

SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE SUNDAY - 2010

The Protest of Love

TEXT: ROMANS 12:9-21 (ESV)



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January 17, 2010
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Sacred Zeal

This week Haiti suffered an earthquake of incredible damage and magnitude. As I write, the Red Cross estimates 45,000 to 50,000 dead. Organizations around the world—religious, secular & governmental—are rallying funds, people, and supplies to relieve that poor country. I pray the Lord would bring

relief, healing and hope to that nation and that with this horrible disaster on our minds He would help us and people everywhere gain a clearer view of how precious and sacred life is. And I pray that He would mobilize His people around the world and in this church to move forward to minister to the material and spiritual needs of that hurting nation. Come Lord Jesus. Come.

Today we observe a day on the calendar we have not observed before as a church—at least not in a formal way: “The Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.” This third Sunday in January is meant for churches across the nation to focus on God’s word and to pray for issues facing our culture which undermine and destroy life.

Being honest, this sermon has been sort of a struggle for me. My struggles haven’t stemmed from what I believe about issues like abortion—which I oppose in every form. My struggle stems more from this question: How can we be zealous about matters holy to heart of God in a way that reflects the heart of God to people on both sides of the aisle? Don’t misunderstand. I am not advocating moral relativism or weak convictions. Quite the opposite. I’m advocating a strength of resolve that demands more of us than simply identifying ourselves by political affiliation or voting issues. I pray we’d be a people of such strong conviction and faith that we’re immovably committed to Christ not only in what we profess, but also in what we oppose.

As I have wrestled with the role of the church in the public debate and as I have examined God’s word concerning how we are to live and move in relationship to issues of human rights and the sanctity of human life, I have so far reached two conclusions: 1) there are many places we can go off the rails and misrepresent the Lord if we jump in without thinking but 2) Christians cannot remain neutral or silent on these issues either. What these two conclusions have in common is the topic of this first ever “Sanctity of Human Life Sunday” sermon—the need for love to fuel not only our response to very real social and moral issues, but also for love to fuel our drive to engage in the silent crusades that have no press or website, but are instead one life pouring the love of Christ into another.

While we will not wait for the “Sanctity of Human Life Sunday” to be the only time we address these issues, we will devote this Sunday each year to focusing our thoughts and prayers on the call Christians have to respect and even defend the sanctity of life under the conviction that all people, regardless of where they come from or what they believe or how they live are made in the image of God, and so their lives are sacred before God. We will labor, by God’s grace, to persuade everyone we can that no one has ever looked upon an unsacred human life, because what we all share in common is that, unlike everything else in all creation, people were made in the image of God.

When we support a cause, or when we oppose a practice or a law, how can we do this with both a holy zeal for the Lord and a humble spirit of love for all—including those who disagree? How do we speak and even protest lovingly? After all, as Paul wrote, even if we have all the right ideas, words and even a heightened sense of the presence of God working in and through us but lack love, we’re just making noise, nothing else. (1 Cor 13) We turn to Romans 12 to lead us to a protest of love as we seek to stand up for the sanctity of human life.

Romans 12:9-21

⁹Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

²⁰To 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.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

What Love Demands of Us

When we talk of the Protest of Love, there are two sides we need to see. Obviously, there is the side we’re probably all anticipating—the idea that love needs to be the means by which we protest—loving people with resolution, courage and humility. The other side of this expression stems from how true, Biblical love will always stand in protest of half-hearted crusades motivated by anything less than love. You can spot a loveless crusader a mile away—they are vocal about where they stand, often even willing to go to jail on some issues. But when love is lacking, nothing changes. Their protests are just noise.

Today's text tells us what a loving protest looks like. "Let love be genuine."⁽⁹⁾ I want us to see how all-encompassing this text is on this issue, and then visit the power of genuine love contending for truth. Genuine love is such that before the mirror, before the watching world, before our opponents, before the needy and before God, our love is consistent.

BEFORE THE MIRROR—"Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good."⁽⁹⁾ "Never be wise in your own sight."⁽¹⁶⁾ The Protest of Love demands we that be people of deep, personal moral clarity. We live in a world that not only down-plays moral conviction, but in fact shames people for it. But part of what it means to love well is to abhor evil—meaning we need an ever developing sense of evil if we are to have an ever developing capacity to love what is good. The voices demanding that we embrace moral ambiguity are, whether they admit it or not, just demanding a new morality that says it is immoral to believe in right and wrong. I believe this is an excellent example of a world trying to be wise in its own eyes. Before the mirror, we need to be people with a moral compass. What does your protest oppose if not evil? What is the goal of your protest if not goodness? In your own heart, in places no one but God sees, abhor evil and chase after goodness, and ask the Lord to give you a greater clarity of both.

BEFORE THE WATCHING WORLD—"Outdo one another in showing honor"⁽¹⁰⁾ "Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all."⁽¹⁷⁾ The Protest of Love says it matters what we show the watching world when we contend for what is right. The unloving crusader does anything to win, but the Protest of Love says we are to think about how to oppose in ways that are honorable in the sight of those watching it unfold. The text seems to focus most explicitly on how we engage our opponents publicly. Love for our opponents should be evident to the watching world.

BEFORE OUR OPPONENTS—"Never avenge."⁽¹⁹⁾ "Bless those who persecute you, do not curse."⁽¹⁴⁾ "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."⁽¹⁸⁾ Genuine love protests even a neutral heart toward our opponents. We are to bless those who persecute us—which is so much more than a neutral avoidance. It is the call to want their best in a genuine way. We don't just want to win the point. We want to win our opponents. Our text ends by highlighting the power of blessing those who persecute us. When we feed our enemies or give them water when they are thirsty, we are the last people on the face of the earth expected to do this, and it is like heaping burning coals on their heads, which is not a reference to some sort of insidious "revenge by kindness," but instead is a reference to doing something so startling that it cannot help but draw a response.

BEFORE THE NEEDY—"Associate with the lowly."⁽¹⁶⁾ "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."⁽¹⁵⁾ The protest of love says we are to enter into the emotional, relational situations of others in need. The tears of the hurting and needy are to be our tears; their joys, our joys. Love costs something, and the protest of love is the act of leaning in to absorb that cost as a way of life. We must personally engage, understanding we can just as easily be brought low at any moment, if we are not already. To stand with the lowly is to stand in a holy place

BEFORE OUR GOD—"Do not be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."⁽¹¹⁻¹²⁾ The Protest of Love is a Godward act. It is bathed in prayer, on the lookout for signs of hope, and patient in times of opposition, even tribulation (which Paul's readers would have defined much more horribly than we can imagine in this country today). Serve the Lord, Paul plainly says. In the work of contending for what is good and opposing what is evil, we are to regard this as service to God above all else.

Outdoing Mom and Dad in Honor

I want to close by talking about my parents. When I think of the ways my parents modeled deep, selfless, unflinching and costly love for the hurting, broken and desperate, I can't help but think of how honored I was to be included in those stories. I want to try to outdo them in showing honor⁽¹⁰⁾ by boasting about them now to illustrate what I pray we'd become as God's people living in a world desperate for dignity, mercy and grace.

When my mom and dad sponsored a kid through Compassion International, they didn't just set-up an electronic monthly payment. They took the picture of the girl we sponsored, Analiza from the Philippines, framed it and hung it on the wall in our dining room with all the other family portraits.

When they felt convicted by God to oppose the practice of abortion, they did it by opening our home for months at a time to unwed mothers in crisis pregnancies to come live with us until these young women delivered their babies so that they might have time to weigh the options of adoption or single-motherhood. All told, a full four years during my Jr. High and High Schools days were shared with such women in our home.

When at the age of 13 my foster sister was abruptly rescued by authorities from unspeakable abuse, the courts called my folks and she came to live with us from that day until she graduated High School, fell in love with a Godly, stand-up guy and married him. Patient in tribulation, constant in prayer,⁽¹²⁾ my sister and parents both know what it means to rejoice in hope—the kind any betting man would have bet against, and yet the kind that shines like a beacon so blinding that details of her life before 13 are now awash with the glory of the brilliance of God's grace.

My parents demonstrated the power and protest of love by not being overcome by evil, but by believing with their very lives that they could be used of God to overcome evil with good. And they did. I saw it happen more than once. Decisively. Did my mom and dad have social-issue bumper stickers on their cars? Sure they did. Did they actively support political candidates who agreed with their values? Passionately. But this was never where it stopped. For what were among the busiest years of their domestic lives, they opened their hearts, home and checkbook to give shelter, help and dignity to people in crisis.

I want to outdo them in showing honor. But let me tell you, I could boast about them all day long and never come close. Why? Because what I'm doing to honor them is I'm *telling* you about their love in action. What they did to honor me was they made me part of their love in action. They made me associate with the lowly. They made me share my bathroom. They made me visit the delivery room so I could hold these precious babies and smile with their mothers. Mom brought me to sit patiently with shut-ins in the midst of their tribulation. Dad treated me like a kid who had something to contribute and then expected me to. I didn't always love it then, but I thank God for it now.

We can't outdo one another in showing honor with words. Words are not enough of a protest for the dignity and sanctity of human life. But do you know what is? Love in action. So may God make us a church full of activists—zealous, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. May there be only one version of each of us—the same in the eyes of the world, the needy, our opponents and our mirror—people passionate to speak up, yes, but more to give ourselves away in service to others as an act of worship before the Lord—holding His image bearers in sacred esteem.