Romans 12:9 & 21

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests: A much appreciated theme in Scripture is love. Love: how does one describe it? You can only do that by means of illustrations and examples. To understand what love is, don't turn to a dictionary or an encyclopedia. Rather, read some poems a good novel, watch a good film.

Well-known is the word of Scripture that speaks of the measure of God's love: God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son in order to bring about reconciliation between God and man. We read of the love which that Son has for those who are His. On the night before He was crucified for us, in the presence of His disciples, His loyal followers, our Saviour directed a prayer to His Father. He prays for His disciples, that they may remain close to the truth of God, that they may be united together, that love will abide in their midst. Love. Which love? The closing words of the prayer are clear: “I have made You known to them in order that the love You have for Me may be in them and that I Myself may be in them.” The point is that all those who have faith in Jesus the Christ are to have the same love in them with which God the Father loves His own, only Son. Christ prayed that the love of God might dwell in us. Our Lord prays that His followers might be mirror images of God: Involved with everything about them as God is involved. The Father’s love, which is so great, that He sent His own only Son to the earth. The love of Jesus Christ, which is so great, that He gave His own life for the redemption of humanity from God's anger. That love, that involvement, that affection, that is what the Lord Jesus prayed about the evening before He died. Our love for God and for the Christ. Our love for all that is God’s: this world and God’s people, the church.

It stands to reason that love is a much appreciated theme among Christians. Love is to be characteristic for upright Christians. The service of God's children may be described as a service of love. Indeed, love is probably the quintessence of being a Christian. Quintessence: the most essential thing. After all, is not God’s will for our lives to love God above all else and to love our neighbour as ourselves?

No wonder the subject receives a mention in Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans 1 through 11 is about various matters in relation to doctrine. It's the theoretical part of this epistle. In Romans 12 Paul turns to more practical issues. And he begins with our service of God, how God enables us to serve God through the various gifts which we’ve been given. And in all of this, love is to stand central. Love must be sincere. That is most certainly a message from God for today's world.

Let us listen to God's Word with this theme: God calls us to sincere love. In doing so we pay attention to (1) The theory of love; (2) The practice of love; and (3) The result of love.

First, the theory of love.

Man was created to form a community. When God had created Adam He indicated that it was not good for man to be alone. Someone else was needed. Just as God consists in a plurality of persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – so man has to exist in a plurality of persons – man and woman. A man and a woman who, through physical union, would give birth to new people. Man and woman, parents and children, and thus a community, thus society came to be.
A community in which love could be given form. Love is closely related to community, to togetherness, to having concern for each other. We exist to offer each other a helping hand in developing this world. People complement each other, and together they form a mosaic of acts of love. A mosaic in which God's love is mirrored in different ways. For indeed, when it comes down to it, it's all about God's love.

You could ask the question, which has priority? Forming a community, or showing love? Did God create a community so that there might be love? Or did God create love so that there might be a good community? Maybe you find the question a little philosophical. But it's an important one. For it determines how you act. When choices have to be made, choices between love and community, how do you choose? Allow me to make this clear with an illustration.

Think of marriage. A married couple form a community in which love plays a central role. How should we act in a situation of marriage breakdown? When, for example, the love between husband and wife cools, and love becomes focussed on a third party. Should one follow the lead of love and break the community of married husband and wife? Or should one put priority on the community of married husband and wife and view love as a lost cause? Do you save the community – the marriage – or the love – the new relationship?

God points us to a third way. The dilemma is, in a sense, false. It's not a case of love or community. But of love and community. A marriage breaks down because there is no love. There is no love because the marriage does not function. There is an interplay here. Both are needed. God requires that we make work of both love and community.

The illustration of love and communion in marriage can be applied to life in general. Love is the road to togetherness and togetherness is the road to love. Not just within a marriage. But also in a family. Also in society. Also in the church.

If people have no affection for each other, no concern for each other, they do not form a community. Love is to a community what cement is to a brick wall or glue is to ply-wood. Without cement, a wall of ordinary bricks will soon cave in. Without glue, plywood sheets will separate. Love keeps a community together. Apply this, for example to the church. If love is absent – the love of God, the love of brothers and sisters for each other – then church members will each go their own way.

The opposite is also true. If there is no community, then people have no affection for each other. Forming a community is to society and to the church what the bond of blood is for a family. Friends may come and go. Family does not. Even if oceans separate you. It is the sense of community that makes people look out for each other. It is a sense of belonging together that causes people to love each other.

Love and togetherness, there is an interplay here. Love is the means to togetherness, togetherness is the means to love.

How can this third way be made to work? “Made to work” is maybe not the best way of saying it, but it works because it is carried by an underlying love of God for us and of us for God. It’s because God has made our lives at bottom all about love that we can work on love and togetherness in inter-human relationships. For Christians, if lack of love or lack of togetherness causes stress in a relationship, be it marital, family, or church, it is love for God which will help restore it. And if things do not get better, it is important for Christians to seriously look at their love for God, for Christ. Is their love for God true love, God-centred love? Or is it a false love, self-centred love, in which God has to serve “me”? 
God instructs us that our love should be *sincere*. Sincere. Boys and girls, letters often end with “yours sincerely.” That’s a way of saying, I really mean what I write. Let your love be of the sort “I mean it.” It's got to be real love, not fake love. Don't pretend to feel something for each other when you don't. If a community is to function well, love must be present. You can be a community a hundred times over, but it is love which colors the community, gives it a tune, gives it substance. Without love, without affection, a community becomes an empty form, and will eventually fade away. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 – I paraphrase – if I was everything, but had no love, I would be nothing. Love: we exist for each other, not just for ourselves. Other-centredness, God-centredness, that's what sincere love is all about.

This love is something wonderful.

This love calls togetherness into being. She is an enemy of loneliness. There's a lot of loneliness today. Loneliness which is a direct result of individualism. It's all “me, me, me” today. Evolutionism taught the world “survival of the fittest” and life has become a battle in which only the strongest survive. Everybody fights their own battle and the world is mighty a lonely place. Love is an enemy of loneliness. Love seeks to protect.

Indeed, love leads to contentment, to satisfaction. For loneliness is often the result of self-centredness. The self-centredness of someone else, and you have become its victim. Or your own self-centredness. You're so busy with your own life, achieving your own goals, you lose your friends and family. And when you finally have all your heart desires, you discover you're on your own, and there is no pleasure in these things. There is no satisfaction. Satisfaction is only gained through love. While love itself is never satisfied – there is always more to love – love gives satisfaction. It does not lead to boredom but to activity. Your joy is not what you achieve and receive, but what you may give to others.

Contentment, satisfaction. That's probably one of the most sought after things in life today. Today we have it so good, so much better than a generation or two ago. The elderly among us look with amazement at the world their activities after the Second World War produced. But has it made people happier? Are people more satisfied today than they were fifty years ago? More holidays, more mobility, more possibilities in the field of communication, all sorts of education programmes? We are learning a lesson other rich civilizations before us have learnt: welfare leads to boredom. True satisfaction is not found in achievements, products, but in actions, processes. True contentment is found in the love that is typical for a close-knit community.

Love must be sincere. Brothers and sisters, this is clearly not the sappy love of penny novels. An emotion of affection, of cosiness and cuddling up together on a couch. Nor is it the love of beginning relationships, of puppy love, of fuzzy feelings in your stomach. This love is different. This is the love of being loyal in good days and bad, in health and sickness, in riches and poverty. True love is like sports or work. Love means using your common sense to make the right choices: what shall I direct my love at. Love means doing all you can to make it last: how can I be loyal, faithful. Paul puts it as follows “Hate what is evil; clinging to what is good.” Love is hating what is evil, clinging to what is good. Love is not something of a moment, or a shorter period. It's something that will keep you busy all the time. Love, brothers and sisters, is not a noun, it's a verb. Love is not something you have but something you do. Love is not something you feel, it's something we are called to. Love God, love your neighbour.

*Love is something you do. It's a verb. Let us look at the practice of love.*
One commentary describes Romans 12:9-21 as a mosaic of descriptions of love. It's a list of images which display different sides of love. A list with a certain logic. It would take us too long for the purpose of this morning to run through that list. I'd like us to pay closer attention to two things in the list.

The first is verse 11: “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Love is like fire. It flares up. You go for it. You’re zealous and you want to go, go, go. But then you meet a cold shoulder. Love asks more than you expected. You meet up with people who kill your zeal, you run aground in structures that make you wonder why you even bothered. Paul knew all about this. What should you then do? Give up? Shrug your shoulders? Vote with your feet? No, for that would be detrimental to the community. That would be a breakdown in togetherness. Never be lacking in zeal. Keep pouring in your energy. But won't this kill a person? Isn't this asking for a burn-out? It depends on where you seek your energy. Paul writes: keep your spiritual fervor. Translations (NIV, ESV, NKJV) tend to make this refer to the spirit of man. It is as possible to see “Spirit” here is a reference to the Holy Spirit – the ESV points this out in a footnote. One might translate here, “let the Spirit fire you up and serve the Lord.” Our activities are not done in our own strength. Seize the opportunities the Holy Spirit gives, employ your gifts as the Spirit has given them to you. And serve – not yourself – but the Lord. Be focused, not on yourself but on Christ. Seek, not your own will but God's will. Listen to what Scripture says. Listen to what God’s people say. Don't be self-willed, opinionated. No, be in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:25) in the service of the Lord. That is what sincere love is all about: your efforts for the other, and ultimately for the sake of God.

A second matter I'd like to point to is found in verse 18. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” The purpose of our lives as Christians is peace. Peace, in the Biblical sense of the term, shalom, is more than the absence of strife and war. Peace is about being satisfied, about being content. Strive to live at peace with everyone, be it people outside the church or inside the church. As far as it depends on you. Another can make it impossible for you to live in peace. But you are not to be the reason that peace, contentment, has become impossible. Where strife exists, be prepared to be reconciled. Always be ready to make up. Where feelings of revenge exist, leave that to the Lord. Seek peace: that is an act of love.

One can speak many beautiful words about love. Maybe some of you are thinking: this is too nice, too beautiful, unattainable. This is not reality. It never has been. Will it ever be? Even when we try, give it our all, it just doesn't work. Look at our relationships. Look at our society. Look at our church community.

Why is it this way? Why is it that our efforts seem to bear so little fruit?

In answer to that, a first question that should be asked concerns the sincerity of our love. Is our love the love of self-denial. Is it patient and kind? Does it always protect, always trust, always hope, always persevere? Is it focussed, ultimately, on God and His Christ? That’s a first.

But even if the focus of our love is right and our love is sincere, we still may not achieve what we should. Something that may help us here is the following. Love is an attitude, a feeling within, that wants to be noticed. Love has everything to do with communication. Thus love is related to language. The spoken word, the touch, the act. And because love has everything to do with communication, the giver and receiver of love must be tuned in to each other. If they are not, there will be static on the line.
It's true for a marriage. Think of a couple where the husband shows his love by buying his wife all sorts of presents. Flowers, chocolates, that sort of thing. While the wife, a bit of a penny-pincher, shows her love by spending time with her husband. Having coffee and your meals together as often as possible. Can you imagine how their relationship may be put under strain? The husband puts in long days, for it takes money to buy gifts. As a result, he's rarely home for meals. The wife may think “My husband doesn’t love me.” And the wife, thrifty in her spending, never buys her husband presents. She's thinks it's a waste of money. The husband may well think, “My wife doesn't love me.” But it’s not true. There is miscommunication here. A misunderstanding with far-reaching consequences. These two people do love each other, but they’re not tuned in to each other.

Brothers and sisters, I’m telling this, for it’s not only true for marriage. The thing is, everyone gets this well. But I’m telling it, because the same sort of thing happens in a church. For some, being a church community is a sense of togetherness. You share in experiences, enjoy something together. These are the people that attend Bible-studies, congregational meetings, a school fund raiser, etc. There are also people for whom being a church is all about achieving something, doing something. These are people that tend to be involved with outreach activities. Help out at Cyrus Centre, in a Thrift Store, do a Mission Trip to Mexico. And with our busy schedules these days it may well happen that these two people only really meet each other in the worship service. It has been my experience that such people at times wonder about the faith life of the other. “You don't really love God, for you were not at League Day.” “You don't really love God, for you're going on holidays instead of helping out with Stepping Stones.” I would wish, brothers and sisters, that you’d be as privileged as I am to see all the works of love and faith that happen in our midst, though never recorded anywhere, other than noticed by God. It hurts me to see how often miscommunication is the reason that our zeal for love deplete and our sense of togetherness wanes. It’s just not true that lack of love is always the problem. Often we do not notice each other's expression of love.

Love must be sincere. There's more to that than “really mean what you do.” It's also a matter of “learn to understand each other’s expression of love.” Don't gauge each other by how you show your love for God and your neighbour. The husband who buys his wife flowers every week most likely loves his wife. But the husband who only buys his wife flowers on her birthday, and may even forget one year, may love his wife just as much.

Let's not forget, we all have different gifts according to the grace given us. You can read about that in Romans 12:1-8. We all have our strong sides and our weak sides. Let's use our strong sides to help others. And let’s be prepared to receive assistance with respect to our weak sides. That is what being a community is all about. When you help each other. Adam received Eve from the Lord as a help-meet. We confess that our help is in the Name of the Lord. Help, in reference to Eve and to the Lord it’s exactly the same word. Let’s help each other. That’s what togetherness is all about, that’s how you show your love.

What does this love produce? In closing we look at the result of love.

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Those are Paul's closing words on the topic of sincere love.
These words speak, first of all, of the work of Christ. “Do not be overcome by evil.” This implies that you have been set free from evil. Here is the practical outworking of Romans 6: freed from the rule of sin. Our initial situation is not a bad one but a good one. Christ has rescued us from the power of sin. We have been liberated to form a new community, the community of Christ. We may form a new body, of which Christ is the head. He is our prime example, it is His love we are to imitate. And it is His love for us and our love for Him that drives us. That’s why we are called to avoid evil. Evil leads to loneliness. Leads to emptiness, to boredom. Leads away from Christ and from God. Do not return to the self-centredness that killed Adam and Eve, that had humanity fall into sin and misery.

On the contrary, fight off evil by doing good. Conquer self-centredness with self-denial. Conquer love of the self with love for others. Love for God, love for Christ, and thus love for each other. Look out for others, and let others find you so they can express their love. Form a communion, seek togetherness, let that be first. That will give you the energy to go on. If everybody digs themselves in, all our energy will be spent on battling each other. We'll quickly tire and droop off. But if all look out for the interests of others, if there is room in your lives for others, then there will be joy when love finds an echo. Brothers and sisters, love is like sport. It takes energy, but it gives you energy.

And what if our love is not returned? Paul writes how we are to deal with our enemies. Show him your love, and you will heap burning coals on his head. Burning coals, not in the sense of vengeance. But in the sense of: he will glow red with shame. Showing unconditional love will eventually lead to respect and appreciation. I think here of the many priests and Pharisees who scorned our Lord Jesus Christ, and later came to love Him, to appreciate Him and respect Him. Indeed, Paul, the human author of our text, was one such person. All his life his former attitude embarrassed him “I am the chief of sinners.” And God granted him the grace of faith. It is by love that God draws in those who are destined for eternal life. Hence, let us give love all the room it needs.

**God calls us to sincere love.** This is not easy. God is love. Thus we, who are to image God, are to be love. That’s only possible if we remain in Christ. We will run up against the limits of our abilities time and again. Our love will undoubtedly wane. We may tire. If that happens, go back to the cross. Listen to the prayer which our Lord prayed, John 17. Beg for forgiveness, pray for strength. And stand up, to give your love and receive your love.

Let your love be sincere. The love of God, proven to us in Christ. The love of Christ, that lives in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit. A love which may come to expression in the fact that we form a community, the body of Christ, the church of God. Let us give it our all so that we may receive peace, the peace that truly satisfies. Without love, we are nothing. With love, we can be everything.

Amen.