used by Jesus to enter Jerusalem.

Do you speak with God's power? God made the same happen for Balaam donkey (Numbers 22:21-31). Do you carry Jesus around? So did the little colt from Bethpage (Luke 9:28-44). Are you from a good Christian or Jewish family? God could use stones to raise up children for Abraham (Mat 3:9). God laughs at our own standards. We humans should consider what God has done and is doing for us if we want to good measuring scale, not how good we think we are (Gal 6:14, *May I never **boast** except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*). If we compare to one another, we have the wrong measuring scale; however higher we may be according to our own standards, our so-called differences pale when we compare them to the distance between God and us.

How much are we worth?

Our actual worth as Christians has been spelt out by how much God has already given out for us. We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus, nothing less. This is both a very exciting perspective, and a very humbling one. Our talents, our merits, our knowledge (1 Co 8:2), our standards are utterly irrelevant in comparison of this fact. God does not honour those who never need him because they cling to their own standards. And if we believe the Word of God, it is foolish to think that we can be good or big enough by ourselves: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away (Is 64:6)*. Therefore, comparing ourselves with one another is utterly foolish, but are we not all guilty of it?

*If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, **without comparing themselves to someone else**, for each one should carry their own load (Gal 6:3-5).*

When you consider our real worth, it becomes much easier to understand the commandment to **honour one another above yourselves**. The point is not to pretend that the brother or sister is better at something than we are. They may be, or not, but it is irrelevant. The point is to consider a brother or sister as someone for whom Christ died. That gives them a serious value and makes decisions about what we do quite different, or so it should.

*Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, **for whom Christ died**, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ (1 Co 8:9-12).*

This value of what Christ has done is much higher than the qualities or strengths the person may have. It is even higher than the person's weaknesses and failings. We should honour such people, even if it is difficult for us to do so. Fortunately, God does not order us to feel love towards all, but to demonstrate love, because of the value people have in his eyes. It is still difficult.

III. Making a difference towards brothers and sisters – the challenge

How can we make a difference? How can we apply the commandment today? One of the ways is in verse 13. *Practice hospitality*. Inviting someone who is not of 'your set' for a meal, a coffee or even a walk near the lake is a nice way to honour one another. It's not the end of it, but there's no need to make things complicated. Demonstrating love in the biblical sense is not something complicated. And when you offer hospitality, do not try to impress with your cuisine, you are worth much more than that. If I may add one last reminder, honouring a brother or sister in this way is all in your interest (Luke 14:12; Mat 10:40-42; 25:43).

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