

Sermon Outline

SYMPATHY (ROMANS 12:15)

I. Introduction

- A. In Matthew 24, our Lord tells us that a day is coming when lawlessness will grow. As a result, “the love of many will grow cold.”
- B. The good news is that God considers us forgiven and righteous only because of Christ.
- C. When God pardons our sins, he begins forming us into new human beings who reflect the Lord Jesus Christ, so working against the coldness of our hearts.
 - Galatians 5:22: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”
- D. This morning, we will consider Romans 12:15, a verse that points us to this sanctifying, humanizing work of God.

II. Genuine Love

- A. This verse obviously doesn’t stand alone. In the portion of Scripture, in which it is written, this verse is a part of a string of virtues, a series of good deeds, that the apostle Paul calls us to emulate or attempt.
 - “Let love be genuine” (v 9)
 - “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (v 9)
 - “Love one another with brotherly affection” (v 10)
 - “Outdo one another in showing honor” (v 10).
 - “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord” (v 11).
 - “Rejoice in hope” (v 12)
 - “be patient in tribulation” (v 12)
 - “be constant in prayer” (v 12)
 - “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” (v 13).
 - “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (v 14)
- B. Those are some of the good deeds the Father calls his children to do. Those the kinds of good works that the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus will form in us as he works in us.
- C. They all have in common is that they are all manifestations of *holy love*; the kind of love that flows from the very nature and heart of God.
- D. Once again, we are reminded of how central holy love is in the Christian life.

- John 13:35: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

III. The Good Work of Sympathy

- A. To “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” is to feel along with one another—to *sympathize* (lit. “feel with”) with one another.
- B. As Paul Tripp teaches us in his book *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, sympathy is not simply a passing, momentary feeling of sadness for someone. It is to feel, to be moved along with the person in whatever he or she is experiencing (Tripp, 166).
- C. When the Lord Jesus teaches us through his apostle to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep,” he is pointing us to the good work of sympathizing with our fellow human beings, believer and unbeliever alike.
- D. Let’s try to understand this instruction more deeply. Let’s see:
 1. Why sympathy is important in the life of a church
 2. How we can actually begin to form sympathy in us.
 3. The stuff of sympathy—weeping and rejoicing
 4. The enablement for our sympathy

IV. Sympathy Serves Harmony

- A. *Why is sympathy so important in the life of a church?* Why is sympathy not something that is only for weak, soft, wimpy, underachieving, or effeminate people?
- B. We may be seeing a hint of the answer in the next verse.
 - Rom 12:16: “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.” (ESV) “Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.” (NASB)
- C. Sympathy is necessary if we are going to live in unity and in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ—brothers and sisters of different personality types, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic backgrounds, and oftentimes vastly different life-shaping experiences.
- D. Harmony is prominent in Paul’s mind, because a few verses later, Paul says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (v 18).
- E. But to get to peace, harmony, and unity, we need to practice sympathy, “fellow feeling.”
- F. Sympathy is not a weakness. It is a vital part of...
 1. healthy human relationships;
 2. loving one another genuinely.
 3. the manifestation of the Lord Jesus in our midst.
- G. Sympathy, fellow-feeling, is needed to live harmoniously and peaceably with one another in the Body of Christ. And for that reason, the Spirit of Christ will work this sympathy into our hearts.

V. Nourishing Our Sympathy

- A. *How can sympathy be nurtured?* To nurture sympathy in our hearts, we need to be with lowly people. Better yet: We need to identify with lowly people.
- Rom 12:16: “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.”
- B. Who are the lowly people? They are those who are especially vulnerable to the natural elements or oft-sinful whims and fancies of the larger community or society.
- C. We cultivate sympathy by sharing in the lives of those who are lowly; not holding ourselves apart from them, not standing at a distance and scoffing at their struggles, but coming near to them, befriending them—and then taking up their struggles as our own, helping them to bear their burdens.
- D. Sympathy is the natural produce of a life that is disposed toward showing mercy even to our enemies. Consider the rest of the passage:
- Rom 12:17: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”
 - Rom 12:19-20: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’²⁰ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’”
 - Rom 12:21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
- E. Sympathy fits very well with that kind of gracious, life-giving disposition that gives good for evil.

VI. Weep

- A. *How does sympathy look like? What does sympathizing with someone involve?*
- B. When we think about sympathy, we often think of *weeping* first: “weep with those who weep.”
- C. Weeping with those who weep is part of how we...
1. love genuinely (v 9).
 2. demonstrate brotherly affection (v 10).
 3. honor a suffering person (v 10).
 4. contribute to the needs of others (v 13).
- D. Weeping with those who weep is not giving a quick, packaged theological-sounding answers to the sufferer. It is about allowing the person the right to grieve over the situation in all its depth and intensity.
- E. Too often, we approach a suffering person as an embarrassing problem to be fixed. But what such a person needs first and foremost from us is respect his or her suffering.
- Proverbs 25:20: “Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.”

- F. How then do we weep with a person?
1. By literally weeping (because our hearts are touched by the depth of the person's pain)
 2. By being respectfully silent in the presence of the person's grief
 3. By allowing ourselves to stand in the person's shoes and feeling his or her pain
 4. By asking God to give us soft hearts that feel the suffering of others.

VII. Rejoice

- A. If it is hard enough to weep with those who weep, it can in fact be even harder to rejoice with those who rejoice.
- Do we rejoice when a colleague is promoted to the position we want?
 - Do we rejoice for the other team who wins?
 - Do we rejoice when a brother in Christ succeeds in his career while we ourselves are not doing well?
 - Do we rejoice when God blesses others in ways he hasn't chosen to bless us?
- B. When confronted with the successes of others we find our remaining "old man" erupting in protest!
- Jealousy ("Why him and not me?")
 - Fault-finding ("So-and-so succeeded because he must be idolizing his work and neglecting his family.")
 - Gossip
- C. But if we look behind these statements, we will find that there is one basic belief behind all of them: "NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE HAPPY IF I AM NOT."
- D. If this is our basic attitude toward others, it's little wonder our relationships are so shallow. We cannot live and let live. We cannot let others be happy. —And if we cannot celebrate with others, how can we nurture communities that are harmonious, peaceful, and unified? There can be no genuine love if we cannot let others be happy and be happy for them.
- E. But fear is also involved and must be addressed.
1. Hebrews 2:15 says that "the fear of death" holds people in lifelong slavery.
 2. This fear causes us to ask:
 - Who is going to care for my happiness?
 - Who is going to bless me?
 - Who is going to care for me?
 - Am I going to ever be fulfilled in life?
 - What is my life worth?
- F. If this fear is not addressed, it would only feed the dark belief that says, "NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE HAPPY IF I AM NOT."

VIII. Freed to Care

If I am loved by God; if the Lord Jesus Christ has died for my sins and risen for my salvation; and if God has given himself to me as my heavenly Father, my Glory, and my Portion in the Lord Jesus Christ—then my heart is set free from having to worry about myself. My heart is set free from having to fear for my future, or worry about what others think about me, and so “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

A. Psalm 73 teaches us to say:

My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever. (v 26)

B. Implications:

1. People may climb ahead of me. But so what? “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” And I am happy that he has blessed them with success.
2. The evil may very well prosper. But so what? “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” I can bless them instead of curse them, because I am fully secure in my Father’s love.

C. If I have God, I already have everything. If I already have everything, then I can begin to look out for others.

1. I can open my heart to others.
2. I can allow myself to feel their grief without fearing that doing so would inconvenience me.
3. I can allow myself to feel their joy and to celebrate their successes without fearing that I would be destroyed by their successes in life.

D. Are you seeing how the Gospel works?

1. In the Gospel, God says to us what he says to the sulking older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (Lk 15:31).
2. The Gospel sets us free from obsessing over ourselves, which is precisely what enables all kinds of self-serving, sinful behavior.
3. The Gospel enables us to repent of the lie that “NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE HAPPY IF I AM NOT” by telling us the truth—“GOD HAS GIVEN HIMSELF TO US FREELY IN THE LORD JESUS CHRIST. GOD DELIGHTS TO BE OUR PORTION IN JESUS CHRIST FOREVER.” (cf. Eph 1:3; Col 2:10)
4. Because God has given you all goodness in Jesus Christ, there is no necessity whatsoever anymore to fight and kill for your own glory in this world. You are set free to love others and to “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Questions for Reflection

1. Was there anything in particular about today's sermon that blessed and encouraged you?
2. Was there anything with which you disagree or found difficult to accept?
3. How do you see the love of many growing cold in our day (Mt 24)?
4. What does God do in us when he pardons our sins in Christ? What does he produce in us, according to Gal 5:22?
5. Rom 12:15 does not stand alone. What other instructions surround it? What are common themes in these instructions?
6. What is *sympathy*?
7. What does it mean to "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep"?
8. Why is sympathy important in the life of a church? (See v 16).
9. How can sympathy be nourished? (See v 16 also)
10. How do we "weep with those who weep"?
11. Ponder Prov 25:20. How does this shape your approach toward grieving people?
12. Are you someone who typically rejoices with those who rejoice? How do you respond to the successes of others?
13. "NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE HAPPY IF I AM NOT." Do you believe this somewhere in you?
14. How does the Gospel set us free to care for others?