

LOVE WITHOUT MASKS

How many of you are list-makers? You make shopping lists, to-do lists, dream lists, project lists. You organize your life in bullet points.

I'm not a list-maker. Whatever lists may exist in my mind rarely find their way to paper. That's too confining. Some people call my style impulsive. I prefer to think of it as responsive spontaneity.

About a year ago our granddaughter called Jeannette to talk about coming over for a visit. "Grandma," she said, "I would like to come to your house. We could do some projects. I'll make a list." Where does she learn such things!

The Apostle Paul was a list-maker. All you have to do is read his letters. Think about our present focus on Romans 12. Beginning in verse 9, Romans 12 reads like a bullet point list—a staccato burst of exhortations that cascade from Paul's mind onto the pages of Scripture, but a list.

Paul's list fleshes out something he urged upon us in verse 2: stop letting the world form your character; be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Beginning in verse 3, Paul unpacks in concrete language what a transformed character looks like.

It begins with renewed thinking about our role in Christ's church. Paul put together a brief paragraph to explain the proper use of spiritual gifts. We're servants who use our God-given grace capacities to enrich one another. Each of us belongs to all the others. We're better together.

And then, in v. 9, Paul starts his list—bullet points. It reads like lists read, in verbal shorthand, mostly without verbs. For instance, when you put together your shopping lists, you don't write in complete sentences. "Milk" on your lists means, "Go to Meijer's and buy the milk that's on sale."

That's how Paul writes. He begins verse nine with this: love—sincere. The translators supply the verb so we can make better sense of it: "Love must be sincere."

Just as an aside, isn't it interesting that Paul follows his instructions about spiritual gifts with the love imperative. He did the same thing when he wrote the church at Corinth. 1 Cor. 12 is the go-to text for thinking through spiritual gifts. 1 Cor. 13 is the love chapter.

But Paul is doing more than adding a footnote to his thoughts on spiritual gifts. The transformation of life that stems from renewing our minds necessarily shows up in this core imperative of the Christian life: love one another.

It's the first thing on Paul's list. And while each of the other items on the list have something to contribute to our understanding of a transformed life, they also expand our grasp of how love acts. When God's Spirit writes God's words on our hearts, the first thing he writes is love. Jesus called love the greatest commandment in the law. In the next chapter, Paul will tell us love is the quintessential summation of the law.

Love must be sincere.

When we took our journey through the seven virtues last Fall, we observed that love topped the list. We said the kind of love the Bible describes is a generous kindness expressing itself in meeting needs. It taps into emotional power, but it isn't primarily energized by emotions. In other words, it doesn't need love-feelings in order to act.

The love that comes from God is unprovoked love, undeserved love, unexpected love. God loves because it is his nature to do so. We love because we have tasted God's love for us in Christ Jesus. That experience leave us forever changed.

Jesus made love the centerpiece of Christian apologetics. People would link us to him as authentic Christ-followers when they saw reality in our love for each other.

No wonder Paul starts his list with what's number one with Jesus: sincere love.

The word translated "sincere" is *anhypokritos*. It comes directly to us in our English word, "un-hypocritical." If we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, that transformation will show up as unfeigned love—genuine, unprovoked, sometimes sacrificial, generous kindness. No play acting.

What does sincere love look like? We experience it as true presence. The person with us is with us—fully there, engaged in our conversation. Sincere loves truly prays when it says it will. It says, "What do you need? How can I help?" It initiates generosity without being asked. It serves without feeling offended or inconvenienced. It is sacrificial without murmur, generous without counting the cost. Sincere love is real.

Insincere love is emotional graffiti. It throws out polite words that don't land. It's offered cheaply and responds, if at all, gratuitously and stingily.

Dr. Chadwick, was one of my seminary profs. He was a bright-eyed Scot with a thick accent. He told us a story one day of being invited for dinner to the home of a wealthy beef rancher in the small church he was then serving as pastor. When they left to go home, the rancher's wife took great pride in giving them a package of meat to take home with them.

They saved it for a special occasion. When the day came, they were dismayed to discover soup bones. Dr. Chadwick said he and his wife almost cried.

Love must be sincere. No soup bones.

And then, Paul tags on two more bullets to his list:

- love—sincere
- hating the evil
- clinging to the good.

Remember Paul is explaining what a transformed character looks like. If we stop letting the world form us, and we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds, we will show sincere love that hates evil and clings to what's good.

Hatred is a powerful word. It describes an intense, negative reaction—a revulsion deep in your soul. For instance, hatred is how a loving parent reacts to the cocaine that holds his or her daughter in its grip.

Hating evil is a necessary compliment to sincerely loving people. Evil always destroys. Sin always produces a dying of one kind or another. Lies destroy trust. Lust kills purity and innocence. Greed stifles worship and generosity. Anger rips the heart out of relationships. Sin contributes nothing to authentic love and robs it of everything.

Hate evil.

How do we do that? We easily hate the evil that has harmed us. When Jeannette and I were first married, our apartment had a small fenced storage area in the basement where we could store those things we didn't immediately need in our living space. I had my fishing gear in there, some camping equipment and a few other things. Someone broke off the lock and stole a bunch of our stuff. I hated that.

I hate being slandered. I hate road rage. I hate prejudice when it shows up against Christ-followers. That comes easy.

And I hate the evil that harms people I care about. If I lived in Leslie, I would hate the violence that almost cost a 14 year old girl her life this past week.

What I don't hate is the evil that charms and seduces me. I don't hate the bitterness I cherish towards one who has deeply wounded me. I don't hate the irritation I justify toward those who fail to treat me as the prince of a guy I really am. I don't hate my arrogance. It seems mostly

rather reasonable. I don't hate the lies I embrace to vindicate my disobedience.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind... Hate what is evil.” How do I reprogram my internal operating system so that I develop a revulsion of evil in *all* its forms?

Listen to the writer of Hebrews: “...you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have *trained themselves* to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:12-14).

How do you learn to hate evil? You train yourself by constant use—immersing yourself in God's truth; getting beyond the elementary truths of the Gospel and learning to think more broadly and deeply about our faith. It means active partnership with the Holy Spirit as he shapes Christ in us, imprinting God's truth upon our hearts and minds.

Just recently I was reading through 2 Corinthians. When I came to chapter 4, God's Spirit popped an image into my head—a jar of money. What's that all about? Listen to the text: “...we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor. 4:5-7).

Men derive deep satisfaction from their work. It's how God wired our masculine souls. But because we're deeply flawed by sin, we want more than satisfaction. We want – and sometimes demand – acknowledgment and recognition.

Sometimes preaching is so much fun I almost have to take something for it. And when it is, unholy parts of my soul want you to know just how terrific I am. What God's Spirit reminded me of is that there's nothing really remarkable about the jar. It's all about the treasure.

To the extent that I keep step with God's Spirit, my tolerance for a little justifiable arrogance gets whittled down a notch or two. By that much I hate evil. And hating that evil enables me by that much to love you more by directing your focus to the treasure and not the jar.

See how that works?

“Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.” The word translated “cling” is used by Jesus to describe what happens in a marriage. A man leaves his parents and “clings” to his wife. It describes a tight bond, an adhesion.

Be a “good” magnet. Stick to it. Choose it. Use the same techniques you use for cultivating a hatred of evil. Let Jesus shape a hunger for what's good in your thirsty soul. Refuse to let the world program your values and shape your desires.

Wednesday night I had a chat with one of our members in the lobby. He said that he and his wife have agreed together to be transformed. They want to let God speak to them through these messages.

They also have a friend overseas they email these sermons to. They invited her to join them in a transformation network. They want God's Spirit to produce real change in them.

I love their commitment to life change. May their tribe increase! When our transformed lives reaches critical mass, it will radically transform our church.

And that's what this series is all about.

So here's your assignment for the week: Love sincerely. Learn to hate evil. Cling to what is good. May that challenge drive you deeper into God's Word and closer to God's heart.

“Just think what it would be like to be part of a group of disciples in which this list was the conscious, shared *intention* and where it was actually lived out” (Dallas Willard).