

# **ROMANS**

Part 24: “How We Are Called to Love”

Romans 12:9–13

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality” (Rom 12:9–13).*

## **Introduction**

Exactly two decades ago this year, I visited the city of Rome. I explored the Coliseum, walked the ancient passages of the Roman Forum, and hiked up the Palatine Hill, where the Emperors built their palaces to overlook their city([Show picture of the Roman Forum](#)).

It's an extraordinary and awe-inspiring sight even today. Though it is now a graveyard of ruins and a mere shadow of Rome's former glory, you can't help but imagine how impressive it would have been to actually see the city of Rome in a time like the first century.

Imagine how remarkable it would have been to see the Coliseum the day it opened or how overwhelming it would have been to witness an ancient Caesar march through the streets of the forum after returning from a victorious battle with his legions. Imagine how impressive it would have been to behold this ancient bustling city with all of its art, ideas, wealth, and power.

Yet, in this exact moment—at the zenith of Rome’s power—another far more impactful force was fomenting within the homes and neighborhoods of Roman citizens. In a mere two or three decades after being crucified on a Roman cross in faraway Jerusalem, there are now a handful of Romans—both Jew and Gentile—who are now gathering together to worship Jesus as Lord here in the capital city. Together, these early Christians meet to pray and study the Scriptures. Together, they gather to share spiritual fellowship and to love one another in the midst of pain and trial. And together, while the eyes of the world are upon the impressive emblems of the kingdom of man that define the city of Rome, it will be their seemingly unimpressive movement that far outlives this once mighty empire.

Now these halls of power in Roman Forum have fallen into ruins that tourists visit. Yet the movement represented by the many unknown and unnamed Christians of the earliest centuries has shaped and reshaped the contours of human history, in ways that Rome—for all its military might—could have never imagined.

Even if you are not a Christian, this fact of history should intrigue and fascinate you. After all, how was it possible for a ragtag group of less than two hundred Jesus followers in Jerusalem to launch an international, history-shaping movement? How did this movement reach across and shatter barriers between people of different cultures, languages, and social classes? How did Christianity become a movement composed of millions of people—despite violent state-sponsored persecution—before it was ever even declared legal by the first Christian Emperor in A.D. 311?

Today, as we delve deeper into Romans chapter 12, I believe we will see part of the answer to those questions.

I will argue that the history-shaping power of Christianity did not originate in the apostles jockeying for short-term political power in Rome. The power of the gospel did not come through military conquest. Nor did the profound relevance of the Christian message resonate with millions because the early church decided to reinvent itself every other decade in order to keep up with the time or accommodate the changing preferences of the day.

Instead, the early church grew exponentially because the power of the gospel was declared by the words, and it was displayed in the lives of everyday Christians. Christians offered to a watching world a new way of life—a new way of being human—that made the reality of Jesus unignorable.

Throughout Paul's letter to the Romans, we have explored the power and glory of the gospel. We have witnessed the unveiling of the righteousness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We have celebrated the great truths of faith, justification, and sanctification. We have explored the mysteries of God's sovereign power and what it means to be a part of the people of God.

But as Paul begins a new movement in Romans 12, he makes a profoundly practical turn. Here we do not witness the long, sprawling sentences and sophisticated arguments of previous chapters. Instead, today's passage reads more like a section from the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

Paul has told us that our response to the gospel of grace is to reject conforming to the world's mold and instead live lives of sacrificial worship unto God. Our text today is a vision of what a Christian disciple's rhythms and marks actually look like in normal, everyday life.

These commands of exhortations seem profoundly ordinary and unimpressive, yet when embraced and lived, they possess the capacity to demonstrate the extraordinary and supernatural power of the gospel.

Said more directly, these commands call us into a way of life that is only possible in Christ. And when the life of Christ lives powerfully and undeniably before the watching world, it unleashes a spiritual power that changes lives and shapes history.

Now, I originally intended to preach through the end of this rather short chapter. But frankly, the material in this last part of chapter 12 was too dense and too important. And I really want to give this chapter extra attention because we live in a cultural moment in which we need more than ever to embrace and embody these truths.

So I want to encourage you to see this week and next week as a two-part sermon that explores how the kingdom of God is able to overcome the empires of men. Romans 12 shows us how this happens in two ways: in how we are called to love and in how we overcome the power of evil.

Today, we will only look at that first idea: **“How We are Called to Love.”**

### **Exposition**

Paul begins by declaring, **“Let love be genuine” (Rom 12:9a).**

Within the teaching of Scripture, love is more than emotion. Love is more than approving, accepting, or generally appreciating someone. To love is to will and actively seek the highest good of another.

We are called to will and seek the highest good of one another and our neighbors. And this love must be more than an act. It must be “genuine” (ἀνυπόκριτος). Literally, the Apostle is commanding Christians, “your love must be without hypocrisy or pretense.”

Christ has willed and actively sought our highest good. Christ has loved in our brokenness and shame, and he loved us so much that he refused to leave us in bondage to sin and death. He loved us all when he gave his life for us while we were still his enemies. We have been adopted into his family together. Now, as Christ has loved us, we are also called to love another (Eph 5:2; 1 John 4:11). As he has forgiven us, he has called us to forgive one another (Eph 4:32).

Thus, the love that Scripture beckons us to is not superficial flattery or mere toleration. We are called to love one another with sincerity. When we come into fellowship with one another, we are to leave our masks of pretense and performance behind us. We are to let our love be genuine.

Likewise, we are to **“Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (Rom 12:9b).** Here, we are reminded that the whole of the Christian life is one of communal repentance.

Remember, within Christianity, repentance is not self-hatred or self-condemnation. It is a regular practice of a new mindset and a new way of thinking. At its core, repentance is a two-fold motion in which we actively turn away from evil—we turn away from the

powers of sin and death—and we turn toward God. Part of this turning toward God means we pursue (and even cling to) what is good and true and beautiful and eternal.

In other words, the Christian life is more than just a drudging avoidance of temptation. To follow Jesus means to actively aim the loves of our heart toward that which will give us true joy. As Paul says in another letter, *“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you”* (Phil 4:8–9).

In Romans 12, he echoes this same idea. We are to “hold fast” or literally “attach ourselves” to what is good. And the Greek word for “hold fast” (κολλώμενοι) is a plural command. To “hold fast to what is good” is something we can only do together. We love one another well when we regularly meet together to stir one another up to good works and encouragement (Heb 10:24–25).

Paul goes on to say the mutual love we have for others within the church is likened to the deep and abiding bonds of family. He says, *“Love one another with brotherly affection”* (Rom 12:10a). We are to view and be committed to one another as we would our own siblings.

It’s true family relationships can be difficult and hard at times. But it takes more than usual to truly break the bond share by family. A family relationship can withstand differences that few other relationships can endure. We can fervently and passionately disagree about many things and yet still gather around the same table for Thanksgiving and Christmas meals. After all, families are bound by the shared blood of our ancestors. But the bond of Christians is deeper still because we are bound by the blood of the one who died for us.

As move into the next verses, I can’t read this next sentence without thinking of a key moment early in the history of Redeemer Christian Church. We had just appointed a new set of elders, and we were still beginning the process of gelling together as a team. We were reading books on church governance, healthy leadership teams, and all that the Bible had to say about a godly eldership.

I asked our group what we wanted to define as some of the critical values that we wanted to be a part of the culture, not just of our church but of our elders. And I will never forget when Milton Jones (without hesitation) spoke up and said, we should seek to have a culture like Romans 12:10. We should, *“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor”* (Rom 12:10).

You see, a lot of us had come from backgrounds of church hurt and trauma. We had seen what it looked like and felt like when a church's leadership had been poisoned by petty infighting over preferences and pet issues. We had seen what could happen to churches when leaders sought to compete with one another over power and significance.

We witnessed how a culture of division within leadership often inevitably flows down into a culture of division within the church.

So that day, we resolved to love one another with brotherly affection and outdo one another in showing honor. And in our last decade, Redeemer's eldership has been uniquely graced with mutual love, unity, and trust that has allowed us to prayerfully navigate the many storms of our cultural moment.

Moving forward in the text, the Apostle commands Christians, *“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord”* (Rom 12:11). The idea here is that Christian love is an active force. We are to love one another, not just when it is convenient or easy. We are to be zealous, fervent, and proactive in our desire to serve one another and those the Lord places before us, as a way of serving the Lord himself.

I am reminded of the great truth of Jesus's parable about the Good Samaritan (*Show “The Good Samaritan (After Delacroix)” by Vincent Van Gogh*). In this story, a traveler along the road to Jericho fell victim to roadside robbers and was left for dead. Seeing his condition, a priest and Levite who were unable to be interrupted, who were too busy, who were unable to love when love was costly, uncomfortable, and inconvenient. But a Samaritan—a cultural enemy and outsider to the Jewish people—stops to rescue, serve, and provide for the man in need. Christ is the true and better Samaritan, who though rejected by men, rescues us in our vulnerability and need. And, likewise, in receiving his grace and love, we are to be imitators of that same love.

Verse 12 shows us genuine love also rejoices in hope, is patient in tribulation. We love one another well when we remember together our eternal hope is greater and more glorious than our present trials and tribulations. I think of the way the church was faithfully endured and even grew in strength in times of plague and persecution in the ancient world. So too, even in our own age of chaos, we have an opportunity to show a watching world that our hope is bigger than the constant fear and rage that fuel our culture war.

Genuine love calls us to pray regularly, “constantly” (προσκαρτεροῦντες), and devotedly (Rom 12:12). We are to pray with and for one another because we believe our God is with us and for us and all of our lives are lived before him. Prayer is a way to remain mindful that we are a part of something cosmically larger than our individual lives. Prayer helps us see our lives and our situations in light of a God who is bending all things to his glory and our good.

Our passage ends in verse 13 with a call to love through radical generosity and radical hospitality: *“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality”* (Rom 12:13).

This generosity and hospitality are definitely displays of genuine love that begin within the local church. I think of the book of Acts, when the Luke says of the early church that there was not a needy person found among them because of the great culture of mutual sharing and generosity (Acts 4:34). I think of the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic

when our church was able to support several of our member who suddenly lost the ability to make an income.

But while the call for generosity and hospitality begins within the church family, that same call is meant to extend to our neighbors and the world around us. Jesus consistently displayed the love of God by healing and feeding, and working miracles on behalf of people who completely misunderstood him.

So too, Christians have a long history of displaying the love of God to those outside our own faith group in ways that have massively changed the fabric of society at large. It was Christians who founded the first hospitals, began the first orphanages, and started the first universities. Now, it is also true that Christians—as flawed people—have been responsible for great scandals and atrocities. But when, by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, we get it right, it gives the watching world a preview glimpse of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, it is true that we are finite, and we cannot meet all needs that are around us. Only our infinitely powerful God is able to right all wrongs and bring beauty from all brokenness. But it has been a conviction of the Christian church since our very founding that we have a role to play in God's kingdom by loving the people around us in both word and deed. Our role is discern how God has asked us to steward our moment and our opportunities.

Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Yet, his light shines uniquely through his people and the circumstances his providence has placed them within.

So, our little congregation is yet to start a hospital. But we have built several homes for the homeless in Juarez. We have drilled multiple water wells for the thirsty in the horn of Africa. We have planted, or helped plant, several churches nationally and internationally. In Refugee Language Project, we have helped birth a ministry to refugees that is doing profound work on a daily basis.

And if one little church can do that, imagine what two billion Christians have the opportunity to do for our world that is fractured with sin and death! Imagine what is possible if we can remember the supernatural power latent within our call to love!

## **Conclusion**

But here is a key truth. We are called to love one another and our neighbors. But the source of our love does not arise from mere human willpower or self-determination. Christian love is far deeper, far more mysterious, and far more supernatural than humanitarian sentiment. We love because Christ has first loved us (1 John 4:11).

Jesus displays the radical love of God in that he calls the isolated into a family of belonging. He feeds those who hunger and thirst—not just for food and drink—but for meaning and purpose. He welcomes the stranger into his Father's house. His love is so great that he calls us out of darkness and into his marvelous light!

God's love is central to the gospel, and our love is central to Christian obedience. For the Christian, love is integral, not optional. Love is necessary, not a luxury.

One of the greatest needs within the human soul is to be truly known and truly loved. Thus love is a gift that the church is meant to constantly offer to one another and give to those we are into our family of faith. For our love, as finite and failing as it is at times, is a central way of pointing unto the greater love that God has revealed in Christ.

So we can let our love be genuine. We can lay aside our masks.

We no longer need to perform to be loved because Christ has accomplished our redemption. We no longer need to pretend we are perfect because the cross has exposed our brokenness. We no longer need to make ourselves worthy of being loved because God's love in Christ has made us worthy. True and genuine love for one another flows from resting in these liberating truths that have been announced to us in the gospel.

The love of God revealed to us in the gospel is stronger than hate, stronger than sin, and stronger even than the power of death. It is a love made possible only by the resurrection of the Son of God. It is a love that is the foundation of our hope. And it is a love that changes the world.

Now, notice this paragraph of Romans 12:9–13 addresses primarily how we love one another within the community of faith and how we love our neighbors that God, in his providence, has placed before us. This love is a power that can change lives and communities. But it is not the whole picture.

This next paragraph, Romans 12:14 –21, will address how we respond when life hurts, especially when our pain and suffering comes from those who wish us ill or harm. That leads us to the following sermon entitled, *"How We Overcome the Power of Evil."* But that will have to wait until next week.

Until then, Redeemer Christian Church, may our love be genuine. We devote ourselves to loving one another as members of the same spiritual family. May we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. May we remember the words of Christ who told us that the world will know we are his disciples when we love one another. He has taught us that when we love the least of these, we show love to Christ himself.

*AMEN.*

## Gospel Community Discussion Questions

- 1.) Read Romans 12:9–13 out loud.
- 2.) In a culture that values performance and often rewards pretense, why is it so crucial for Christians to seek to display a love that is “genuine” and without hypocrisy? What might be the key differences between genuine love and ingenuine love?
- 3.) As you read through the commands of Romans 12:9–13, which one of these commands is most important to you? Which one of these commands is most challenging for you?
- 4.) What are some practical ways you can help your Gospel Community and/or family have a culture of love that lines up with this passage?