

How to Hug

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to comment briefly on the title of this message, *How to Hug*. This was suggested to me by a story I once heard about a man who was walking down the street. He passed a used book store, and in the window he saw a book with this title, *How to Hug*. He was taken by the title and, being of a somewhat romantic nature, went in to buy the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was the third volume of an encyclopedia and covered the subjects “How” to “Hug.”

I have often thought, as I think of that story, that the church is like that. Everyone knows that the church is a place where love ought to be manifested, and many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to discover an encyclopedia on theology. But I am grateful that God is changing that today. Thank God that hugs are returning to the churches. Here we often greet each other with a hug, and I think that is great. In the early church the Christians actually greeted one another with a holy kiss. You don’t see that too often these days, but perhaps it is coming back. At least we have begun to hug one another. Once in a while you see somebody greet someone with a kiss – I don’t know if it is holy or not – but we have at least begun to hug. That is great, because that is what the church is to be like.

If you have read through this passage, Romans 12:9-21, you can see that the theme is clearly given in the very first sentence: “Love must be sincere.” Our English word *sincere* comes from the Latin *sincerus*, which means “without wax.” It stems from a practice of the early Roman merchants who set their earthen and porcelain jars out for sale. If a crack appeared in one, they would fill it with wax the same color as the jar, so a buyer would not be aware that it was cracked. But astute buyers learned to hold these jars out in the sun, and if the jar was cracked, the wax would melt and the crack would be revealed. So the honest merchants would

test their wares this way and mark them *sincerus* – without wax. The word literally reflects what the Greek says here, “Let love be without hypocrisy.” The Revised Standard Version translates it, “Let love be genuine.” Phillips says, “Let us have no imitation Christian love.”

All this indicates clearly that the primary character of the early Christian community was that it was a place where love was demonstrated – so much so that people began to imitate it. You can see this emphasis in the New Testament. Every writer in the New Testament stresses the need for love. In First Timothy 1:5, Paul writes to his young son in the faith and says, “The end of our endeavor is love.” That is where it all comes out. “The end of our endeavor is love, out of a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.” Peter says (1 Peter 4:8), “Above all else put on love.” Paul reminds us here, and in other places, that this love must be a genuine love, not phony, not hypocritical.

In those early days of the church it was easy to imitate love if you didn’t really have it because it was so widely valued and so visibly manifested. So people fell into the habit, as they do today, of pretending they loved, using loving terms and gestures, but really not feeling it in their hearts. This, of course, is hypocrisy, and this is what this passage warns against. Don’t let your love be hypocritical, don’t put it on. We are living in an age in which this is the very spirit of the times – to project an image, to pretend you are something that you are not. All the world holds that up before us, through the media of television and radio and all the rest. We actually are encouraged to be something we are not.

No one seems to see how phony this is. But in the church it is intolerable. That we should be in any sense phony in our love is a violation of all that the Lord came to do. Sham love, of course, comes

from the flesh. It comes from that pretender that is down inside all of us that wants to be thought well of even though we really are not worthy of it. And so we easily succumb to this desire. But true love, as we have been seeing, comes from the Holy Spirit. In Romans 5, Paul says, “The love of God is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit which is given unto you,” {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. True love is manifested by learning from the Word of God how you should behave in a certain situation, and then, depending on the Spirit of God to give you the strength to do it, moving out and doing that very thing. That is the way you love – by acting in obedience to what the Word tells you by the power of the Holy Spirit within you.

This is what we are exhorted to in this passage:

- Verses 9 through 13 set forth love as it is manifested in the family of God, the church.
- Verses 14 through 21 describe how Christian love looks when it is out in the world.

This outline will be our guideline as we look at this passage together. Let’s take each of these two sections separately and see what is covered by each of them.

First, **love in the church** is described in Verses 9-13:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. {Rom 12:9-13 NIV}

This describes love among Christians. Notice that it consists of six things which the apostle brings out very clearly. In order to understand them, let’s look at them one by one:

1. First, true love rejects sin but not the person: That is what Paul means when he says, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” He is talking about people. That is, hate what is evil in people, but don’t reject the person because of the evil. The person is good. God loves

him. He or she is made in the image of God. Therefore, true love learns to hate evil but not to reject the good. I grant you that this is difficult to do. But notice that hypocritical love, love that pretends to be Christian, does the opposite.

Hypocritical love rejects the person because he doesn’t behave according to an acceptable standard. You find many churches that do this. In fact, this is one of the things in the church that has turned off more people than anything else. People come and hear the great words of the New Testament about love and peace and joy, and expect to find them exhibited, but instead they find all the world’s attitudes – rejection and prejudice, and even contempt and disdain for people. The church cuts them off and sets them aside, not wanting to have anything to do with them because they don’t meet a certain standard of performance. That is what this word warns us against. It is hypocrisy to reject persons because you don’t like their behavior.

But you can go to the other extreme in this too. It is also hypocritical to condone sin because you accept the person. Christians often realize that it is wrong to cut people off and have nothing to do with them because they are not behaving rightly. But some Christians accept these people and say nothing about their evil or sin, and even defend it on occasion. We are seeing something of this today in the matters of homosexuality and alcoholism. People want to defend these sins, as though they were right, simply because they want to accept the person. “Hate what is evil [loathe it]” – but “cling to what is good.”

2. Second, notice that true love remembers that relationship is the ground of concern, and not friendship. That is why Paul says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” This doesn’t refer to just anyone that is in need or in trouble; it specifies your brother or sister. The basis of concern for one another is not that we know each other well or enjoy one another, it is that we are related to one another – even though we may never have met before. If we are Christians, we know that we already have a tie that ought to evoke concern and care for one another. They are our brother, our sister. It is

because we are related that we treat our brothers and sisters warmly and with acceptance and forgiveness.

3. Third, Paul says that true love regards others as more deserving than yourself: “Honor one another above yourselves.” I like Phillips’ translation here. He says, “Be willing to let other men have the credit.” That is a practical application of this. Years ago I ran across a sign that has helped me many times when I have done something, that I wanted to be credited with and yet people had credited others with it. I would be on the verge of pointing out that the credit belonged to me, but I would be stopped by the remembrance of this little sign:

THERE IS NO LIMIT
TO THE GOOD THAT A MAN CAN DO,
IF HE DOESN'T CARE
WHO GETS THE CREDIT!

If you really don’t care who gets the credit, then you can just enjoy yourself and do all kinds of good deeds. Just be glad that it is done, and don’t worry about who gets the credit. Again, our flesh doesn’t like that. It is very eager to be acknowledged and promoted and recognized. But the Word tells us that real love will not act that way.

4. Fourth, real love retains enthusiasm despite setbacks: “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” I think that one of the most noticeable marks of a Christian walking in the Spirit is that he retains enthusiasm, always rejoicing, rejoicing in hope. He never lets his spiritual zeal flag or sag, but maintains it. After all, the one thing that the Lord cannot put up with, as he tells us in the letters to the churches in Revelation, is lukewarmness {cf, Rev 3:16}. It is nauseating. He will spew you out of his mouth if you are indifferent, neither hot nor cold, just going along with the crowd. Jesus says that lukewarmness is very distressing to him.

I have always enjoyed the Old Testament story of David and Goliath. Remember how all Israel was sunk in despair because of their fear of this giant? The whole army of Israel was helpless because of the taunts of this man. But little David is fearless. He is only a stripling,

but he is not afraid. He looks at Goliath, in all his impressive height and great strength, and says, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, who dares defy the armies of the living God? Who does he think he is?” {cf, 1 Sam 17:26}. Now where did David get this kind of enthusiastic response? David tells us. He says, “The battle is not ours but the Lord’s,” {cf, 1 Sam 17:47}.

This is what Paul is saying here. The answer to keeping your spiritual fervor is that you are serving the Lord. It is not your battle; it is his. It is not your resources that are required to work it out; it is his. After all, why should you be afraid or distressed or want to give up? It doesn’t depend on you. You are serving the Lord! That is why it is important that Paul adds the phrase “serving the Lord” here – to help us remember that the only thing that will keep our enthusiasm high is an awareness that we are serving the Lord.

I have always appreciated Paul Winslow, who is on our pastoral staff, because he always is excited about things. Even when they go badly he looks at it as a chance to do something a different way. I like that. And this is what the apostle is telling us here.

5. Fifth, true love rejoices in hope: “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” The way to rejoice in hope is explained by the two others things mentioned here. You can rejoice in hope because you are patient in affliction, and you are patient in affliction because you have been faithful in prayer. That is what makes you patient. So, when trials come, the thing to do is to begin with prayer. As Paul tells us in Philippians, “In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known unto God,” {cf, Phil 4:6 KJV}. Take them to him. If you are faithful in prayer, you will be able to be patient in affliction. You won’t be dropping out, or copping out, or quitting, but you will be staying in there, waiting until God works it out, not getting impatient and angry and resentful, but quietly waiting for God to accomplish what he had in mind in this whole trial. That, of course, will make you rejoice in hope – because you will discover that God has a thousand and one different ways of working things out, ways

that you can never imagine. That makes you begin to rejoice. You rejoice because God knows what he is doing and he is able to work it out.

6. Then, six, true love responds to needs. “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” In these days when we have so much social help available – unemployment insurance, Social Security, welfare, Medicare, etc. – we tend to forget that there are still human needs and that we have a responsibility to meet them. I think we need to be reminded at times that people are still hurting and that it is a direct responsibility of Christians to care for one another’s needs.

I can suggest two ways that you can help to meet this responsibility:

- One is through the Need Sheet. Did you know that every week a sheet that lists the needs of people is published and handed out at the door at the Body Life service? It is also available at the table in the back of the auditorium after the morning service. Every week this list is fresh. Items are never carried over from week to week. Every week it lists needs that you can meet. Here is one:

“Help needed! Someone to fix my dryer, or at least tell me what is wrong with it.”

There is a name and a phone number to call. Here is something for some of you electricians to do in response to a need.

Here is another:

“High school girl needed to spend a few hours on Saturday with a high school girl who is in the educable mentally handicapped class in high school.”

Here is a ministry for a high school girl.

There are other needs every week, so I suggest that you pick up a Need Sheet and help out.

- Another way of helping is through our Need Fund. We have a fund that is set

aside for the pastors to dispense to people who are in need. Every week people are without food, without money for rent and other things, and their needs are met through this fund. You may not know about direct needs, but you can give to that fund and we will try to help others through it.

But first of all we are to do what Paul says here. “Practice hospitality.” Hospitality – to have your home open for a bed or a meal that somebody needs – is a manifestation of love.

This is the way that you manifest love in the church. There are six ways to do it. Let me review them quickly for you:

1. True love rejects sin but not persons;
2. It remembers relationship is the ground of concern;
3. It regards others as more deserving than themselves;
4. It retains enthusiasm despite setbacks;
5. It rejoices in hope by being patient in affliction and faithful in prayer; and
6. It responds to needs in direct and personal ways, and especially by practicing hospitality.

Now Paul moves on to describe **love exhibited to a non-Christian world**. Tomorrow morning you will all be back in your shops and offices and schools and places of business, and Christian love is to be manifested there as well as it is here. So Paul gives some very practical help on this. Again, he gives us six ways to do this, Verses 14-21:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Don’t be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don’t be conceited.

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.

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.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. {Rom 12:14-21 NIV}

1. First, love speaks well of its persecutors. That is a tough one, isn't it? “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” That is getting right down to where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? That means you don't go around badmouthing people who are not nice to you. You don't run them down or speak harshly about them to others, but you speak well of them. You find something that you can approve, and you say so to others.

That is a tough one. I confess that that is not my natural reaction. When somebody persecutes me, I persecute back! At least I want to. But this is what the Word tells us we don't need to do and we should not do. I think this applies to such practical areas as traffic problems. Have you ever been persecuted in traffic? It happens all the time. Somebody cuts you off, and you want to roll down the window and shout, “Melonhead!” But according to this, you are not supposed to. Now, this doesn't tell you what to call them, but it tells you to bless them, anyway.

2. Second, true love adjusts to other people's moods: “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” When somebody in your office is feeling low and gloomy, don't come in and sit down and whistle away. When they obviously don't respond, don't say, “What's the matter with you? How come you're so down all the time? Why don't you be cheerful like me?” There is nothing worse than a cheerful person when something has gone wrong for you. No, Paul says, adjust yourself. Mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice. I think he puts rejoicing first because that is so hard to do sometimes – especially if it awakens our envy or self-pity. If there is something someone else has achieved that we think we ought to have, it is hard to go up to that person and say, “I'm so glad for you.” But that is what love does, and it is

possible to do it – for those who walk in the Spirit.

3. Third, true love does not show partiality to persons. Paul says very precisely, “Live in harmony with one another. Don't be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited.” That is amplified in these words, “Don't seek high-up people, but associate with ordinary people.”

When Jesus came to Jerusalem he stayed with Mary and Martha and Lazarus out in the little suburban town of Bethany instead of at the Intercontinental Hotel in Jerusalem.

Many of us have been rejoicing over the way President Carter is seeking to manifest this kind of a spirit in his high office. He is spending the night with the ordinary people in little towns in New England and various other places. The whole nation is caught up with the beauty of that kind of approach – we love it.

This is what the apostle enjoins Christians to do. And he suggests that the real reasons for respecting persons, and for name-dropping and that kind of thing, is really personal conceit. “Don't be conceited,” he says. “Don't think highly of yourself.” That is what makes you always want to be associated with the high-ups. But if you have an honest view of yourself, you know that you are no better than anybody else and therefore you will be willing just to enjoy the ordinary people. And you will find a rich, rich manifestation of love and humanity among them.

4. Fourth, love is not sneaky or underhanded (Verse 17). Paul tells us not to give back evil for evil, but to plan to do right, out in the open, before all. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody.” I think that Paul is telling us not to take silent revenge for imagined or real insults, and not to resort to subterfuges to get even.

I remember hearing of some officers during the Korean War who rented a house for themselves and hired a Korean houseboy to work for them. He was a cheerful, happy soul, and they were young and had a lot of fun playing tricks on him. They would nail his shoes to the floor, and they would put water up over the

door so that when he pushed it open the bucket would fall on him. They played all kinds of tricks, but he always took them in such a beautiful, good humor that they finally became ashamed for themselves. They called him in one day and said, “We’ve been doing all these mean things to you and you have taken it so beautifully. We just want to apologize to you and tell you that we are never going to do those things again.” He said, “You mean no more nail shoes to floor?” They said, “No more.” He said, “You mean no more water on door?” They said, “No more.” “Okay then,” he said, “no more spit in soup!”

So you see, it is possible to take silent revenge. But the Word of God warns us against doing it. Don’t be sneaky and underhanded about your actions, it says, but “be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody.”

5. Fifth, true love seeks to live at peace with everyone: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” There are people who just will not allow you to be at peace with them, but don’t let it start with you. Remember the old song, *It Takes Two To Tango?* I think that last word ought to be *tangle*. It takes two to tangle. If you refuse to tangle, at least the conflict does not depend on you and is not traceable to your actions and your attitudes. That is what love really does.
6. Then, finally, love does not try to get even. Listen to these words again. “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.” Revenge is one of the most natural of human responses to hurt or injury or bad attitudes. We always feel that, if we treat others according to the way they have treated us, we are only giving them justice. We can justify this so easily. “I’m only teaching them a lesson. I’m only showing them how I feel. I’m only giving back what they’ve given me.” But any time you argue that way you have forgotten the many times you have injured others without getting caught yourself. But God hasn’t forgotten. This always puts us in the place of those Pharisees who, when the woman was taken in adultery, were ready to cast stones and stone her to death. Jesus came

by and said to them, “He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone,” {cf, John 8:7}. That stopped them all dead in their tracks, because there wasn’t a one of them who wasn’t equally as guilty as she. They needed to be judged too. We must never carry out revenge, because we are not in the position of a judge. We, too, are guilty. We need to be judged. Therefore, Paul’s admonition is, “Don’t try to avenge yourself.” You will only make a mess of it. The inevitable result of trying to get even with people is that you escalate the conflict. It is inescapable.

When I was in school in Montana, I used to watch the cows in the corral. They would be standing there peacefully, and then one cow would kick another cow. Of course, that cow had to kick back. Then the first cow kicked harder and missed the second cow and hit a third. That cow kicked back. I watched that happen many times. One single cow, starting to kick another, soon had the whole corral kicking and milling and mooing at one another, mad as could be. This happens in congregations too.

Paul gives two reasons why you should not avenge yourself:

- One is because God is already doing it. “Leave room for God’s wrath.” God knows you have been insulted or hurt or injured. He knows it and he is already doing something about it.
- Second, God alone claims the right to vengeance because he alone can work it without injury to all concerned. He will do it in a way that will be redemptive. He won’t injure the other person, but will bring him out of it.

We never give God a chance; we take the matter into our own hands. And Paul says that is wrong. It is wrong because we don’t want that person to be redeemed; we want them to be hurt. We are like Jonah when Ninevah repented. When God spared it, Jonah got mad at God. “Why didn’t you wipe them out like you said you would?” We get angry because God hasn’t taken vengeance in the way that we would like. Paul reminds us that God is already avenging, so we should leave him

room, and God claims the right to vengeance because he alone can work it without injury to all concerned.

You say, “What do you expect me to do? Somebody hits me – do you expect me just to sit there and do nothing? Oh, no. There is something you can do. Look what it is: “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.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Two things will happen if you refuse to avenge yourself and let God do it:

- First, you will be enabled to act positively instead of negatively. That will result in what Paul, quoting Proverbs {25:21-22}, calls “heaping burning coals on his head.” This doesn’t mean that you are going to get even by another process – burning his head. No, this refers to the ancient way of lighting fires. They didn’t have matches in those days, so if you wanted to light a fire in your home, you couldn’t go and borrow a match. But you could go and borrow some coals from your neighbor. Of course, you took along an earthen jar that would not burn. Then you would ask your neighbor if you could borrow some coals to light your own fire. Now, if he was a good neighbor, he would fill the jar and you would carry the padded jar home on top of your head. This became a picture of an ample, generous response to a neighbor’s need. Because of that, it became a metaphor for responding so generously to your neighbor that it made him ashamed of himself for his attitude toward you. That is what Paul is suggesting here.
- The second result of leaving vengeance to God is that you win the battle. If there is a conflict going on, you will win it if you respond with doing good instead of evil.

I was reading one day a story about a boy who was in the army. He was a Christian and had formed the habit of praying beside his bed before he went to sleep. He kept up this practice in the army, but he became an object of mockery and ridicule to the entire barracks. One night he knelt to pray after a long, weary march. As he was praying, one of his tormentors took off his muddy boots and threw them at the boy, one at a time, hitting him on each side of his head. The Christian said nothing about it, and just took the boots and put them beside the bed and continued to pray. But the next morning, when the other man woke up, he found his boots sitting beside his bed, all shined and polished. It so broke his heart that he came to that boy and asked him for forgiveness. That led, after a time, to that man becoming a Christian.

This is what Paul means when he says you overcome evil with good. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him your friend.”

Three times in this passage the apostle has stressed the fact that you are not to return evil for evil. In Verses 14, 17, and 21 he states it. So, throughout this passage it is underscored that the major way we express love in the world is by not reacting in vengeance when we are mistreated by the world.

Can you imagine what would happen on this Peninsula if the Christians would begin to act this way? How many times we turn people away from Christianity by assuming the same attitude the world around us has. Surely this is a practical way Paul has of reminding us that we are not to be conformed to this age. We are not to think like they do.

It is recorded of the Lord Jesus that when he was reviled, “he reviled not again, but committed himself to him who judges all things righteously,” {cf, 1 Pet 2:23 KJV}. That was given for our admonition, that we might behave as Jesus did in the midst of the world.

What a testimony of grace that would be!

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