

Dear Friends in Christ,

I looked up the definition of the word “**love**” in the *Merriam/Webster Dictionary* online and the Oxford Dictionary and one other. “Love” was defined as *personal affection, as a desire, as benevolent*, but the definition of love that St. Paul gives us today was not present. Love for your enemies or those who don’t love you, was not given. Love was not defined as “grace” any of the three dictionaries.

*Merriam-Webster* is not alone. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day also believed that you didn’t need to love your enemies. The Pharisees defined love in this way, “**Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.**” Jesus and St. Paul disagree.

We get our definition from the same sources as the Pharisees. We learn the definition of love at home and at church. Could we also have it wrong? Let’s look at what St. Paul teaches us in Romans 12. He speaks of **Merciful Christian Love**. It is a love that goes beyond loving those that are easy to love. We too want to practice **merciful Christian love**.

### **1. It is displayed in actions toward believers.**

St. Paul speaks first of love which is displayed in actions toward believers. A. If we are to show love we must know what Christian love is. The Apostle describes love as: **sincere, devoted, zealous**.

1. When I hear “**sincere**.” I think of something that is the opposite of hypocrite. But Paul defines “**sincere**” this way, “**Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.**”

In the Old Testament reading David hated the idea of killing wicked King Saul. Since God had put Saul on the throne David clung to and wouldn’t let go of the idea that there was something good about Saul’s reign. As a result the loving thing to do was to spare his life and to be **devoted** by honoring him as King of Israel. David did all of this even though Saul was trying to murder him and didn’t deserve his love or loyalty.

2. How was David able to do this? The answer was he was **zealous** or serious about serving the Lord. That meant honoring and serving the Lord’s king, who was Saul. The way David kept his zeal up was by being in contact with the Word of the Lord. In Psalm 19 he writes, “**The law of the Lord is**

**perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.”** By “law” here he means the Word. It refreshed him. It made him wise. David displayed his love for Saul in the right way.

B. St. Paul continues with a series of short, choppy sentences that give us a list. The list suggests to me that if we are to love, we must be focused.

1. First we focus on the Lord. There are three things that the Lord gives you and I as we focus on him. We are **joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** The Lord has given us joy and hope in our salvation. We have not always loved God. The Lord God loved us and gave Jesus up to die for our sins. Because we have hope then we are patient in affliction. Since we don't want our afflictions or troubles to continue we faithfully pray for the Lord's help knowing that he hears and answers our prayers.

2. Helped by the Lord we focus on others. Two things we do: 1) We share with those in need. 2) We practice hospitality. These are common situations that you and I run into. They are opportunities to display love. When someone needs help, if we can help, we do. If they need help, but it is beyond our ability, we pray for them. In Paul's day brothers and sisters in faith traveled to conduct business. Paul wanted the local believers to receive them and show hospitality. As many brothers and sisters in faith come down for the winter, our church shows hospitality and invites them to join us. Paul's suggestions are only a start. He wants us to think of other ways to display our love.

Application: The David and Saul story reminds us that sharp conflict can happen in the church. When St. Paul wrote to the Philippian church he pleaded with Euodia and Syntyche to be of the same mind. There was some conflict there. We should not be taken by complete surprise when there are conflicts among believers today.

St. Paul points out in Romans 12 that we can love if we hate what is evil and cling to what is good. The only way we can do that is like David we focus on the Lord who gives us hope and patience. He makes us devoted to helping those in need.

I have many stories I could share. Years ago in Tempe I went to give Communion to a husband and wife. She was in poor health due to Alzheimers. She would be rather sharp with him. He took care of her day after day without complaint. This had gone on for quite some time. In his humble and loving manner, you could see Jesus. The Lord's love for him

strengthened him, to take good care of her. So the Lord will strengthen you and me to love and do whatever he needs us to do.

We might be comfortable doing this for a spouse, a fellow believer. What about an un-believer or even an enemy? Paul has an answer.

## **2. It is displayed in actions toward unbelievers.**

We are to love those who are unbelievers and love even our enemies. We display love in our actions towards these people.

A. St. Paul has a list for us again in verses 14-16 of how we can do this.

1. We are to bless and not curse our enemies. As we hear of people going through life, we pray for the Lord's blessing, rather than wishing misfortune on them. We can tell them as they are taking their kids to their first day of school or they are headed to the hospital for surgery, "I am praying for you. I hope all goes well."

2. We can empathize with them. If our neighbors or our enemies kids are graduating from school we rejoice with them and maybe send them a card. If they lose a loved one, we express our condolences.

3. Finally St. Paul says we should live in harmony with them and be willing to associate with them. This may not be easy, but love finds a way.

Application: This stands in sharp contrast to our world which cheers when bad things happen to their enemies and they mourn when good things happen. Christians should stand out like a sore thumb in the world. This is a part of God's plan that we are light in a dark world. Through us his love shines.

The Lord has a goal in all of this. It is stated in verse 21.

### **B. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (21)**

This is the plan, overcome evil with good.

1. St. Paul tells us that the best way to do this is to avoid going after revenge, but instead seeking peace as much as possible. If we do what is right and seek peace, it gives an enemy less reason to be an enemy. We might say, "*Some people just want to make trouble.*" Paul advises that we let the Lord take care of any justice. It is his job to repay evil.

2. The Lord has something else in mind. When we repay evil with good, he says it "**heaps coals on their head.**" Coals are hot. What the Lord causes to happen is that their conscience starts to burn. They feel bad repaying our good with evil. The Lord will call them to repent and they may repent and look to God for forgiveness and mercy. God wants to save them. Yes, even our enemies.

Remember Jesus' words in Luke 23:34 when he was on the cross. They had nailed him to a cross and then played dice in front of him for the last of his personal possessions. But he said, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"

Jesus words could just as well be for us. When we sin we don't understand how we are hurting others and we are defying a holy God. Yet Jesus did not repay us with evil, but he died on the cross for our sins. When we run to him crying for forgiveness. He is there to calm our anxious hearts and assure us that all is forgiven.

That enemy, that person causing us trouble may very well have an anxious heart at night. He may be terrified of dying and facing God. The Lord may give us the privilege of telling that person, "*Don't worry your sins are forgiven in Jesus. I forgive you.*" If it does happen, it is the best thing that could ever happen to them. The Lord uses us as his instrument of divine love.

Conclusion: Please consider taking some time to read 1 Samuel 26 again this week. It is a great example of what St. Paul is talking about. David had an enemy in Saul which probably is more powerful and dangerous than you and I will ever have to deal with. David shows us how we are to treat our enemies. We love and respect and if necessary keep our distance. We don't have to be best friends, but we can show love and respect and live in peace as much as possible. Our love is Merciful Christian love. Jesus, our Savior who loved even his enemies empowered us to display this kind of love. Amen.