

Sermon Transcript from December 4th, 2016
Sincere Love
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As Dave just mentioned, we've been in this "Moral Vision of the New Testament" series. And this series is really dedicated to, now that we've been on this long journey reading through the Scripture together as a church community. And we've seen so much about the story of God and now we see this culmination in the life of Jesus and His institution of the Church. And the real question for us now with this moral vision of the New Testament series is how do we actually live? Right? Like, what do we do now? How do we think? How do we feel? What do we do?

Over the last few weeks, we've been trekking through the inclusive versus exclusive Paul, we've talked about transforming our minds, we've talked about not being conformed to the patterns of this world. Last week, Dave Dealy preached on the value of encouraging one another in our gifting. And today, I get to talk about love. Sincere love. Not just any love, but a Christian form of love; sincere love from Romans 12:9-13. So, if you have a Bible, go ahead and open up to that or flip your app to it. I love using the app. I don't have any judgment towards people who use the app. That's like an arbitrary thing that people have decided that the app's not as good. That's not the case for me. Alright?

Romans 12:9-13. Let's read it together. Yeah. Would you guys read with me, actually?

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

Let's pray.

Lord God, we sit under this passage of Scripture from Your Holy Word and we ask, Holy Spirit, that You would teach us so much from it this evening, that it might give us a clear picture of what the sincere love of Your Kingdom is like so that we would not just have an idea of what it's like, but that we would start embodying that love to our community groups, families, friends, loved ones, coworkers, any person who comes to mind who crosses our path, God. Make us sincere lovers in the style of Your Kingdom. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, in our text today, I believe that Paul is describing the style of love of God's Kingdom and it is marked by its sincerity and there's a tension built into this Scripture and that tension might feel jarring for the modern ear to take in this passage if we're being told to be sincere but also, at the same time, we have a list of commands that follow that. Right? So, there's a tension in my mind. Love must be sincere. And we already have a tendency, I think, as a culture. We love sincerity. We love authenticity. I think we live in an age of authenticity. And it comes through in the phrases that we use like "do you" or "just be yourself" or "live true to your heart." You know? These sort of phrases that are common among us.

And this is basically really common for us. I remember growing up, for me, I really was committed from a really young age to being – I was Matt. From a young age, I was committed. I didn't want anybody to tell me what to do ever. That was kind of my go-to thing. I was the youngest of three, and I enjoyed lots of privileges as the youngest child of three. So, I stayed the cutest the longest, which meant that I got extra presents from my grandma and these sorts of things. I got taken care of for way too long. I eventually had to tell people to stop taking care of me. Like, I need to be an independent man. Stop taking care of me, right?

But, there were also some things growing up where they weren't really privileges of being the youngest, and

that was the fact that over and over, repeatedly, I was the most likely target to be told what to do. So, not just by my parents, but my two older sisters. And like clockwork – it was like my catchphrase as if this were a sitcom that I was living in growing up – whenever I was told what to do, I would say, "You're not the boss of me."

And, you know, then the Full House theme song starts playing, right? "You're not the boss of me." Even at five, just curly-haired little Matt, I was so dedicated to – I wouldn't have used these words then – my autonomy; my independence. I didn't want anybody to tell me what to do. I was a unique individual. "Don't you dare tell me what to do."

The crazy thing about that is that sometimes I didn't want to be told what to do even when some of that stuff was so good for me and completely for my benefit. Right? And this is the tension that I think this Scripture invites us into. Because we're told to love sincerely, to live authentically in this sincere kind of love; to be true and to do it from the heart. And at the same time, we're told a bunch of commands. Commands not only about what to do, but maybe even how to think or how to feel, too. These are the sort of commands that we're given. And in this tension, there's actually an opportunity. This is the opportunity that – gosh, he's like my philosophical, theological superhero – Soren Kierkegaard writes about in "Works of Love."

He starts explaining how, sometimes, duty and command is what liberates our love. It's what liberates our love. So, when we read something like "love must be sincere" and then there's this list of commands, those commands exist in order to liberate our love. He explains it like this. So, he gives the example of romantic love and how when we love a significant other or a spouse, what we're loving in them is actually our preference for them. So, like, "I prefer this person." But, if I really prefer that person who I'm in love with, in a weird way, in a roundabout way, what I'm loving in them is actually what I choose, what I like. And in an odd way, it ends up becoming a little bit of self-love.

He writes, "The same holds true for friendship as of romantic love. In as much as this, too, is based on preference, to love this one person above all others, to love Him in contrast to all others, the Christian doctrine, on the contrary..." – this is what we're talking about. This is the sincere love that we're talking about tonight – "...is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and to make no exceptions neither of preference nor of aversion."

So, we don't even have the right to choose who we're going to love if we're going to love in the Christian style. We have to love, literally, every single person regardless of how much we prefer them or how much we have an aversion to them. These are the people who we're called to love. And this expression of love, it liberates us from the narrow focus of preferential love that could just so easily ensnare us. And instead, it tells us about a different style of love that's available to anybody at all times.

And in this way, it's actually the command that sets us free for this kind of love. Follow me on this. So, he continues on in this book that the divine command, something like, "You shall love your neighbor," that "shall" is the command aspect of it. Or even the commands that we have in our text today. These are the kinds of commands that set us free from a purely human form of love and call us into something a whole lot bigger than that.

He writes, "Wherever the purely human wants to storm forth, the commandment constrains. Wherever the purely human loses courage, the commandment strengthens. Wherever the purely human becomes tired and sagacious, the commandment inflames and gives wisdom. The commandment consumes and burns out of the unhealthiness in your love. But, through the commandment, you will in turn be able to rekindle it when it, humanly speaking, would cease."

So, right when we feel like we're at the end of our willingness to love, that's actually the ripe territory where we

know that we've hit the edge of our preference and we're getting to the point where it's just like, "I'm done with this person," that's where the command sustains us. This command, "You shall love your neighbor," in that way liberates us to love and liberates all of society to love. This is the kind of Christian love that we're talking about and Christians have practiced throughout millennia now.

And in this way, commands exist sort of like a trellis. So, just imagine we've got this big pot, we've planted a plant in it, it's growing. But, this vine is having trouble growing out of this pot. So, we put this trellis in and it's just this scaffolding of things for this vine to grow on. In the same way, commandments exist almost as scaffolding, as a trellis for us to grow on so that our love can further expand beyond what would have been possible without it. So, commands liberate us. They do so much for us. They liberate us from just preferential love to a love that's far more expansive.

If any of you are like me and you hear the word "command" and you're just like, "I'm not interested" — like, if I were you and I was hearing this sermon right now, I might be like, "I don't want to hear the word 'command' anymore. Thank you. I'm good as I am."

I just invite you to be open. Alright? There's sometimes a hesitance that we have when we're asked to submit to a command or a rule. But, there's this man and his name is Sadhu Sundar Singh. He was a Christian holy man in India. Just an incredible story, this guy. He grew up Sikh. He would burn the Bible. He was on the verge of taking his own life and he just said, "If there's anybody out there, I need a vision of who you are."

And then Jesus miraculously appears to this man. This is around the turn of the 20th century. And he dedicates his life to serving Jesus. But, he's an Indian man through and through. So, he takes on holy orders of Indian tradition, becomes a Sadhu, which is like a wandering holy man. So, he just wandered all over India and into Tibet as a holy man. Quite like Jesus, in that regard. He would make these observations about nature all around him and kind of glean the spiritual significance of these things. One day, he looked out and he watched these baby birds in a nest and their mom swoops in and she feeds them and they're just squawking and opening their beaks, and this is what he says:

"These tiny birds did not say, 'We will not open our beaks until we see our mother clearly and also see what kind of food she offers. Perhaps it is not our mother at all, but instead some dangerous enemy. And who knows if it is proper nourishment or some kind of poison that is being fed to us.' This is not what these birds are thinking. If they had reason thus, they would have never discovered the truth. But, they held no such doubts about the presence of love of their mother. So, after a few days, they opened their eyes and rejoiced to see her with them. Day by day, they grew stronger and devolved into the form and likeness of the mother. And soon, they are able to soar up into the freedom of the skies."

So, again, I invite you to take this posture of openness. I think these words, these commands, have the ability to nourish us in ways that we really, really, really need. And if we take them in, good things are going to happen. I promise. I promise. So, let's look at some of these commands. Let's do the first one. He says, "Hate what is evil and cling to what is good."

So, what does this have to do with sincere love? There's a classic definition of love that to love is to will the good of another. So, if I love this fellow right here, this gentleman, my brother right here, if I'm going to love him it means I need to really want what's good for him. Right? But, love and goodness, they're a package deal. Alright? So, if we don't have a vision for what is good, we also don't understand what is loving. Does that make sense? Yeah. And I mean, if we truly, truly want the best for a person, if we want what's good, if we want the stars for a person, we better know which way's up. Right? And in this way, to hate what is evil and cling to what is good is this command that grounds us in morality. This is a morality question. What is good? What is evil? And chances are we probably have a good sense of what's evil and what is good. I believe that, as a community of believers, we've got good background on that.

And at the same time, let's remain open. I feel like it's important for us to regularly recalibrate our moral compass, because the conscience is a malleable, fickle thing and sometimes it doesn't help us discern what is good and evil. So, we have to consistently return to "what is good and what is evil and what does God say is good and what does God say is evil?"

If we're going to do that, then we have to cling to God and we have to hate what is evil. So, what is evil according to the Scripture? I mean, I could go into nonstop nuance about this and give multiple sermons on this. But, here's just a couple of the fruits of evil. Things like death, destruction, hatred, indifference, deceit and rebellion against God. But, what is good according to the Scripture? God Himself is good and the source of things like abundance of life, truth, beauty, redemption, peace and compassion. And I want to highlight "redemption" there for a second. Because, redemption is the quality of seeing an evil thing and then being able to turn it into good.

So, this is the beautiful thing about God's goodness is that redemption is a component of it. So, that list of things that are biblically considered evil, they can be turned around into goodness. So, for example, death, if we look at it from a redeemed understanding, it has redemptive potential in things like sacrifice or the resurrection as exemplified in the life of Christ. These things, too, can be redeemed.

In the end, I guess what I'm asking for us to do and for us to consider as a community is if we're going to be sincere lovers in the way of God's Kingdom, we have to not be lazy about morality. We have to not be lazy about morality. If we're signing up for sincere love, we're signing up for discerning good and evil. The regular recalibration of our moral compass so that we know what is good and what is evil so that we can will what is good for other people. And we do this by clinging to goodness, which is God Himself, by understanding what He says about it in the Scripture and also by looking to the wisdom that exists in the world that God, by His grace, has put there to tell us what is good.

And we can be alert to this sort of goodness and regularly recalibrate our compass so that we can become really sincere lovers. So far, I've been talking in abstraction and, lest we think this is some sort of lecture or something, I want us to turn as quickly as possible to getting really, really practical. And it's going to get a little uncomfortable. Alright? Are you guys ready? It's going to get a little – alright, yes. Thank you. Alright.

Because, I'm talking about my life and your life. That's what we're talking about right now. We're talking about each other. I'm talking about you and me and the sort of love that we want to have in our community. So I think the remainder of the Scripture gives us some good handles on a few key questions. Who do we love? What is the state of our heart as we love? And then, lastly, how do we love? Right?

Who do we love? The text says be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. The "one another" highlights for us that this is something that's mutual. And we're not talking abstractions, so look to your left and your right. I'm actually asking you to do it, to actually look. Luckily, we're in this sort of horseshoe shape where you're constantly seeing each other. So, that's good. But, these flesh and blood people next to you, this is who we're talking about when we're commanded to love one another and honor one another above ourselves. We're not talking about some imaginary person, we're talking about the people in this room and beyond the walls of this room.

But, what's the state of our hearts as we love? The Scripture gives us some clues. It says, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord."

Zeal is sort of an odd word. I don't feel like we use that word very much these days. Fervor, either. We might prefer to call it something like passion. So, to keep passion alive. And the thing that I find really off-putting, if I'm honest, about this verse is that it's commanding me to feel a certain way. Alright? And this is where the "you're

not the boss of me" five-year-old wants to rear its head and just say, "You're not the boss of me, God," even though He actually is. And I want to say, "Don't tell me to be zealous when I don't feel like being zealous. Don't tell me to be fervent for You when I don't feel like it."

But, this is the good stuff. This is the good stuff that liberates us, liberates our love once again, because it takes us out of the realm of loving when we feel like it. So, it's not something that's based off of our mood, but instead based off of this existential commitment to a command that we know and we value and we've been given and it's a command from God. "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord."

If there's anybody I know who embodies zeal and fervor for the Lord, our C.G. Director, Nkechi, she absolutely does this. She's just a wonderful, wonderful woman. She's so fiery and animated all the time. She's just like an absolute joy to be around. And I just could sit at the feet of Nkechi just by watching her example and learn how to be zealous and fervent for God, how to be joyful and hopeful. So, I'd love to just tell you about zeal in her own words. This is what she wrote for me.

She says, "God's love is radical. We are instructed to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to not overcome evil with evil, but to overcome evil with good."

I hope you hear her passion in these words. I can't pull it off. I can't pull it off.

"In Paul's time, this kind of love was a political statement. It was radical, it was revolutionary and it served the needs of the saints. To love your enemy who persecuted you left them looking the fool. It defused the worldly powers from evil kings and put God's supernatural power in the hands of His believers. A society was changed. The early believers had proximity to Jesus to keep their zeal alive. We can't love this radical Jesus way in our own strength. We can only love this way by the Spirit of the Living God. It is our privilege as believers to keep that fire stoked, to protect His Spirit in us, to keep it aflame, to keep our zeal alive in order to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer."

And I hope you guys have people in your life who you can look to who embody that sort of zeal. You know, Nkechi's always ready to make more friends, too. She actually is. She's the most warm and welcoming person I've ever met in my life. And if you're looking for examples of people who are truly joyful, she's a person who God has trained in the ways of joy and zeal.

I want to definitely, though, acknowledge that some of us may not be feeling that. We don't feel this way. I don't want you to hear this as some sort of dogmatic command. That's actually not the kind of command that God gives. He doesn't give just dogma that doesn't care about who we are. His commands exist more as targets like goals to set up rather than something that completely abridges and ignores how we're feeling. That's not the way that God works. So, if, as I read this to you you're just like, "I don't have any passion for God or joy is basically not a word in my vocabulary. What is that?"

You're welcome. You're in the right spot. I hope that there is for you an opportunity just to open a conversation with God about that. That is the best thing that could happen and, in doing so, if you're faithful in prayer in that way, you still are doing exactly what God is asking.

The last thing that I think this passage really clarifies for us is "how do we love?" And it gives this answer as, "Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

If we're going to do this, we need to know who is in need. Right? If we're going to share with the people who are in need, then we need to know who is in need. And right now, we have this opportunity as a church community and also as we go beyond these walls to, as if putting up a radar, just kind of scanning, thinking, "Who are the people who are needy among us?"

Their needs can take any number of forms. But, we're called to have this sort of spiritual radar, this really practical radar. "What are the needs that exist in my community and how can I share with that person?"

If you find yourself as a needy person in this room, like maybe you're going through a lot, you're so in the right place. This is where we live, according to this command, and we share with the Lord's people who are in need. And I just ask for you to let your needs be known. That's the best thing that any person who's in need can do is say, "Hey, here's what I'm needing. Will you please help me?"

Likewise, if you don't find yourself in a particular place of need, to ask people like, "How are you doing? How can I help you? What's going on? Are you hitting some difficulty?"

Like, this is real practical. I'm giving real, practical suggestions, because this is our lives that we're talking about right now. Again, it's not theories we're talking about. I'm talking about real life with flesh and blood human beings and ways to really, practically do this stuff. And when we do this, it might take a couple shapes. It could be tangible stuff. Maybe giving money, helping financially. It could be very service oriented or maybe a person is just like, "Could you just spend some time with me and hear me out? That's what I need. That's the sort of support that I need."

I also want to say just one more thing about this: when we practice this form of love to share with those in need, sometimes it's easy if you're feeling like you're a person in need to think, "What do I have to offer people around me?" And I've experienced over and over in my life, the times where I'm in need are the times where I have to seek people out the most and also have that radar out for who are those in need around me. And the thing that – and this is the blessed paradox that is in the words of Christ: it's more blessed to give than to receive. That's where we get to see this at work and at play. If you feel like you're really in need, still look for those who are in need around you and think, "How can I be giving to these people?"

It might be exactly the sort of thing that sets you free. The Scripture also instructs us to practice hospitality. Hospitality is a central value to our church right now. I'm feeling super – like, you guys are super hospitable to me. Thank you. You're listening. I appreciate it. So, we embody these values. And one of the ways that we do that, the primary way, the way that we define it as a church is that when we practice hospitality, we make room for another person to be exactly who they are. To be exactly who God's made them to be. Total acceptance and tenderness in that.

One thing that I've found as hospitality really, really is visible in a community, it has a couple tells. For one thing, social posturing decreases. So, social posturing meaning wanting to look cool or competent. That goes down. And man, if I have trouble loving certain people – this is my growing edge – I have trouble loving people who are really posturing with coolness. That's my issue. Because, I think coolness is just like – don't get me started. Coolness is a thing that MTV invented in the 1990s to sell stuff. That's all I'll say.

So, if we stop posturing as cool or competent, it allows us to get vulnerable with each other and talk about what's actually happening in our lives. And also, this is my favorite thing about when hospitality is visible: people get a lot nerdier. A lot nerdier. Like, the quirks in people just come out because they feel safe and welcome to be themselves. It's just the most beautiful thing to watch a person just be a totally nerd. Yeah. Amen. Thank you. Thank you. Yes. Yes. Yeah.

And, as we are a hospitable community, we're going to see a whole lot more nerdiness happen. And, for example, I love board games so much. I've loved every Marvel movie that came out so much. I like Shakespeare so much that I went to SF Shakespeare in the Park two weekends in a row. So, these are the nerdy qualities about me. There's a variety of nerdy qualities about us. Some of us are business, entrepreneurship nerds. Like, you just want to be on Excel and look at org charts and read the latest stuff.

Some of you are total sports nerds. You're just all about your team and you read every article that comes out about your team. You know stats about players. You're like that level of nerdiness.

And, as soon as we can just let that be the case and just know that that's okay, that that's good, that's when we're going to be stepping out in hospitality and we're going to see so much more nerdiness come out. And I just want that really badly for our community. I want it so bad.

I've been really lucky to have two wonderful examples of this style of sincere love in my life who love non-preferentially, who know what's good and want good for people, who are willing to kind of passionately commit in love. It's my parents. One day, my dad called me up and he told me this story that blew my mind. I have to tell you guys about it.

So, they have this neighbor and, my mom and my dad, they've lived side by side with this couple for a long time; as long as I can remember. And this neighbor's husband was starting to have some health issues and it was kind of troubling. The medical expenses were rising. It was just like a sad, hard situation. Over the years prior to this, my dad had told them, "Hey, I like your pickup truck. If you're ever looking to sell your pickup truck, just let me know. I'd love to take it off your hands."

So, this neighbor goes to my dad and says, "We're looking to cover these medical expenses. We want to sell you the truck. So, just make an offer and we'll give it to you."

So, my dad and my mom, they meet up and they're just like, "Okay. We want this truck. That sounds like a good investment for us. But, we know that our neighbors are in need and we care about them. So, let's look up the fair value. But, let's shoot for the high end of fair value. We just want to really give to these people."

So, they go to their neighbor and they're like, "Hey, we want to give you this much."

And then the neighbor's just like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. That's way too much."

And then she lowballs them on the offer. Right? This isn't the way negotiation is supposed to work. And as my dad's telling me this over the phone I'm just like, "Dad, what are you telling me right now? I'm freaking out."

What happened was they were in this blessed haggling that was like the inversion of economics as we know it. Right? Where the goal isn't "how can I get the most by giving the least," the goal was "how can I be so giving to this person and so bless this person." That was the purpose. "How can I honor this person above myself?"

It has ramifications, this sort of love, and ramifications that are economic like this. Ramifications that are political. It plays out in family and friendships and roommate relationships. It plays out with strangers that you meet on the street. It plays out in who you're going to choose to befriend or who you're going to choose to date. It plays out in whether you're going to go for this big career advancement move or not. This is the sort of stuff that sincere love effects.

And you guys, I really want this. I really, really want this for us. If we could love this sincerely one another, oh my gosh. It's hard to imagine what would be possible. But Scripture, thank God, give us a picture of what would happen if this is possible. In the reading for advent – advent, by the way, is just a season of waiting and longing for God to return and make right all things. And this Scripture was part of our reading. It says, "The wolf will live with the lamb. The leopard will lie down with the goat. The calf and the lion and the yearling together. And a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear. Their young will lie down together. And the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobras' den and the young child will put its hand into the vipers' nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

If we were to so embody Christian love, this non-preferential love that knows what's good and wants that for everyone, if the knowledge of the Lord covered the earth, this is the sort of stuff that we would see. And this is a poetic image, but imagine for a moment if the most wolfish person among us was so at ease and in harmony and unity with the most delicate, gentle lamb among us. If the little child, what if our kids had no fear that they would stick their hands in the cobras' den, that they would have no fear. They don't have to fear where they go, what they do, because the knowledge of God has so pervaded the world and such sincere love has taken over.

And I hope that this can capture your imagination for what's possible. Because, this isn't just a message for the future. We're not talking theories, guys. Again, we're not talking theories and we're not talking about something that's far off. We're talking about something that's happening right now and that we practice as believers in Christ. This kind of sincere love right now. With the people in this room, with people at work we practice this sort of sincere love so that we see this kind of stuff happen. Such harmony and such unity. And it starts with how you and I sincerely love one another. So, we have to commit to these commands that liberate our love from just being for those that we prefer, but actually be for those that we have an aversion to, people that we really don't like. If we love them, then good stuff happens. We want what's good for them and we know what's good for them because we consistently, regularly recalibrate our moral compass to be in line with the way that God sees what is good, what is evil and what God defines as love.

And when we do all of this with passion and service to God, there's a sustaining sense of, "This is worth it. This is good. I can handle this. No matter how hard it gets, I know that this matters because it matters to God and God matters to me and this is why I'm driven to this beautiful goal."

You guys want to love like this? Are you up for that? I, again, am desperate to see this sort of stuff actually play out amongst us. To actually see it. And it happens when we choose to let it be so.

Let's pray.

Lord God, You are our instructor and our example of love, of perfect love, Jesus. You taught us exactly what it looks like and You exemplified it throughout Your life, including in Your death. And we pray that we would be a people who really practically, earnestly, honestly, sincerely love in this fashion and that it wouldn't just be something that we do when we feel like it, but that we'd do it even when we don't because we know that Your love that is a command liberates us to love beyond the scope of our natural vision.

So, God, we thank You for that. We continue to place ourselves at Your feet, Jesus, to learn from You. Teach us the way of love, God. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.