

Carry My Love to My Beloved

by John Piper

Paul's love for the Roman believers is rooted in the gospel and is demonstrated through the holy kiss, which is a physically demonstrative way of showing love and affection.

Duration: 42:19

Scripture: John 13:35, Romans 5:9, Romans 8:1, Romans 16:6-7, Romans 16:13, Romans 16:16, 1 Peter 5:14

Topics: "Christian Love", "Fellowship"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the importance of expressing love and affection towards fellow believers, highlighting the significance of genuine relationships rooted in Christ's love. The speaker delves into the concept of the 'holy kiss' as a physical demonstration of love and explores the deep foundation of affection found in our union with Christ and the gospel. Additionally, the sermon discusses how shared sufferings, long-standing partnerships in labor, and the remembrance of God's choice of believers intensify the bond of love among Christians.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Oh how the Apostle Paul loved so many people. He could get his arms around so many.

He would have kissed them had he been there. And so I pray that his spirit, which is your spirit, would come and perform at Bethlehem, downtown, north, south, this great work, this beautiful work. Nothing I can do will suffice.

No words can make the miracle of love in Christ happen, but you can. And so I ask you to come and make this message an instrument of that miracle, I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

I don't think Paul is doing anything underhanded here. I don't think he has any hidden agendas. Verses 5 to 16 of Romans, I don't see any evidence that Paul is working his audience to attain some advantage.

I think we're going to make a big mistake if we read this and try to find a beneath-the-obvious point. And I don't feel any need to find a beneath-the-obvious point because what lies on the surface of this text is so beautiful and so profound and so deeply rooted in the Gospel of chapters 1 to 11 and so needed at Bethlehem and in the church today that I don't think I need to go snooping for anything other than what lies on the face of this text. So what is the plain, on-the-surface meaning of this text? Surely it's going to be

found in the word greet because it occurs 13 times in 12 verses.

So that's the unmistakable rhythm. So let that sink in. Paul in these verses is greeting and greeting 13 times in these verses.

So now we should ask, what's that? What's going on when that happens? They're always, in this setting, kind of situation, they're always three people or groups of people. There's Paul, there's the one to whom he's talking or the group to whom he's talking, and then there's the one that he's telling them to greet or group. So there's three, these three points.

Paul, one spoken to, and the one that's over here that's supposed to do what? Yeah, greet. Now what is that dynamic? What's happening there? And I'm going to argue something is being carried from Paul through this person over here to this person. Something being carried.

You say, well, the greeting is being carried. Well, yeah, but the greeting is just words. What do greetings carry? And I'm going to argue they carry love.

So what I'm seeing here is 13 times love being conveyed into a person and then from that person over to another person through these words called greetings. Now the reason that I conclude that that's what's being carried is that he says so four times. Verse 5, my beloved.

Verse 8, my beloved. Verse 9, my beloved. Verse 12, the beloved.

So very simply, very on the face of it, I see Paul loving Christians as best he can several hundred miles away. The point I see in these verses is I love these people. I want my love to go from me to them through you.

So would you please make your lives a bottle into which my greeting of love is coming and would you take that bottle over to their house and would you please pour it on them for me because that's the way I feel about these people and I'm not there and we don't have any email and there are no telephones. There's just this rare letter and would you please transmit my heart to their heart through you. Would you do that for me? I love them.

Carry my love to them. So whatever else you see here, don't miss the obvious. The preciousness of Christians in the heart of Christians.

That's what I see. The preciousness of Christians in the heart of other Christians. So what should we do with that now? That's just lying there, obvious.

What should we do with it? And I'm going to do three things with it. I'm going to observe an expression of it in the holy kiss. Second, I'm going to look at the foundation of it in our union with Christ and the gospel.

And third, I'm going to consider the intensification of it in the kinds of things that endear these people to Paul. You be asking at each of these points how that relates to you. Number one, what should we make of the holy kiss in verse 16? Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Twelve, thirteen times. Thirteen times. Greet, greet, greet, greet.

And now a very concrete urging how to do it. If I were there, I would kiss them. Would you kiss them for me? That's what he's saying.

If I were there, I love these people, and my way of showing it is to kiss them. And I would like you to kiss them for me. Five observations about this holy kiss.

Number one, it was a widespread custom, which we can see in the New Testament. Here's one example. Do you remember when Jesus went to the house of the Pharisee named Simon? He comes in, and Simon does not like Jesus very much.

And there's a woman there of the street who has been evidently profoundly changed by Jesus, and she takes a very expensive ointment, puts it on his feet, and kisses his feet. And Jesus, when he's rebuked for this, says to Simon these words, do you see this woman? I entered your house, and you gave me no kiss. That's significant evidently.

So evidently it was a pretty common thing. If it's an ordinary, just, you didn't do it. Something's wrong here.

This relationship is not good. That statement was not about her. That was about Simon.

You didn't kiss me. So that's my first observation. It was not unique to Christian fellowship.

It was pretty widespread. Number two, it was holy as Paul took it up and transformed it. Judas could use the kiss the way he did because it was normal.

He didn't do anything weird, except use it wrongly. That was an unholy kiss, if there was ever an unholy kiss. There are other kinds of unholy kisses.

There are lots of unholy kisses. A kiss of betrayal is unholy. A kiss of adultery is unholy.

A kiss of fornication is unholy. A kiss of seduction is unholy. And I think if Paul heard you say, that's the only thing kisses mean to me, he would say, well then, you better not kiss yet.

Third observation, this affection that's flowing through this holy kiss is family affection, not romantic affection. He calls them brothers. He calls them kinsmen.

It's the kind of affection I felt when I kissed my father 500 times as he left to go preach the gospel at the little Greenville Spartanburg airport. And as he came back again two weeks later, that was the rhythm of our life. Kiss going, kiss coming, kiss going, kiss coming.

We were a kissing family. And it was so good, so right, so pure, so holy, so full of family affection. Fourth observation, the kiss of love, that's what Peter calls it in 1 Peter, is a physically demonstrative way of saying you are precious to me.

It's physically demonstrative. Healthy families touch each other. Healthy families are not afraid to touch each other.

Healthy families have the mark of unselfconscious security and warmth and love in all the touching that they do. It is so sad in our day that we have to deal with so much ugliness right now. Newspapers just full of it, just full of it.

All kinds of abuse talk and all kinds of manipulation talk. That's just so sad. Because you, I pray you do, you know what a healthy touching is.

You know it's sweet, hugging and kissing and wrestling and playing and you know all that. Come snuggle with me. It means nothing evil.

It's just so good, it's so right. It's so sad that we have to think about these alternatives. A woman came up to me at the on the parking lot outdoor service in August up at the North Campus from, I think she was from California, I can't remember.

She was from out of state, a visitor that Sunday. Only time she's ever been to Bethlehem. And she waited a long time and then she came up to me and she said, I hope you take this right, but I really like to watch your men here, the way they hug each other.

They seem manly and natural, that's all. I just wanted to tell you. I tell you, I felt so good about that.

I felt so good about that, that we're not pulling back from that kind of natural, physical, demonstrative. There's a lot of back slapping in this church and the best back slapping is not this kind, but this kind. And I thank you men, don't be afraid of that.

Women, don't be afraid of that with each other and as appropriate and delicately navigated also between women and men. It should be able to happen. That's number four.

It's physically demonstrative. Paul wants it to be that way. It's a good thing in a healthy family.

And the fifth observation is the more difficult and risky one, and I say it with some less than authority. I doubt that we should say that the kiss of love is universally binding requirement for all believers in all time at all places, that you have to kiss each other. I mean, I don't even know what that would mean, in fact, how many people would have to kiss tonight, you know.

I don't think Paul described it as an obligation rooted in creation or rooted in the gospel that if you don't kiss a certain number of people tonight, you're sinning. I think he took what was there in the culture, as we observed, and he made it holy. He said that must be holy.

Use that holy. Do that holy. Make it a holy thing.

Transform that and use that. And I know, and you know, that there are cultures and there are situations when a kiss would not communicate anything that Paul wanted to communicate. And therefore, we must be wise.

Hugging might. Handshake might. Various other cultural expressions of demonstrative physical contact might.

Now, having gotten you off the hook, I'm going to put you back on the hook, because I have the feeling that if Paul kind of walked through Minnesota, he would say something like this. Well, I think what you've said, Piper, so far is kind of generally right. However, the cultural basis that gives rise to a holy kiss is probably a better cultural basis than one that doesn't give rise to any meaningful physical expressions of affection.

So, while it is culturally connected, not all cultures are equally helpful here, and it might be helpful for you to be involved in a little cultural transformation in Minnesota, Bethlehem. I'll leave you there with that. What I'll do in conclusion to that first point on the holy kiss is to say that Paul wants the believers in Rome, and I think us, not just to greet each other with words, but with more demonstrative expressions, more whole expressions of affection that say, you are precious to me because you're my sister or my brother.

Number two, the second point. Let's remember the foundation of this affection that Paul is expressing and asking to be expressed to his loved ones. The foundation is the death of Christ and our union with Him.

Now, the reason I say that is not because I want to get the gospel in here, because I'm a Christian preacher, but because I see it, oh, about eight times in these verses. In the phrase, in Christ or in the Lord. Notice them.

Verse seven, in Christ. Verse eight, in the Lord. Verse nine, in Christ.

Verse ten, in Christ. Verse eleven, in the Lord. Verse twelve, two times, in the Lord, in the Lord.

Verse thirteen, in the Lord. Now, what is the point of that? All these greetings, in the Lord, in the Lord, in the Lord, in Christ, in Christ. What is that? What's that communicating to us about the love that is flowing here and its basis? I think that communicates to us, it does to me, that the intensity and the depth and the reality and the authenticity of this love that is flowing from Paul into the Roman leaders, into the others, what's flowing there, the authenticity that's flowing, is rooted in the keen awareness, I've been rescued from the wrath of God, which was infinitely dangerous, at a cost, namely the death of the Son of God, which was infinitely valuable, and I have been now placed on a solid ground, infinitely and eternally safe with everybody else who has been also.

I think Paul is thinking that way. Let me take you to two verses to make the connection. You can just listen to them if you want.

Romans 5.9 and Romans 8.1, putting them together. Romans 5.9 goes like this, Since therefore we have now been justified by His blood, that's the death of Christ, making it possible for God to declare me just and righteous. Much more, since being justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.

So now you've got bloodshedding Savior rescuing from wrath of God in one verse. And now Romans 8.1, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. So, put those three pieces together now.

We were imperiled with infinite danger on the precipice of the wrath of God, falling with a gravity created by our own sinfulness and the justice of God. We were falling into a bottomless pit of suffering called the wrath of God. That's the first thing we need to feel.

And then, by the blood of God Christ, we've been justified. God snatches us from the precipice and He says, mine, righteous, because of His Son as we trust in Him. And then He puts us on solid ground in Christ with everybody else that He's snatched.

Now, ask yourself how you feel right at that moment. Have you ever watched the news? There have been several of these in the last several years where minors are trapped deep underground. And the families are gathered on top.

They're in churches or homes. The vigils are long. And there was one, as you remember, spectacular rescue with that little tube that went way down.

They brought them up one at a time, opened the door, blackface, they walk out. When they walk out, having been imperiled underground, thinking probably we won't get out, and the extraordinary expense and effort and labor gets them out, and the door opens and the air is clear and the wife and the children are in front of them, you know who hugs? Everybody hugs. Everybody hugs.

These old minors are hugging and the TV crew member are hugging and the family is hugging. Everybody's hugging. It's just the way it is when you've been rescued.

And all the more so if everybody had been rescued. So, the reason, one of the reasons why we're not more affectionate to each other is that we don't feel it. We don't feel like we deserve wrath.

The ice, that's the best way I know to describe it, the way I respond to precipices, the ice in my thighs on the edge of a precipice, I haven't felt it for years. The rescue, the firm grip as you were falling, the placing in absolute everlasting security in Christ, we just don't feel it. So all these other folks in this bubble of everlasting protection, they get on their nerves.

Why? It's because we don't, we don't feel it. We don't live in it. We don't live in the gospel.

We don't live in the truth that today John Piper deserves wrath. And today, it's as though yesterday he was plucked by sovereign grace and the cost of the death of the Son and he was put with you on solid ground, justified, safe forever, and he just forgets it. He just forgets it.

And therefore, our relationships begin to sink into world relationships, just ordinary world-like relationships. And they're not, they're not. I think Paul could never get over Damascus.

I just could never get over it. I'm gonna kill him. I'm gonna kill him.

I hate these Christians. Where does he deserve to be? Squashed under the hand of the Almighty Christ. What happens? He gets made an apostle.

He couldn't ever get over it. And you shouldn't ever get over it, should you? You shouldn't ever get over it that you're heaven-bound and not hell-bound. And all these people around you have been snatched like you.

If we want to understand this experience of warmth and greeting and love, then I think we're gonna have to experience again being rescued from wrath by the blood of Christ into infinite eternal safety together. That's number two. And now the last point, number three.

What are the things that endear these other believers to Paul and thus intensify his affection for them? Now, if you ask, which I would if I were you, why did he go there? Why is he asking that question? I mean, there's a hundred questions you might ask here. Like, who's Junia? Frankly, I'm bored by that question. I very much want to know how to love people.

Figuring out who she is has not helped me very much. I want to know how to be like this. And the reason I'm here is because I find Paul, as he moves through this list, going from person to person, he says things about them.

Do you notice that? He says things about them. Why? Why does he choose that to say? He's not commending anybody to the church in Rome. They're there.

They know them. He's not sending them there with commendations that they don't know about. These folks are in Rome, known by Rome, and he's way far away sending love to them and telling them, now pour the bottle of my love on them, and then he says things about them.

I think the simple answer is, he says things about them because as he thinks their name, things pop into his head that endear them to him. He just says what endears them to him. And that solves, by the way, a lot of problems here because people struggle with why do you say this about this and not them? Because surely he loves.

He says beloved about what? Four of them. Doesn't he love the others? Let me point to four things. There are more.

I'm just going to take the time for four. Four things that Paul points to that endear other believers to him. You should ask what endears other believers to me? If I'm sending a greeting to someone, what might I say about them that would show I'm really special? There's a special thing here that comes to my mind about them.

Number one, he remembers sometimes in regard to some people the simple fact that God chose them. Verse 13, greet Rufus chosen in the Lord. You read the commentaries on this, they all get down in a shape about this.

And they ask, so why does he call Rufus chosen? He's the only one he calls chosen. Aren't the others chosen? They're Christian. All Christians are chosen.

And therefore they make it mean like choice or something like that. It's a choice person. Oh, give me a break.

Here's what I think is going on. I don't know why he calls him chosen, but I can think of a lot of reasons. For example, Rufus and he might have, maybe in Jerusalem, because there's some good evidence that Rufus was there, maybe in Jerusalem gotten into some heated arguments about divine election.

And the point came where Rufus woke up to the unbelievable, precious beauty that sovereign grace broke into his life and saved him because God decided that it would. And it stunned him. It just leveled him.

It blasted all self-centeredness out of his life. And Rufus, in Paul's experience, was one of the most beautiful evidences of embracing for the glory of God the truth that he was chosen. So every time he thinks of Rufus, he thinks he's chosen.

Maybe. I have no idea if that happened. Or here's another possibility.

Maybe Rufus was the worst sinner Paul ever knew besides himself. And therefore, his conversion was such a stunning display of God's power and sovereign, free grace that every time he looked at him as the most unlikely convert, he would say, chosen, chosen. You can have experiences like that without saying, and nobody else is chosen if I call you chosen.

That's ridiculous. That's not the way life is. When I think of you, any one of you, as chosen, it doesn't mean I don't think anybody else is chosen for whatever reason.

I don't know the reason. I just think that at this point, we in this church, many of us here love the doctrine of election because we love the fact that we've been plucked sovereignly from that precipice owing to nothing in us. Totally unconditionally, God reached down and plucked us up and it stuns us to this day that he would take one like us and as we walk around in this church and we look at each other, we should feel chosen, chosen, amazing.

Look at all these chosen ones. And that should endear us to each other very deeply. Number two, Paul was endeared or they were endeared to Paul by how long they were in Christ.

Verse 5, second half of the verse, and verse 7, greet my beloved Eponidas who was the first convert to Christ in Asia, and verse 7, greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles and they were in Christ before me. First convert in Asia, that's western Turkey, the province of Asia, western Turkey, Ephesus maybe, in Christ before me.

So Paul, when he thinks of Eponidas, he thinks of years ago, the dangerous, he talked about the dangers of Ephesus, wild animals threatening to eat him up. And in that Ephesus situation, one came first. He's been in Christ a long time and it was Eponidas.

When he thinks about Andronicus and Junia, he thinks back, his mind probably does something like this, they were in Christ before me, which means I wanted to kill them once. I love them so much. I love them.

Do you see how this works? God does things in our lives, just little simple things that when we think of somebody, there's something that comes into our mind that says, and that's an endearing thing, that's a precious thing. Number three, they are dear to him and his affections are intensified for them by their partnership in labor. Verse six, greet Mary who has worked hard for you.

Verse nine, greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ. Verse 12, two times, greet those workers in the Lord, Trephana and Trephosa. Greet the beloved Perseus who has worked hard in the Lord.

So, I can imagine myself writing a letter or preaching a sermon and saying, I love to watch my fellow pastors work. I love to watch them keep their late hours, unplanned crises, difficult conflicts, family stresses, never-ending preparations, the patient pursuit of the wayward. And I see myself writing a letter or preaching a sermon and saying, Tom and David Livingston and David Michael and Sally and Chuck and Sam and Kenny and Brad and Eric and Tom, the other one, and Ken and Dan and Craig and Gil and Joyce and Ben and Rick and John, the other one, I love you for your work.

You know, when a team, a comradeship has been together a long time, on the way over here on the bridge, my revelatory bridge, I was doing math, computing how long each of you had been here, how long each of the pastors had been with me, because I'm the longest now. Tom and I came almost at the same time, Tom Stella, and I computed, give or take five years, 175 years together of these 20 pastors and ministers. When you are together a long time with a common vision of God, in a common cause, through common struggles, the depth of interweaving of life is glorious.

I am so thankful that many of my fellow pastors have found it in their heart to stay here a long time. That is so precious to me. So, I think I feel a little bit of this, this long shared labor, working hard together is a good thing.

Finally, and we're almost done, number four, what intensifies the affections or endears them to Him, I'll mention lastly, shared sufferings. Verse seven, greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow

prisoners, my fellow prisoners. We pass over it so quickly.

She is a woman probably, Junia. There's a little bit of argument about that, but not much. So, you got probably a man and a wife here, and they were in jail.

Jails are not like they are now, no TVs, meals not provided. And they were there, and Paul was there. I don't know how long, I don't know when it happened.

He was in jail a lot, and they were there once at least with him. And when he says, I love you, tell them, kiss them, there's a lot there. The hardest times forge the deepest friendships, do they not? The white hot point of the welder's flame makes the strongest joint in the welded frame.

So, here's the sum of the matter. Because God rescued us from the precipice of destruction, at the cost, the infinite cost of His Son's life, and took us and put us in the safest place in the universe called in Christ, together. He did that together.

Then there should be a kind of trembling, joyful, I can't believe we're here, as we look at each other. We're here. We're not at the bottom of the mine.

We're not falling. Do you ever have dreams like I did as a kid, when I read Bottomless Pit? Falling, falling, falling, and never getting beyond that feeling. And we're not there.

And we're not ever going to be there. And you're not, and I'm not, and you're not, and I'm not, and you're not, and I'm not. How are we going to love each other? What feelings are we going to have for each other in that safe, O Father in Heaven? What a wonder love is.

What a precious gift it is, from You to us, and then experienced among the believers. No wonder the Apostle John said, by this you know that you have passed out of death into life, that you love the brothers. So Father, grant that we would experience the wonder of having passed from death to life.

I pray this in Jesus' great name. Amen.

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