

I. **Read Romans 12:9-21**

II. Wrapping up sermon series on change and transformation

1. **Surrender**
2. **Action**
3. **Power**
4. **Character**
5. **Relationships**

II. Our faith is not just about us and God . . . Our faith is also about us, we . . . there is a deeply communal aspect to our faith.

- a. **Creation (Genesis)** – Adam and Eve created to be together (mirroring trinity in relationship)
 - i. Genesis 2:18
- b. **God chose a people in Israel** (set apart to live together) to be a witness to the nations
 - i. Genesis 12:1-2
- c. **Jesus chose 12 disciples to teach, train and to live with him in community**
 - i. Matthew 4:19
 - ii. Matthew 18:20
- d. **The early church met in homes of smaller groups of people that lived life together**
 - i. Acts 2:42-47

III. **Perhaps more than anything else, our world deeply needs faithful people to model relationships.**

1. When researchers look at what distinguishes quite happy people from less happy people, one factor consistently separates those two groups. It is not how much money you have; it is not your health, security, attractiveness, IQ, or career success. **What distinguishes consistently happier people from less happy people is the presence of rich, deep, joy-producing, life-changing, meaningful relationships.**
2. Social researcher Robert Putnam writes, **“The single most common finding from a half-century's research on life satisfaction, not only from the U.S., but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections.”**
3. Emotionally, isolated people are more prone to depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, substance abuse, sexual addiction, and difficulties with eating and sleeping.
 - I. When scientists have done studies on animals one of the most damaging things to health and well-being is isolation. That is why it can be used as a torture device. That is why when couples have been married for a long time and one spouse dies, the other dies soon after.
4. **The problem in our culture though is that our world has confused being connected with someone with having friends. When we talk about biblical relationships, the issue is not how many people we know, but who do we truly love and who loves us.**

IV. **Show cultural slides.**

V. Our passage this morning begins with **“Love must be sincere.”**

1. We are commanded to love God and to love our neighbors. We love God and we love each other. **But that love must be sincere (not hypocritical).**
 1. Our statement of love, or our commitment to the Great Commandment, must be affirmed by our actions. Love is a commitment. We must demonstrate our love through our commitment to God and other people.

1. **One of the primary obstacles to us truly loving others in our world today is that our enormous world has been made to seem smaller.** And so we spend time talking about how much we love hypothetical people. For instance, we want to say that we love the homeless, or immigrants, or widows and orphans, or some other representative group needing love, but we have no relationship with them. We cannot be sincere in loving everyone at work if we don't start by loving the guy that sits next to us. And we can't be sincere in loving those struggling in our community unless we start loving our neighbor who has cancer.
2. **It is hypocrisy for us, God's people, to say that we are a loving people and yet not demonstrate that love, that commitment, to the people that we are in contact with on a daily basis.**
3. **What does love look like in relationship?**
 1. **Vs. 9-13.**

VI. **One of the most pervasive ways that we are hypocritical, or not sincere, in our love is through gossip.** Gossip seems harmless, but it is a pervasive problem in our world and also amongst Christians. Our talk about others, especially our negative talk about others, forms our minds and hearts in negative ways.

1. **The Bible is clear** on the fact that we are to use our tongues for good rather than evil. James says that those who keep their tongues in check control both spirit and body. Paul says in Ephesians 4:29, **“Let no evil come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”**
2. **The problem with gossip is that in gossiping about someone we immediately push them outside of the means of relationship. We feel comfortable saying something negative about another without the sincere love necessary to go and speak to them personally.** And as we allow these negative feelings and comments to fester, we find ourselves in friendships or groups of people where the majority of our time together is characterized by talking about people. And our negativity and separateness grows.
3. **When we have something negative to say about someone, the Bible gives us an explicit method for dealing with it.**
 1. Matthew 18:15-17. **“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”**
 2. **That is sincere love because it desires what is best for the other and not ourselves.** We do not get the satisfaction immediately of someone else affirming our negative feelings, without first having invested our time in trying to deal with it. If we aren't willing to personally confront someone, we don't have the right to speak negatively about them.
 3. Deitrich Bonhoeffer says, **“Where the discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the start, individuals will make an amazing discovery. They will be able to stop constantly keeping an eye on others, judging them, condemning them, and putting them in their places and thus doing violence to them.”**
 1. And Bonhoeffer, I think, makes a good connection to creation when he talks about gossip. He points out that when sin is not involved, yet we speak negatively about another, we **do not permit them to live freely** as God

created. Bonhoeffer says, **“God does not want me to mold others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in their freedom from me, God made other people in God's own image. I can never know in advance how God's image should appear in others. That image always takes on a completely new and unique form whose origin is found solely in God's free and sovereign act of creation. To me that form may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every person in the image of God . . . ”**

2. **In sincerely loving others, our view of that person expands and we can begin to see the richness of God's creative genius.** God did not make others as I would have made them. As we speak less negatively, others become an occasion for us to rejoice, whereas before others were only a nuisance and trouble for us.
3. **“Hate what is evil and cling to what is good.”**
4. Remember Ephesians 4:29, **“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.”**

VII. Another thing that comes out of reflection on this passage is a deep need to listen.

1. If we are to sincerely love others, we have to learn to truly listen to them. But we cannot listen to others until we are ready to think less about ourselves.
2. **Just as our relationship with God begins by listening to His Word, our deep relationships with each other begin by listening to each other.**
3. Christians who can no longer listen to one another will soon no longer be listening to God either; they will always be talking, even in the presence of God. **Those who think their time is too precious to spend listening will never really have time for God and others, but only for themselves and for their own words and plans.**
 1. There is also a kind of listening with half an ear that presume already to know what the other person has to say.
 2. There is also a kind of listening that cares more about our evaluation of what is being said than about listening to another's authentic sharing.
4. **The person who has really listened to others is the very one who can easily stop talking.**

VIII. The last thing I want to emphasize about how our relationships are transformed by Christ is through what our passage refers to in vs. 14-21. (Read 14-21)

1. Vs. 15-16.
2. Galatians 6:2 says it even more clearly, **“Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”**
3. In Christianity, those that we sincerely love become a burden to us.
 1. In our culture, this is a direct attack on our independence. We want to care for others by maintaining a certain level of protection from their pain or struggle.
 2. In relationships in our culture, the other person never becomes a burden. They simply stay clear of every burden the other person may create in them.
 3. But Christians must bear the burden for one another. They must suffer and endure one another. Only as a burden is the other really a brother or sister and not just an object to be controlled.
 4. Jesus Christ modeled burden carrying for us. He sacrificed by taking upon himself our burden of sin. He did not just say that he cared for us or loved us, he literally took our pain upon himself and carried it for us. God maintained relationship with us by suffering and enduring our pain.

1. It is like how a mother carries her child or a shepherd cares for his sheep. There is pain and sacrifice wrapped up in their love. Yet there is no more intimate relationship.
 1. Again, though, quantity makes this more difficult, if not impossible. We are talking here about quality far outweighing quantity.
 2. Henry Nouwen says, "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

Sources Consulted:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible. Minneapolis, Minnesota: First Fortress Press, 2005.

Ortberg, John. The Me I Want To Be. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2010.