

All In The Family
To the Romans...Pt. 21

Well, we are on the downhill stretch of what is already the longest series in SWFF's 18-year history, I'm guessing we've got less than a half-dozen messages left. But since early January, we have been walking through Paul's letter to the church at Rome. And I hope you agree that it's worth the effort. Some of the deepest theology and highest thoughts in all the Bible are found in these 16 chapters.

And last week, we entered the final section, starting in Chapter 12, that urges and instructs the readers or hearers to *apply* the theology to their everyday lives. We said last Sunday that you can't build an artificial distinction between the mind and the body – between information and application. What we hear and learn is always supposed to be acted on in mind, body and emotion.

You see, many people believe God is real and God loves them, and yet, those people can be just as selfish, just as messed-up, and just as anxious as everybody else. Now that belief ought to make a *big* difference. That belief ought to make you more secure, happier, and more humble, and yet our beliefs *don't* do that in so many cases. And the reason they don't do that is because beliefs don't *automatically* turn into changed thoughts and feelings and behavior.

Beliefs have to be turned into changed character through what have been called throughout Christian history “spiritual disciplines”. There are certain things we have to participate in and *do* if our beliefs are actually going to produce changed lives. And Paul is addressing many of them here in the last few chapters of his letter to the Romans.

So we read the first half of chapter 12 last week and we're going to cover the second half today. So let's read it and then we'll begin to dig in. **Romans 12:9–21**, *“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

19 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. 20 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." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Now, there's obviously a ton to mine out of those verses, but what I want to focus in on is the spiritual discipline of community building. Did you know that Christian community is a discipline? It's true. There are a number of Christian practices you can do on your own – pray, read the Bible, fast – but ultimately, you cannot "Christian" on your own. Now, notice, I'm using the word as a verb, not a noun. Yes, you can *be* a Christian on your own, but you can't be an effective one. You can't carry out the calling of a Christian by yourself. And you were never intended to.

Now, I mentioned last week that in the Western World, and especially in modern day America, we are uniquely primed to miss this because of the radical individualism on display in every corner of our society. Church attendance is declining across the country – but honestly so is participation in every form of community – PTA, social clubs, voting, you name it.

And part of it is technology has made us lazy – the internet that you carry in your pocket can deliver just about anything you want right to your front door or television – including a church service. But I think the technology is only exaggerating an individualistic mindset that's been creeping since probably the 60's.

And honestly, some of that has to do with the very language we speak. There have been linguistic studies about how language impacts society. For instance, the native peoples who most recently held these lands before we did, the Comanche, were a very aggressive and violent tribe – even against other Native Americans. And their *language itself* is very aggressive and violent. So the debate is did the language make the society violent or did the violent society make the language. Probably a little of both.

Well, likewise, the importance of Christian community is kind of hidden when *we* read the Scripture just because of the *language* we're reading it in. You see, the English language doesn't have a second person plural pronoun. I mean, we do in Texas, but *ya'll* don't use it in polite company, do you? So when you read, for example, the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says *you* must do this, *you* must do this, *you* must do this, we read it and we tend to think of it as just the way God wants *me* to behave.

But actually, almost all the pronouns in there are “you all”; they’re plural. And so what Jesus is saying is, “I want ya’ll to be part of a community like this. I want ya’ll to form a community like this.” And we’ve missed the whole point of the Sermon on the Mount. Now what I want to do today is to begin looking at this subject of the importance of Christian community. We’re going to do a whole series on church culture when we’re done with Romans because I think it’s so critical right now. But we’ll see some of it today.

Now in the text we just read, we have a whole lot of statements. They’re great. There’s more here than I can possibly cover, but I want to pull out three things we’re going to learn about community from the passage. There’s more than that in the passage, but here’s the three I’d like to cover. I’d like us to notice the *family nature* of Christian community, the *graciousness* of it, and its ultimate *source*.

Now, first, The family nature of Christian community. This is crucial to the whole passage. It’s right up here in **verse 10**, “*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.*” Now “brotherly love” really, in English at least, is a very vague and sentimental idea. But the original Greeks and Romans who saw the brotherly love practiced by Christians knew how radical it was and how *offensive* it was.

Lucian of Samosata, who was a 2nd century Greek writer who watched Christianity growing and didn’t like it – he was a critic – and he makes this comment about the early Christians, “Their founder, Jesus Christ, persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another and therefore they despise their own privacy and view all of their possessions as common property.” See, he recognized how *radical* it was to say that every other person who’s experienced the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ is your brother or your sister. See, Lucian understood that was *radical*. Do you?

Let me take a look out of this passage at three things about what it means to have a family relationship with *all* other people who have experienced the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ. There are three marks of family relationship. I’m going to put it negatively first. Family relationships are marked by non-selectivity, non-privacy, and non-safety. Why even be in a family, right? I know!

First of all, non-selectivity. Verse 10 says brotherly love and that is one of the few Greek words everybody knows. When it says, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love,” the word brotherly love is the word *philadelphia* - yes, like the city - which means “love of brothers”. But the *first* word in that sentence, “be devoted to one another”, was another word that describes family love. It’s actually the word *philostorge*, or *storge*, which is often translated “bondedness or affection”. It’s saying you should experience family bonding, if you understand the gospel.

C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Four Loves*. He was an Oxford professor of ancient literature, by the way, so he knew his stuff. And he said there were four basic Greek words used to describe four kinds of love. And one of them was *storge*, which is this word for family or familiar affection. And then there was the word *philos*, which means friendship. There was the word *eros*, which of course means romantic love, “erotic”. And then there was the word *agape*, which meant sacrificial, serving love.

And Lewis pointed out that *storge* has a particular glory. Because all the other loves require some strength or merit either in the lover or the lovee; either in the one giving the love or the object of the love. So he said for example *agape* - which is sacrificial serving love - that requires a certain selflessness in the lover. A strength or a merit in *you*. Or in *philos*, friendship, and in *eros*, romantic love, they require something attractive or strong. Something that merits your love in *them*. But he said *storge* is different because it meant the love of a mother for her infant and a love of the infant for its mother, a kind of automatic, natural, deep bond. That’s what *storge* meant.

And Lewis goes on and talks in his book about the peculiar glory of it. He says, “[*Storge*] is not discriminating...Friends and lovers feel that they were ‘made for each other.’ The special glory of Affection is that it can unite those who most emphatically, even

comically, are not. People who, if they had not found themselves in the same household or community, would have had nothing to do with each other.”

See what he’s trying to say is think about brothers or sisters you may feel a bond with, but frankly you’d never choose a person like your sibling to be your friend, right? You know, you didn’t choose your sibling; there it was, and you *wouldn’t* have chosen your sibling. He says *storge* exists between people who, if they had not found themselves in the same household or community, would have had nothing to do with each other.

But listen. “Growing fond of ‘old so-and-so’ at first simply because he happens to be there – you know, because you’re thrown together in the same family or the same platoon or the same dorm room – I presently begin to see that there is ‘something in him’ after all. The moment when one first says, really meaning it, that though he is not ‘my sort of man’ he is a very good man ‘in his own way’ is one of liberation.”

“Really we have crossed a frontier. That ‘in his own way’ means that we are getting beyond our own idiosyncrasies, that we are learning to appreciate goodness or intelligence in themselves, not merely goodness or intelligence flavored and served to suit our own pallet.” (36)

Then comes one of my favorite Lewis quotes, “Dogs and cats should always be brought up together; it broadens their minds so.” Now what is he saying? This is a very important word. He says *storge* is a deep sense of connection and bondedness that is there with people who are just *given* to you. People you wouldn’t have chosen and you *don’t* choose, and yet you sense that connection. You sense that bond.

You begin to see things you never would have seen otherwise because if you had a chance to choose them, you never would have chosen them. And that connection, Paul is saying, *is* there and must be practiced and seen by all Christians with all other Christians.

I’ve been liberally quoting another Brit a good deal during this series. I’ve been reading the massive commentaries of Dr. David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the pastor of the great Westminster Chapel in London in the middle part of the 20th century. Now, his title is well earned. He began his vocational life as a physician in London from 1910–1920; a very educated man in a very class-conscious society.

And then he received a call to the ministry. And his first assignment was a small church in Sandfields, which is a very small, very blue-collar town on the coast of Wales. And his church was filled with tin-makers and fishermen and very, very simple, humble people. And he came to realize something as he began to minister among them; he found something very strange happened.

When he got there and talked to these people whom otherwise he had *nothing* in common with and never really in the past felt *any* kind of affinity with - when he spoke to them about the Gospel and how they all together had come by the loving grace of God to see they were sinners and through the cross of Jesus they were saved completely by grace - he felt a bond.

He felt a connection that shouldn’t have been there in natural society. That he’d *never* felt with someone of such a different class and station. And then he came upon a place in **Ephesians 1:15**, where Paul says “*For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love **for all God’s people**...*” meaning that one of the tests of Christian faith is that you feel a love for *all* Christians. And Lloyd-Jones wrote a sermon on that text – he’s got a whole set of commentaries on Ephesians also! Maybe we’ll spend all of *next* year in that. No!

But that text was a real paradigm breaker for him. He said he began to realize that he had one of the marks of real Christianity, which is...The bank account didn't matter. The education didn't matter. The temperament didn't matter. He began to say, "Okay, some of these people are very difficult. Some of these people are not very pleasant. Some of these people are certainly not cool. They're not hip. They're not sophisticated. But I don't care anymore! I feel a connection. I feel a love. I feel in many ways a connection with them I don't feel with people of my own class who have not had the paradigm-shifting experience of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

And in that sermon, he used an illustration, about the famous Bible commentator, Matthew Henry. Matthew's father and mother – Phillip and Katherine – had fallen in love, this is back in the late 1600s. But Phillip Henry belonged to a much lower social class than his fiancée. And in that day, of course, that just wasn't done.

And her parents were not pleased and came to her and said something like, "This is not a good match. This man, Philip Henry, we don't know his family. We don't know where he's from." But when Katherine became a Christian, social standing no longer counted with her. And she said very famously, "I don't know where he's from. All that matters to me is I know where he's going."

And after telling that story, Lloyd-Jones said, "We belong to the same Father, the same household, the same family. We are going to the Father's mansion and we know it, but some brothers and sisters are very difficult. Some are very trying. Some are very unworthy. That doesn't bother us. We don't stay away from them."

He says, "We've stopped selecting and we've stopped auditioning people like we do in every other area in life. You don't choose your brothers; you don't choose your sisters. Thank God that because we're all God's children and we're on the journey together, the day will come when all our faults and blemishes will disappear. We shall be glorified and beautiful together and we know that."

So that's non-selectivity. Christian community has to be marked by an incredible lack of snobbishness toward people of different temperaments and personalities and races and classes, but also, secondly, non-privacy. Remember what Lucian of Samosata said? "Despise their own privacy." Now, non-privacy. Think about family relationships. This is going to get uncomfortable, everybody. In a family, how much privacy is there?

Now, there's one sub-set of people in a family that demands their privacy: teenagers. They *demand* their privacy. "I'm not a child anymore. How dare you look into my drawers?" That kind of thing. And yet parents know the law will throw the book at you; public opinion will throw the book at you if you don't know what your children are doing, teenagers or not. And of course, you *do* have to give them a certain amount of privacy, there's no doubt about that, but if they screw up bad enough you would be legally liable, right? The headlines would read, "Where were the parents?"

The world and the law will throw the book at you if you don't know where your children are, if you don't know what they're spending their money on. Which means that *even* teenagers...For them, inside a family there's a limit to how much privacy there is. Now we don't like this. Lucian of Samosata didn't like it. This isn't just an American thing, but it's especially an American thing. This church is not a club. In a club, you get together for a particular reason and you only contact each other over that reason.

Let's just say we're The Bird-Watchers Club. And if you're in the Bird-Watchers Club, you want to talk about birds when you get together. You can talk to each other about birds. But if in that club somebody comes up to you and says, "What are you dating *him*

for? He's not good for you," you're going to say, "Excuse me? That's none of your business! Let's talk about birds, please." Okay? But in a family, who you date, what you spend your money on, all those things actually entails everybody.

And the simple fact of the matter is, if the Christians around you are brothers and sisters, then who you're dating and how you're spending your money and your life - of course, there has to be a certain amount of privacy even inside a family - but there's a limit to it. What does **verse 9** say? It says, "*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*" What is that doing in a whole list of things on relationships and community? The answer is, Christians are supposed to be holding each other **accountable for the truth**, or they're not loving.

You don't love somebody by knowingly letting them do something evil. And so you see, to have brothers and sisters means they have a claim on you and every aspect of your life. And Lucian of Samosata was particularly put off by the fact that if these people are his brothers and sisters, they have a claim on his possessions. Indeed! Look at **verse 13**; what does it say? It says, "*Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*"

By the way, the words there, the Greek words actually mean give your money; share your possessions. They have a *claim* on them. If you have other brothers or sisters in need, they have a claim on your money and your possessions and your time. And not only that, but thirdly on your emotions when I say non-selectivity, non-privacy, and non-safety. Right in the middle of all this talk about community, you have a very interesting couple of exhortations in **verses 11-12**, “*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*”

Now if those words were somewhere else, we might think they were talking about how you should in some general way keep your spiritual fervor. But in the middle of brotherly love and in the middle of sharing with God’s people, what this means is if you take seriously what the Bible says about your relationships with your brothers and sisters, you will find yourself often relatively exhausted.

Look especially at **verse 15**. “*Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.*” That is actually saying there has to be an involvement and an emotional identification so deep that what is happening to them affects you. And notice the order. Rejoice with those who rejoice *before* you weep with those who weep. Do you know why? Because rejoicing with those who rejoice is a lot harder. Have you ever thought about that?

Which scenario would be easier? You have a brother-in-law who is in the same industry you are. He gets laid off. You comfort him. You say, “If you need a little help, let me know.” *Or...* your brother-in-law gets a huge promotion and is now a couple of tax brackets above you...and it shows. Do you rejoice in his success?

Don’t you see? It is *much* harder to rejoice with your Christian brothers and sisters who are actually doing better than you are. That’s *real* love. That’s *real* identification. Weeping with those who weep is relatively easy, but what this is saying is it’s not emotionally safe to be a brother or sister.

You can’t be detached; you *have* to be involved. You have to care. You can never give up on them. And when they’re hurting, you’re hurting. That’s the reason C.S. Lewis can say: “There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements.”

“Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell.” (*The Four Loves*, 121)

To have brothers and sisters is not safe; it's to be willing to have your heart broken. To have brothers and sisters is not private; it means they have claims on you. To have brothers and sisters means they're given to you and you sense that bond and you give them brotherly and sisterly love and you find that bond, whether you like that kind of person or not. Non-selectively, you stop auditioning. How are we doing as a church? How are *you* doing as a Christian? It's a family nature of community, see?

Secondly, rather briefly actually, **the graciousness of Christian community**. There's something else this text tells us which really deserves not only one sermon, but a whole set of sermons. The first half of the text is mainly talking about relationships between Christians *inside* - family relationships. But the last part of the text is talking mainly about how people inside the Christian community relate to their opponents, relate to the people *outside*: specifically, persecutors and enemies.

And this is as *crucial* to the uniqueness of Christian community as the relationships inside because there are *many* other communities in the world that have extremely close bonds and have such shared values they talk about each other as brothers and sisters. Fine. But here's something I think is very difficult to replicate and that is your relationship, not to brothers and sisters, but to outsiders and enemies.

Here's why this is so important. We live in a very pluralistic society now. Very! And it used to be everybody in a particular society believed one thing. So you know, everybody in Sweden was a Lutheran. Everybody in Italy was a Catholic. Everybody in India was Hindu. Everybody in Texas was Baptist! But now you have these things called "cities"; and they're rapidly increasing – Austin doubles every 20 years - and cities are pluralistic.

Cities have all kinds of diverse communities and now how are we going to get along with each other? How are we going to deal with each other? And one of the answers is a naïve answer - it's not a good answer - one of the answers is to get rid of exclusive views. Let's get rid of exclusive views of truth.

“Don't say you have the truth! Don't you dare say that! Because that leads to demonizing the people who *don't* have the truth. How dare you say Jesus is *the* way, the truth and the life. What do you mean *no one* can come to the Father except through the son? That's very exclusive! Why don't you just let anybody in? Then you would be inclusive. That would make the world a better place to be.”

There's a huge naiveté in saying that. For example, when someone says, "Let's not draw boundaries anymore. Let's not draw any lines." Do you know what you just did? You drew a line, and the line is, over here the good people who don't draw lines and over there the bad people who do draw lines. Even to say "you shouldn't draw a line" is to draw a line. Or to say, "Don't tell anybody you have *the* truth and they have to believe in the gospel to be saved. Don't do that." Well, what have you just done? You're saying you have a better way of doing it and we ought to adopt your way. You're doing the very thing you said I'm not allowed to do over here.

And also, this idea that all communities ought to be inclusive is actually silly. Because all communities have to have boundaries because what makes you a community...to *be* a community, you have to have values that set you off from others. So for example, here's the National Rifle Association chapter and here's the Green Peace chapter.

We would say, "One of these is very conservative and one of these is very liberal." Yeah, I know, but if you're on the steering committee of the Green Peace chapter and you say, "I've come to believe we need to do a lot more drilling for oil in the Alaskan tundra." They'd say, "Why don't you go join the National Rifle Association?" "Well, aren't we very liberal? Shouldn't we be very inclusive?" "Well, yeah, but if we're too inclusive, we can't be the chapter anymore! We're not a community anymore if *everybody* can believe *anything*, right?"

Right! So you don't say, "Oh, what the world needs is people with less exclusive truth." That *is* an exclusive truth! You're saying *that's* the answer and everybody else is wrong unless they believe. No. Listen, the 20th anniversary of 9/11 is coming up – can you believe it! – but I remember when there were all these newspaper articles saying the trouble with the world is fundamentalists, people who believe they have the truth. They're the ones who are doing the terrorism. They're the ones who are being violent.

But it's not true that all fundamentalism leads to violence. It depends on what your fundamental *is*. Have you ever seen an Amish terrorist? Why not? I mean, if anybody is a fundamentalist, Amish are fundamentalists. But their fundamental is a man dying on the cross for his enemies. A man who *refuses* to strike back, even when they come after him.

And if *that's* the fundamental of your life, if *that's* the exclusive truth you have to believe in order to become a Christian, then that should lead you to be the most *open* in your exclusivity. Why? Because your exclusive truth leads you to practice the most inclusive love and kindness to the people outside. See, here's what you really want in a community. Not a community that doesn't believe in exclusive truth and bondedness and boundaries.

What you actually want is a community whose beliefs lead them to not demonize the opposition, but love and respect the people on the other side. And here's what Paul says, "Bless those who curse you. Bless and curse not." He doesn't just say don't get revenge. Don't hurt them. That's certainly implied in it, but he doesn't just say that. He says *bless* them. What does that mean? Wish them well. Love them. Respect them. Pray for them.

We should all post this at the top of our social media profile; "I promise to be loving and respectful to anybody I'm criticizing." Paul says *if* you understand the fundamentals of the gospel, you will bless and not curse. You will love and respect and never disdain or demonize the people who don't agree with you...even the people who are against you, even your opponents, even your enemies.

If you believe they need judgment, you leave it to God, that's verse 19. And if you believe they need great conviction for their sins and need to see the error of their ways, they need to have burning coals put on their heads to wake them up and convict them of their sins, then convict them through your loving behavior. Convict them through your doing good to them.

What makes Christian community unique is not just the family nature between those inside, but the absolute love and respect you show the people outside. Is the Christian church in America known for that? Of course not. And I think that's a big reason why people are leaving the church in droves. *We're* not living up to our own standards, so why should *they* try? But the bigger question is, are we at *this* church known for that?

Well, even if we want to be, where do we get the power for this? **Third, The ultimate source of Christian community.** Look, let me cut our American church a little slack. We're not the first to blow this and we won't be the last. The Bible is actually about the failure of family; do you know that?

If you take the bird's eye view of the entire Bible, in many ways it is a story of the failure of blood, the failure of family, to give us the unconditional, intimate, endlessly patient relationships we really need. See, that's what it means to have a family relationship. Non-selectivity means unconditional love. Non-privacy means intimacy. Non-safety basically means people will put up with you and love you and they just never give up on you.

Unconditional intimate love. We want that! And yet family has basically failed to give it. If you go all the way back to the very beginning of Genesis, what do you have? Cain killing Abel, a brother's blood spilled out on the ground! Well, maybe that's just a very bad start. But let's keep going. The rest of the Genesis! Ishmael struggling with Isaac, brother against brother. Rachel struggling with Leah, sister against sister. You're not going to get off the hook, ladies! Esau wanting to kill his scheming brother, Jacob. He has to run away. Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers – and that was them being *nice*, they originally planned to kill him.

On and on it goes and it doesn't stop there. Where's this idea of *storge*? You get into the history of Israel. Here's King David, being driven into the wilderness by his son, Absalom, who was leading a coup to kill him. Here's Amnon, another son of David, raping Tamar, his sister. Here's Abimelech in Judges 9, killing all his brothers so he can be king.

And it's not just the Old Testament. We get all the way to Mary and Martha, with one sister rebuking the other for spending more time listening to Jesus than cleaning up the kitchen. And the greatest of all parables of Jesus Christ, the parable of the prodigal son. It was actually about an elder brother who absolutely hates the guts of the younger brother and will not be reconciled to him. Over and over again, the Bible talks about **the failure of family** to give you the unconditional intimate relationships that your hearts were built for.

And even where you have some reconciliation, like Jacob and Esau are reconciled and Joseph and his brothers are reconciled, it comes at an *enormous* cost after *years* of pain. There's a place in **Proverbs 18:19** that actually says, "*An offended brother is more unyielding...*" - harder to win back – "*...than a strong city.*"

But then Jesus comes and we see him saying something absolutely remarkable. His family had decided he was crazy and come to have him locked up. Did you know that? Jesus brothers were against him. His mother was against him. His *family* had turned on him. And the people said, "What are you going to do about that?"

And in **Mark 3:35** Jesus says something that is as controversial in our day as it was in his. He points to the crowd of stragglers assembled around him and says, "*Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*" Do you get what he's saying there? He says "blood has failed you. The human family has failed you. But I have something that can give you the *storge* you need - that unconditional, intimate relationship."

What is it? Well, here's what it is. Right after Abel was murdered by his brother, God comes to Cain and says, **(Genesis 4:10)**, "~~The Lord said,~~ *“What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood **cries out to me** from the ground.”* That's actually a metaphor that happens a lot in the Bible. And that metaphor is that innocent blood spilled on the ground cries out for the condemnation of the people who spilled it, cries out for vengeance. Hmm? Vengeance. So Cain is driven out; he's exiled.

But in the book of Hebrews, there's a fascinating spot where it says that when you embrace the Christian faith, **Hebrews 12:23-24**, *“You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to **the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**”* Do you know what that's saying? Think about it. Jesus came to his own, but his own received him not. Jesus was betrayed - betrayed with a kiss from one of his closest friends. He was handed over into death by his brothers.

He's like Abel and his blood has been spilled out on the ground. He was slain. One more testimony to the failure of human family love. *But* there's a difference. He did it voluntarily. He did it as our substitute. Jesus came to pay the penalty for all our failures to love one another. All of our selfishness, all of our isolationism, all of our pride...He came to pay the penalty for all of our spilled blood.

Think of all the ways in which you have failed to be a brother or a sister to your real brothers and your real sisters and the people around you. And Jesus Christ said *“I'm going to deal with the barrier between you and God.”* And what that means is Jesus Christ is the true and ultimate Abel, who though his innocent blood was shed, his blood cries out *not* for condemnation, but for acquittal. His blood cries out not for justice, but for grace.

His blood *demand*s the Father give you fatherly love. Unconditional. Intimate. Endlessly patient. And God does...and *that's* the thing you're really looking for. The mother of the infant? How dare God say this, but in **Isaiah 49:15** God looks at us and says, *“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!”*

And what God is trying to say is, “Look at a mother loving her infant.” It's *storge* love, right? It's like biological. It's primal. It's strong. It's chemical, right? “And yet, that's nothing compared to My love for you.” See, this is almost deeper than friendship love, deeper than romantic love. I mean, you can use all those images, but what we're talking about there in Isaiah where he says my love for you is stronger than a mother's for an infant is that through Jesus Christ you finally have the family love your heart longs for, and that will free you.

God the Father says, “When you see what we did, what my Son and I did, in order to bring you into our family, that will free you to love your enemies. It’ll free you to love non-selectively. It’ll free you to look around this room and see people, the un-hip and the un-cool. The people you ordinarily wouldn’t like and say, “Sister. Brother.” Love one another as he has loved you or as **Ephesians 5:2** says it, “*Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*”

Let’s pray...