

The Highest Love

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Introduction

All track and field events are difficult, simply because in every event, all the athletes do all they can in order to win. That ends up with the same enormous effort being required in every case in order to become the champion. Whether it is in throwing, jumping or running, everyone has to do his or her very best.

Nevertheless, there are two track and field events that seem more difficult to me than the others, for a rather particular reason. I am talking about high jumping and pole vaulting (which, when you come right down to it, is just high jumping with the help of a pole). In these events, the contestant has to jump over a bar that is placed higher and higher. Each time he succeeds, though he is pleased with his success, he is rewarded by having the bar placed a little higher the next time. In the end, no matter how good he is, there will come a point where he simply cannot get over the bar, despite the number of tries he is allowed. In other words, there is a sense in which the competition always ends up in failure, even for the winning athlete. It seems to me that that must be frustrating in a certain sense, even for someone who is quite satisfied with his overall performance.

Paul develops the principle of love in Romans 12:9-21 in a very similar way. He continually "raises the bar", spurring us on to an ever more demanding love. He never gives us the leisure of settling back contentedly, satisfied with our success. Every time we think we can congratulate ourselves for being able to put into practice without difficulty what he teaches about love, he simply incites us to go further. By the time we get to the end of the section, we are confronted with a love that is so demanding it seems downright impossible. But even that love is not yet up to the level of the love God has shown for us (such as it is described in Romans 5:6-10, for example).

Just as for a high jumper, each one of us will come to our limit sooner or later. For some it will be at one level; for others it will be at another. But none of us will be able to go all the way to the end of what Paul teaches, merrily telling ourselves that there is nothing hard about any of that.

And just as in athletics, you need to train at the very level where success is the hardest. As believers, we must never settle for mediocrity when the Word of God commands us to go farther. The limit where love becomes difficult simply means the point where selfishness takes over, the point where our priority is on our own well-being instead of on seeking the good of others. Since selfishness can never be accepted as a normal part of Christian behavior, that means we always have to ask our divine Coach to equip us for going farther. For after all, it is God Himself (and not Paul, who is merely His messenger) who is actually setting the bar higher and higher. He is the one who wants us to learn to love with the highest love.

Love without hypocrisy

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good."

Romans 12:9 gives us the guiding principle for the whole program that is developed in the following verses. "Love must be sincere." We could say pretty much whatever we want about love, if we just use this principle without paying any attention to the context. It would be up to us to decide what sincere, unhypocritical love is. But Paul does not give us that option; in the verses that follow, he describes himself what sincere love is all about.

That, in fact, is the subject of this whole section of the book of Romans. In this remarkable letter, Paul systematically develops his entire doctrine on the Christian life. His theology is based on the three points he always uses in his teaching, faith, hope and love. In the first section (1:18—3:20), he describes the spiritual

bankruptcy of natural man, man who knows nothing about true faith, who has no true hope and who cannot show true love. Next (3:21—5:21), he describes the faith we need, sparing us the requirement of figuring out for ourselves what it is or how it manifests itself. The third major section (6:1—8:39) shows us how to live in accordance with hope and once again Paul explains clearly what that involves. After a section that ties the two preceding sections together (9:1—11:34) by showing us that true hope is only for those who come to God by faith, Paul begins in chapter 12 the fifth and final section of his letter, the section that will talk about love. It is thus perfectly in keeping for him to explain love to us as clearly as he explained the principles in the preceding sections.

The section starts out by exhorting us to give ourselves totally to God (12:1-2). It is only by becoming a "living sacrifice" that we can know and accomplish God's will for us.

Following that, Paul sets the tone for his outlook on love in verses 3 to 8, where he calls us to a life based on commitment to others instead of on promoting our own importance. He is not at all against Christians thinking they have some valid talents, but teaches that our talents have been given to us by God so that we can edify our fellow believers as much as possible. The person who wants to show off about his "spiritual gifts" for his own profit or so that others will admire him is centered on himself. In these verses, Paul exhorts us to a love that is centered on others. Love is not sentimentalism, for the pleasure of the one who loves, but service, for the profound good of the one who is loved.

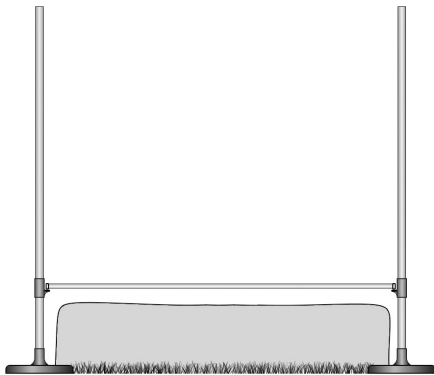
All of that forms the background of this detailed description of "sincere love." Love is just as much part of an authentic Christian life as faith and hope. But we have to be careful what kind of love we are talking about. More than anything else, love is an attitude, a commitment to serving others. Love considers the edification of others as more important than its own rights or well-being.

The very first thing Paul teaches about this kind of sincere love, in fact, is that it explicitly and determinedly refuses evil in all its subtle and pernicious forms. "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Love is first and foremost a question of choosing right instead of wrong. Evil manifests itself in self-centeredness, the attitude that puts a priority on one's own interests. Good, in a universe created by a God of love, always manifests itself in true, sincere love.

None of that tells us yet, in any practical way, what love is. That is why the following verses are there. Nevertheless, Paul has already situated love very clearly in the arena of right and wrong, rather than making it a question of feelings. That is extremely important, since it is so easy to content ourselves with love as a feeling. The importance of love goes much further than that.

The first level: appreciation

"Be devoted to one another in brotherly love."



Love is not mere sentimentality. That will become abundantly clear further on, when we see the incredibly demanding love that Paul describes towards the end of the chapter. Nevertheless, we should not dismiss feelings completely. They are not the highest form of love. We are only at the beginning here. But they do indeed have their place.

Brotherly love is unquestionably a love that manifests itself in feelings. The term "devoted" that Paul uses here refers to a strong affection. It describes the mutual appreciation of each other that we feel, the pleasure we experience in moving together towards our common heavenly home.

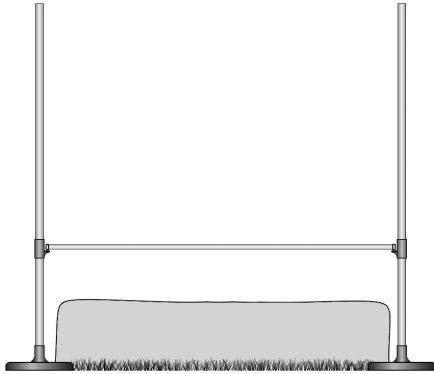
This needs to be understood, to prevent us from reacting excessively against the sentimentalism that sometimes characterizes Christian churches. We might be tempted to think that affection has no place among us, that we should place no importance on the pleasure of appreciating one another. Paul reminds us here that the good feelings that bind us together are appropriate. They are a part of the love that should exist among us.

The trap here, however, is the risk of thinking that this is the highest form of Christian love, when in fact

it is the merest beginning. This is hardly the highest level. The greatest expression of Christian love is not the emotional appreciation we feel toward one another. It is no great feat to get along with one's friends, and to appreciate them. We should not fail to express the affection of brotherly love among ourselves, but we should not congratulate ourselves too much, either, as if that emotional love, in itself, was the total fulfillment of the Biblical command to love one another.

The second level: respect

"Honor one another above yourselves."



Just a bit beyond the brotherly affection of mutual appreciation comes respect. Respect is still by no means the most demanding manifestation of love, but it is a little more difficult than good feelings.

Respect is the oil that keeps the gears running smoothly in personal relationships. As such, it is an essential virtue, but one that, unfortunately, is lacking more and more in our society. Even to the extent that respect is still practiced, it is usually limited to an attitude reserved for those who are over us, the necessary deference that keeps us out of trouble. This is not a respect that flows from the heart, simply out of consideration for those around us.

Among Christians, our attitudes should be different. When Paul speaks of respect, he specifies respect for one another. That means that each of us should treat everyone else honorably, without consideration of that

person's position. Respect for those who are over us should not be mere concession to their status, but courtesy towards a person. With that attitude, we will not show any less respect to those who are "under us". There are different degrees of responsibility in the Body of Christ, but that should never cause us to think of ourselves as "better" than anyone else. The mutual respect Paul is speaking of here is a simple recognition of the dignity of other human beings. As such, it should be shown toward everyone.

The foundation of respect is the fact of considering others as more important than ourselves. We should show a certain esteem for everyone, simply because they are people. We should not hesitate to show to every person the courtesy and consideration we would show to those who are over us. Among other things, this mutual respect will help us avoid setting up too much of "hierarchy" in our churches. If we really have this kind of respect among ourselves, we can accept without difficulty the fact that we have different roles in the church without some being thought of, or thinking of themselves, as "above" others.

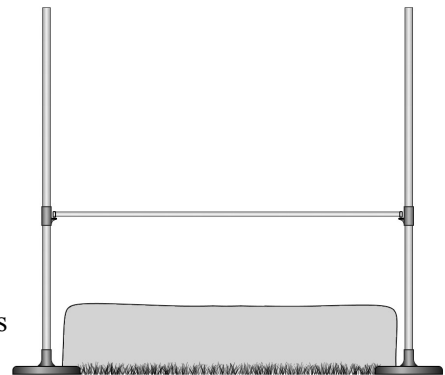
Showing consideration for others, even for those who are not our special friends, requires love that is a little more demanding than the mere appreciation of each other that comes about relatively easily among us. And yet, we are still at the lowest levels of love here. There may be those who find it difficult, already at this level, to live this kind of love. If that is the case, they are will have to ask God to help them seriously. There is still a lot of progress to be made before we come to the highest kind of love that Paul describes in this passage.

The third level: service

"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."

The two levels that Paul has mentioned so far did not actually require us to do anything in particular, except for displaying certain attitudes. But love must act also. Love acts in service.

Paul show us here that love is even zealous in its service. Laziness has no place among us. To want to do as little as possible for others is



simply the selfishness that is the exact contrary of love. We should be actively willing to serve those around us. Willing to preach or sweep, willing to preside or do the dishes, depending on what is needed. When others need us, we are available.

This is a demonstration of love. Jesus showed His disciples the example of a servant, and then told them that they should act the same way. It was in this exact context that He gave them the "new commandment" to love one another (see John 13:12-17; 34-35). A Christian should not be afraid to get his hands dirty, to tire himself out in helping others. He should not consider certain menial tasks as "beneath" him. In my travels as a conference speaker, it has happened that I have been asked to take my turn doing dishes, just like the other participants. I find nothing shocking in that. Unless I have other responsibilities that simply do not leave me the time, there is no reason that "the speaker" should not help out with the work like everyone else.

Serving others does not come easily to us. If we must serve, we would much prefer that it be in a setting where we will be admired for what we do. It is interesting that in Christian circles, those who are in "full-time Christian service" are often thought of as being somehow superior. Those whom Jesus called on to serve others have become the very ones who are considered as "above" the ones they are to serve. That is not the sense of this verse. The term that Paul uses for "serving" describes the role of a slave, not the role of a highly skilled worker who is paid a fortune because of his rare abilities. We should be zealous even in doing the menial tasks that would be given to slaves.

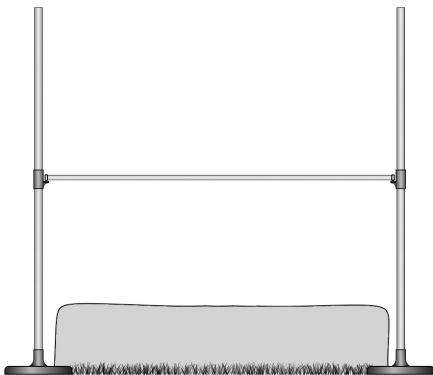
It is in this light that Paul exhorts us to "serve the Lord". Some may think that the fervent service Paul speaks of is only in the Lord's work. Our "high responsibilities" for the Master thus excuse us from common service towards others. But that is not at all the idea. For one thing, the whole context here is one of love for one another, love between us as believers. When Paul writes that we should be zealous, "serving the Lord", it is a way of saying that we should be willing to help others just as we are eager to be used of God. That, by the way, is the meaning of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:31-46. He judges people on the basis of their service for Him, but they are not aware of having had anything in particular to do with Him, either those who were willing to serve or those who were not. But Jesus says that it is in service for others that we serve Him.

And that brings us to the most important point about serving the Lord. I have been in "full-time ministry", as we say, for about twenty-five years now. I "serve the Lord". But in one sense, I do not serve Him at all. He has no need of me, to help Him out with His personal needs. In reality, every last bit of my "service for the Lord" is actually done in serving people. If we think about it, there is not one single "service" that we can accomplish for God that is not a service to our fellows.

Thus, it is clearly in the framework of love between us that Paul tells us to serve the Lord. One of the most concrete and sincere ways of serving the Lord is in our willingness to help out even with menial chores. That, too, is love, for our fellow believers and for the Lord.

The fourth level: loving even when life is hard

"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."



This verse does not explicitly speak of love. It speaks rather of the steadfast perseverance that does not give up in the face of difficulties. In the context of Romans 12, however, it is entirely proper to apply this principle to Christian love. Of course, there is a much wider application of this verse, an application that is perfectly legitimate. But even though the framework of love for one another is not the only application of these principles, it is obvious that Paul does indeed apply them in that context.

This is not an easy world to live in. Life is not always easy. People are not always easy to get along with, either. The situations we face are not always convenient. Sometimes they are downright difficult. That is when we feel like giving up, like wallowing in our own feelings of self-pity and forgetting about everyone else. The first thing we feel like

giving up when life gets difficult is what we have to do for others.

That is why this principle represents a more demanding level of love. The "bar" is placed even higher. Appreciating, respecting, even serving can all be done without too much difficulty as long as things are going well for us. But when our own situation is not what we wish it was, that is when we discover the most clearly the limits of our love for others.

In this verse, Paul gives us several useful principles for moving ahead even when we are facing major obstacles. The first one is the idea of rejoicing in hope. This is a very simple principle, but one we are not always aware of. Usually, we prefer to find ourselves in situations where we can rejoice in our present surroundings. But the Christian life is in large part a life of hope. (Paul developed this theme in enough detail in the preceding chapters that there can be no serious doubt on this point.) What is most important to a Christian is not his present situation but the outlook of all that God has prepared for us.

In chapter 8 Paul wrote that God is working everything out for our good. He explained that that means He is bringing us to the point where we will be conformed to the likeness of His Son. He ended the chapter by reminding us that nothing can separate us from God's love, that our present trials are nothing compared to the glory that is to come. All of that comprises one extremely important aspect of God's promises towards us.

It is thus in times of difficulty that we discover to what extent we simply want God to help us out by taking care of our little problems, and to what extent we are truly rejoicing to know that we will be with Him for eternity. We always need to remember, after all, that trials we pass through in this life have no effect whatsoever on our hope. If we have placed our trust in God and chosen to walk with Him, our hope will remain perfectly solid even if the whole world falls apart around us.

This kind of outlook permits us to rejoice at all times. That does not mean we will not be affected by difficult circumstances we face, but only that we will need never fall into despair, self-pity or the "poor me" attitude of a powerless victim faced with inescapable doom. Even in our sufferings, there can be a sort of calm undercurrent of unshakable joy that never really disappears from our heart, like an anchor that holds a ship in place despite the storms. That is what it means to rejoice in hope.

This in turn is what makes it possible for us to be patient in affliction, in trials, even in profound misery. Instead of demanding that God remove our difficulties immediately, we can remember that none of that is what is really important. This life is but a passing instant, compared to eternity. When we have that outlook, patience is not really all that hard after all. Bearing with adversity is difficult only when we are preoccupied with this life, as if the few fleeting years we spend on this Earth were the major part of our existence. But hope produces patience, patience which sees beyond the tears and the trials, patience that is satisfied to look to the glorious things that God has prepared for His own.

In addition to all that, we must never neglect prayer, the third principle that Paul gives us here. Prayer is a way of discarding our worries and burdens, by entrusting them to God according to the principle of I Peter 5:7. Prayer allows us to get our eyes off ourselves, our own preoccupations and our own situation. It allows us to focus our thoughts on God. A person who has his eyes on God instead of on himself is someone who is available to help others.

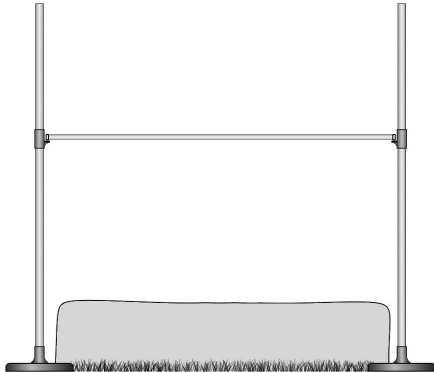
Perseverance despite our trials is thus a fundamental principle for believers. We need to refuse completely the recent notion that the Christian faith is basically a way of being sure that God will deliver us from every trial and every difficulty. This gospel of health, wealth and personal well-being comes directly from human self-centeredness, which is a way of saying it is rooted in sin. It is a blatant attempt to require God to serve us, simply in order to make our lives easy.

Throughout history, Christians have had to persevere despite trials. They never had the idea that God would deliver them from all their problems, illnesses and cares. They learned to look beyond those difficulties. Hebrews 11 describes not only men and women who were delivered from trials, but others who were not delivered, who suffered for their faith, sometimes to death. God gives us both kinds of people as examples to be imitated. The first application that is made of this chapter, in fact, right at the beginning of Hebrews 12, is an invitation to persevere since we have such a multitude of witnesses of what persevering faith is.

Determined faith will persevere in many areas, but among others it will persevere in love for others. A believer who can no longer think about others, as soon as he finds himself in difficulty, is someone who has found the limits of his love. If this is where you have problems, then this is the area you need to work on, in order to go even farther. For even here we still have not come to the highest kind of love.

The fifth level: a love that costs us

"Share with God's people who are in need."



It is strange that we are sometimes very willing to help others, even if it is very difficult, as long as there is no financial cost involved. But when we have to dig into our wallets, we discover that love does not come quite as naturally to us as we might have thought. We cannot eliminate poverty from the earth. But we can at least demonstrate our commitment one to another by taking care of our own. Love gives of its time and energy (that is what service is all about); it also gives financially, when that is necessary.

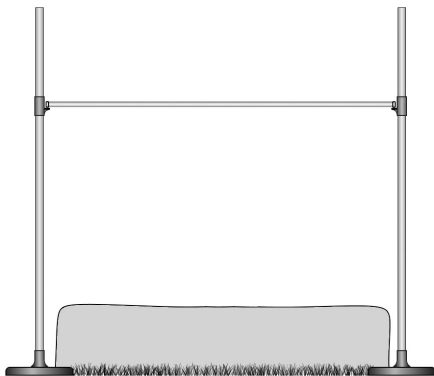
We need to be very discerning here. This verse is not a grounds for encouraging irresponsibility, laziness or greed in those around us. Paul exhorts us to share with those who are in need among our brethren, not to give in to all their whims. Even perfect love, if it existed among us, would refuse certain requests. That is what the perfect love of our heavenly Father does, after all. He does not always give us what we think we want.

But when the need is real, love does not hesitate to help. Love does not first make sure there is plenty of money for all the comforts and luxuries we like, and then give if there is anything left over. Of course, we must not neglect our own families to help others. That is not at all the idea here. No one expects us to let our own children go hungry in order to put something in an offering for the needy. Nevertheless, it is not normally the necessities of life that hinder generous giving; it is the extras.

True love will be willing to sacrifice the money that could have been used for personal pleasures, for making life easier, if there is true need. We all are glad to enjoy the comforts that God permits us in this life; we do not need to feel guilty about that. But we also need to know that that is not what is the most important. If we need to make sacrifices in this area because others are truly in serious need, that is a demonstration of a love that puts others' needs before its own personal well-being.

The sixth level: a love that goes beyond "our own"

"Practice hospitality."



So far, the love Paul writes about has been primarily a love between believers, love within the Body of Christ. At various points he has said so explicitly. And it is true that love should manifest itself first of all between us, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Nevertheless, the world is bigger than the Church. We are called on to look beyond our own group, our own friends, those we think of as "our own".

That is the Biblical principle of hospitality. Some people think hospitality means inviting friends from church over to eat, but that is not what the word means in this context. The term used here specifically means "caring for outsiders". That can mean a lot of things, depending on the context. It might mean foreigners, it might mean those who are not members of our own family, it might refer to quite a few different groups of people. But the primary idea is always one of being open to those who are "outside" our own little group. In the context of believers, then, it refers to non-believers.

Once again, this is a step further in love. Perhaps it is not as hard as persevering despite trials, but it still refers to a practice that does not come naturally to us. Loving others, even when it costs us, might seem reasonable towards members of our own family, towards friends or members of our church. But Paul

encourages us to extend the boundaries of our love even farther, to reach beyond those we normally think of as "our own".

This will not always be easy, and such love will not always be accepted. There will be suspicion, since the whole idea here is to reach out to those who do not know us well, perhaps those who do not know us at all. A precise translation of the Greek text would be something along the lines of "strive to practice hospitality." Love towards those outside the church will not always be accepted, but we must try. And we must not just try once or twice. We need to make a habit of truly reaching out to those who are outside our own group.

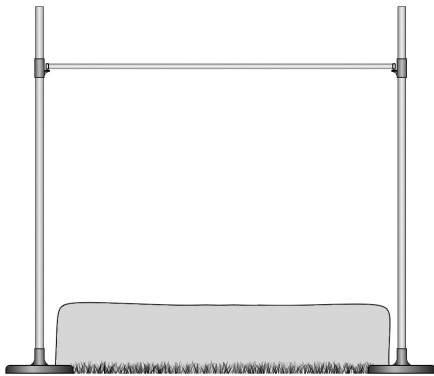
It should be mentioned also that this love is not just a question of announcing the gospel. When the "friendship" that we are willing to show to non-believers is only the willingness to discuss the gospel, when that "friendship" will be withdrawn if they are not interested in the gospel, this is not a true interest in them. This is basically the same attitude as a salesman who can be extremely sociable when he thinks there is a sale to be made but who turns away without a backwards glance when he sees there is nothing to be gained. People will see that that is our attitude, if we act that way, and they will not appreciate it.

I once heard that, on the average, someone who turns to the Lord in the United States no longer has any non-Christian friends after two years. I do not know what the corresponding statistic would be in other countries but I have seen the same general phenomenon in Europe, at least. This is unfortunate. It would seem that our interest in others is pretty superficial. It is thus not surprising that we have a hard time convincing others of our sincerity enough that they will really be willing to listen to what we have to say about the gospel, in a context of mutual trust.

Hospitality is a question of realizing that those who are not in our own sphere of interest (those who are not believers, in this context) are people just like anyone else. They want others to care about them, too. Sure, our friendship will never become real fellowship, as long as they do not turn to the Lord. But in many cases, there is nothing that prevents us from having such friendships. Every study that has ever been done on the phenomenon shows that it is, in the long run, an extremely efficient means of sharing the gospel.

The seventh level: love that does not repay evil for evil

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."



As quick as we extend the principle of love beyond our own Christian circles, we will come across people who are not very nice. Already in our churches, there are people who are not always easy to get along with. But I have seen enough of the world to know that despite the criticisms we commonly hear, Christians in general are nevertheless nicer than those who refuse the gospel. To be sure, there are some really wonderful people in the world, even among non-believers. But there are also some who are downright hostile. They will openly oppose us and the message we have to announce.

But love does not give us just because of that. Paul teaches here that we must love these people who are against us. The love he speaks of here is a question of not returning evil for evil. If they hurt us, we will not respond in turn by seeking to hurt them.

It might seem that Paul is asking a lot of us here, but he is not the one who originated this principle. What he writes here was taught clearly by Jesus as well. In Luke 6:27-36, Jesus' words go along the exact same lines. (In fact, at times He even goes well beyond what Paul asks of us here. We will come back to that shortly.) In verse 28, for example, He says, "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." This is practically identical to what Paul writes.

This is not at all in accordance with our natural tendencies. When someone hurts us, it shows his contempt for us. He thinks he is better than we are, and thus allows himself to treat us like dirt. Our natural reaction to something like that is to try to turn the situation around, to see to it that it is the other person who is put in his place. It is obvious, after all, that he is the one who is not very good, as proved by the way he treats

us. Everything in us calls out for "justice", meaning it should be clearly seen that he is the bad guy. We want him to be punished, humiliated, and put in his place for the wrong he did to us.

Praying for him, though, and blessing him, means seeking what is good for him. That does not come at all naturally to us. I am the first to admit it. If it was up to me to invent such teachings, they would not be in the Bible. I, too, feel like getting even when someone hurts me.

Of course, I never put it quite that way. Being very well acquainted with Christian teaching for a long time now, if I openly admit (even to myself) that I want to get even, the contradiction with what the Bible says is too blatant. So I do like everyone else. I rationalize what I am going to do, finding a "spiritual" way of putting it. I tell myself that I just want to see justice done, for example, or that I do not want to encourage the other person's sin, or whatever.

And all of that is not even really wrong. It is indeed appropriate to see justice done. But the error is in the illusions that I allow in my own thinking. While pretending that it is divine justice that motivates me, what I really want is to defend my own honor that has been attacked. It is thus my personal interests that determine my reactions, rather than love for the other or love for divine justice.

We recognize this kind of reaction pretty easily when we see it in others. But it is very difficult to recognize it in ourselves. It is even very difficult to admit it when someone else sees it in us and mentions it. And yet it is a very common reaction, since it flows directly from the sinful nature that is in us.

This is, for many people, where love begins to falter. (And yet this still is not the highest level!) Just as a high jumper may succeed at one level after another but there nevertheless comes a point where he just can not get over the bar any more, so it is for us. Little by little, with the "training" that has allowed us to go ahead in the Christian life, we have learned to love in the various areas Paul has mentioned thus far. It sometimes costs us, but it helps us grow as well. So we go ahead. But when it comes to refusing the desire to get even, to renouncing on the desire to put down those who have hurt us, that gets extremely difficult. So instead of doing it, we criticize those who teach it. "That's impossible! It's unrealistic! You can't expect me to let everyone walk all over me, can you?" (Yes, those who teach the Word of God know about this kind of reaction. We have heard it often enough and, worse yet, we have even reacted this way ourselves at times.)

But it is the Lord Himself who tells us that we must love in this way. We must either recognize the wisdom and the good sense in this exhortation, or admit that we are not willing to submit to the Word of God. If the Bible tells us that this is part of the love that the Lord wants us to demonstrate, then we must do it.

First practice session: refusing a self-centered outlook

"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another."

When a high-jumper realizes that he has found his limit, he does not just give up. He goes ahead with his training. He works at getting over the bar at the height where he normally does not succeed. If he easily clears the bar at six foot eight but almost never succeeds at six foot ten, there is no sense in training with the bar at six feet. It will be easy for him and make him feel good about himself (since he will always manage it), but it will not help make him jump higher. He needs to work at what is difficult for him.

To get over the bar at the higher level, however, he does not need to learn new techniques. The techniques are the same, but he needs to master them better. What is needed is to get back to basics and work at perfecting them.

That is exactly what Paul is doing here. In verses 15 and 16, he comes back to two fundamental principles that allow us as believers to love others. These are principles we need in every area of Christian love. If we master them imperfectly, though, that will not necessarily prevent us from demonstrating love in areas where it is relatively easy. It is only when we talk about a truly demanding love that we find out just how well we master these principles. For many of us, that means when we have to love those who are against us.

The first principle, in verse 15 and the beginning of verse 16, is absolutely basic in all personal relationships if we want those relationships to truly reflect Christian values. It is the question of knowing how to

put yourself in the other person's place. It means not living your life in terms of your own needs and desires, but really caring about others.

It is obvious that this is the guiding principle of love. And yet, it is not at all easy in those areas where love is very demanding. The fundamental nature of sin consists of thinking of yourself as the center of the universe, of considering your own well-being as more important than anything else, of believing that you know better than anyone else what is right. But putting yourself in the other person's place, rejoicing at his success even when things are not going well for you, weeping over what hurts him even if it does not affect you directly—none of those are natural attitudes for a sinner. Only the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts allows us to learn such reactions.

It is already hard enough to learn to have such attitudes towards our friends. But if we really want to demonstrate the kind of love the Bible teaches, we need to learn to care about others even if they are "bad" people. That is why demanding love requires us to come back to this fundamental principle. To the extent that our own well-being is what is most important to us, we limit our possibility of truly loving others. But learning to really care about what others are going through is a principle that will help us progress in love.

Second practice session: living in humility

"Don't be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited."

There is another principle that needs to be worked on as well. It is tied in with the preceding one, but is worth looking at explicitly. It is the principle of humility. Humility is not an easy quality to develop. Someone has said that what is strange about humility is that as soon as you know you have it, you have lost it! There is a lot of truth in that. A truly humble person is not particularly interested in himself, not even to the point of wondering if he is humble or not. It is pride that is interested in itself, not humility.

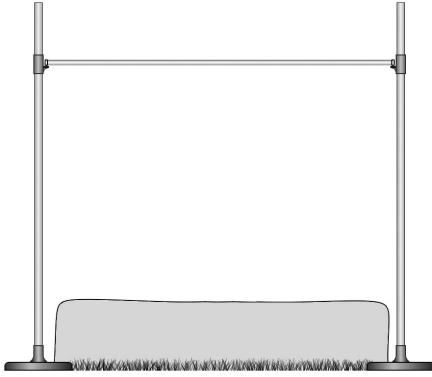
We are all bothered by proud people. Thus, we agree that pride is a problem. What we do not realize as clearly, though, what is hard for us to admit even when we hear it, is that other people's pride bothers us precisely because it conflicts with our own pride! That is what is so unbearable about pride. How can I put up with someone who thinks or acts like he is better than me, when I am more or less convinced that I am just as good as everyone else, if not better? How can I let him try to draw everyone's attention to himself, when I would much rather that everyone was paying attention to me instead?

That is why we absolutely must refuse pride, refuse trying to make ourselves look good, and having too high an opinion of ourselves. When I myself am guided by the principle of pride, I can no longer honestly seek the well-being of the proud people who are around me and who are hurting me. (And it is almost always pride that is the root motivation of all those who hurt us.) I will simply counter his pride with my own pride.

When we have trouble loving, when we think that this idea of not trying to get even with those who hurt us is unrealistic and too demanding, we have come to the limit of our humility. We have come to the point where we demand a good place for ourselves, where our own ego is guiding our reactions. That is where we need to come back to the basic principles of the Christian life. We need to work even more on developing love for God and love for others, on discovering a life that is not self-centered. This is the only hope we have of ever coming to the point of showing true love in the most difficult cases.

The seventh level (second attempt): love that does not repay evil for evil

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord."



After reviewing the basic principles that allow us to love, Paul comes back to what he had been developing before. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." Love does not react by doing wrong, not even in the most subtle of ways, to those who do wrong to us. That kind of behavior drags us into evil ourselves, and will certainly destroy us in the end. It is not for nothing that Paul introduced these thoughts on love by exhorting us to hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Selfishness, pride and the desire to hurt those who hurt us all spring from evil. Love can never use evil, not even "to bring about justice". Thus, we refuse evil and seek after what is good, even when others are unfair to us. True love cannot act any other way.

Paul does not say that it is possible to get along with everyone. From his own experience, he knew very well that it was not. He had had plenty of difficulties, sometimes very serious, with those who refused the gospel. Even Jesus Himself was violently persecuted and killed by His enemies. You cannot always be friends with everyone.

What Paul does say is nevertheless extremely important. You have to make absolutely sure that the problem is never your fault, not even in part. "As far as it depends on you," he wrote. I am not responsible for the actions and attitudes of others. But I am responsible for my own actions and attitudes. If my sinful reactions cause the other person to sin in return, I am in the wrong. Not that I am responsible for his sinful response; he is the one who chooses his own behavior. But I am wrong to act in a way that provokes him to sin.

Very often, if we think that "it was the other guy who started it" and that, in any case, the whole problem is 90% his fault, then we allow ourselves to display attitudes that are marked by sin. A bruised ego, a bit of self-pity, a wish to see him "put in his place", and so on. All of that tends to throw oil on the fire. Maybe the fire would be there anyway, but our bad attitudes are partly responsible, even so.

This is where Paul tells us that we must take care of our part of the problem. Even if the other person does not make any efforts, even if he is the one who started it, even if he is responsible for most of it, I still need to straighten out the part that I have caused. I need to make very sure, when I am having a hard time getting along with someone else, that my own bad attitudes are not doing anything at all to make the problem worse.

A little piece of practical advice can help us out in this area. I do not really like it any more than you do, probably, but it seems to me the only way to really make sure we are doing what we ought to. When we are in a conflict with someone, it is extremely difficult for us to be objective. Our own interests are at stake and it is much too easy simply to try to look out for ourselves.

What we need to do, then, is to ask the advice of someone who is not involved in the conflict, who knows the situation well enough to give a valid opinion, and who has proven himself in terms of spiritual maturity. Such a person may well be able to show us areas where our own reactions are not entirely pure, things we could change. That alone will not necessarily put an end to the conflict. It is not for nothing that Paul included, "if it is possible," in his exhortation to live in peace with others. It is not always possible. But letting someone else point out what we could do to improve the situation will allow us to be sure that there is no part of the conflict, not even 1%, that is our fault.

Verse 19 brings us to the question of justice, the principle that so often and so easily serves as an excuse for seeking to put others down. But there is nothing wrong with justice in itself. A Christian should wish that justice will be done. After all, II Peter 3:13 says we are "looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness." Nevertheless, it is not up to us, as individuals, to do justice. Paul reminds us here that the Lord is the one who must deal with that. He is the one who will repay those who have done wrong. That means we should not use the principle of divine justice as a weapon to bring about our own personal revenge.

This text is not speaking only of the last judgment, as it has sometimes been thought. In verse 19 Paul writes, "leave room for God's wrath," then adds in chapter 13 (which immediately follows chapter 12, by the way) that civil government is "God's servant, an agent of justice to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (verse 4). The term translated "bring punishment" literally means "exercise wrath". It is thus the same term that Paul used at the end of the preceding chapter.

There are, in our society, various agencies that can bring about justice. Letting them deal with

wrongdoing is one completely valid way to "leave room for God's wrath." We can refuse totally and completely the temptation to seek to put someone else down and take things into our own hands, and yet let justice be done by the proper authorities, if the problem is serious enough. That is why God has ordained that such authorities should exist.

A word of caution needs to be included here. In western democracies, where we try to pay attention to the principle of human rights, a judge would never be allowed to deal with a case where he himself, or a member of his family, had been the victim. The conflict of interest would be much too great. Even if everything seemed to indicate that the defendant was indeed guilty, there would be a defense lawyer to make sure his rights had been properly observed and that every possibility had been looked into. Judgment would be passed by those who were as objective as possible.

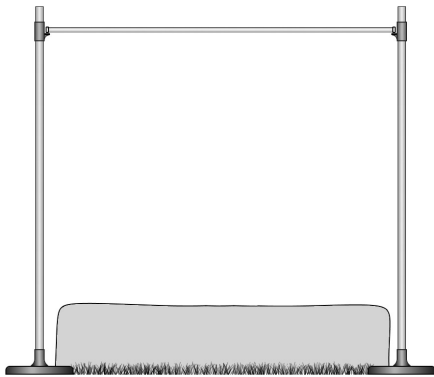
This way of doing things is extremely reasonable. And yet I note that it is rarely applied in Christian circles. If a pastor is wronged by one of the members of his own church, he normally uses his position to deal with the situation himself. Sometimes he will associate his friends on the board to give more weight to his decision. But they are not always much more objective than he is, especially if he has a fair amount of control over them.

Such a procedure would never be allowed in court in a democratic country. Do we honestly think we are so objective that we can deal fairly with a situation where we ourselves have been wronged by someone? Do we really think we are completely immune to any temptation for personal vengeance? In my personal experience, cases where a church leader was wronged and used his "spiritual authority" to deal with the situation himself have almost systematically led to abuse of that authority. Though we claim that all we want is to see justice done and God glorified and so on, there is almost always an element of getting even in such a decision.

Leaving room for God's wrath thus means letting other authorities deal with the situation. It means renouncing on your own desire to get even and turning it over to people who are not under your control. If it is truly justice that we are after, it should be obvious that that is the best way to see justice triumph.

The eighth level: love that does good even to those who do us wrong

"On the contrary, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."



Even the refusal to repay evil for evil is not the highest level of love that Paul describes and expects Christians to demonstrate. He finishes his presentation of Christian love by encouraging us to live a love that is even greater than that. It is the love that actively seeks to do good, even to those who hurt us.

We might as well admit it, that really is not easy. But in a sense, it maybe is not all that hard, either, if we have managed to pass all the preceding levels. If we have really gotten over wanting to get even, refused to let our reactions be determined by our need to be esteemed and respected, and overcome the desire to see those who have put us down put in their place, then the additional aspect of doing good to them as well, the same as we would to anyone else, is not that much of an

obstacle.

This teaching, like that of the preceding level, is not original with Paul. It, too, is what Christ Himself taught. We already saw Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:27-36, showing us we should not do wrong to those who do us wrong. In the same passage, Jesus encourages us to actively do good to those who are against us, sometimes saying so very explicitly. Verse 27 says, for example, "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." In the following verses, Christ gives us a number of specific examples of what He means by that, and then He comes back to the same principle at the beginning of verse 35 where he says, "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back."

What He says next is extremely important. At the end of verse 35 and in verse 36, Jesus concludes His teaching on this subject with the words, "Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

The fact that we are children of God is not seen in doing good to those who do good to us, or in getting along with those who are nice to us. Even non-Christians do that much. The love of God is seen in caring about those who do not deserve our love or compassion, those who are against us. Jesus tells us that if we are children of God, we should demonstrate the same kind of love as that of our Father. And we all know very well that the love of God extends even to those who are totally unjust.

It is this love that Paul (quoting Proverbs 25:22-22) puts at the end of the list in Romans 12. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." In other words, the good that we do to someone who is in need must not be dependant on whether or not he is nice to us. Though a person in need be a friend or an enemy, that should make no difference at all. Love cares about others, no matter who they are.

We must be careful, however, that the "good" we do to those who hurt us is not done in a subtle desire for revenge. Paul continues with the words, "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." (That is the continuation of the quote in the book of Proverbs as well.) But if we are "helping" someone we do not like when he is in need merely in the hope that that will somehow cause him suffering, we cannot very well pretend that it is love that is our guiding motivation.

Most Biblical commentators interpret the principle Paul gives here by saying that the undeserved good, especially coming from someone to whom the person had done wrong, is fairly likely to provoke a reaction that will encourage him to repent. That certainly seems to fit in with the image Paul gives. An unexpected contact with burning coals will make a person back off in a hurry. In practice, it has often been seen that when someone is unexpectedly helped by someone to whom they had done wrong, that does indeed bring about a radical change in their attitude. Usually, when someone deliberately hurts someone else, he does it because he thinks the other person has done something wrong to him. There are cases where someone will hurt someone else for no particular reason, but that is fairly rare. Nine times out of ten (at least), it is because he thinks the other person is somehow in the wrong. If the other person reacts by getting even, that will simply confirm his opinion. "Look how bad he is. Look how he reacted when I put him in his place."

But if, instead of responding by trying to hit back and get even, the other person acts in a kind and even helpful way, that usually makes the person who had hurt him change his ways. As if he had been touched by burning coals, he is profoundly reprovved by the way he had acted, and realizes he was wrong. Doing good to those who do wrong to us is thus the best way to encourage them to repent. It will not work every time, but it will be much more effective than what most people tend to think.

Christian love goes that far. Not only should we not repay evil for evil, we should even do good to those who hurt us. That is the ultimate demonstration of a love that does not originate in human hearts. My twisted heart would never cause me to react in such a way. Thus, when such love is manifested in my life, I can know that our heavenly Father has changed my heart. Only in that way could I demonstrate the same kind of love as that which motivates Him.

An even greater love

"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Our text goes no farther than the eighth level, but there is an even greater love than that. The most demanding love that the Lord requires of us is described in two different ways in the Bible. Here in Romans 12, speaking of our enemies, Paul tells us that love should extend even to the point of doing good to those who have deliberately hurt us, when they are in need. In a different context, speaking of our relationship with those we care about, Jesus says that the greatest love is seen in the fact of laying down one's life for one's friends (John 15:13). Thus, love will go farther for friends than for enemies (as Paul says explicitly in Romans 5:7).

We could put these two aspects of love together, and conceive of an even higher love. The ultimate sacrifice, the giving of one's own life, would be an even greater demonstration of love if it were done for one's enemies than if it is for one's friends. God's Word does not require us to practice that kind of love, but it does in

fact exist. Romans 5:6-11 shows that it is precisely such love that God shows towards us.

Though God does not ask us to pay such a price, it is worthwhile to reflect a moment on this supreme love. First of all, the context of Romans 12 helps us to better appreciate the greatness of God's love for us. When we have struggled so hard to love the way Paul asks us to love, when we have failed so many times along the way, we are overwhelmed more than ever by a love that goes that pays an even greater price, and that for its enemies.

Furthermore, it is useful to contemplate God's love for us in order to remember that He is not asking us in Romans 12 to do anything that He has not already done for us. In fact, He does not even ask us to do what He has done. His demands are not so unreasonable after all. Having loved us with such great love, it is at all surprising that He requires us, albeit to a lesser extent, to demonstrate that love in our own lives?

Conclusion

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Paul ends his reflections on the different levels of love the way he started, encouraging us to refuse evil and choose good. As we look at all of what he has to say on the subject, we now see just how we can do that. We do not combat evil with evil, but with good. Refusing evil thus means committing yourself without reserve to doing good. "Good" is this love that goes all the way.

The path is not easy. It means that we have to let ourselves be encouraged to go farther and farther on the path of sacrificial love, for the good of others. But this is the path on which our Lord Himself trod, giving us the greatest example there could ever be of what love really means. It would thus be appropriate, I think, to conclude our thoughts on love by quoting Jesus' well-known words on the subject, from John 13:34-35.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."