

The Christian Life

Romans 12:9-21

Series: Romans, Spring 2023: Walking Out the Truth

Preaching Date: March 19, 2023

Text: Romans 12:9-21

Worship: Love One Another

Key Sentence: 18 ways love imitates the character and actions of Jesus.

18 ways to reflect the love of God with every facet of your being

Outline: (N/A)

Romans 12:9–21

- (1) Let love be genuine.
- (2) Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.
- (3) ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection.
- (4) Outdo one another in showing honor.
- (5) ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.
- (6) ¹²Rejoice in hope,
- (7) be patient in tribulation,
- (8) be constant in prayer.
- (9) ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints
- (10) and seek to show hospitality.
- (11) ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
- (12) ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
- (13) ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another.
- (14) Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.
Never be wise in your own sight.
- (15) ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil,
but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.
- (16) ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
- (17) ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God,
for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”
²⁰To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty,
give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals
on his head.”
- (18) ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Christian Life Romans 12:9-21

Everyone here has heard, I suspect, the story of God's work at Asbury University in Wilmore Kentucky. Starting February 8 the Hughes Auditorium was filled with prayer, singing, and repentance. This movement of God continued for more than 250 hours and has sparked similar experiences on other campuses. It's interesting that the text preached in the chapel service that started all this was the same text we're studying today, Romans 12:9-21. The sermon was preached by Zack Meerkreebs, a pastor who works for Envision, a Christian and Missionary Alliance ministry. He is also assistant coach for the Asbury men's soccer team. At the time, Meerkreebs thought he had "whiffed" the sermon. He told a reporter for the Free Press "I had just gotten back into town late Tuesday night and I was exhausted and didn't have time to prepare."

But the first verse of his assigned text really stood out. He says "It's thirteen verses, verses 9-21 with 30 commands on how we should love one another, and it's all radical. The first line is 'let love be genuine,' or in other translations, 'let your love not be hypocritical,' which I'm super passionate about as a Christian, because I've experienced a lot of un-genuine love. I'm passionate about the church and Christians living that out." So he showed up to chapel and he started by talking the word love: "I love gelato; I love coffee; I love tacos; and Pappas and Lata. But is that different than how I love these people? These are my girls. Right? Do I love tacos like I love Mercy, that mighty baby in the middle. Do I love dry cappuccinos like my beautiful wife K.P.?"

He was differentiating pure love from the things we say we love and the kind of treatment other people tell us is love. Of that he says "It's polluted love. It's selfish love. And some of you guys have experienced radically poor love. Evil love. And I would say today that we should not even give it the honor of calling it love." He contrasted that selfish love not only to love spelled out in today's passage, but to the love of God. He said "you're not going to be able to love like this until you experience the love of Jesus." As he ended he didn't really think much of his sermon, but he invited anyone who needed to experience the love of God to come up on stage. "I pray that this sits on you guys like an itchy sweater, and you've gotta take care of it." So experience His love. Become the love of God by experiencing the love of God. Amen?"

What happened next? At first Zach said maybe about eighteen students stayed as the rest of them packed up their bags, went back to class, carried on, but then other students started getting word, they were sending out texts to each other.

“Hey, you need to come back here. Something is happening.” “I got a text from my friends and they sent me a video of what was happening in Hughes and people were like “come back to Hughes, come back everyone.” Some confessed and repented of sin, some prayed for God’s presence in a new way, some led out in simple praise songs. And that’s how the 250 hours began.

Today we look at the same verses in Romans, and our message is not that different. You and I are called to a radical, practical, selfless love which shows up not only in our actions but in our character. This is both the evidence that we are being transformed into the image of Christ and the means of transformation. Here are 18 ways to reflect the love of God with every facet of your being. Think of yourself like a diamond. A diamond has all these facets, these planes at different angles. Each one reflects and refracts the light that shines on it. The light doesn’t belong to the diamond, but shines through it in many ways. In the same way the love that we receive from Christ and the genuine love that we have for God and others can be displayed in every facet of our lives.

Let’s read it Romans 12:9-21, then we’ll walk through it. Or, actually, run through it, just touching on each facet. *Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

So, here we go. Facet 1: Let love be genuine. The word for love is agape, and this is the first time in Romans this word is applied to horizontal relationships, love for one another. Up to this point it has always been used of the love of God rescuing and saving us. “But God demonstrates his love for us in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Now, take that same love that has been poured into you and pour it out for others. And this love must be genuine, not hypocritical. A hypocrite says they love you, but there is a hidden motive, a using of you that makes the love a mask and not the real thing.

This command is especially pertinent to an age of social media. It's easy to "love" people out there, people at a distance, to post your undying love and friendship in the comments. But if we had an in-person relationship with that person, love would be more costly, would involve our time, our energy, our thought, our good will. To a large and often humbling extent you can measure your love by its costs. Lord, keep me from a fake love that costs me nothing.

Facet 2: "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." Two commands, but they are mirror images of each other. When you abhor something you push it away. You don't hold it fast. The contrast is between good and evil. Paul has already said that all people have the basic truths of God's law written on their hearts, that good and evil are evident to their consciences. This innate knowledge is reinforced by God's revealed will, which lays out good and evil plainly. Then there is the life and example of Jesus, who did good to all he met, yet was willing to take a stand against the evil and oppression wherever he found it.

This begins in the heart. You may be tempted to evil: to hatred, to anger, to blaming, to abuse, to laziness, or to worldliness. But you are to hate these things in yourself and cling to love, to peace, to acceptance, to industry, and the daily reality of your relationship with God. An example of this, apart from Jesus, might be St. Francis of Assisi, who rejected both the riches and the military honor of his culture in order to live a life of humility, self-sacrifice and poverty. From this personal rejection of evil and embrace of good he founded the Franciscan order of monks, which still strives for the same things.

We rotate the diamond a little further and look at facet 3: "Love one another with brotherly affection." This verse contains the second and third words for love in this section. In verse 9 it was agape love, the kind of love that God has for us. Here the picture is of family love. The first word, translated "love," is most often used of our natural affections, especially the love of a parent for a child. The other word is philadelphia, 'brotherly love,' love of brothers and sisters. The city of Philadelphia calls itself the city of brotherly love. Paul says that this family love should be seen in the tender, warm affection which unites brothers and sisters in the family of God. God has blessed me with three wonderful, imperfect families in which to express and receive this love over the years. The closest has been my own family, my wife who has been my closest love, and our kids. The natural and real way that kids love each other in a close family has been a huge blessing to me, and I'm loving seeing that in the lives of our grandchildren as well. But I've also seen this affection in the Body of Christ. I saw it in the Christian fellowship at college, a strong Christian family in a secular place. I learned there the ordinary practical bonds of brothers in Christ and the growth which comes when iron sharpens iron.

The third has been church families, mostly this one, though there were a few others when Gail and I were younger. But I've been both parented and brothered because believers in this body have taken seriously this command to love. Treat fellow believers like family.

Facet 4: Outdo one another in showing honor. Sometimes this is translated "honor one another above yourselves." It's not really a competition. None of these things are. But it is definitely a getting-your-eyes-off-yourself and working for the blessing and success of others. To honor someone is to defer to their judgment and their wishes, to respect their opinions and ideas even when they differ from your own. It is to put them a bit on a pedestal, and point to them rather than yourself. Did you ever hear the word "festschrift?" It's German and it means something like a festival or celebration of writing. The word is used when a whole volume of essays is gathered to honor a particular author in his field of work. For example, one of my favorite commentary writers, R. Kent Hughes was the preaching pastor at College Church in Wheaton Illinois for many years. He was a great preacher and a writer on preaching. In 2007 thirty different colleagues wrote "Essays on Expository Preaching in Honor of R. Kent Hughes." One reviewer wrote "A book packed with preaching wisdom to honor one of this generation's greatest expositors of Scripture. Kent Hughes is rightly honored, but God's word is ever more highly honored in this special book." Who in your world can you festschrift?

Facet 5, verse 11: "Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." This is really one thought "Do not be slothful in zeal but instead be fervent in spirit as you serve the Lord." One of the phrases I've often used "Sold out." That person is sold out for the Lord. In the words of the old hymn he or she gives "heart and soul and mind and strength to serve the king of kings." Another way of thinking of it is that the fire never goes out. The word fervent has that image. I hope we all know a believer like this, not someone who is always on top of the world, not someone who is always "rah rah rah," but one who gets up pretty much every day, throws another log on the fire through their intimacy with God, and the goes out and serves the Lord again. I praise God that I've known quite a few brothers and sisters who were like this.

Verse 12, Facet 6: "Rejoice in hope." Two truths: we have hope, and we can rejoice in it. Peter tells us that we have been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Christ from the dead." He goes on to say that "in this you rejoice." You may not always be able to rejoice in your circumstances, but you can rejoice in the hope that is guaranteed by the resurrection: eternal life, the return of Christ, freedom from sin. These verses from 1st Peter are going to be our topic on Easter Sunday, April 9th, so stay tuned.

Facet 7 “be patient in tribulation.” Jesus said “In this world you will have trouble.” That’s a promise. Relational trouble. Financial trouble. Cultural trouble. Medical trouble. Mental trouble. And more. Trouble continues to beset us in a fallen world. Not to mention persecution. But anxiety doesn’t help. Patience does. I’m sharing at the memorial service for Faye Ray soon, and I can’t help but think of her patience in tribulation. After her foot was broken many years ago she endured years of pain and countless operations to try and fix it and keep it from getting re-infected, but nothing worked. Finally she decided that she would take the option of having it amputated. But even then she endured phantom pain for the rest of her life. She was sweetly patient in tribulation.

Facet 8: “be constant in prayer.” Oh yeah. Be constant in prayer. I wish this more characterized my life. I try, as I’ve said over the years, to have a conversation with God going on in my head all the time. That’s good, but the flaw in it is that my prayers tend to stay very in the moment and mundane. Deep praise and deep and regular petition for others have not been my strength. As I get older though, and wake up in the middle of the night more often, I am finding it an opportunity to really pray for people and their needs. I know people in our fellowship who are deeply invested in prayer, and I want to be like them.

Verse 13. This is the ninth facet on the diamond of a Christian life: “Contribute to the needs of the saints.” Some translations say “Share with God’s people who are in need.” The word “share” is a great New Testament word, *koinonia*, which suggests community and fellowship. It can mean both sharing our resources with people or to share in their sufferings. The early church was characterized by *koinonia*, and the believers, we’re told, had everything in common, *koina*. They shared with those more needy than themselves. Paul talks about giving to missions, to churches, to the poor, but he emphasizes that our brothers and sisters in Christ should not go needy while we have the means to help. The Holy Spirit must show us how to help, but like other things on this list, we should expect that our Christian life does not come at no cost.

Facet 10: “seek to show hospitality.” This is a great one. Hospitality is opening your home to welcome others. It might be a meal, it might be a place to spend the night, it might be any investment in relationships. This was crucial in the early church. The Apostles and their fellow workers moved around. There were no Holiday Inns. It’s also crucial today, because loneliness is epidemic. Face-to-face and in-person is rare. Table fellowship, the act of sharing a meal together is one of the great places to forge a relationship that impacts you and others. We’ve talked about this before and I highly recommend Rosaria Butterfield’s book “The Gospel Comes with a House Key.” Rosaria Butterfield’s own life was turned toward Christ through generous and compassionate hospitality.

Ok, are you exhausted yet? The good news is we're more than halfway through. Paul is not only talking about the Christian life lived in the church, but the Christian life lived in the world. A segment of the world persecutes believers and a segment promotes world views that make Christianity unlikely or laughable. Facet 11 "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Have you noticed that Paul sounds a lot like Jesus here? Paul knew the life of Jesus, both from time spent with the disciples and by revelation. Stott lists fifteen places in Romans 12-15 where Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus. "Bless those who persecute you" summarizes what Jesus taught in Luke 6: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either." If you read stories of persecuted Christians, like Richard Wurmbrand, imprisoned for 14 years in Communist Romania, you find that they pray for their enemies. You and I may not have enemies of that sort, but we can approach conflict as an opportunity to pray for people and to bless them.

Facet 12, verse 15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Because our culture is very isolated, there is almost no ministry more needed than hearing somebody's heart and seeing their struggle. There's a scene in C. S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew* where a boy named Digory meets Aslan. His mother is sick, and he wants to ask for Aslan's help, but he's afraid. Lewis writes: Up till then he had been looking at the Lion's great front feet and the huge claws on them; now, in his despair, he looked up at its face. What he saw surprised him as much as anything in his whole life. For the tawny face was bent down near his own and (wonder of wonders) great shining tears stood in the Lion's eyes. They were such big, bright tears compared with Digory's own that for a moment he felt as if the Lion must really be sorrier about his Mother than he was himself. "My son, my son," said Aslan. "I know. Grief is great. Only you and I in this land know that yet. Let us be good to one another."

Facet 13, verse 16 "Live in harmony with one another." The Greek sentence reads literally: "Think the same thing towards one another" Paul says something like this in Philippians 2 "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Notice again the central place of our mind and our thinking. But the word also points to harmony with others, as translated here. I love that word. Harmony means that we don't all have to sing the same note, but the different notes we sing go together and make something more beautiful than each alone. And just as harmony is not arbitrary, but is actually a mathematical relationship between the notes, so our harmony is not arbitrary or manmade but is an objective reality based on our relationships with God. He wrote the melody, he teaches the harmony.

Facet 14: “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.” This is spiritual pride. We all know from reading the Gospels that Jesus spoke strongly against the Pharisees. The sins they were guilty of were spiritual pride and hypocrisy; thinking they knew it all and were better than others. Despite this warning, the same attitude has cropped up in the church over and over again from the early church of Paul’s letters to the Catholic church of the middle ages to the middle-class church of post-war America. But we are not to be high or arrived or always right in our own eyes. We are to be those who willingly associate with those struggling, uncertain, doubting or questioning. Many of us have seen the movie “Jesus Revolution.” It took some of us back to our early days in the faith. My favorite moment in the movie is when Chuck Smith has invited all the hippies into the tiny Calvary Chapel. This arouses the spiritual pride of the church board. So Chuck Smith gives an ultimatum. He says the door of this church is always open. It’s open for anyone who wants to come in, and if you’re not good with that, it’s open for you to leave. His chief antagonist and his wife, they get up and walk out. And another board member gets up. He watches the first guy walk out. He looks at the hippies. And he crosses the aisle and sits with the hippies. Friends, if a new pastor is going to move Trinity forward, change is going to come. It’s going to be uncomfortable. We all may have to cross the aisle a little bit. Let’s not hinder that with spiritual pride or clinging to our own wisdom.

Our last verses, 17-21, are more tightly connected than the previous 14 facets of the Christian life, but I’m still breaking them into four pieces. Verse 17 “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” This is non-retaliation. Jesus never repaid evil for evil. He teaches, as we’ve already seen “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic.” Peter says of Jesus “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” Peter goes on to say “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless.” Even the Old Testament taught this. Proverbs 20:22 “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the LORD and he will deliver you.” We, on the other hand, have a sinful impulse to get even with people. When the church renounces this impulse, the world notices. Do you remember “Les Miserables,” the musical or the movie? It was the bishop who showed Jean Val Jean mercy who changed his life. And it was Jean Val Jean’s mercy to the jailer Javert that ultimately broke Javert’s legalistic pride, though ultimately he couldn’t embrace mercy for himself.

The contrast to retaliation in verse 17 is respect: “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” The renewed mind does not waste time thinking about how to get even, but invests thought in how to do right. Verse 18 “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” “Live peaceably with all.” Don’t be the one to raise your voice. Don’t be the one who lashes out on social media. Don’t be the one who makes a mountain out of a mole hill. Don’t be the one who gets bent out of shape because some perceived right has been violated. If you have to be different, be different in a harmonious way that makes a symphony rather than a cacophony.

Verse 19, Facet 17 in our list “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Don’t take revenge. Paul has already covered that. But now he says, leave it to the wrath of God. Maybe you’ve been truly wronged, truly sinned against. Do not sin in return. But if there is truly sin against you, God is not going to forget it. His justice, and even human justice can go forward. We’ll see the role of human justice next week. But not personal revenge.

Notice that non-retaliation is not passive. It attempts to do good for a person. If he is in need, attempt to meet the need. And this will “heap burning coals on his head.” If the one I do evil to does good to me, there is at least the possibility that I will be shamed into reconsideration or even repentance. The burning coals carried on the head may even be a picture of repentance, as they were in some ancient cultures. In any event, the bottom line is, verse 21 “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That’s a fantastic summation of the last two verses, and really a fantastic summation of the whole diamond. We focus on doing good, in our home, in the church, in our community, and in the world. Jesus said “let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” That’s every facet of the diamond showing the light of Christ in us.

So, that’s an eighteen facet outline. How are you supposed to deal with this? Shall I counsel you to go forth this week and concentrate on all eighteen things? That would be foolish counsel. We are not wired to do that. But it may be, and probably is, that one or two of these have caused you a bit of pain, pierced your soul. Those are the ones you probably need to concentrate on this week. And in the weeks to, and the months to come and the years to come, I pray that this list becomes ingrained in your thinking. Because this list is one of the best places in the whole Bible to see what it looks like to live as a Christian.