

Romans 12:9-21

A quick look in the margin of your Bible denotes that the section we're looking at today is all about 'love'. This is down to earth practical Christianity—it's the old time religion with its sleeves rolled up! The cameo here is of committed individuals wearing a pair of dungarees. It's all about living out our faith in the community where God has strategically placed each one of us. This is supernatural living in the third millennium.

There are loads of short snappy sayings in these verses—they are easy to remember, not always so easy to put into practice. In a sense, that's where the real challenge is. When your life and mine is fully dedicated to the Lord, then these truths are part and parcel of our daily life. When we live in the good of verses 1 and 2 and enjoy the benefits of a transformed mind, all these pithy one liners become second nature—they're the kind of thing we want to do as we bless other people.

When we lift the lid off this potpourri of spiritual advice, the first exhortation in verse 9 reads: 'love must be sincere'. That makes a lot of very good sense especially in a world where true love is a rare commodity.

There is so much that is done in the name of love in today's world that is insincere and hypocritical—Paul has no time for such hollow expressions of feigned love. He's looking for the real McCoy. It's an impassioned appeal from Paul for us to be authentic. He's pleading for reality and authenticity. Paul is encouraging us to be honest and transparent in our dealings with other people—when we love like that, the hallmark is one of humility, grace, and tact.

The love that we share with others is an outward expression of what lies deep inside. The love that I show to my fellow man is born from my relationship with a loving God—we love others because God has first loved us. And the love that I dispense to others, whoever they are, whatever their problem, is a love that finds an echo at Calvary. It is a selfless love, a sacrificial love, it doesn't sit down and ask 'how

much is this going to cost me', it just loves, and keeps on loving! We may not like what they do, but we love them for the sake of Jesus, and we love them into the kingdom of God.

The other side of the coin is reflected in Paul's insightful turn of phrase: 'hate what is evil, cling to what is good'. We live in a world where PC is the buzz word—well in this duo of phrases Paul is advocating a healthy brand of discrimination. This has nothing to do with playing favourites, or bigotry, or prejudice, but it does involve detesting 'what is evil' and embracing 'what is good'. What Paul is talking about here may not be politically correct in some circles, but it's biblically correct, and that's all that matters!

In other words, genuine love rejects the many torrid and nasty faces of evil and stands against them at every turn. Real love bonds itself to all that is good and support the virtuous in every possible way.

It needs to be emphasised that love is not soft on evil—there is nothing in the text to even suppose that. We're not talking here about a sentimental slushy mindset in a do-good culture! The bottom line is that evil in every shape and form is to be hated! It is to be firmly and implacably opposed. When it comes to evil, there is no room for toleration! We're against it! You see, sincere love demands God honouring moral resolve regarding good and evil.

In today's postmodern world where so many issues are blurred, where a vast array of traditional values are hijacked, where many well-meaning folks are talking a load of mumbo-jumbo, we have our work cut out for us. However, if we take on board Paul's injunction in verse 9, we'll shine like bright neon lights in the prevailing inky black darkness.

Think about that for a moment and, after the music break, we'll launch into verse 10 where Paul tells us it's high time to get our act together in the church of Christ.

MUSIC BREAK

'Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.' That's a clarion call to commitment in the local church—the words *be devoted* are the translation of a Greek word which combines the words for

friendship love and family love. When we put them both in the one sentence, that's a potent force in any gathering of the Lord's people. There is love among us!

That love is born out of our initial commitment to Jesus Christ and it finds fulfilment when we show it to one another. It's a lot more than friendship because friends come and go—it has the idea of us engaging in a loving long term relationship. We are family, after all! When we do that the natural outcome is reflected in Paul's next one liner: 'honour one another above yourselves'. That means we appreciate other people for who and what they are; we don't look down on others, we don't set ourselves up on a pedestal. It means there is nothing toffee-nosed about us, nothing snooty, we don't walk around with our nose in the air pretending to be something that God knows we're not!

It means we have a warm genuine respect for other people and we're happy and glad to see God doing beautiful things in their life. It means we don't cringe when we see them getting on in life, nor do we harbour jealous grudges against them either. In a word, we are in it together, and the ground is level at the foot of the cross!

Verse 11 is one of my all-time favourites in Paul's epistle to the Romans, that's where he tells us to give it all we've got: 'Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.' It's all about maintaining our spiritual glow! Keeping our foot on the gas pedal! That principle is reflected in the life of Henry Martyn, the tireless missionary to India, whose heart's desire was to 'burn out for God'.

It seems to me that Paul talks here about enthusiasm and energy in our service for Jesus, he wants us to fire on all four cylinders for God. As my old father used to say, 'the only place where sleepers are an asset is on a railway line'—Paul wants us to be active and diligent in our service. He doesn't want us to cool off, he doesn't want us to lose our edge. He wants us to stay on the boil for Jesus—the only way to keep the fires burning 24/7 is for us to enjoy a

meaningful heart relationship with the Lord and for us to savour those precious moments of intimacy with the Almighty.

That little phrase at the end of the verse—‘serving the Lord’—is what it’s all about. It has to do with perspective and priority. It’s you and me investing our all in serving Jesus, it’s when we give him total dedication, it’s one hundred percent commitment to the cause. At the end of the day, as we serve each other, we are serving the Lord—that puts service on a new level, does it not! It doesn’t matter how menial or mundane the task, when it is done enthusiastically for Jesus, it’s a job well done!

Paul aspiration is for you and me to be passionate in our service for Jesus, he longs for us to be passionate in our interpersonal relationships in the church, he wants us to be passionate for God. He’s talking about people on fire for God! People with an insatiable appetite for God.

We’ll pause for a short music break and, when we come back, I want us to unpack the teaching in verse 12 where we have three more timeless sayings.

MUSIC BREAK

The trilogy outlined in verse 12 is superb. Paul challenges us to: ‘Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.’ In one sentence, that’s quite a theological mouthful! Having said that, if we get it right here, we’re on to a winner!

In one sense it’s all down to our personal attitude to trials and troubles, it’s all about coping with what life throws at us, it’s getting a handle on the ups and downs of life! It’s living life on the ragged edge without getting harassed and hassled—the key words say all that needs to be said: ‘joyful, patient, faithful’.

What does it mean to be ‘joyful in hope’? Let’s fact is, without hope, we could never survive. Hope is what keeps us going, it is the oxygen in our soul. The word ‘hope’ takes us out of the present and the past and projects us into the future—the bright future God has planned for us.

We know from Romans 5:2 that our hope lies in the glory of God that we will one day experience when we are fully renewed into the image of Christ. A better day is coming! No wonder Paul says 'be joyful'. This is something to sing and shout about, something to get excited about—God is working in us right now and he'll keep at it until he has us the way he wants us to be! We keep our eyes on the horizon!

Hope keeps us going in the good times, it also enables us to stay the course in the bad times—hence Paul's comment for us to be 'patient in affliction'. Affliction is never easy to bear, it's tough, it's hard, it's a struggle more often than not. There are a few days when it's easier to cope than others but, whether we like it or not, suffering enters all of our lives sooner or later. We may not like it, but we need it! It moulds our life, it shapes our character, it takes off the rough edges, it perfects us, and it enables us to effectively minister to broken hearts and lives in a fragmented world.

Showing patience in the midst of incredibly tough times does not come easily. It goes against the grain, we chafe at the bit and we become unbelievably restless in ourselves. We want it over and done with as quick as possible. We don't like it when we are laid low!

Paul wants us to show perseverance in the midst of adversity, he wants us to hang in there and hold on tight. It's always too soon to quit! There's no point in running away from trouble, it is much better to run to the Lord—when we do, he'll give us all the staying power that we need; there is ample grace, sufficient for each and every trial.

The next saying: '[be] faithful in prayer' is something most of us pay lip service to. We nod our head and say, 'Great, let's do it!' But, when the crunch comes, prayer is often the last thing we do! It should be our first response to every situation that we find ourselves in.

Paul wants us to be faithful in seeking God's face, he wants us to realise that God is not a fair weather friend—the Lord is the same,

come what may! He wants us to communicate with God in the best of times as well as in the worst of times. He wants us to keep short accounts with God, to keep the channels wide open at all times. Communion with God should be the norm for us in our daily walk with God.

Prayer makes a world of difference because prayer makes all the difference in the world! In our relationships, in our church life, in our battles with the enemy, in our turbulent times, in our service—all these should be bathed in prayer. Prayer for you and me should be a way of life—there's nothing wrong with us having a hotline to heaven; the man's a fool if he doesn't make the most of it! I think we'll take a breather there and, when we come back, we will explore some more of Paul's upbeat teaching on life.

MUSIC BREAK

Paul gets down to basics when he tells us in verse 13 to 'share with God's people who are in need.' Well, folks, that's what it is to follow Jesus. It costs! There are times when we need to put our money where our mouth is. We are here to help others! There are many needy people in our church family and we owe it to them and to the Lord to support them in whatever way we can—it'll bless us, it will really bless them.

We're not into helping spongers, we're talking here about cases of genuine need! It covers the whole gamut of issues, be they physical, spiritual, psychological, or financial—we are here to give assistance to one another. We're not on our own, we're in it together. That's what love is all about.

It also shows itself in our willingness to 'practise hospitality'. Open homes and open hearts are a wonderful blessing. I know that from personal experience. In my ministry around the world, I'm so grateful to the Lord for so many folks who have treated me as one of their own and shared with me something of the love and goodness of God. People like that are priceless and their hospitality is a joy to receive. This is love in action, their hospitality is a reflection of the kindness of God.

The next three verses focus on our duty to all people, believers and non believers. Here's where the rubber hits the road, the man next door is watching and he misses nothing! It's seen in our attitude to others inside and outside the church! Sadly, it's here where so many of God's people make a pig's breakfast out of it, they blow it, big time!

Paul is asking us to be consistent in all that we do and say. He wants us to be level headed in our assessment of good and bad. He pleads for us to think before we talk! My actions speak far louder than my words. Reactions are everything, especially in a hostile less than friendly environment. We are different, and we're meant to be. That means when people kick us in the teeth, we don't retaliate or threaten to sue them! Instead, we bless them, and treat them as if they were our friends. It means when people are going through rough times that we sympathise with them, we try to ease their heavy burden. We don't go around thinking, they're getting what they deserve and more!

It means when people are living on cloud nine that we share in their elation and celebration. There is no point in us pouring cold water on their joy just because it didn't happen to us. It seems to me that Paul is looking for us to grow up and act as mature individuals. He wants us to be there for people when they need us, to be available for them in the good times as well as the bad times. He is keen for us to treat people as people, men and women made in the image of God—they may not be from our street, they may have a different outlook on life, they may kick with the other foot—Paul says that doesn't matter, we are to minister to them as if it was Jesus we were dealing with. I like that!

Paul rounds the chapter off with some pertinent insights into the real world. He tells us how to handle ourselves when some folks are determined to get at us for one reason or another. The fact is, two wrongs never make one right! We must never go out of our way to get our own back on people who have taken us to the cleaners, we

should never seek to undermine them or harm them irrespective of what they have said or done.

Paul reminds us that God misses nothing—he sees and hears all that has happened, and he takes note. It's recorded in his black book, as it were! We need to take a long view of things, a view that lifts us into eternity for that's where God will deal with all those who have done the dirty on us. Their day is coming. To be sure, they may seem to get off Scot free down here, but one day it'll catch up with them!

In the meantime, we are to live out the golden rule in this world and treat people as we would expect them to treat us. If they do, that's fine; if they don't, we keep on going, for we're meant to be Jesus in our community. When confronted with evil in all its ugliness, we stop and ask the question: what would Jesus do in this situation? And then we go and do it!

Let Paul have the last word, when it comes to living your life in the twenty first century, he advises us: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!'