

# **International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**

## **“Love Conquers All”**

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*  
Romans 12:9

**Sunday, November 1**  
Major Gerald (Gary) Reilly  
The Salvation Army  
Mississippi-Rideau Lakes Corps

This past week we witnessed again how evil can drive a person to hate with such intensity as to commit heinous acts of brutality. On a peaceful day in Nice the life of a church sexton—a middle aged lay member of church staff and father of two children—was tragically taken; an elderly woman stabbed to death and beheaded (as her attacker yelled “Allahu akbar!” – or “God is most great”, or “God is greatest”), and yet another woman who died after making her way to a nearby shop seeking assistance. Just weeks ago, a school-teacher who had taught his class a lesson on freedom of speech, was beheaded outside his school. This was actually the third attack in less than two months after a trial opened related to 2015 attack at a satirical newspaper – Charlie Hebdo—and at a kosher market. The comments section of the online news stories were a treat to read, filled with all manner of hatred, bigotry and rage. That is, after all, how the world reacts to violence and hatred. Hate for hate. Spite for spite.

We live in a world that is fractured, that is broken, that is cold and getting colder (so much for global warming), and full of the same foul contents as was the proverbial cup that turned the stomach of our Lord as He prayed in the garden, *“My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from me! Yet not what I will, but what you will.”*<sup>a</sup> On this, the day of prayer for the persecuted church, we are given pause to reflect on the very real persecution going on in diverse places; and the sobering fact that what is at present “out there”, is coming to a neighborhood near you. We see how the world reacts to police shootings, or to those with differing opinions or of another political stripe. We’ve seen the riots, the demonstrations, heard the fiery rhetoric. But how are we as Christians to react? How do I relate to those who oppose Biblical values? How do we respond to those who scoff at our attempts to live holy lives?

In the letter to the Romans, Paul spends the better part of chapters one through eleven giving a detailed look at the doctrines of our faith: our sinfulness and God’s grace. In chapter twelve Paul begins to describe how doctrine is lived out as the duty of our faith. For Paul, the evidence that we are truly saved is found in changed lives, and he begins his section on duty by saying:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”<sup>b</sup>

The Message renders verse two: *“Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.”*<sup>c</sup>

There is a lot to bite off and chew in these verses we are looking at this morning. John Stott sees in verses nine through twenty-one, a recipe of love containing twelve ingredients:<sup>1</sup> Sincerity, discernment, affection, honour, enthusiasm, patience, generosity, hospitality, good will, sympathy, harmony, humility. I’m going to spare you a twelve-point sermon, but let me survey these ingredients as we seek to find the Christian response to ever increasing hostility from the world. He begins with a premise.

---

<sup>a</sup> Matthew 26:39 NET

<sup>b</sup> Romans 12:1-3 NIV

<sup>c</sup> Romans 12:2 NLT

## Premise

<sup>9</sup> **Love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good.**

The Greek word used here for love is 'agape', which is the *love* most often associated with God. It is love that is grounded not in emotions; nor shaped by reciprocity; nor motivated by selfishness. This 'love' is the nature of God—God is love. This love is without hypocrisy, that is, it doesn't wear a mask, it is pure—pure because God is love. Love begins with God, finds its meaning in God, and is therefore best displayed by God. Without God, we cannot know this love. The world might throw the term around, but apart from God the world's love is but a poor imitation of the real thing.

I had on my feed the other day an advertisement for some jeweler, featuring a large gaudy ring, with the caption, "Love begins here." Rubbish. That 'love' is as far removed from the divine 'love' of which Paul is speaking as the east is from the west. The only way we know love is because God first loved us. God has loved us from before we were born; and at no time did he ever fall out of love for us; and at no time will he ever fall out of love for us. Through Isaiah God asks, "*Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*"<sup>d</sup> The sad truth is that the world's love is transient, fickle, and too often is about what makes me feel good; what is good for me, rather than God's love, which is poured out upon us for our good. "*For God so loved the world He gave...*"

When we submit ourselves to Christ and accept Him into our hearts, we are filled with God's love. Therefore, it follows, we should have equal aversion to that which is unloving. *Abhor* is a distinct word, found only here in the New Testament, meaning, "to dislike, to have a horror of." One source pegs the meaning, "to shudder with horror."<sup>2</sup> We are to run from evil; distance ourselves from sin. But our faith is not just characterized by negatives; don't do this; stay away from that... Remember the old Romper Room, "Do Bee and Don't Bee?" God's Words also gives positives.

As God's children we are to *cling*, the word meaning, "to glue, to cement, to fasten together, to join one's self to. Get the picture? We are to "cleave to" the good. When Jesus was called "Good," He pointed out that only one is good—and that is God. When we cling to good, we are clinging to that which is pleasing, honoring, and inclines towards God. In the movie *Master and Commander* one of the old sailors, who would have been climbing up and down the rigging of the ship in all manner of conditions, had tattooed on the back of his fingers the letters: "H-O-L-D-F-A-S-T". While gripping the ropes there would be on his hand a reminder to not hold the ropes casually or lightly. He was to hold fast.<sup>e</sup>

John Stott says of God's love (and therefore the love we are to possess): "It is so passionately devoted to the beloved object that it hates every evil which is incompatible with his or her highest welfare."<sup>3</sup> The more we are filled with the love of God, the more and better we will be at discerning what God's will is, and as a consequence we will be better able to cast off the sin that

---

<sup>d</sup> Isaiah 49:15-16

<sup>e</sup> This is actually one of my good friend and retired Officer Major Peter Eason's favorite movie illustrations.

so easily entangles us.<sup>f</sup> This love we possess shuns evil; clings to the good, and is displayed in how we relate to those in God's family.

### Love in the Family

<sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people.

Paul uses here another Greek term for love – a word describing the love of husbands and wives; parents for children and children for parents. Rather than getting bogged down in a detailed examination of each term, just look at the actions this love entails. We are to show eagerness, not be lacking in zeal, and being enthusiastic: this love is acted out—it is visible and vibrant. To be 'enthusiastic' is to boil. The Amplified Bible has: "*be aglow and burning with the Spirit*," while The Message has, "*keep yourselves fueled and aflame*." Luthi says too often "we are like wood that is both green and wet, and therefore difficult to set alight."<sup>4</sup> However, it could and should be said of the church, that if we were to capture this love of which Paul is speaking, that being with other Christians one hot time! Try that line with your secular friends when they ask you what you did on the weekend – "I had a hot date with some smokin' people." That'll get a conversation going!

This love is an interactive love, as we assist one another, and pursue ways by which we can demonstrate hospitality. And, regardless of how we are treated, we bless. That's why it is so important we be filled with God's love, for without that love we would too easily fall into the kneejerk reaction of reciprocating the way we are treated. When Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, He is telling us to react in a way that is different than that of the world—in a way that is least expected.

And we are to share in one another's lives—our joys and our sorrows. There is the old adage:

A sorrow shared is  
But half a trouble,  
A joy that's shared is  
A joy made double<sup>5</sup>

The Psalmist song: "*How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*"<sup>g</sup> is echoed by Paul's "Live in harmony..." Are you starting to see why it is so necessary for us to be filled with God's love? There are some pretty discordant people out there! And here is the rub, the word Paul uses here means 'unfeigned, undisguised.' It is not just that we are being called to tolerate objectional people—you don't know anyone like that, do you?—we are called to love them, to enjoy them, to look out for their interests. Dare I say, even with 'those people', we are

---

<sup>f</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>g</sup> Psalm 133:1

to pursue hospitality. Really Paul? Yes, really. John notes: "...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."<sup>h</sup> It is logical then that if we don't love one another, God does not live in us, and we possess only a distorted and weak affection. Luthi notes: "We ourselves, our hearts and our natures are hostile territory to God's love and therefore have to be conquered and cleansed of all sorts of things that masquerade under the name of Love..."<sup>6</sup>

Only with the love of God in us can we hope to love, or be able to love, beyond the family of God. For we are not only to encourage one another, we are meant to reach out to those who might resist God's love—and even violently oppose God's love. Therefore, Paul continues...

### **Love for the World**

<sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. <sup>19</sup> Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but give place to God's wrath, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> Rather, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head. <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Understand, the New Testament was written in a culture opposed to Christianity – violently opposed. When Bible authors, under the Spirit's inspiration, penned these words, they did so in an environment that was overtly hostile to the faith. These aren't just nice platitudes; or out-of-touch suggestions. Paul would write the Epistle of joy, the letter to the Philippians, whilst in prison. When James writes: "*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance,*"<sup>i</sup> he does so to a church undergoing persecution. And not just you can only gather at 30% capacity type hardship, but the if you are found worshipping Christ you go to jail—or worse—type hardship.

According to Independent News, "900,000 Christians have been 'martyred' in the last decade, equating to 90,000 a year and one every six minutes."<sup>7</sup>

Open Doors USA<sup>8</sup> reports that:

- In North Korea, Christians are considered hostile elements to be eradicated
- In Afghanistan—Christianity is not permitted to exist
- In Somalia, Christians are high-value targets
- Believers in Libya face abuse and deadly violence
- Christians in Pakistan live with constant threat of mob attacks
- Christian converts in Sudan targeted for persecution
- There are Christians imprisoned and dying in shipping containers in Eritrea

In Yemen, in Iran, in India – on every continent these are not easy days to be a Christian. Then again, it never has been easy—for being a Christian is not a matter of birth; it is not a matter of nationality, it is not just a worldview, it is not just a matter of being a moral person. To be a Christian means to have been radically transformed by the love of God, through the sacrifice of Christ and by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>h</sup> 1 John 4:12 NRSV

<sup>i</sup> James 1:2-3

It is to be filled with a supernatural love. It is in that supernatural love we find the ultimate weapon. Three times Paul has pointed out how the Christian is to react to the world's opposition.

Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good.  
Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people.  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We don't overcome evil by signing a petition; by marching in a protest; by electing a certain candidate; or by winning an argument on Facebook. We overcome evil with good—that is, we overcome evil by the love of God. Good is stronger than evil because the heart of God is good. Everything has its limits, but the love of God 'never ends.'<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The truth is, none of us can love as Paul advocates, if we are loving in only our own strength. That's why Paul begins his section on duty with the call to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. If we can't love like this, it is because we've built this little stronghold—or perhaps two or three strongholds—in our hearts that we refuse to turn over to the love of God. God I'll give you my devotion, and my talent...but I'll just hold on to this one thing. God you can have my relationships and my time...except for when I'm with my buddies Lord, but that's only once in a while. We have a hard time with the "all" in "all your heart, mind, should and strength."

An old evangelist once pointed out: "To be a Christian means to give as much of myself as I can to as much of Jesus as I know."<sup>10</sup>

Aren't you glad that when Jesus went to the cross He didn't ask God to mostly save us. That he didn't pray, "Father, forgive them...unless..." Or promise, "And lo, I am with you a lot of the time..." We have here words that tells us love conquers; and we have a history that demonstrates love conquering time and again; and we have the promise that in the end, those found in Christ will be more than conquerors.

Our Saviour said: *"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."*<sup>11</sup>

As we enter a time of reflection, guided by the words of the John Gowans, it may be you are perhaps struggling with feelings of doubt due to the circumstances around us. Feelings undoubtedly experienced by Christians in Nice, by brothers and sisters in Bangladesh, in areas of Nigeria, in Yemen – and so many others. The chorus says:

For His love remains the same,  
He knows you by your name,  
Don't think because you failed Him He despairs;  
For He gives to those who ask

---

<sup>11</sup> John 13:34-35 (cf. John 15:12)

His grace for every task,  
God plans for you in love for He still cares.

As the music is played and the words appear on the screen, allow the love of God to renew you this morning, enabling you to love others as God loves you. God *is* great, because God *is* good. And the goodness of God is shown in a Love that passionately longs for your highest welfare — a love that you can know and with a love of which you can be filled.

Additional Material

The story is told of the old Swiss divine, Klaus von Flue, who was said to have been asked the definition of avarice by a high Church dignitary. He answered that the dignitary should know best its meaning, for he recently purchased, at a ridiculously cheap price, twenty-seven wagon loads of wine from the peasants, which he then sold shortly afterwards at an exorbitant price.<sup>11</sup>

## **Endnotes**

---

<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 330-333.

<sup>2</sup> Spiros Zodhiastes, *Lexical Aids to the New Testament* in *The Complete Word Study New Testament* (Chattanooga; AMG Publishers, 1991), 891.

<sup>3</sup> Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 331.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Kurt Schoenenberger (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 180.

<sup>5</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Preach the Word: Romans, Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 232.

<sup>6</sup> Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans*, 177.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/christians-killed-martyred-900-000-last-decade-africa-boko-haram-al-shabaab-study-global-christianity-vatican-a7526226.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/11-christians-killed-every-day-for-their-decision-to-follow-jesus/>

<sup>9</sup> Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans*, 182.

<sup>10</sup> Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*, 214.

<sup>11</sup> Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans*, 178.