



Today we're looking in Romans chapter 12, verses 9 through 21. As you turn in your Bibles, I just want to start by saying that this is a radical and revolutionary passage of scripture. It's not only counter-cultural, but counter-natural. Paul's words to us here fly in the face of our instincts, our pride, and our preconceptions about love and relationships. That's the heart of this passage—how the gospel changes everything about how we treat people. Remember that Paul is writing this in light of what we studied last week: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." So as we read through these scriptures, I want to show you some of the incredible ways that this view of God's mercy changes the way we love; how remembering the love Jesus showed us on the cross revolutionizes the way we love one another.

**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.**

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.**

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:9-21).**

My dad is a pastor. When I was about three years old, he was leading a church in Fort Worth, Texas and there was one old gal named Shirley who gave my dad no end of grief. She was constantly complaining, gossiping, sowing dissent, and generally causing problems wherever she could. At church, he'd be calm and pastoral towards her, but at home, behind closed doors and around my three-year-old ears, he'd say "that woman...I could just kill Shirley!" Those of you with small children know where this is going. One day, while he was talking with her after church, I walked up to them and said, "Dad! We could just kill Shirley, couldn't we?" As you can imagine, he went pale and stammered "no, no son, we love Shirley!" I was so confused! At three years old, this made no sense to me. How could we want to kill Shirley at home and love her at church?

This brings us right into verse 9 which explains that the Gospel changes how we love.

## The Gospel Changes How We Love

**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.** Before we go any further talking about love, we should ask "What is love? What is its nature?" Love is sincere. The word here in Greek literally means "un-hypocritical." The love we're talking about isn't fake, phony, or superficial. This love is true, honest, and genuine. And love has to be true or it's nothing. How many of you have said or been told "I love you" but you knew it was fake or forced? The words are almost an insult. Love without sincerity isn't love at all. It's something else, something hollow and ugly. Without truth, love is meaningless.

That's why Paul follows up with the statement "hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Another way to read this could be "hate what is evil in others while, at the same time, clinging to what is good in them." From this we see two things about real love: first, real love goes deep.

### Real love goes deep

It seeks out the other person's best, even if that means confronting hurtful or immoral behavior you see in them. It doesn't placate sin or prop up an artificial harmony. Love cares enough to cause necessary conflict. We struggle alongside, we enter the chaos, and alongside the Holy Spirit we work to mend brokenness. To do any less isn't actually love. If I don't speak out against sin in a person's life because I'm too concerned with what this person thinks of me or I'm too worried about losing the relationship, I don't really care about them. I care about me. I love the love I receive from this person more than I actually love them. My own personal comfort is more important to me than the heart and soul of this person.

That kind of self-centered love is ultimately powerless to do anything but make me feel good. The kind of love in this passage can tear down strongholds and save lives. This is the kind of love God shows us—a love deep enough to intervene. As He works to repair my heart through the power of the cross, how can I do any less than intercede when I see someone else being harmed by sin?

### Real love believes the best

Next we see that real love believes the best. Have you seen these extreme close-ups of things? Notice how rough and, frankly, gross some of these things look the closer we get to them. People are just like that. The deeper we go in relationship, the closer we get to one another, the more and more obvious our sin becomes. And if we hate what is evil, how can we see such glaring flaws and still love this person?

The only way that we can hate what is evil and still love the person doing evil is if we cling to what is good. We hold fast to a conviction that no matter what else might happen, no matter what might come up as we're struggling together against darkness and fear, I believe that there is good in you worth fighting for.

Going deep in relationship is a lot like diving to the bottom of the sea. The further down you go the darker and colder it gets. The pressure becomes so great, it can crush you. This hope in what is good is your diving suit. It's the armor that allows us to go deeper in relationship with one another. And it's here in our relationships with one another that we see the next revolution of the heart as the gospel transforms us. We see here in verses 10-13 that the gospel changes how we live in community.

## **The Gospel Changes How We Live in Community**

As love changes our hearts, it moves outward. From this point on, Paul describes how our love, transformed by the gospel, begins affecting the circles of people that are further and further out from us. Let's take a look: *"Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."*

Here we see four ways that the gospel changes our love as it relates to those we live in community with, particularly our church family. First we see that we are to be committed to one another.

### **We are committed to one another**

Here in verse 10 it says to *"be devoted to one another in love"* and to *"honor one another above yourselves."* There are some interesting things Paul does with the language in this verse. The words "devoted" and "love" both show a familial kind of affection—in essence, the devotion and love that we're to show each other should be the same kind of love and affection we show to members of our own family. And not only that, but we're to outdo one another in showing honor. That's actually the phrase Paul uses in the original language. We're supposed to show more honor to others than they show us. In our culture, we regard people like veterans and Olympians with honor. This passage is saying we're to show that same level of respect to each other, and we're to show it more often and to a greater degree than it's shown to us.

### **We are passionate in serving**

Verse 11 tells us to *"never be lacking in zeal* (which is enthusiasm and energy), *but keep your spiritual fervor* (keep your passion alive), *servicing the Lord."* Loving others is hard work, right? There are times we all want to throw in the towel. But here we see a way to keep our hearts in the right place. We keep our spirits awake and alive by serving the Lord.

It might seem counter-intuitive that serving actually gives you energy, but ask anyone who's spent time doing it. Nothing is able to fill your spiritual cup like serving the Lord alongside others. I know this is true for me. On Sunday afternoons I'm physically exhausted, but my heart is full. My spirit is soaring. I never feel more alive than when I'm serving you.

You see, service puts us outside of ourselves. It reorients our focus from our own needs to the needs of others. If your well is dry, if you feel like you're running on empty, if you just can't seem to connect with this church community, the answer is service. And there are plenty of opportunities around here to serve!

### **We remember God is in control**

In verse 12 we're commanded to *"be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer."* These might seem like three

different commands, but the common thread that runs through them is the same. Each comes from an understanding of God's sovereignty; an unshakable belief that God is in control.

The first command—be joyful in hope—describes the nature of our hope, not just the end result. Happiness is conditional, but joy is permanent; it's the filter through which we see the world and find contentment in every circumstance (even if it doesn't make us particularly happy). A joyful hope is secure because it knows that God is in control. The second command to be patient in affliction goes deeper than just pushing through pain. When we realize that God is eternal and that his plans for us are also eternal, we develop a long view of our lives, understanding that there is an ebb and flow to suffering. An understanding of God's sovereignty shows us that our problems are momentary and we can be patient as we go through them.

The final command to be faithful in prayer is the most important. As Christians, prayer is our power source. Hold up your smart phone. See that device you're holding? If you don't plug it in to charge at least once every day, that thing is going to become pretty useless. That's what prayer is like. If we're not engaging with God, plugging into the source of our power, we're going to run out of energy and suddenly it's impossible to find joy in hope or patience in affliction or to love others the way we should. This habit of prayer grows out of a belief that God is sovereign and actually does have the power to intervene in our lives.

Knowing God is sovereign helps me love others. I know that in my own heart, I struggle to dive into this vulnerable love. What if they hurt me? What if they leave or things don't work out? Really believing in God's sovereignty allows us the freedom to trust, knowing that God has our ultimate good in mind. We can joyfully hope for the best. We can be patient when relationships are difficult. And we are motivated to continually pray, both for our own hearts and those around us.

### **We put our love into action**

Finally, in verse 13, we're commanded to put our love into action. *"Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."* Essentially, we're being told to put our money where our mouth is. I can say I love you all day, and I can really feel like I love you. But if you have a need I can meet and I don't meet it, how sincere is my love really? If my love doesn't actually motivate me to do anything, is it even love to begin with?

The words of this verse are so convicting. Honestly, I have a hard time giving to people in need. The voice of my flesh says "they're probably lazy or wasteful. They deserve what they're getting." That voice is so loud it often drowns out the voice of the Holy Spirit saying "Who are you to judge? This is not your call to make. I'm asking you to give." That's why these next words encourage me...practice hospitality. Practice. Like a skill. I can play guitar and sing and lead you in worship because I've spent years practicing. That's the secret to getting good at something, isn't it? Practice. Practice hospitality. Start giving of yourself, your time, your resources. Don't hold back when you see a need. Just like any skill, your generosity will grow the more you use it until those layers of cynicism and selfishness are peeled away and hospitality becomes your default response to need.

## The Gospel Changes How We Treat Everyone

At this point, the view shifts outward to an even wider circle as the gospel changes how we treat everyone. We're told in verses 14-16 how to treat those who aren't necessarily close to us, those who may not be believers. The Bible says: *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."*

Okay, who wants to talk about persecution? I don't want to dwell too long on this, but have you considered the inevitability of persecution? The message of the gospel is inherently offensive. The idea that everyone is a sinner bound for hell and Jesus Christ is the only way to be right with God is pretty far from PC. Jesus himself said in John 15:20, *"a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."* Even so, I can't help think how rare persecution seems to be in America. We see stories on the news about Christians being killed by religious extremists, or arrested in communist countries where the gospel is illegal. Those are pretty stark pictures of persecution and honestly, they're hard for those of us in affluent Northern California to understand. But persecution takes many insidious forms. Have you ever been mocked for your beliefs? Disrespected? Told you were intolerant? Have you ever lost a friend, a job, or given something up for the sake of the gospel?

If you have, you understand the rage that can poison your heart against your persecutor. This reaction is perfectly natural. But we as Christians have died to the natural and been raised to the supernatural. The way of Christ is different than the way of the world, and here we're told to *"bless those who persecute."* What does it mean to bless them? It means to pray for their greatest good. In the case of someone who is persecuting you, this means to pray that God would convict them and that this conviction would lead them to Christ, repentance, and a change of heart. This is what Jesus did as he hung on the cross. He prayed that God would forgive those crucifying him, saying, *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."* When you are persecuted for Christ's sake, pray for your persecutor's ultimate good; that God would convict and draw them to know and follow Jesus.

The Bible goes on to say, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."* Thankfully, there are more than just our persecutors in this outer circle. There are people who are rejoicing, there are people mourning, there are people of high and low position. This passage tells us the key to living in harmony with them is humility.

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of singing in and leading many different choirs. I've learned a lot about harmony. One of the most important things that I've learned is that there can be no divas in a choir. Everyone has to sing the same tone, dynamics, notes and rhythm. You can't have someone improvising a solo no matter how good they are. For a choir to work, each singer has to humble themselves and sing their part for the good of the group. That's the attitude this passage is telling us to have. In our church, we have sopranos, altos, tenors and basses, each with their own unique voice. None of us can believe that we're better than another and refuse to sing alongside them. Harmony begins with humility. That's what this passage is asking us to do—set aside pride and pitch in with everyone else!

## The Gospel Changes How We React to Enemies

We've talked about how our love should be towards those in our inner circle. Then we talked about how this love impacts those outside our community in our outer circle. Now, we reach the final circle where our enemies live. How does the gospel change the way we react to those who are opposed to us? Let's look at the passage. *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. 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.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

There are a couple of parts to loving our enemies that the passage describes: the first is to not be overcome by evil.

### Do not be overcome by evil

Verse 17 says, *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil"* and verse 21 says *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* The word "overcome" invokes this sense that there's a battle, there's a struggle going on against evil. This is the oldest trope in storytelling: good versus evil. We as humans understand this on a primal level. Good and evil struggle, not only in the world at large, but within our own hearts. This battle is so easy to lose because, even though we as Christians have the good of Christ at work in our spirits, we live in bodies and wrestle with minds that are prone to evil. This passage says "do not repay anyone evil for evil" and "do not be overcome by evil." So following that logic, the moment you repay evil with evil, you've been overcome by evil. You've lost the battle. The only way to defeat evil is by doing good to the one who has wronged you.

How many of you have seen or read *The Lord of the Rings*? The author JRR Tolkien beautifully illustrates this concept in his story. The heroes are on a journey to destroy the One Ring, an artifact that will give the Dark Lord Sauron the means to conquer Middle Earth. Though the ring has great power, it is ultimately evil and corrupts anyone who uses it. While it could be used to defeat Sauron and restore peace, doing so would blacken the soul of the one who used it, turning them into a new Dark Lord. Instead of using evil to fight against evil, the characters in the story must achieve victory through sacrifice, perseverance, and standing beside each other against all odds. Sounds a lot like the love Paul is describing. They must overcome evil with good.

As I read this passage, I'm reminded also of the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: "Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

And let me just add the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:44-47: *"But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"*

The struggle to resist repaying evil for evil is not just for the sake of the person we'd be repaying. It's for the sake of our own hearts. We can't do something evil to another human being and escape with our hearts intact. Christ submitted himself to death on a cross at the hands of evil men. We can't call ourselves his followers and retaliate against those who do evil to us.

### Live a life of peace

The other command we're given in this section is to live a life of peace. As far as it depends on us, we're to live in peace with everyone. I recognize that this isn't always possible. There may be times when you have to defend yourself or your loved ones from harm. The scripture isn't telling us to roll over when threatened, rather it's saying that you are the one who chooses peace right from the outset. This choice changes your attitude and affects everything from the way you drive to the way you spend money to the way you vote. Your entire life is under the umbrella of peace.

***"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord."*** Taking revenge not only pulls us out from under that umbrella of peace, but demonstrates a disbelief in God's sovereignty. When we take revenge on someone, we're saying that we don't believe God values justice like we do. We're the role of judge, jury, and executioner that belongs to God alone. To take revenge is to deny the sovereign place of God, who says that he will repay. Again, this is for the sake of our own hearts. We can't take revenge, repaying evil with evil, and walk away with our hearts intact. Let God handle the dirty job of doling out justice; he's the only one who can do so and keep his hands clean.

With a mindset of peace, it becomes a lot easier to track with verse 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.'"*** In that last line about the burning coals, Paul isn't saying that by doing good to our enemies we're hurting them in some passive aggressive or morally superior way. He's quoting Proverbs 25:21-22 which belongs to a collection of proverbs that poetically tie actions to emotional responses. When he says that providing for your enemy will heap burning coals on their head, what he means is that this action will bring light and warmth to a dark, cold heart. It will bring conviction and remorse for what they've done and turn their demeanor from one that is cold and calloused to one that is warm and open. Essentially, he's saying that the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn them into a friend. And the best way to do that is not to retaliate against them, but to care for them.

Sometimes TV shows and movies do us a disservice, showing the hero blasting through bad guys one after another. In real life, there's no such thing as a "bad guy." There are people who do bad things, but in their minds, their actions are totally justified. No one is a leering, mustache-twirling cartoon villain who's only out to make the world worse. Everyone is the hero of their own story. They might be a criminal, a terrorist, or someone who intentionally hurts you. But they have a family, friends, hopes,

dreams, and a personal history that drives them to act the way they do. It's a lot easier to choose peace when you realize that the alternative is to harm or destroy this full life, this walking story, this complex human being that Jesus loves and died to save.

You see, all the punishment for every sin, all the justice that ever needed to be done was poured out on Jesus at the cross. All necessary punishment was meted on the innocent Christ. All vengeance was satisfied by the suffering and death of God's only son. My hand held the whip that struck him as I lashed out at my enemies. My voice cursed him when I cried out for justice. When I think of Jesus bleeding out for all the wrong that was done to me and wrong that I've done to others—all the horrible retribution I've earned—my desire for vengeance dries up and all I'm left with is awe for the grace that saved me, the grace that longs to save even my enemies.

I want to share with you the story of Saint Patrick because his life is a perfect picture of the radical, revolutionary love we've been talking about. We celebrated Saint Patrick's Day a few weeks ago and there's a whole mythology around the man. They say he drove the snakes out of Ireland and defeated the druids in magical duels. Great story, but none of it is true. He wasn't even Irish!

The real Saint Patrick was a young Roman who was kidnapped from his home in Britain at the age of 16 and thrown onto a slave ship bound for Ireland. His family was Christian but Patrick didn't believe in God. For the next six years, he was abused as a slave and forced to work as a shepherd in brutal conditions. But during his captivity he began to pray to God day and night while working as a shepherd in the Irish hills. One night, he had a dream where God told him to escape, that a ship was waiting to take him home. Patrick fled 200 miles on foot to the west coast where a ship reluctantly took him home.

Once home, he studied to be a minister. One night he had another dream that an Irishman came to him with a letter that said "holy boy, please return to us. We need you." Patrick struggled in his soul. He felt God's call to bring the message of Christ to the Irish, the people who had enslaved and tormented him. Eventually, Patrick obeyed and returned to the land of his enemies, boldly preaching the gospel in a barbaric land of spiritual darkness.

Patrick's ministry lasted 29 years. During this time he baptized over 120,000 Irishmen and planted 300 churches. The life of Saint Patrick is a perfect picture of what it looks like to overcome evil with good. Here we see a man who has every reason to hate the Irish and yet he risks everything so that they can know the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

And that's the heart of this message: the gospel changes everything about the way we love people. As our love is changed, we begin to change the hearts around us through sincere love, starting with our community and spreading outwards, even as far as our enemies. None of this is possible in our own strength. But by keeping in view the mercy God has shown us, we can love those around us in a deep, powerful, and world-changing way.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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