

# Christian Birthmarks – Part 1

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Romans 12:9-10

January 27, 2019

## Introduction:

How many of you have a birthmark? I was reading about birthmarks and learned that most people have at least one of some kind. I personally have a small red oval birthmark on my chest, near my right shoulder. For the most part birthmarks are harmless and in some ways they can even be helpful. A particular birthmark on an individual can help positively identify the person, almost like a fingerprint. For example, there's a show on Netflix called *Stranger Things* and in one episode a mother has to identify a body that had been pulled from a lake to see if it was her son. The government officials, for reasons I won't get into, had faked her son's death and had made a corpse look convincingly like her son. Yet the mom wasn't so easily fooled: she looked for her son's birthmark and discovering it wasn't there, she knew she was being lied to.

Over the next few weeks, we're going to talk about what I'm calling "Christian Birthmarks," that is, identifying markers in our lives we should have as a result of the new birth. These are attitudes and behaviors that should be distinctive marks of someone who is a believer. Our passage today is the first of many verses where the apostle Paul gives one injunction after another about what should be true of us. Paul's done telling us about what we're to believe; now he's laying out for us how we're to live. So for the next six weeks, we'll be getting extremely practical about what living a transformed life of worship looks like.

So let's look at the first of these identifying markers by opening your Bibles to Romans 12. We'll be looking just two verses this morning: v. 9-10. You can find our passage in the hardcover pew Bibles on pg. 948, if you haven't done so already. Please follow along as I read Romans 12:9-10. Paul writes, **"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."**

Now there's not any kind of discernable structure here. Starting with these two verses and running through the end of this chapter, Paul is providing instructions about what should be true of us in light of our redemption. He shoots them out machine gun style, quickly giving one command after another, in no particular order. So as we go through this passage this week and over the new few weeks, I want us to think of them as birthmarks that every Christian should have that would identify them as Christ-followers. So let's begin with the first birthmark that should be true of us, which is this...

## 1. Christians love genuinely

Love, of course, is to be a distinctive hallmark of a Christian. Jesus summed up the entire law under the command to love: we're to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul spoke of the supreme place of love in 1 Corinthians 13, reminding us that no matter what spiritual gift we have, it is worthless apart from love. And the apostle John in his letter to the church repeatedly

called for his readers to love one another. So it's no surprise that the top of the list here begins with a call for us to love. There is nothing more distinctive about a Christian than demonstrating a heart of love towards God and others.

But I want us to focus on how Paul qualifies his command to love. He says in v. 9, **“Let love be genuine.”** Depending on what translation you're using, it might also read more literally, “Let love be without hypocrisy.” Let's think about that for a moment. What is hypocrisy? Hypocrisy is doing one thing externally while hiding something different internally. It's putting on an act for the sake of show. Jesus repeatedly called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. They would perform acts of piety in public because it resulted in the praise of men, but the reality hidden in their hearts was they really didn't care about God or the well-being of others; they were only concerned for themselves, for keeping up appearances and holding on to power. They did good deeds to be seen by others while their hearts were full of pride.

So when we're told that love must be genuine, Paul's warning us of putting up a front with people just so we can retain a good reputation or manipulate someone so we can get what we really want. He's calling us to make sure the inner attitude of our hearts matches our outward words and actions. We have figure of speech we sometimes use to describe this. Have you ever “battered someone up”? Of course we don't mean we literally treated someone like a walking piece of toast. It means we've said kind and flattering things not because we really meant it, but so we could get the person to do what we want. It's a form of manipulation and is the very opposite of the genuine love we should have for others.

Now I think we need to be honest here and admit that this is actually really hard to do. Loving others genuinely is not easy because we don't always like the people we've been called to love. This is especially evident sometimes when it comes to family members. Can you think of any relatives that you'd be pleased as a peach if the weather didn't allow them to make it to your holiday celebration? “What, Aunt Edna won't be coming over on Thanksgiving Day to complain about her life incessantly during dinner? Aww, what a shame.” Let's face it, it's difficult to be genuine in our love towards people who irritate and annoy us, isn't it?

How much also then can that be true in the church. We're a big mix of people with differing personalities and temperaments. Some people are really easy to get along with, others are a bit odd, and a few others are irritating and annoying. That's going to be true everywhere you go, and in a church our size you're going to find people you like, those you dislike, and maybe even some that you really would just rather avoid. So this call to **“love genuinely”** is actually something we need to fight for because it doesn't come easily. We need the Holy Spirit to empower us and humble us so we can love others without being disingenuous.

I recognize the need for this in my life especially. There are things I have to do because it's my job to do it. So I know I can fall into making a show of things externally while my heart isn't really in it internally. There are times I need to pray for God to help me get over myself and whatever emotions are raging inside of me and love this person without

manipulating them or try to get rid of them. People are not pawns to be used to advance my own agenda. Love must be genuine and so it's something I personally need to strive for and we all must strive for in our relationships with each other.

So I encourage you: let your love be genuine here at Grace Fellowship. Don't settle for mere outward displays of kindness. Let your heart match your actions. And for those here you struggle to love, pray that God would soften your heart towards others. We're not given an option to opt out of loving our brothers and sisters in Christ: the mark of a true Christian is the pursuit of genuine love with fellow believers in the church. This passage applies especially to the people here; it is to be lived out at Grace Fellowship if this is your church home. We dare not settle for being hypocrites: strive to love each person with true sincerity and genuine, heartfelt concern.

So that's the first birthmark we're given: as Christians we're to love people genuinely. Moving on now to the second birthmark, Paul goes on to give us two sides of a coin when he says this...

## 2. Christians hate evil and hold fast to good

Paul says in the second half of v. 9, "**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**" The first thing I need to point out is that "**evil**" and "**good**" are objective realities that exist outside of ourselves. Whatever is evil is evil regardless of how you or I or anyone else feels about it and what is good is good regardless of whether you like it or not. This needs to be stated up front because Western civilization has mostly lost any sense of objective morality. We live a culture that claims you can decide for yourself what is right and wrong, that your subjective opinion determines what is good or bad. But that is not what this passage assumes nor is any such notion found in Scripture. Some things are objectively good and objectively evil no matter what you think or what the majority of people think.

So how do we then determine what is good? Look back for a moment at v. 2. Paul says this, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" What is "**good**" is the will of God. God is the one who decides what is good because whatever is ultimately good aligns with his will. And therefore the opposite is also true: whatever is against the will of God is "**evil.**" So we might paraphrase this to say, "Abhor what goes against the will of God; hold fast to the will of God." What is good or evil is determined by God, not us.

But it also needs to be pointed out that this is not merely an intellectual exercise of simply recognizing good from evil but a call for emotional intensity for one over the other. As Christians, we're to "**abhor**" what is evil. We're to loathe it. Hate it. Want nothing to do with it. Do you hate with intensity those things which are evil? Do you loathe words and deeds, attitudes and thoughts that fly in the face of God's will? Paul says you should. And on the flip side, do you "**hold fast to what is good?**" It could also be translated as "cling to." Do you cling tightly to the good and perfect will of God? Do

you love it in an equal and opposite way to your hatred for what is evil? Is God's will revealed in his Word something you hold on to with dear life, never to let go? Do you see how these words call us far beyond casual indifference or intellectual apathy? That which is against God's will is evil and we ought to "**abhor**" it and that which is good we should "**hold fast to**" in willing obedience.

Another way of describing this is found in what our Lord said in the Beatitudes. Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.*" The righteousness of God is the good we ought to hunger and thirst for. A hungry man isn't indifferent about a plate of steak and potatoes. A thirsty woman won't be apathetic towards a tall glass of ice water. The birthmark of a Christ-follower is that he or she deeply longs for what is good and detests what is evil. Before I became a Christian, I wasn't particularly concerned about whether I was sinning or not. But once I did, once I was born again, those desires awoke in me to begin to hate the evil and love the good. I hungered and thirsted for righteousness and passionately wanted to avoid sin. That's what should be true of us.

Moving on now, we need to return to the command to love once again. Before we were told that love must be sincere, now for our third Christian birthmark...

### 3. **Christians love fellow believers with brotherly affection**

The first half of v. 10 says, "**Love one another with brotherly affection.**" We need first to remember that Christians are part of God's family. God is our Heavenly Father and we have all become brothers and sisters through faith in Christ. That's a reality: we're family in a way that is actually more significant than our biological families. Our earthly families, while important, aren't eternal. I have aunts and cousins who don't know the Lord and if they never come to faith, they'll be eternally cast away in hell. But if you're my brother or sister in Christ, I will dwell with you forever in the new creation.

The second thing it's important to point out here is that this is referring specifically to those believers who are part of the local church. I can't love with brotherly affection believers who live in a different city that I don't know at all. But I can love those who are in the church that I'm a member of, that I regularly attend. So the application of this verse refers to people in this room right now. Look around you. The "**one another**" you are called to love with brotherly affection are sitting in front of you and behind you and down the pew from you. If Grace Fellowship is your church home, these people here this morning are the ones to whom you've been called to love.

So how does this happen? How do we go about loving others in the church with "**brotherly affection?**" To begin with, it means you need to be here and involved in the lives of others. You can't love those you don't know and you can't know them if you're never around. You need to be present. You can't come only once in awhile and expect to have deeper relationships with others. Church attendance needs to be a regular part of your life. And even more, you need to be get involved. You can't just look at church as a box you check on Sunday morning. You need to be connected to others through serving and activities. My involvement here goes far beyond just our

Sunday morning gatherings, and that's not just because I'm the pastor. I have many friends here and I live in community with them throughout the week: going to each other's homes, eating meals together, playing games, talking, laughing. You can't just linger off on the sidelines and expect to obey this command.

Furthermore, you have to be devoted if you're ever going to go deep. There are times to leave a church, but sadly people leave too often for too little of reasons. What would you think of me if I left my family because one of my daughters said something that rubbed me the wrong way? You would consider me to quite the villain. Yet people do this all the time to their church family. The slightest provocation and they're out the door! The commitment people have to their families is what makes them stick it out, even when that family member is difficult to deal with. How much more so should that be true in the church. Loving others in the church with brotherly affection implies the kind of commitment and devotion you show to your own family, even when relationships are strained and challenging.

So Grace Fellowship – go deep. Don't settle for the shallow end of the pool relationally. This church should be like a family to you and quite frankly, if it's not, it may be more to do with you refusing to sit yourself down at the table during family gatherings. Come and pray with your church family when we pray. Hear about what is going on in the lives of your brother and sisters here. Get involved in a Discipleship class. These are communities of people that you can get to know. Join a small group. Serve on one of our Teams – the Worship Team, the Care team, the Business Team, whatever is of interest to you. Get together with people outside of church. Have them over for lunch or host a movie night or a craft night or a game night. You need develop relationships with fellow believers if you're going to love them with brotherly affection and you never will if you simply warm a pew once a week, never interact with anyone, and never get involved. Commit yourself to this church and to building relationships within it so that you begin to feel in your heart a true affection for the people here.

But before we move on, let me address the question of how to feel brotherly affection for difficult people. Personalities clash. Some people are odd. Others are irritating. So how do we develop affections for people we don't particularly like? Here's the answer: we need to pray. We need to ask God to change us, to soften our hearts towards the people who annoy us. Implore God to help you see the evidences of grace in that person's life. Ask God to show you your sin through them, that you might remove the plank in your eye before you get too worked up over the speck in theirs. The kind of love God calls us to is a supernatural love that must be empowered by the Holy Spirit. So don't seek to do this in your own strength. When you encounter a fellow believer who is like fingernails on a chalkboard to you, ask God to soften your heart and grow tender affections towards that individual.

We've been talking about the need to love other believers with sincerity and brotherly affection this morning, and our final birthmark we're going to discuss together is one of many different manifestations of the love we are to have. So, moving on now to the second half of v. 10, the last Christian birthmark I want us to consider is this...

#### 4. Christians strive to honor others

In the second half of v. 10, Paul says we are to “**Outdo one another in showing honor.**” So we need to consider what it means to show honor to others and why we ought to outdo one another in showing it. First, to honor someone is to show them respect or hold them in high esteem. For example, we honor those who have served in the military because they provided to us a great service of protecting our country, at the cost of possibly losing their life. We respect their sacrifice and we hold them in high esteem for what they’ve done on behalf of our nation.

But you don’t necessarily have to be an honorable person to be honored by others. We can honor those who serve in the military or who served as policemen or firemen even though they personally may not be the nicest person to be around. In 1 Timothy 6:1 Paul instructs slaves to regard their masters as “worthy of all honor.” Were all slave owners honorable people? Not likely. No doubt some were cruel and harsh. Yet Paul says they should be honored regardless of their personal character.

So here’s the thing for us: we’re to give honor to fellow believers regardless of whether we like them or not. Even if they’re difficult and temperamental. Why? Because of who they are in Christ. They’ve been loved by God and redeemed by Christ. Just as we can honor a soldier for his sacrifice even though we may find him to be a scoundrel, so can we honor others because of the sacrifice Christ made for them.

So Grace Fellowship, show honor to others here. Give each and every person respect due them by virtue of Christ’s love for them, even if you find them disagreeable. Let your words and actions be such that you show them high regard and respect. Every person is created in the image of God, and that alone makes them worthy of honor. How much more so for believers who have been redeemed by Christ and beloved by him! It reminds me of what C. S. Lewis said in *The Weight of Glory* regards our highly exalted position as image-bearer of God Almighty. He said this,

*“It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.... It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.”*

But what about this call to “**outdo**” each other in showing honor. I like how John Piper summarizes it ([www.desiringgod.org/messages/love-one-another-with-brotherly-affection](http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/love-one-another-with-brotherly-affection)),

*“I think it boils down to ‘prefer to honor rather than be honored.’ If you try to out honor someone it means you love to honor more than you love to be honored. You enjoy elevating others to honor more than you enjoy being elevated to honor. So don’t be giving energy to how you can be honored, but how you can honor. Put to death the craving for honor. Cultivate the love of honoring others.”*

How true it is that we often are so consumed with being honored that we neglect the need to honor others. And yet Paul makes this magnificent challenge: **“Outdo one another in showing honor.”** It’s almost like a competition. Who in the church can be the best at showing honor and respect to others? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we had this mindset here at Grace Fellowship? You notice someone patiently listening to a fellow church member or you hear them giving a word of encouragement or you find out about some sacrificial act of service someone else has done and instead of being jealous you say, “I want to outdo them! I want to go and serve them or encourage them or be there as a listening ear for them as well. I want to honor this person even more than what I’ve seen others doing.”

Wouldn’t this be a glorious place to be if we were competitive in trying to our honor each other? Instead of rushing into complaints and bickering and anger, what if we sought to honor and respect people more and more and sought to outdo each other in being the most respectful person in our church. And my friends, if that’s your mindset, if your goal here at church isn’t merely what you can receive but rather what kind of honor you can give, then those previous commands about sincerely loving others with a brotherly affection will begin to happen as well. Honor people and your love for them will grow. God will create in you those loving affection when you humble yourself by stop striving after your own honor and instead begin seeking to honor those around you.

## **Conclusion**

So then, let me close our time by encouraging you to be not merely hearers of the word but doers as well. Don’t leave these two verses here and do nothing with them. There’s a lot here that should mark us as those born from above. These are practices that should be evident in our lives, fruits that are growing ever more mature. So what we need to do is first reflect upon our own lives and ask ourselves if these Christian birthmark can be found in us. Are they true of you? Is your love towards fellow Christians here at Grace Fellowship genuine? Do you love them with a brotherly affection? Are you striving to show honor more than seeking your own honor? Are you clinging to the good and perfect will of God while abhorring that which is evil, especially the evil of sin within your own heart? And as far as we need to confess and repent of those ways in which this is not true of us, let’s be sure to do so.

But then, after self-examination comes action. We need to love each other, to honor one another, to love what is good and hate what is evil. Make this true in increasing measure here at Grace Fellowship. Let us be a church that is full of Christians who love like this. Seek to make these marks clear and unambiguous in your life, for your good, for the well-being of this church, and for the glory of our God and Savior who redeemed us all.

Please join me now as I pray.

**This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2019.**