

Interpersonal Relationships **(Romans 12:9-21)**

Getting along well with others is a key ingredient in a life that's being transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Our interpersonal relationships often reflect our growth in God's grace. Those who have committed their lives to Jesus Christ (Romans 12:1-2) and are exercising their spiritual gifts (Romans 12:3-8) will increasingly value other people. Paul captures this concept under a single heading, "sincere love" (Romans 12:9). Sincere love for others—for fellow believers as well as unbelievers—is a mark of the Christian faith (John 13:35). In Romans 12:9-21 Paul presents thirty brief, punctuated exhortations that reflect sincere love for others. These exhortations can somewhat artificially be grouped together under three broad concepts—realigning our innermost attitudes, prioritizing the needs of others, and embracing peace. Taken as a whole, this passage teaches us that a life transformed by Jesus will be a life characterized by love.

Loving relationships begin by realigning our innermost attitudes (12:9-13).

Love for others cannot be a mechanical reaction. It must flow from the heart, from the innermost attitudes of our minds. This requires realignment from our self-focused tendencies. Paul presents twelve exhortations that fit under this idea, exhortations that describe five characteristics of unhyprocritical love.

Unhyprocritical love is characterized by discernment (12:9).

"Love must be sincere," Paul states. Actually, he includes no verb, making this phrase a poignant heading for the following verses—"Sincere Love." The word translated "sincere" is literally "un-hyprocritical." For Christians, love is the defining virtue. This love must be without hyprocrisy, sincere in every way. We're to love God, to love one another, and to love our neighbor. At every level, love must be free from hyprocritical attitudes.

Paul then begins a series of exhortations that flow from unhyprocritical love. Love motivates us to hate, that is, to hate or abhor evil. By contrast, we're to embrace the good. The word for "embrace" or "cling to" is sometimes used of the intimacy of a marriage union. We're to be united as one with that which is good, and thereby reject that which is evil. This requires discernment coupled with determination to honor God's highest standards of right and wrong.

Unhyprocritical love is characterized by selflessness (12:10).

Love—the selfless, sacrificial, God-like love (Greek: *agape*)—motivates us to demonstrate brotherly love through devotion to one another. To “be devoted” carries the connotation of a family relationship, a relationship that becomes explicit in Paul’s use of the term “brotherly-love” (Greek: *philadelphia*). In the same way Christians are to “give preference” to one another with a sense of honor. To “give preference” may mean to outdo one another in showing honor, but more likely emphasizes showing honor by giving others preference over our own desires. Familial devotion and preference are acts of selflessness that flow from unhypocritical love.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by passion (12:11).

Here Paul presents three related exhortations about passionate service. “Never be lacking in zeal” means to not become lazy or complacent in the expression of our faith. “Keep your spiritual fervor”—literally, “boiling in spirit”—may refer to the Holy Spirit, but more likely describes the inner spiritual fervor that should characterize every believer (compare Acts 18:25). All such zeal and fervor are not, however, unbridled fanaticism. They must be focused passions for serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by endurance (12:12).

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” Rejoicing is an understandable expectation for those who have experienced the love of God, and that expression of joy looks forward with confident hope to a brighter future. Patience, or endurance, is a necessary response to afflictions, the basic challenges of life and the additional hardships that Christians receive from an unbelieving world. Being “faithful” literally means persevering. We preserve best through prayer, seeking God’s strength and direction through our living relationship with Him. Joy, endurance, and perseverance are, again, offshoots of our unhypocritical love for God.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by generosity (12:13).

Love motivates us to be generous toward people in need, to “share” (from the same root word for fellowship) with the “saints,” fellow believers, in relieving their needs. This sense of love-driven generosity applies to helping strangers as well. We’re to “pursue” the display of brotherly love to strangers, that is, we’re to provide hospitality. Generosity with our money, material possessions, homes—all our resources—is an indication of unhypocritical love that flows from our innermost attitudes.

Loving relationships develop by

prioritizing the needs of others (12:14-16).

The next nine exhortations in Paul's description of sincere love can be summarized under the concept of prioritizing the needs of others. There's an obvious grammatical change in the Greek original beginning in verse 14 (a change from participles to imperatives, then infinitives, then back to participles). Love places a high priority on meeting the needs of others. Three broad characteristics of love emerge from these exhortations.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by forgiveness (12:14).

So far in this series of exhortations Paul has been describing relationships between fellow believers, but now he interjects an imperative regarding our treatment of unbelievers. Christians are to bless those who persecute them, a clear parallel to Jesus' teachings (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27-28; compare 1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Peter 3:9). Paul repeats this exhortation to "bless," followed by "do not curse" in regard to those who persecute. To bless those who harm us means that we must extend forgiveness just as Jesus Christ has forgiven us.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by sympathy (12:15).

Love motivates us to be sympathetic toward others. We're to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We're to be sensitive to the emotional needs of believers and unbelievers alike, sharing in their joys and sorrows.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by humility (12:16).

Love and humility go hand in hand. Christian love changes our mindset regarding ourselves and others. In verse 16 Paul uses related terms for the believer's thoughts or attitudes—"minding the same thing with one another," "not minding high things," "not to have a mind toward ourselves." These phrases indicate that we're to be at harmony with one another, to resist pride, and to avoid conceit. In addition, we're to be "carried away together" with the humble, whether the humble things of life or the people in humble circumstances. Loving relationships will motivate us to prioritize the needs of others.

Loving relationships flourish by embracing peace (12:17-21).

The final nine exhortations in Paul's outburst of enthusiasm for the expression of sincere love point directly to the Christian's relationship with non-Christians. Four general

characteristics of love summarize these exhortations. In our relationships with a hostile world we're always to embrace peace.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by peace (12:17-18).

Although the unbelieving world will treat Christians with disdain, scorn, marginalization, and even persecution we're never to retaliate. We don't return evil for evil but must caringly respond to evil with good toward all people. While the measure of that which is good might be the standard set by the unbeliever, Paul more likely means here that we're to do that which is good in God's sight so that the unbeliever might observe these actions (compare Matthew 5:16). We're to set the pace for peaceful relationships in contrast to retaliation. However, relationships always involve more than one party, and we may have limited influence in a particular relationship. For this reason Paul says "if" it's possible, "as far as it depends on you," Christians are to seek peace with all people. We need not take responsibility for the inappropriate responses of others to our peaceful and loving actions.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by restraint (12:19).

Even though our intention is for peace, people will sometimes push us to the edge. In such cases we must show great restraint. We're never to avenge ourselves, to "get even." Instead, we're to "give place to wrath," here referring to God's wrath as Paul's subsequent quotation implies. It's not our place to condemn those who reject God and us. God will judge them in the proper way at the proper time. According to Deuteronomy 32:35, vengeance belongs to God alone and He alone can justly repay those who commit evil acts (compare Hebrews 10:30). Christian love requires us to show restraint, allowing God to judge justly.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by grace (12:20).

Along with restraint we're to demonstrate grace toward those who become our spiritual enemies. Quoting Proverbs 25:21-22, Paul states that we must feed our hungry enemy and give our thirsty enemy something to drink. In other words, we're to extend grace to those who oppose us. In so doing, "you will heap burning coals on his head." This phrase may mean that we intentionally add to our enemy's impending judgment, but the tone of Paul's thoughts in this context seems to point more toward grace and kindness. Therefore, the idea more likely means that in performing acts of kindness toward our enemies we will help bring them to a place of burning shame in regard to their sins and lead them to repentance. Our gracious response to hurtful treatment by our enemies may actually soften them to the gospel.

Unhypocritical love is characterized by virtue (12:21).

Paul concludes his list of pithy exhortations by stating, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Evil should not conquer us. Instead, we must conquer evil by practicing that which is right and good. Virtue, based in Jesus Christ, overcomes any evil acts performed against us. Right wins over wrong when prompted by sincere, unhypocritical love. A life transformed by Jesus will be a life characterized by love.