

## “Tough Love”

Scripture: **Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 5:43-48**

Harper Flohr and Avayanna Simpson-Cook



**First Presbyterian**  
CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE

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was having a really hard time around camp. I wanted to go back to the comfort of home. My normal. I had never been away from home for this long, and I was only two weeks into my five week stay, 3 more weeks of this come on?. I felt uncomfortable. Alone. And overwhelmed.

Everything in me was saying...“just quit, this isn't for you.” But the people around me didn't let me quit. My parents were made aware that I was really struggling, but they encouraged me to stick it out. They did not swoop in to rescue me. They told me I would regret it later if I left.

The camp staff was supportive but also helpful in pushing me outside my comfort zone. They reminded me I was capable of more than I felt I was. Nobody was making this experience easier for me, but they were reminding me that I was stronger than I thought.

It was hard at the time, but ultimately I made the decision to stay. It didn't happen overnight, but things did change. I ended up developing true bonds and friendships that are still with me today. The experience helped me build confidence within myself. It helped me realize I was more capable than I thought. It also taught me that joy can and often does come out of discomfort and pain. The thing I almost walked away from became one of the best parts of my life.

In Matthew chapter 5 verses 43-48, Jesus calls us to love in a way that goes beyond what's easy. Sometimes the difficult thing to love is not a person, but a situation. A challenge we didn't choose. Or a particularly hard season of life. Tough love means choosing growth over comfort.

What I take from this is that love is not just a feeling, it's a practice. Love is like a muscle. The more you use it the stronger it gets.

At camp there were many opportunities for me to practice growth. I practiced loving being around people when I felt uncomfortable. I practiced positive thinking when everything in me wanted to be negative. And I worked on embracing situations that were uncomfortable and making the most of them. It wasn't easy, but I put my faith in God and tried to push past my present difficulties.

Romans chapter 12 verses 9-12, describes a love that does not give up. God tells us to be devoted. Be patient. And hold on to hope. During my camp experience I was shown patience and hope by those around me, and I learned to show that to myself as well. Real love stays and grows, even when leaving would often be easier. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”. This verse really sticks out to me. It is easy to show love to people and situations we enjoy. But it is much harder to show or feel love when things feel difficult, uncomfortable, or unfair.

Looking back, here's what I can see now that I could not see then...if I would have left I would have missed some significant growth opportunities that bring joy to my life now. I would have missed out on meeting some of the best friends and most important people in my life. I would

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have missed out on building confidence that has helped lead me through high school. And, I would have missed out on what has been a building block in my life of faith. Sometimes, the best growth opportunities are lying inside the things we want to escape from the most. Sometimes we need to be quiet, let go and let God. I went back the next summer. And the next. And the next. I continued to look for, and find, growth opportunities at camp, and I plan to work there after my freshman year of college, the same as my dad did. What once felt impossible became something I loved.

Now I am about to start a new chapter of my life. I will be attending the College Of Charleston in the Fall. I'm excited, but also very nervous. And anxious. I don't have everything figured out, but I'm embracing the hard parts because I know those are the parts that matter the most. It will be another new place with new people. I will again be away from the safety of home. A new version of life where nothing feels fully certain. Honestly it feels a lot like that first summer heading to camp.

But I know some things this time that I did not know then. I know I don't want to quit early when things get tough. I know that growth takes time. And I know that discomfort is not failure. I've learned that the hardest beginnings often lead to the best outcomes.

We all have something that feels hard right now. We are starting something new. We are sticking with something difficult. We are trusting God in times of uncertainty. So here's the question I want to leave with you: Where is God asking you to stay instead of walk away?

What discomfort in your life may be a growth opportunity?

God's love for us is the ultimate example of tough love, God does not give up on us, he calls us to grow, and he walks us through hard things. The more we practice giving and receiving that kind of love- the kind that stays, the kind that preserves, the kind that chooses good even when it's hard - the stronger we become.

What I learned at camp did not just help me survive 5 weeks in the woods. It's shaping how I choose to live my life. To stay. To Grow. And to love. Even when it's hard. It showed me that growth does not happen when things are easy and your love muscle can't get stronger unless it is being worked.

The same love that carried me through camp is the love I'm trusting as I head to Charleston. And it's the same love that's with all of us in whatever we're facing next. Thank You.

seems.

There was a time in my life during my freshman year of high school when I saw how quickly tension could spread between people. It didn't start as something huge—it started small. Misunderstandings, rumors, small comments that weren't fully explained. Tension between one person and another slowly spread to tension between entire friend groups.

What happens in situations like that is that silence starts to fill in the gaps.

Instead of asking questions directly, people start assuming. Instead of talking things out, people start talking around each other. And instead of clearing things up, things get interpreted in different ways depending on who heard what.

So what started as something small began to grow.

And the hardest part was that it didn't stay between just those two people—it began to spread. One person felt hurt and talked to others about it. Those people formed their own opinions. Suddenly, it wasn't just a one-on-one situation anymore—it became a group situation.

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People began choosing sides, even if no one really planned to. They could care about people from both groups, but there was pressure to “stand with” someone. And that’s when it shifts from misunderstanding into division.

What made it even more confusing is that the original reasons started getting lost. If you asked different people why there was tension, you’d get different answers. After a while, people weren’t reacting to what was actually happening anymore—they were reacting to what they thought was happening.

So the situation kept growing, while the truth kept getting smaller.

Eventually, even being around each other felt heavy. Going to school during this time became draining. This situation that started small began to take over everything—not because of one big event, but because of all the small, unresolved pieces that built up over time.

And what stood out most to me was this:

Nobody actually chose this.

No one woke up one day and decided they wanted to be in an ongoing conflict that would disrupt their entire school year. It just slowly happened through unspoken hurt, assumptions, and reactions that kept building on each other.

And that’s why passages in Matthew hit so strongly—because they’re not just talking about extreme enemies or huge conflicts.

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Jesus says in Matthew 5:43–44: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He’s challenging a normal human reaction.

The normal response is: if someone hurts you, you respond with the same energy. But Jesus flips that. He says to love people even when they are difficult—even when it would be easier to shut them out.

Because love is not supposed to only exist when it’s convenient—it’s supposed to break cycles that hatred creates.

And He continues in Matthew 5:46–47: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? ... And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?”

Loving people who already love you is easy. Everyone can do that.

The real challenge is what happens when relationships become complicated—when feelings are hurt, when misunderstandings happen, when people pull away.

Those are the moments where you have to decide whether you’re going to continue the cycle... or interrupt it. In Romans 12:17–18, it says: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil... If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

This doesn’t say conflict won’t happen. But it does say your response is still your responsibility.

“Do not repay evil for evil” means don’t mirror the negativity that’s given to you. Don’t let someone else’s actions decide your character.

And “as far as it depends on you” means you can’t control everything—but you can control whether you contribute to peace or to more division.

If I’m being honest, in that situation, repaying evil for evil felt normal. It felt expected.

In friend groups, when one person has a problem with someone, it rarely stays between them. It spreads. And once it spreads, it becomes about loyalty. People feel like if they don’t match the energy of their group, they’re being disloyal. And that’s where it gets difficult.

Because sometimes choosing peace doesn’t feel natural—it feels like going against the crowd. It can even feel like you’re being seen as weak.

But reacting with negativity isn’t strength—it’s often just unprocessed hurt.

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People want others to feel the same pain they felt. They think matching energy will make them feel better. But in reality, it just multiplies the hurt.

Hurt people hurt people. But it doesn't have to stay that way.

At some point, something shifted. Not because everyone suddenly became best friends again—but because everyone got tired.

Tired of the tension. Tired of the negativity. Tired of carrying something that wasn't bringing anything good into their lives.

And we realized something important:

We might not all feel the same about each other, but we couldn't keep treating each other the same way.

Because it was draining us.

And that's where the idea of “tough love” comes in.

A lot of people think being tough means being cold, unbothered, or able to hurt someone back. But that's not real strength.

Real strength is choosing love when it's harder. Real strength is choosing not to continue something that's hurting everyone.

Because choosing love isn't always popular. Sometimes people won't understand it. They might even be upset with you for not reacting the way they expect. That's the loss.

But what do you gain?

You gain peace within yourself, because you didn't make the situation worse. You give other people permission to choose differently too. And you align yourself with the way God calls us to live.

By the end of that school year, there was a realization that stuck with me:

So much time had been wasted. So much energy spent on division that didn't lead anywhere.

And the truth became clear:

Hatred only creates more hatred. But love—real love—creates something different.

It creates space for peace. It creates space for healing. And it creates the possibility for something better.

So when we look at Matthew and Romans, this is what they're calling us to do:

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Not just to be nice— but to break cycles. To stop passing hurt forward. To choose something different, even when it's difficult.

Because if we want the world to be a loving place, we can't wait for everyone else to change first.

We have to choose to be loving ourselves.

Even when it's hard. Even when it's unpopular. Even when it feels like you're the only one doing it.

Because love doesn't just respond to the world, it changes it