

CHOOSE GOODNESS

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Last Sunday, I spoke to you about “our job” for God: to learn to love one another in practical ways. It’s a BIG job! You don’t have what it takes. Until God Himself gives it to you.

Romans 5:5 For we know how dearly God loves us, because He has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with His love.

Christian salvation is not a philosophical concept; it is a daily relationship with the Living God through the Resurrected Christ. That’s why every believer receives the Holy Spirit. You can’t do this without Him.

He has come to live in you. He guides you into all truth. He teaches you what the Bible means. He reveals Christ in you. He empowers your life. He fills your heart with the Father’s love.

That’s *His* job! That’s why He has come to you. To FILL your heart with HIS love.

You can’t do this without Him!

You see, this life of Christian love is a calling from God. Just as He called you into His love, so He has called you to give His love away to others.

Last week, we heard from Peter’s pen. Today, we’ll hear from Paul. I think the family resemblance will become clear.

Really Love Them

Romans 12:9 Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. ¹¹ Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically.

¹² Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. ¹³ When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

“Really love them” should be the subtitle for this passage, because everything else trickles down from that plea.

If you really love them, you won’t “just pretend.” It won’t just be an outward show; it will be genuine, from the heart.

Your expressions of affection will be genuine. You will excel in showing respect for one another, with gratitude and joy.

If your love is real, you won't be lazy when hard work is needed, but will energetically serve the Lord.

Our confident hope in the Risen Savior will be a continual source of joy, of patience, and of persistent prayer.

When you really love God's people, you will be ready to help them, and eager to embrace them.

Eugene Peterson, author of The Message translation (may he rest in peace, for he left this world for the next last week), put it this way:

Romans 12:9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

11-13 Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

Love Does Good

If the essential nature of love is authenticity, as the above passage indicates, then the essential expression of love is goodness, as the next eight verses show.

Read them with me, or else, please listen closely as I read them to you.

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

"Bless and don't curse." Why does God have to tell us this? Because we have serious problems with this practice!

Apostle James was very clear about this:

James 3:9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. ¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

How can that habit be loving?

“But they’re not being loving *to me!*” you will say. Agreed. It is not loving to persecute a brother or sister. We’re probably most familiar with this kind of mistreatment within our nuclear families, where young siblings seem to naturally persecute each other. You might think that people would grow out of such behavior, but instead, we seem to develop adult methods and rationale for maintaining childish behavior.

But if you want people to stop persecuting you, cursing them is not the answer. That is stooping to their level, trading tit for tat. Cursing adds fuel to the fire. Only genuine blessing can snuff out the flame of persecution.

This is what makes Biblical Christianity so radically different than other religions. Jesus didn’t tell us to “just take it” when people treat you poorly, but to overcome it!

How do you do that? Simple: ask God to bless them. Pray for your persecutors, that God will bless them, that God will make them supremely happy.

I know you don’t think they deserve it; and you’re right, they don’t. But we’re not asking God to give them what they deserve; we’re asking Him to do so much more than that. We’re asking God to give them much more than they deserve. Give them overflowing joy!

Why would we do that? Because joy will soften their hearts, brighten their thoughts, and sweeten their attitude. After all, it’s usually hurting people who hurt others.

You see, the love of God is GOOD. When you’re full of His love, you will think good thoughts, say good things, and do good to others.

When others are made glad, you will rejoice with them, instead of envying them. And when others are made sad, you will share their sorrow, instead of gloating. Goodness doesn’t envy or gloat.

God’s love mends torn relationships and harmonizes our differences.

Please note that it does not *eliminate* our differences.

Our differences were *designed* by God; He made us. Our differences only become problematic when there is discord among us.

Let me illustrate: Most pianos have 88 keys, both white and black. 88! There should be room for discord there, and there is. But the same keys played properly create harmonious chords.

Harmonious notes = a chord = accord

It is not our differences that make trouble, but our *attitudes* about our differences. With a bad attitude, almost anything can become a source of irritation.

Romans 12:14 Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

Pride makes for bad attitudes. And who likes a know-it-all?

If you're going to obey the Word of God and "*live in harmony with each other,*" you need to cast off your pride and its bad attitudes. You need to learn to "*enjoy the company of ordinary people.*"

I don't know who comes to mind when you think of "ordinary people," but they will be the opposite of "special" or "preferred." They're not the people whom you think can enrich you or do you favors. They won't be the coolest people, or the most popular, and they probably can't offer you any social advantage.

But if you'll climb down off your high horse, you can learn to enjoy their company. And when you do, your fellowship with Jesus will improve, because He loves to hang with people like that.

The Pharisees berated Jesus for hanging out with "tax collectors and sinners." They thought He was uncool because of the friends He chose. But only another Pharisee would care what a Pharisee thinks. I don't want to be like them! I want to be like Jesus, who went about doing good (Acts 10:38).

How good is God? Can we measure it? God's goodness is measured by how He treats His enemies. Your goodness is measured the same way.

That's why Jesus said:

Luke 6:27 "To you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you.

Everyone here, at one time or another, has considered himself or herself "good enough" to get into Heaven. Because we measured our goodness by acts of kindness toward our family and friends. We were good to those who were good to us.

Jesus spoke very directly to such thinking:

Luke 6:32 "If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them!"³³ And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much!"³⁴ And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.

We are to measure our goodness by how we treat our enemies.

Romans 12:17 Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.¹⁸ Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord.

²⁰ Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads."

²¹ Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

Measure your goodness by how you treat your enemies.

Your One Obligation

Romans 13:8 Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law.

Philippians 2:1–4; MSG If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care—then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

⁵ Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.

Everything Jesus asks of us, He already did for us. God is so good! That's why we praise Him! That's why we sing of His goodness. And that's why we offer Him our everything.

Would you give Him your everything today? Today is a day for repentance and surrender.

Offer yourself today to the Lord Jesus Christ as a Living and Holy Sacrifice. Choose goodness.