

The Distinguishing Marks of Disciple

Romans 12:9-16

January 21, 2024

Not long ago I dug out my old sports card collection from our basement. I still have thousands of 80s and early 90s football, baseball, and basketball cards from when I was a kid. Few of them hold any actual value, but one card holds pride of place in my collection: my 1983 Topps autographed Kent Hrbek card number 690.

I grew up in Ohio, but my parents and grandparents were from Minnesota, so I was a huge Minnesota Twins fan. Kent Hrbek was my favorite player. One year, I decided to send him a letter and ask him to autograph one of my baseball cards. I dropped it in the mail along with a self-addressed stamped envelope and waited to see if my card would come back with his signature. It did!

My card was signed by the first baseman and Twins legend himself.

At least I think it's his autograph.

I'd like to believe that Mr. Hrbek actually read my letter and autographed my card, but I can't know for sure. Unless I choose to pay a professional to authenticate his signature, I have to accept the fact that the autograph is either a fake or the real deal.

Before we resume our look at Romans chapter 12, I invite you to open a Bible and turn to John chapter 13 and look with me at verses 34 and 35. On the night leading up to his crucifixion, Jesus met with his disciples and told them,

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35, NIV).

Jesus said a lot more than this that night, but what he spoke in these two verses is extremely significant. First, Jesus gave his followers a clear command: love one another. This was so important that he repeated it three times in these two verses. As his disciples, they were expected to love one another.

But in addition, Jesus also spoke about what would happen if his followers committed to love one another. Jesus said, “everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” In other words, **the distinguishing mark of a disciple is love for one another.**

Romans 12:9-16 is a passage all about love. But more than a text that helps us to define what love is, this passage is here to help us discern what love looks like. In particular, this passage picks up on Jesus's command and answers the question, “How will we know when deeply devoted followers of Jesus are becoming more and more

like Jesus?” The answer is love. Genuine Father-glorifying, Christ-abiding, Spirit-formed love for one another.

We know this is Paul’s primary focus in these verses by the way he begins the passage in verse 9: “Love must be sincere.” A more literal rendering of this phrase would be “Let love be without hypocrisy” (CSB).

In the ancient world, the term *hypocrite* could be used to refer to a person playing a role—an actor. Some of you may have watched this year’s Emmy awards earlier this week. In Hollywood, it’s an honor to win an award for outstanding work as an actor. In the church, to be known as an actor or as a hypocrite is not a complement.

Paul wants us to hear that love must never be a performance. True love can’t be faked. There is a pseudo love that conforms to the pattern of this world, and there’s a transformed love that flows from a redeemed heart and renewed mind. Christ-like love must be sincere. It must be genuine (ESV). It must be without hypocrisy.

In the time we have together this morning, I want us to consider eight characteristics of Christ-like love highlighted in Romans 12, verses 9-16. You’ll notice that these characteristics are listed as a series of commands. We could say it this way: Those who wish to love like Christ must live like this. Those who live like this, will love like Christ.

Immediately after Paul insists that “Love must be sincere,” he follows it up with his first two commands: “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

Now, when I was kid, I was taught to use the word “hate” cautiously and sparingly. I was never allowed, for example, to say that I hated my sister. In those instances, the smart-aleck in me would always retort, “Fine. Then I *strongly-dislike* my sister.”

But when it comes to evil, *hate* seems to be the appropriate term. Of course, we hate evil. We hate the abuse of power, racial injustice, and the wickedness of human-trafficking. We hate suffering, disease, and death. There are plenty of good ways to hate what is evil. But is that all that Paul is saying here?

Think back to Romans 12:2 where Paul said, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world.” The word *world* in that context refers not to planet Earth, but more specifically to this current age.

If we had more time, we could trace the contrast made throughout Scripture between this present age (sometimes called the old age) and the age to come. What we would see is that this age, the one we are living in now is consistently characterized by sin, evil, and human rebellion against God.

So when Paul follows his statement that “Love must be sincere” with “Hate what is evil” and “cling to what is good,” he’s telling us that **Christ-like love is counter-cultural**.

The kind of love that is characteristic of the age to come is not characteristic of this present evil age. The problem is, even as those who are in Christ, and thus, belong to his kingdom, we still live, work, go to school, raise our families, and live out our Christian faith in this present evil age.

Though we don’t belong to this age, it still surrounds us. Therefore, to love like Christ is to love in such a way that is profoundly counter-cultural. Just because “they will know we are Christians by our love,” doesn’t necessarily mean that the world will define love the way Jesus does. Christ-like love is counter-cultural.

Second, Paul says in verse 10, “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Before we unpack that verse, I first want you to ponder a philosophical question. Were you expecting to do some philosophy this early on a Sunday morning? My question is this: if God is eternal, what was God doing *before* he created the universe and everything in it?

The creation account in Genesis doesn’t give us a lot of detail about how God spent his time in eternity past. But there is one place in Scripture that speaks of what God was doing before anything was created. Before God said, “Let there be light,” God was saying, “Let there be love.”

But the philosopher in you might ask, “How could God love if there was no one else around to love?” Exactly! Listen to Jesus’s words from John 17:24.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” (John 17:24, NIV).

Before the world was made, God loved. The Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Father. I think it’s probably safe to extrapolate that the Spirit also loved the Father and the Son and vice versa. The point is **Christ-like love is necessarily communal**. That is, it is impossible to obey the command to love unless there is someone to love.

Now look at Romans 12:10. It is impossible to “Be devoted to one another in love” or to “Honor one another above yourselves” unless there is a one another in the picture.

If there’s one thing that we should remember from verses 3–8 that we looked at last week it’s that I need the body of Christ, and the body of Christ needs me. And the only

way that's possible, and the only way we can obey the one-anothers of the Bible is in community. Christ-like love is *necessarily* communal. It doesn't have to be a big community (that's why I love small group ministry), but it can't just be me and Jesus.

Third, Paul says in verse 11, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." Let's consider what this verse has to do with Christ-like love.

Let's be honest and admit together that some people are just hard to love. Let's confess to ourselves that some of those hard-to-love people may be in this room right now or [will be/were] in the other service. Lord love those people, but do I have to?

Are there members of your church family that would exhaust all your energy to love on them? Have you come to a place in your heart where you feel it would just be better for your spirit if you kept your distance? Is your tank fresh out of zeal?

Brothers and sisters, **Christ-like love cannot be complacent.** If we are to love others like Christ, we cannot pursue the path of least resistance. Love takes work.

But love is not a work that we can conjure up within us. That's why Paul goes on to say in verse 11 that we are to "keep [our] spiritual fervor." To avoid complacency and letting our love grow cold, we need the Spirit to keep our spiritual fervor good and hot.

The word-picture behind the phrase "spiritual fervor" leads me to picture a tea kettle on a stovetop. A tea kettle cannot boil water on it's own. Water in the pot will stay at room temperature unless it's heated. But when the burner is turned on and heat is applied, a kettle does what a good tea kettle is designed to do: boil water for a nice hot cup of Earl Grey tea.

So let's take our temperature this morning. How hot is your spiritual fervor? Is it cold and complacent or is boiling over with blessing?

Christ-like love, especially for those who we find difficult to love isn't going to happen if our zeal is at room temperature. To love like Christ demands a spiritual fervor that boils up only when we yeild to the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts. Christ-like love cannot be complacent.

Notice also in verse 12 that **Christ-like love leads to persistent prayer.** Paul exhorts us in verse 12 to "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Nothing zaps our joy faster than suffering and affliction. But nothing fuels our hope and empowers perseverance more than meditating on God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Way back in Romans chapter 5 Paul said, "[W]e boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does

not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:2b-5, NIV).

You may also remember back when we were working through Romans chapter 8 that Paul said, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:18, NIV). He said this not to try and minimize our suffering, but to lead us to maximal hope. He went on in that passage to describe how all of creation is eagerly awaiting the day when God will set everything right.

In verses 24 and 25 of Romans 8, Paul pointed us to our future hope. "For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently (Rom. 8:24-25, NIV).

Paul went on in Romans 8:26-27 to say, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27, NIV).

Now look again at Romans 12:12 and notice a very similar thread. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer" (Rom. 12:12, NIV). When we consider God's love for us and we see Christ-like love formed in us, we find joy and hope even in the midst of affliction and suffering. The more we keep these things in view, the more we will want to persist in prayer. Christ-like love leads to persistent prayer.

Paul continues his rapid-fire series of commands in verse 13 and following. Another characteristic of Christ-like love is that it is costly. More specifically, **Christ-like love embraces costly fellowship.**

I've admitted before that I'm not crazy about the word "fellowship." It's a fine biblical term. I just don't like how in modern usage we've watered down the meaning of the word as presented in the New Testament.

The NIV doesn't use the word "fellowship" in verse 13, but it does translate the word into English as "share with." To share with or to have fellowship with someone is to have some skin in the game. Fellowship isn't merely friendship, it's a partnership. And in a partnership, each party invests something of value into the relationship.

Similarly, Paul goes on in verse 13 to say that we should "Practice hospitality." I don't mean to be picky about translations, but "practice" really isn't a strong enough word. The word "pursue" gets us closer to Paul's meaning.

Pursue hospitality. To pursue means to go looking for something until you find it. In fact, in the very next verse, Paul uses the same word in a negative context to describe people who pursue Christians with evil intent. We call those people persecutors. We'll get to verse 14 in a minute, but let's apply what it means to fellowship with believers in need and to pursue hospitality.

I need to confess that in studying this passage, I found this verse to be the most challenging and convicting. I want to dismiss Paul's words and push this command off onto those in our church who have the gift of hospitality and the gift of generosity.

Unfortunately, Paul's words are addressed to all Christians, that is, to all who want to exhibit Christ-like love. It means I need to prayerfully pursue members of my church family who are in need. I need to go looking for people to bless and for those I could invite into fellowship in the truest sense of the word.

If Christ-like love means embracing costly fellowship with those I want to love, what does it mean for those who are my enemies? Paul picks up on Jesus's teaching from the Sermon on the Mount in verse 14 by saying, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Rom. 12:14, NIV). To bless someone means to ask God to show them his goodness and favor. To curse means the opposite.

We'll do a deeper dive next week into what it looks like to love our enemies, but for now let's observe that **Christ-like love is counterintuitive**. It ain't normal. It's not our default setting. It's not our first move toward those who intend us harm. Paul spoke about the counterintuitive love of Christ back in chapter 5. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8, NIV).

And yet, compassion for others doesn't come natural either. But **Christ-like love calls for compassion**. Look at verse 15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom. 12:15, NIV). It's a bit easier to "mourn with those who mourn" or as the ESV puts it, "weep with those who weep." It's a bit more difficult to "Rejoice with those who rejoice," especially when jealousy and envy lives within us.

Let's help one another out as we seek to encourage one another toward Christ-like love. This week, whenever you have a chance to share a prayer request with someone, in addition to sharing a need, invite others to share your joy.

If you are going through a particularly difficult time right now, it might be challenging to find something to rejoice over. Don't overthink it. Simply share one thing that God is doing in your life right now, even in the midst of trial.

And when that person shares with you something God has done to bring them joy, rejoice with them. Praise God with them for his grace and goodness. Rejoice together over what God has done.

Finally, in verse 16 Paul invites us to “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Rom. 12:16, NIV). We could summarize this final thought by saying that **Christ-like love corrects our self-perception.**

It’s no coincidence that verses 9-16, a passage on genuine Christ-like love follows the passage we looked at last Sunday about the body of Christ and the diversity of its members. The things Paul says to church in Rome here in chapter 12 are nearly identical to things Paul said to the church in Corinth.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. (1 Cor. 12:21-26, NIV).

There’s a great line in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Speaking to a mixed crowd of well-wishers and free-loaders attending his birthday party, Bilbo Baggins says to his attendees, “I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.”

It’s a funny line, but I hope it’s not descriptive of us when we gather together with our church family or when we meet one another during the week. Where there once was pride and conceit, may the Lord Jesus correct our self-perception and form in us Christ-like love.

We’ve covered a lot of ground this morning and have considered together eight characteristics of Christ-like love. Now let’s pray and ask the Lord to make us more like him, so that in our love for one another everyone will know that we are his disciples.