

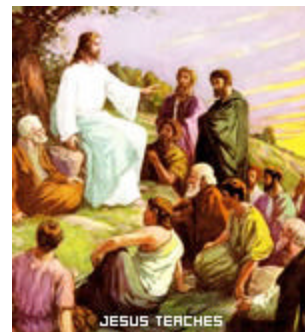
23rd Sunday OT A – 7 September 2008

LESSON: Christ-like Love Is the Heart of Christianity

All of St Paul's New Testament letters have a **similar structure**.

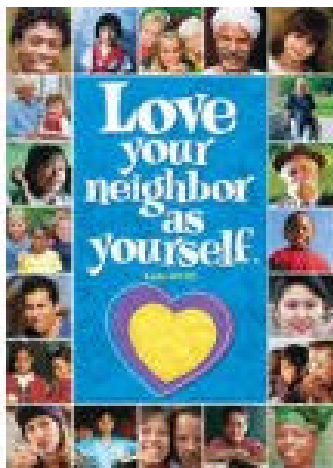
After an initial greeting, he usually **explains** some aspect of what we, as Christians **believe**.

- ? These explanations are a **gold-mine** of Christian **doctrine**, of things that **Jesus has revealed** to us about God, the world, and ourselves.
- ? One of the clear signs of the **Holy Spirit's presence** in the Church is that these doctrines **have stayed solid** throughout the twenty centuries of the Church's existence.
- ? The **Creed** that we pray every Sunday after the homily is a **summary** of the very things
- ? that **Jesus taught to the Twelve Apostles**,
- ? that St Paul **worked so hard** to teach the first Christian communities,
- ? that he, St Peter, and all the other **martyrs** have believed so **strongly** that they **gave up their lives** instead of **denying** them.



But St Paul never ends his letters without taking **one more step**.

- ? He makes the **connection** between what we **believe** and how we should **live**.
- ? People who believe **one** way but live **another** way are called **hypocrites**.
- ? St Paul doesn't want any Christian to experience the **tragedy and misery** of being a hypocrite.
- ? And so after explaining Christian **doctrine**, he instructs us in Christian **morality**.



Today's Second Reading gives us one of the most **beautiful** of those instructions.

- ? In the first part of the Letter to the Romans, Paul explained the **goodness of God** and his plan of **salvation**.
- ? And now, in the second part, he explains how we who have **received** that salvation should **respond** to God's goodness.
- ? We no longer have to worry about the **thousands** of confusing commandments and laws that cram the Old Testament.
- ? All of those, he writes, are **summed up** in one simple phrase: **love your neighbor as yourself**.
- ? This is the **heart** of Christianity and the path to **fulfillment**, because it is **Christ's** path.

ILLUSTRATION: Mother Teresa of Calcutta Describes True Love

What does this Christian love look like?

- ? Jesus gave us a **very clear standard**, the standard of **the cross**.
- ? First he **told** us what Christian love is, at the Last Supper: "No one has greater love than this: to **lay down one's life** for one's friends" (John 15:13).
- ? Then he **showed** us what Christian love is, by laying down **his** life on the cross.
- ? The **crucifix**, the central image in all of our churches, is the **standard of Christian love**.

It's such a **different** standard than what we hear in the **love songs on the radio** or see in the **movies** and on **television**.

That's false, **consumer** love, not **Christian** love; it's about what we can **get**, not what we can **give**.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta explained Christian love, the self-forgetful, self-giving, Christ-like love, **clearly** when she addressed the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, DC, in 1994.

She told the political leaders of the United States that:

- ? "It is not enough for us to say, 'I love God,' but I also have to **love my neighbor**."
- ? "St. John says that you are a **liar** if you say you love God and you don't love your neighbor. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbor whom you **do** see, whom you touch, with whom you live?"
- ? "It is also very important for us to realize that love, to be **true**, **has to hurt**. I must be willing to give **whatever it takes** not to harm other people and, in fact, to do good to them."
- ? "This requires that I be willing to **give until it hurts**. Otherwise, there is no true love in me and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me."



To give until it hurts, like Christ; **that's** what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

That's our standard. **That's** our mission.

APPLICATION: An Alternative to Useless Criticism and Complaining

Today's Gospel passage shows us **one way** of loving our neighbor as ourselves that is especially **powerful**, and especially **difficult**.

- ? In this passage, Jesus tells us about the case of someone who is **clearly doing something wrong**: "If your brother **sins against you**," he says.
- ? This could refer to those times when we simply feel **misunderstood** or **neglected** by family members or friends.
- ? Other times we feel **unfairly treated** by superiors at work, teachers, or civil servants.
- ? Or it could be that someone we know has fallen into a **habit of sin** that doesn't directly damage **us**, but damages someone **else**.

When we experience that kind of thing, what is our **natural reaction**?

Almost always, we feel a **strong desire** to **complain** about it, to start **criticizing** the person who is causing us so much **grief**, to begin **gossiping** about them and telling everyone **else** about our gripe.

But that's exactly what Jesus wants us to **avoid**.

- ? Instead of **useless complaining** and **poisonous criticism** and gossip, he teaches us to respond with **maturity and patience** by going right to the **source** of the problem.
- ? Instead of talking **about** the people who are making things difficult, Jesus wants us to talk directly **to** them.
- ? And if that doesn't work, we are to be **patient**, bringing **objective parties** into the conversation, treating **others** as we would like **them** to treat **us**.
- ? In **no** situation are we to spread **useless, bitter criticism** just to make ourselves **feel better** or to cause someone else **humiliation**.
- ? Jesus wants us to gently but clearly "**warn** the wicked," as today's First Reading put it, not just **complain** about them or **look down** on them.



Of course, this is not **easy**.

Resisting our **natural tendency** towards judgmental criticism and useless complaining takes **effort** - but **true love always** takes effort.

And the good news is that we don't have to do it all on **our own**.

Jesus himself is always ready to come to our aid, as he will do in just a **few moments**, when we receive him in **Holy Communion**. Our reception of Communion unites us to our neighbor – it brings us together as Christ's Body – it helps us to **live** the Faith we profess.

Let's put aside our bitter complaining and gossip – and work hard to truly love our neighbors as we ourselves.

