

Activate | Week 2

Romans 12:9–21

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The Beatles insisted that “all you need is love,” the Captain and Tennille believed “love will keep us together,” Celine Dion recognized the “power of love,” Keith Urban promised to “love you like nobody loves you” and Rhianna discovered “love in a hopeless place.”

We talk about love a lot in our culture! We can all admit that love is something that everyone needs to thrive. Having it is crucial and losing it is devastating. But with all this talk of love, how well does our culture understand what it is? Is it a feeling? An action? A commitment? A desire? An obligation?

We were created by a God who is love. Jesus tells us that we must love God and love others. In the section of Romans that we are looking at this week, Paul will give us a vision for loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those who are outside the family of God. He shows us love in action.

Day 1

Paul wrote Romans to a divided church. Gentile believers were tempted to seek status and honor according to the requirements of Roman culture, and many Jewish Christians believed that pagan converts couldn't really be part of the people of God unless they followed the regulations described in the Torah. It's not hard to imagine some tense gatherings of believers in the city of Rome.

Paul is trying to cut through this tension with some simple, but potent reminders. As we saw in Romans 12:1–8, the followers of Jesus should consider themselves spiritual siblings. They are brothers and sisters, and together, they should offer themselves as embodied sacrifices to their merciful God. There is no place for arrogance or conceit in the body of Christ where every member is dependent on the others. The gifts of the Spirit that they have received should be used to build each other up for the good of the body and the sake of the gospel.

Paul continues with this same line of thinking in the verses we will look at this week. How does the body of Christ imitate and demonstrate God's love? As you read, count the number of commands or imperatives that you find.

Read the Word

Romans 12:9–21 (NIV)

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ 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. 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."*

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

- How many imperatives did you count?
- Many commentators believe that some of the instructions in Romans 12:9–21 teach how Christians should treat one another and others teach how to interact with those outside the body. Look back through the imperatives you found. How would you label each one? For the body or for outsiders?

Reflect

In Romans 12:9–21, Paul hits us hard with a list of imperatives that should guide how we treat others. None of them are particularly easy. But before we consider this list impossible, remember Paul's main points in Romans 5–8: in Christ we are no longer slaves to sin and death, but are now under the reign of the Spirit who dwells in us. We are Spirit people, led and empowered by the Spirit to live as God desires! And he desires us to live as Paul describes.

Paul believed that the life he outlines in Romans 12:9–21 is possible. Do you? As we go through the week, we will discuss the passage in more depth. As we do so, commit to praying through each imperative, asking the Spirit to help you see how they can be lived out in your relationships.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father God, you have shown me mercy and rescued me from the power of sin. Even though I struggle to live according to your will, my desire is to yield to your Spirit so that my life will be characterized by your love. Spirit, I invite you to convict me. Because I am secure in your love for me, I can confess where I am failing to love others. Help me change.

Day 2

1 Corinthians 13:4–8 is a beautiful exploration of what it means to love. It's so beautiful that it is often read at weddings:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

Yet the context for Paul's words are similar to what we find in Romans 12. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul discusses gifts given by the Spirit for the good of the body, then declares they are useless without love:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–4).

As we saw last week, in Romans 12:4–8, Paul lists several Spirit-empowered grace-gifts, and exhorts the Roman believers to use them. But as he does in 1 Corinthians, he reminds believers that there must be genuine love flowing between the members of Christ's body.

Read the Word

Romans 12:9–13

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Reflect

In Romans 12:9–13, most scholars see Paul instructing believers in how to treat one another. He begins with love. In Greek, the first part of verse 9 literally reads “*agape anypokritos*.” *Agape* means love and *anypokritos* means “without fraud,” “genuine,” or as the NIV has it, “sincere.” Because there is no verb in the Greek (translators add one, so it’s more readable), some scholars see this phrase as almost a heading with the imperatives that follow showing what sincere love looks like.

To show genuine love, a believer must cling to what is good, be devoted to others, and willing to show more honor to another than is received for oneself (vv 9b–10). Genuine love is eager and active, and it compels fervent (literally the Greek says “boiling”) service for the Lord (v 11). Love manifests itself in joyful hope, endurance in the midst of affliction, and persistent prayer (v 12). In love, Christians should share with those in need and open their homes and hearts to one another (v 13).

Consider how these imperatives would have landed on those in the Roman churches. Gentile believers in particular had been trained to believe that honor and status defined who you were. Pursuing these was a noble goal. In the Roman world you sought relationships with those who could benefit you and any gift or kind gesture came with strings attached.

Jewish believers would also have struggled with these commands. Those who insisted on Torah-observance defined themselves as God’s in-group. Many would have thought that their piety set them apart. Of course, Jesus had been routinely ridiculed by the Jewish religious leaders for sharing a table with sinners. And here is Paul, expecting his followers to do the same.

Paul is telling these believers that genuine, Christlike love is the highest virtue for a Christian. He defines it as honoring others more than oneself, offering oneself as a slave to God, sharing unreservedly with those in need, and welcoming to their tables those whom society considered unworthy.

Now think about how these imperatives might land on people in the 21st century American church. I see quite a few similarities between us and the Christians in Rome, how about you? We still struggle to act for the good of another, especially when it goes against our own self-interest. We get easily distracted and wane in our passion for Christ and his kingdom. We are tempted to hoard our time, resources, and energy rather than devoting ourselves in love to those around us.

Yet the Holy Spirit invites us to live differently and promises to empower our transformation.

- Read carefully though Paul’s instructions one more time. Why are they challenging in our present culture?
- Which ones are most challenging to you as you think about your relationships with other believers?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Jesus, I want to love like you love. I want to be boiling with the desire to serve you and help people find and follow you. I want to be less motivated by my own selfish desires and more motivated by your love for others. I want to give help to those in need and share the grace you've given me with others. I yield to your Spirit. Show me the way.

Day 3

I've heard it jokingly said that the best and worst thing about churches is that they're full of people. Some of the most transformational relationships we can have will be with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Yet, we can also experience deep pain when we fail to love one another the way Paul calls us to in Romans 12.

In the verses we will look at today, Paul will continue to instruct us in what genuine love looks like.

Read the Word

Romans 12:14–16 (NIV)

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

- Which instructions in this list do you think are aimed at how Christians should treat their fellow Christians? Are there some aimed at how they should treat those outside the body? What has led you to this conclusion?

Reflect

Paul's call to the churches in Rome involves a radical transformation in the way believers relate to each other, obliterating long-held, deeply ingrained views of social class and ethnicity and replacing them with the image of a unified body of Christ characterized by Christ's sacrificial love.

Some scholars see verse 14 as a shift. Paul's instructions seem to show how to relate to persecution coming from outside the church. To the larger Roman culture, the followers of Jesus were seen as peculiar, strange, and even threatening. The persecution of Christians would get more extreme as Nero's reign continued, but even at the time of Paul's letter to Rome, Christ's followers experienced hostility from nonbelievers.

What Paul is calling for in these verses is a distinctly Christian way of treating others because it is formed from the teachings of the both the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. In Judaism, “to bless” means to call on Yahweh to bestow his favor on the other, while to curse meant seeking divine retribution. Jesus calls his followers to “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28). According to Paul, our willingness to pursue the good of others, even at our own expense should outshine our need for revenge when we are mistreated.

In the rest of this passage, Paul seems to move back discussing the behavior of brothers and sisters toward each other. Again, these instructions demonstrate what it means to have sincere, Christlike love. “Love that is genuine will not respond to a fellow believer’s joy with envy or bitterness, but will enter wholeheartedly into that same joy. Similarly, love that is genuine will bring us to identify so intimately with our brothers and sisters in Christ that their sorrows will become ours.”¹

Harmony is a beautiful word and should characterize the overall environment inside the body of Christ. Like an orchestra or choir, the church should be made up of diverse individuals playing different parts who come together in unity to honor God and living according to his will. Pride and conceit will inevitably disrupt this harmony with sour notes, while recognizing the essential contribution of every member of Christ’s body, regardless of their status in the world, makes unity possible. Yet unless we yield to the Spirit, harmony will always remain elusive.

- It’s not easy to find harmony in the body of Christ. What are some practical ways we can pursue it?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, you sent your son to bring blessing and peace. Jesus, you laid down your life for those who persecuted you. Spirit, you pour out the love of God into our hearts so that we can show your love to others. As I read these verses, I am reminded of how often I fail to do what’s being described. Forgive me and transform me. Show me how to think and act according to Paul’s teaching.

Day 4

In the movie *Taken*, actor Liam Neeson delivers a now-famous speech to the people who kidnapped his daughter:

¹ Douglas J. Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 782.

"I don't know who you are. I don't know what you want. If you are looking for ransom, I can tell you I don't have money. But what I do have are a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a very long career. Skills that make me a nightmare for people like you. If you let my daughter go now, that'll be the end of it. I will not look for you, I will not pursue you. But if you don't, I will look for you, I will find you, and I will kill you."

Audiences cheer when the hero in a story gives this kind of warning because they love to see the bad guys get what's coming to them. They want to see justice done, even if that justice comes in the form of revenge. We can relate to the emotion generated by a powerful story, but in real life, God calls us to think and act differently toward those who seek to do us harm.

Read the Word

Romans 12:17–21 (NIV)

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ 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. 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."
²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

- What reason does Paul give for not taking revenge?

Reflect

We can only do what Paul instructs in verses 17–19a if we truly believe 19b, that God will deliver a just sentence and repay the evil that is done in this world. We have to trust in what Paul patiently explains in Romans 1–3. God is both gracious and just. Those who don't trust in Christ's payment for their sinful acts will one day be judged by God. Those who do are redeemed from their enslavement to sin and given the transforming Spirit. Christ takes their sin on himself.

Yet our natural tendency is to want to get back at those who hurt us. We want to make them pay. We want them to feel our hurt. But that is not the way of Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us a better way. He says:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.... 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, 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” (Matthew 5:38–39, 43–45).

Jesus, Messiah, Son of God and rightful King suffered the greatest injustice the world has ever known. Though he was without sin, he was executed as a criminal so that we could live. In Christ’s sacrificial act, God has shown us his immense love and his uncompromising commitment to justice. He has shown us his faithful desire to bring all people into a right relationship with him while ensuring that all things are made right in the end. We can trust him enough to release those who hurt us from our debt.

It’s worth pointing out that these principles do not prohibit us from seeking earthly justice when serious wrongs have been committed. Recall that the heading of this section is “Love must be sincere.” It is not loving to allow someone to continue in sin without calling them to account. It is also not loving to allow a perpetrator to go on and hurt other people. Christians must stand for justice. It is to the benefit of society that wrongs be addressed and criminals be held accountable. Perhaps that is why Paul’s next topic coming up in Romans 13 is the believer’s relationship to governmental authorities.

Paul’s point in these verses is that we don’t seek personal revenge, but release the person to God. There is no consensus among scholars as to what the image taken from Proverbs 25 of heaping burning coals on someone’s head meant to a Jew like Paul. But we can understand the acts of mercy that he describes in verse 20. We are to give aid to our enemies and thus imitate our gracious God whose kindness leads to repentance. We can have grace toward others because we are completely reliant on his grace.

If we ask the Spirit to see those who do wrong as he sees them — as people created in his image, as people loved by him, and as people enslaved to sin and in desperate need of liberation — he can give us supernatural mercy for even the worst perpetrator.

- What challenges you about Paul’s instructions in these verses? Why are they so hard to live out?
- To show the genuine love that Paul is describing in these verses, we will need the Spirit. We cannot do it on our own. How can we yield ourselves more and more to him in our daily life?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I know that you are a righteous God and that you will see that your justice is served. Help me trust you more and more. Give me discernment in when and how to seek justice through earthly authorities. Help me see those who do wrong as you see them. Give me a supernatural ability to love.

Day 5

Happy Friday! I was challenged by our passage from Romans this week. How about you? Take some time today to reflect on the Word and pray for wisdom as you seek to apply it to your life.

Reflect on what you've learned

Paul has challenged us this week. The verses are short, but the implications are enormous! Open your Bible (or your Bible app) and read through Romans 12:9–21 one more time. Read through each verse carefully. Consider how each command is reflected in Jesus' own life.

Make connections

As followers of Jesus, too often we fail to live out Paul's instructions in Romans 12:9–21. I've seen it first hand, and so have you.

I've witnessed Christian neighbors take each other to court over a very minor property dispute. I've seen two Christian dads threaten to beat each other senseless on a ball field. I've watched precious daughters of God tear each other to shreds with gossip and slander.

And of course, I'm not without blame. I've been guilty of unforgiveness, envy, selfishness, and resentment toward other believers. I've said and done things that were unkind and failed to love as Jesus loves.

The sad thing is that often in the moment our sinful thoughts and actions feel justified. It's frightening how good we are at rationalizing our unloving behavior. But the aftermath of this kind of sin is never pretty. We hurt one another, divide the body, and bring dishonor to the name of Christ.

We're better than this, aren't we? Not because of our innate goodness, but because we're dead to that kind of sin and destruction and alive to a new life in the Spirit. Isn't that the overarching message of Romans? We are Spirit-people who owe everything to Jesus. Let's lay down our pride, set aside our differences, and show genuine love to one another.

Spirit, teach us how to love.

Pray and consider your next step

Based on what you've read and reflected on this week, spend some time with your Father in prayer.

- Pray that Christ Fellowship would come together as one body united by genuine love. Pray that we would show love to one another and to the outside world. Imagine the impact we would have for Christ's kingdom if we loved like Jesus loves.
- As you read through Romans 12:9–21 again, where are you feeling the most conviction? What circumstances or relationships come to mind? What is your next step? Do you need a change in thinking or attitude? Do you need to seek forgiveness or offer it? Is there a practical step you can take based on one of these verses?

Linger a while longer with God and experience his love and seek his wisdom.