

**Romans 12:9-21.**

***<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***

**Love**

**Our God reminds us of his love.**

**He shows us examples of what love will look like in our lives.**

**He reminds us that love overcomes.**

Two men were in a café talking and their conversation turned to current events. At some point one of the men leaned in toward the table and with a voice filled with tones of concern and consternation he said to his friend, *"When did it become standard practice to treat anyone who has a different opinion than you as an enemy?"* As we observe what is going on in our world today we can probably relate with the point that this man was trying to make. It doesn't take us long to think of examples of animosity and division, harsh rhetoric and bitter attacks which demonstrate how a divisive and hateful attitude has erupted onto the front page of our culture today.

Into the bitter atmosphere of a world full of hatred and division the LORD Jesus speaks his especially sweet directive that seems as relevant today as ever. ***<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be sons 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.*** Our Lord tells us to love our neighbor, yes even to show love, to demonstrate Christ-like love to those who may attack and harm us with hurtful words and hateful actions.

In doctrine, in teaching and theory, we as Christians know this to be good and right. Of course, Jesus calls us to love all people. Of course, Jesus tells us to be kind and to pray for those who persecute us. He was so patient and kind and loving to all people, even the people who abused and rejected him. He would even call out to his Father to forgive those who crucified him!

As those who believe in God, we know from his Holy Word that our Father in heaven takes care of all people and sends blessings such as rain and good weather, food and needed supplies. The Father in his goodness does this for both the righteous and the unrighteous. God is good to all, to both the evil and the good; and so we too as his children ought to be good to everybody. In doctrine, in teaching and theory, we know this to be good and right and true. However, we must admit this is difficult to do. One writer put it this way: *“Our flesh finds Jesus’ commands revolting. The human animal snarls when attacked and bites back when bitten.”*<sup>1</sup>

The growing practice around us is to vilify those who hold different views. The human animal inside of us tells us to get revenge to those who hurt or harm us, or even, speak against us. And of course, the devil himself only eggs us on toward hate. This the awful tone that has been set, this worldly pattern that is played out over and over on the front pages of our culture, the is the type of bitter atmosphere that we breathe in daily. It is unfortunate therefore, but hardly

shocking that such bitterness towards others shows up in our daily life. Not only is this kind of hatred and division seen splashed on the pages of the daily news but it is seen splattered in the moments of our daily lives. We are easily angered, we draw unneeded lines in the sand as we make neighbors, and friends, and even family members out to be enemies for no real reason except that they might hold a different opinion on this issue or that issue. We find reasons, we make up excuses to label people as the enemy and then we act on thoughts and feelings of evil. We think and write and speak words of hatred and harm.

It is into this atmosphere of sinfulness and hatred that God speaks to us in words of patience and love. In his mercy and grace, in his patience with this sinful world, in his love towards sinners like us, the Spirit of God breathes out his word so that we may hear such a simple and yet so terribly needed reminder and be refreshed. He tells us simply to: Love. Our God reminds us of his love. He shows us examples of what love will look like in our lives. And then he reminds us that love overcomes.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing Christians who must have found themselves very much unloved. In the midst of world of hatred and division and questionable moral standards these early Christians must have been targeted by verbal opposition and hurtful and hateful actions. In the midst of this difficult situation Paul encourages them to be renewed and transformed in their thinking and he calls them to stand out in in contrast to the world around him. Certainly, they were to stand up for what they believed in, to confess their Savior, and to be steadfast in their commitment to the holy will of God, but an important part of living out their faith included resisting the urge to tear down and attack others who opposed, even persecuted them. Instead they were to show love. They were to show love to their fellow believers and to even pray and show love to others who hated them and attacked them for their faith.

In the first part of the chapter Paul offers them this powerful encouragement. ***In view of God’s mercy offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.***

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<sup>1</sup> Planning Christian Worship: Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, page 47

***Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*** They were to love God and to show love to their neighbor. God wanted them to love both believer and unbeliever alike, because God first loved us and sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. They were to see all things and all people through eyes of compassion and in view of God's mercy. Instead of conforming to the pattern of the world, they were to conform to the pattern Christ set for them. A few verses later Paul encourages them to love as he describes what God's good and perfect will looks like. He says. ***9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good... 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves... 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.... 16 Live in harmony with one another... 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.***

We need a transforming of our minds so that we do not conform to the pattern of the world. Do not align yourself with a culture, with a mentality, that attacks and mistreats and slanders those that are opposed to you. Abhor and recoil from that which is evil and wicked, immoral, and nasty and mean. Have no part in the hatred and volatile and toxic culture that is playing itself out in so many different ways in our world today. You have been shown and given the love of God; and this love which is in you is sincere and it stays away from that which is evil and it clings to that which is good. With the Spirit's help, may we daily reach out for and cling to that which is good.

Cling to the good and holy Scriptures that have been graciously given and revealed to you. Cling to the gospel and embrace the many accounts of Jesus showing love. Embrace Jesus' outlook of compassion and grace. In this volatile world that is so full of hatred what better thing can we do that to look to Jesus and his love. Look to Jesus who forgives us our hatred, who cleanses and redeems us. Look to Jesus and learn from him, from his words, and from his example. Look to Jesus who loved everyone, who spent time with sinners, who healed those who were hurting, who turned the other cheek to those who hated him, who was patient with those who cause him so much trouble and pain. Look to Jesus who was so patient with a thief who hurled insults at him that he won his brother over and was able to give that thief the paradise of heaven. Look to Jesus who lived and died for you, who is patient with you in your anger, who chases away your hateful words and actions, cleanses your sinful heart, and transforms and renews your mind and your life.

It seems that lately droves of people have taken to the internet, to the streets, and to other public and private forums to voice their displeasure on a number of different issues, and often this comes with the horribly negative response of making enemies out of those who are on the opposing side. So many have been moved to speak and to action because of hatred and anger. May it be love and compassion that spurs us as Christians on to action.

In view of God's mercy, in view of God's love for you, in view of God's love for all people, may we be spurred on to action to proclaim and demonstrate Christ-like love. And it begins with the body of believers. There might be someone in the pew in front of you that thinks the affairs of the town, or the local school or the nation should be handled differently than you do.

Don't let that interfere with your bond as believers. Remember the pattern and the encouragement that Paul gives. Be devoted to each other in brotherly love. Respect each other as a fellow child of God. Honor one another above yourselves. And be eager to explore ways to show love to each other in so many other ways. Speak to each other in the narthex and out in the community. Rejoice and mourn with each other. Encourage and support each other in good times and bad. Practice hospitality. Welcome each other into your homes. Eat and break bread with each other, treat each other as equals no matter your social or economic status. Live in harmony with your fellow believers and do the same with friends and neighbors and family members who might hold different views on religion. To be certain, this does not mean we are going to change our views or downplay what we believe about God and his will for our life. But what good is going to do them, what good is going to do us, if we view others as the enemy and treat others as the enemy. It will just result in this tireless cycle of hatred. The most powerful weapon against hatred is not more hatred but rather it is love.

When we follow this pattern of love something rather remarkable may happen. When we interact with those around us, when we have face to face conversations with those who have different opinions on this and on that suddenly you realize that this is not an enemy, this is a person. Remember the surprising instruction that the Lord gives us through the apostle Paul. <sup>20</sup> ***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."*** <sup>21</sup> ***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*** Not hate, but love, love overcomes.

The recent epidemic-like breakout of hate has spread from one person to another because of constant exposure to the infectious cloud of division being coughed out upon the masses. Like a bad cold it infects us as Christians and may even sap us of our spiritual energy, or our willingness and ability to do good and to help others. Thankfully, the love of Jesus is the powerful antidote and cure. His love, which led him to overcome sin and temptation, hatred and scorn, suffering and pain, forgives and saves us. And this love of Jesus given to us through faith also serves to daily renew and transform us. As we study and learn his word his love fills and fuels us more and more so that we might break out of, and shake off, and avoid the pattern of hatred that seems so prevalent in the world today. His love fills us so that we may not be overcome by evil, but instead we may overcome evil with the kind of good that spreads his truth and love to those around us. His love helps us to see others not so much as the enemy but as our fellow human beings who are also loved by God. Dear fellow believers love everybody and pray for those who persecute and harm and hurt you.

In view of God's mercy<sup>2</sup>, knowing and being filled with the amazing love of Christ, offer your bodies, offer your lives to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be daily transformed by God's grace and let the love of Jesus renew your mind and change the way that you see and treat other people. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:1-2