

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 10, 2013)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Life’s Chief Assignment: Love

(Romans 12:9-21)

Study #21

Introduction: A lot to chew on...

[Romans 12:9] Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. [10] Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; [11] not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; [12] rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, [13] contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. [14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. [16] Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. [17] Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. [19] Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. [20] “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That is our passage for today. And to that I say, “*Whew!*”

Paul has packed quite a collection of commands, exhortations, warnings, and instructions into one thirteen verse passage! What are we to do with this?

Once, many years ago, I sat through a series of studies presented at a church where the pastor taught, on consecutive weeks, every one of the fifteen “*deeds of the flesh*” listed in Galatians 5.

We could do something like that and spend three dozen Sundays looking at what I have just read. We won’t.

Nope. We’re going to work our way through the *whole passage* in one sitting. And in choosing to tackle a challenging Chunk o’ Scripture in one message, we’re in good company.

Hey, I once listened to Chuck Swindoll preach the entire Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) in one thirty minute message. I heard Charles Ryrie preach the whole book of Revelation on one Sunday. We can do this!

However, studying a passage like Romans 12:9-21 does present a challenge. With over thirty specific exhortations, we will take more of a bird’s eye approach lest we get lost in the weeds and lose the forest for the trees.

What we will see, I believe, is a unifying theme that is as inspiring and life-changing as any we find anywhere in Scripture.

Last Sunday, we saw that every one of us has been gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve and that we should therefore serve in our area of giftedness. (Romans 12:3-8)

THEN, we emphasized the *uniqueness* of our individual calling in Jesus. TODAY, we focus on the *sameness* of character to which each of us is called in Jesus.

And how fitting, how predictable, that Paul would begin by urging us to sincere love.

Opening Summation: Love - the First and Last Word (v. 9a)

[9a] Let love be without hypocrisy.

Once, the Lord Jesus was asked to summarize all of the commands of God and to identify which one of those commands was the most important.

Without hesitation, He answered, *[Mark 12:30] And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. [31] The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”*

There we have it. The chief assignment of life is to love. As important as it is to handle finances responsibly, pick up our clothes, keep a neat lawn, and floss daily, nothing compares to the importance of love.

Nothing is as central to life as God calls us to live it as being transformed into someone who loves well.

Today, Paul gives us a whole laundry list of commands that will lead to a God-honoring life. All of them are important. And this is the best way he could think of to launch into his theme: LOVE.¹

He uses the Greek word *agape*, a word that so far in Romans has only been used to describe God’s unconditional, sacrificial love for us, poured out on us in Jesus. Now he tells us that we are to love/*agape* each other.

We are to love “*without hypocrisy.*” Interesting...

Adding those two words turns Paul’s opening words from an order to a thoughtful call to explore our hearts, to evaluate the depth and the quality of our love.

Maybe it’s possible to *pretend* to love without really loving. Maybe it’s even possible to *think* we are loving when we aren’t.²

When Jesus called us to love as He loved us³, He forever raised the bar of what it means to love.

¹ The command is central to life in the same way that Saint Augustine said, “*Love God and then do what you please.*”

² John Calvin: It is difficult to express how ingenious almost all men are in counterfeiting a love which they do not really possess.

³ *[John 13:34-35] A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved, that you should love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love for one another.”*

It is to love sacrificially. It is to act with the other’s person’s best interest at heart. It is to act to bless someone with full emotional investment.

In other words, it’s not love if I’m treating you well so that you’ll treat me well. It’s not love if I’m nice to you because I’m afraid of what you’ll do to me if I’m honest with you. It’s not love if I’m being outwardly kind to you while secretly hoping for your destruction.

No. Love is a heart-felt passion to bless someone. It is a burning desire to work for their good - even when it gets uncomfortable.

Nothing is more important than that you and I learn to love. That’s why Paul starts off this passage with a call to unhypocritical love.

It would be quite a diss to say of someone, “*Well, he wasn’t very loving, but he sure could preach.*” or “*She was a tremendous organizer, just not very loving.*”

On the other hand, a summary of a life of spiritual and personal power might very well sound like this, “*I don’t know what it was about her, but despite her many failings, I always knew that she loved me.*”

When it comes to how we conduct ourselves here and now, there is nothing more important than that we become people who love well. That’s where it all starts. And then, right after his remark about loving without hypocrisy, Paul calls us to a life of holiness before God.

In fact, this exhortation is located at both the beginning and the end of our passage.⁴ First, listen to how we are to view that which is evil.

Life Before God (a call to Holiness) (vv. 9b, 21)

Hate Evil (vv. 9b, 21a)

[9b] Abhor what is evil...[21a] Do not be overcome with evil

This is to be our posture with respect to sin: We hate it.

⁴ This arrangement proves that vv. 9-21 is a complete unit of thought.

We don't hate people who sin. If we did, we would hate everyone! No, we are to love people without hypocrisy. But the evil in this world - personal and systemic - is to be the target of our hatred.

God gave hate for a reason. It's a good thing to hate evil in all its forms, and the forms of evil are many and varied.⁵

There is the abuse and exploitation of the weak by the strong - as in slavery, sex trafficking, and the physical abuse of women and children. There is injustice in the workplace, drug abuse and abortion, sexual perversion and addictions, greed - and more.

We don't have nice thoughts when we think of these evils. In fact, it wouldn't be right to feel good about any of them.

Jesus wants us to have a visceral, emotional response of disgust, abhorrence, toward that which is evil. We loathe it because it violates God's goodness and holiness. We detest evil because it brings horrible consequences to those who practice it AND to those who are touched by it. We abhor it because it multiplies human suffering.

Seeing sin and evil as God sees it, being disgusted by evil, creates a vacuum in our hearts. The place of evil is empty, and that vacuum is now free to be filled with an embrace of that which is good.

Love Good (vv. 9b, 21b)

[9b] Cling⁶ to what is good...[21b] But overcome evil with good.

Like a man adrift at sea clings to his lifeboat, we cling to good. THAT is to be our relationship to what is good.⁷

⁵ Among my favorite reads is C. S. Lewis' Space Trilogy. In the second book, *Perelandra*, the hero, Ransom, discovers what hate is for when he is called to fight an evil foe. "Then an experience that perhaps no good man can ever have in our world came over him - a torrent of perfectly unmixed and lawful hatred. The energy of hating, never before felt without some guilt, without some dim knowledge that he was failing to distinguish the sinner from the sin, rose into his arms and legs till he felt like they were pillars of burning blood."

⁶ To help us imagine the kind of love we are to have for good, righteous, and holy things, Paul used a word for "cling" that is also used to describe the bond of marriage (*kollaw*). We are to "cling" to holiness as a husband "clings" to his wife.

We are getting a picture of a powerful life - one that is centered on love and one that is laser focused on holiness.

We see love without hypocrisy, love from the heart, as our highest calling. It is to love as Jesus loved. And we are learning to hate evil and to desperately cling to good.

This - love and holiness - is our life's foundation. And on this foundation we are going to build the structure of a life that will make God smile.

First, let's consider that life as it is played out with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Again (as if we might so quickly forget), Paul urges us to love.

Life in the Church (vv. 10-13)

Brotherly Love (v. 10-11)

Again, LOVE (v. 10)

[10] Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another in honor

If God is my father and God is your father, what does that make us? Brothers! Family! In Jesus, we are family. And Paul says that in the family of God one of the things we are to do is to go out of our way to honor each other.

The quality of our love is measured by how well we show ***"preference to one another in honor."***

The thought is that instead of waiting for praise from others, we try to beat them to the punch and honor them. Give them the best seat. Pour their iced tea. Look for ways to esteem them.

⁷ ***[Philippians 4:8] Finally, brethren, what is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.***

And there is no time to waste in getting on with this, either! In urging us to love and honor, Paul writes breathlessly.

No time to waste! (v. 11)

[11] not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit⁸, serving the Lord.⁹

So, let's say that you've got an idea about how to honor one of your friends in Jesus. Great! Do it! Don't let the opportunity pass you by. Now is the time. Get intense, get fervent, get zealous about honoring your brother and your sister in Jesus!

I'll bet that right now, there's that one person you're thinking of who could use a little affirmation, right? You've thought about telling them how their service has blessed you. You noticed their kindness. Why not jot yourself a note - now! - to ensure that you don't forget to affirm them later.

Be quick to affirm them for what they do well or for what they do for Jesus. Affirm them in a private note, or honor them in front of others.

And listen to what Paul says next. After telling us that we should love one another by honoring and affirming, he now tells us each to be faithful to the Lord despite whatever hardship we may be facing.

Faithful Despite Hardship (v. 12)

[12] rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation,¹⁰ devoted to prayer

⁸ This exact phrase, "*fervent in spirit*" is used of Apollos in Acts 18:25. Some see this as a reference to the Holy Spirit, and that the Christian is to allow himself to be set on fire by the Spirit. I am more inclined, though, to see the "spirit" here as our human spirit.

⁹ The knowledge that we are "*serving the Lord*" is the best antidote in the world for spiritual weariness. Those words, "*serving the Lord*" stir us away from sloth.

¹⁰ The apostle Paul frequently referred to the afflictions he himself had endured or was enduring either because of his Christian faith or because of the normal hardships of life. And, here, he calls us, not to a simple endurance OF tribulation, but to steadfastness IN the trials that come our way.

No one lives long without tribulation. If, right now, you are going through a season of relative ease, wonderful. But be aware - THIS is not heaven. Trials will come.

And when they do, you can remember that Jesus promised there would be trials. You can remember that this world is broken. Remember that you have a hope beyond this life.

And pray. When we read, "*devoted to prayer*" what does that tell us but that prayer may just NOT be one of those activities that comes to us naturally. We need to devote ourselves to nurturing a life of prayer - or it won't happen. And friends, it has got to happen!

Prayer is the God-ordained means for finding His grace for every need. Particularly, prayer equips us against the temptation to lose heart when tribulation hits. Hardship met prayerlessly is guaranteed to result in failure.

If I am prayerless, I'll either give in to despair and lose that way OR I'll remain stable and consistent and become independently proud of my success. (!) Prayer is essential if we want to nurture a life of love and trust.

Paul gives two more pieces of wisdom about life in the church lane. First, an encouragement to real "fellowship."

Charity and Hospitality (v. 13)

Material witness through fellowship

[13a] contributing to the needs of the saints (literally, "*having fellowship with the needs of the saints*")

Now, quick. What comes to mind when you hear the word, *fellowship*? Church brunches or the time between Sunday School and worship service?

If so, you should know that the Greek word for *fellowship* (*koinonia*) has nothing to do with either after-church snacks or bite-sized conversation.

The word means “*shared life*.” The thought behind the word *fellowship* is that of contributing to the material needs of fellow believers.

Here is Scripture calling us to pay attention to what we might be able to do for our brothers and sisters. If your brother was in need, you’d help him out, right? If your sister was hurting, you’d come to her aid. Well, we here in this church are family, and our family bonds grow stronger when we help each other out.

So, you’re all on board with this and you’re ready to start helping. But you’re not quite sure how to find out what needs exist.

After all, Sunday mornings are a blur. Paul suggests we try hospitality.

The ministry of hospitality

[13b]...practicing hospitality¹¹

I’ve seen hospitality wonderfully exercised by many people in many ways here at our church.

Sometimes, it is practiced by opening up a home. Sometimes, it’s practiced by opening arms to receive a newcomer. At times, hospitality is a specific set of actions and at other times it is a welcoming presence.

But there may be no better way to get a window into someone’s life than to have them over to your home or apartment for a meal.

There may be no better opening to see what’s really going on than to hospitably look someone in the eye and ask them, “*How are you doing, really?*”

¹¹ The church elder is one who is “*hospitable*.” (1 Timothy 3). The word combines the Greek words for “love” and “stranger.” In the early church, an open door policy of hospitality was a prime means of demonstrating the truth of a shared life. The world around these first Christians was quite inhospitable. In the first centuries of the church, there was an urgent need for the practice of hospitality, because of the persecutions which made it necessary for Christians to migrate from place to place. In addition, itinerant Gospel preachers and evangelists were dependent on the welcome mats of believers across the Roman Empire for their sustenance.

Healthy relating in the body of Christ is all about a growing commitment to love. We look for ways to honor each other. And we put shoe leather to our very practical desire to help out when there is need.

That’s life in the church. And of course, in addition to life together in Jesus, each one of us also lives in the broader world. How are we to navigate outside of church life in a way that honors God?

This morning we listen as Paul gives some great direction. He’ll end with some thoughts about dealing with those who actually oppose our faith, but he starts out with some general thoughts about how to be helpful to those who are far from God.

Life in the World (vv. 14-20)

With the Human Family, Generally (vv. 15-16)

Weeping and rejoicing (v. 15)

[15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

This is about as close as the Bible ever comes to giving a formula for how to “be” around people. Boiled down, we are to match the emotional level of the person we are with.

There is no limit to how helpful you can be when you join in someone else’s joy or when you join in their sorrow.

Picture someone you know coming to you with great news - maybe something you can’t even really relate to. But you lose yourself in their excitement.

This isn’t two buddies celebrating a win by their favorite sports team. This is a friend rejoicing in his friend’s win.

Have you ever had the pleasure of someone rejoicing just because you are rejoicing? There is nothing like it! Their laughter FOR YOUR JOY blows wind into your sails.

(We could add a twist to make it more challenging and suggest that your friend is rejoicing over the promotion that you desperately wanted. When you rejoice at *that* moment, it is a sure sign of God's work in your life!)

Or, think about the time that life has dropped a bomb on your friend. The bottom has fallen out. Hope seems gone - and you join her in her sadness. You don't at that moment tell her about your own exactly-the-same experience of ten years earlier. You listen. You weep with her.

I remember that lots of people said lots of kind things to me at the door leaving the church following my mother's funeral in 1980. To this day, my most vivid memory is of the tears streaming down the face of my friend, Bob, as he looked me in the eye.

What does "*weep with those who weep*" mean except that we are to enter into the sorrows of others. Let's call it emotional investment.

That's love. It's costly.

But if you are looking to bond deeply with someone and really want to learn to love as Jesus loved,¹² you will give of your heart to your friend and serve them by your laughter and your tears.

That's good counsel for life in the world. And listen to another piece of sage wisdom about relationships out in the non-church arena.

A call to humility (v. 16)

[16] Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

We can hope that to "*be of the same mind*" doesn't mean that we are required to agree with each other. If it does, then whether at home, school, work, or church, we might as well all pack up and go, well, where could we go?!

The thought is rather that we who believe in Jesus are to give consistent care and attention to all, irrespective of social status, family setting, race, gender, age, or background. We are to never look down our noses on anyone as if we were better than they.

All people are image-of-God bearers. Favoritism toward the well-heeled is ugly.

We are to meaningfully engage with all people, embrace them warmly, and sincerely pay them attention.

We are to relate to the less fortunate in ways that are free from any patronizing or condescension. We are to relate to the well-to-do in ways that are free from social-climbing or pretense.

Again, it's all about love. It's all about heartfelt actions for the other's benefit. And it's really important to love when times are calm and when peace prevails.

Sometimes, though, things can get tough out there. When we live in a society as diverse as the one that exists in 2013 America there will be lots of different ideas floating around about what is right and what is wrong.

Here is some helpful direction from one citizen of a pretty diverse Roman Empire as to how we might navigate the waters of diversity today.

With Those Who Oppose, Specifically (vv. 14, 17-20)

Be [known for] who you are (v. 17b)

[17b] Respect what is right in the sight of all men.¹³

There are some who believe that Paul is saying that we are to, "*respect those things that all men see are right.*" I don't think so.

¹² See John 11 and the story of the death of His good friend, Lazarus; especially John 11:30

¹³ Cranfield, "Hardly does Paul mean that Christians are to concentrate on taking thought for those things which are agreed by all men to be good.

I think what the Bible is telling us here is that we are to, “*Respect what is right* (objectively, in the sight of God, according to Scripture), *so that everyone can see that you respect the right things.*”

Paul might go on to tell us, “*Christian, you know what is true and right and honorable. Stand by it. Stand for what is good and true and pure, even if that is unpopular.*”

Take a stand. But don’t take an unnecessarily contentious stand.

Do the things that make for peace (v. 18)

[18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.¹⁴

It won’t always be possible to be at peace with everyone.

But we are to see to it that the loss of peace with those in the world is NOT due to our hard-heartedness or hard-headedness or disregard for others’ feelings and convictions.

Here is a tough one. Seek peace, not at ANY price, but at any price we can afford to pay without compromising our faith and integrity.

And then, of course, there will come times when things will get downright dicey. Life in the world is not always benign. Enemies will, from time to time, surface.

When they do, here is how we deal with them.

Bless the opponent (vv. 14, 17a, 19-20)

[14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...[17a] Never pay back evil for evil to anyone...

¹⁴ Good nature should not degenerate into compliance so that for the sake of preserving peace we are complacent to men’s sins.” (Calvin)

[19] Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God,¹⁵ for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. [20] BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK;¹⁶

It is one of the high points in the life of faith when we are wronged or opposed and then respond by committing ourselves to God. Period. Paul invites us to trust God to right wrongs *in His own sweet time.*¹⁷

Take a cue from the life of David before he was crowned king. Over and over again, King Saul, the mad king, tried to kill David with a spear. Notice that David never threw the spear back at Saul. Romans 12:19 speaks of a refusal to throw spears at those who throw them at us.¹⁸

I will sadly have to admit that this is a lesson I am still in process of learning.

On those very rare occasions when I have been oh-so-very slightly wronged, my tendencies have been to either want to get even, or (more frequently) to withdraw from the person who has (as I have perceived it) wronged me.

But we are not called to back away or to get even. We are called to bless those who oppose.¹⁹

Honestly, all it requires to resist the temptation to get even is a bit of self-discipline. To pray from the heart for the one who has persecuted you, wronged you, or insulted you requires the grace of God.

¹⁵ The “wrath” here is not defined. In the original, Paul simply says, “*Leave room for wrath.*” Some have suggested that he is referring to the wrath of Satan, or of the state. However, in Paul’s writings, virtually every place “wrath” occurs, he is speaking of the wrath of God.

¹⁶ “Food and drink” stand for kindnesses of every sort.

¹⁷ Vengeance and punitive action are God’s prerogatives. And the essence of ungodliness is to presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands. This is not to say that there is no place for justice in the legal realm. When the laws of the land are broken, there must be enforcement and prosecution.

¹⁸ See 1 Samuel 19:8-11.

¹⁹ Here, Paul sounds just like Jesus who told us to ***[Luke 6:28] “pray for those who mistreat you.”***

When we are hurt or insulted, we have the example of Jesus before us. Listen to Him as He prayed for those who were putting Him to death, *[Luke 23:34] “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”*²⁰

So here’s what we are to do when we are opposed, either for our Christian faith or for our stand for what is right.

By God’s grace we are to pray fervently for our opponent. We are to show kindness to them, to the extent that is possible.²¹

When we do this, Paul says that we will be putting in motion a redemptive process that could well lead to our enemy becoming our friend and ally and a friend of God.

Aim for the opponent’s conviction/redemption

[20b] FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS²² UPON HIS HEAD.²³

So what in the world does Paul mean by THAT?

Actually, there are all kinds of ways to take this reference to the burning coals. But the obvious picture is of an opponent being convicted of his wrong by the kindness shown from the one he wronged.

Many fierce opponents to the faith have turned to Jesus because they have seen a Christian respond to their hatred with love and forgiveness.²⁴

So, what do we do when we exit the church and enter the world of work and play? We love.

- We enter in to our friends’ joys and sorrows and seek to bring refreshment and comfort.
- We treat all people with respect. No partiality.
- We stand firm for the truth as we know it from Scripture, but kindly.
- We love and seek to bless those who oppose us, because that’s exactly what God, in Jesus, has done for us.

Conclusion:

Final thought? You’re not surprised by this. The final thought is the same as the first thought.

The chief assignment of life is to love.

LOVE God by hating evil and clinging to good.
LOVE your Christian family fervently, from the heart, in deed and in truth.
LOVE those who are far from God with the same love Jesus showed when He died, even when you are opposed!

²⁰ And, in the same way, Stephen, the first Christian martyr, prayed for his killers (Acts 7:60) as they were pelting him with rocks.

²¹ Not that we intentionally are called to open ourselves up to further abuse; I do not believe the Bible calls us to that.

²² *“Burning coals”* is almost an exact quotation from Prov. 25:21-22.

²³ Some have misunderstood Paul to mean here that when we do good to our enemies, when we love those who have treated us shamefully, we are intensifying the judgment of God against them. Sorry, but that totally misses the loving, redemptive point of the whole passage!

²⁴ For some very stirring stories of this kind of movement, check out www.persecution.com.