

The Miracle of Love

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[0 : 00] Our Bible reading for this morning is taken from Romans chapter 12, verse 9 to 21. Romans 12, 9 to 21. You can find it on page 1139 of the Church Bible.

Page 1139. Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good.

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.

[1 : 06] Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

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.

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.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Angela, very much.

If you keep your Bibles open at page 1139, that would be very helpful as we look together at that.

And you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful.

[2 : 12] Let's ask for God's help. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, glorious Son, and Spirit of light and truth, we praise you, God of love, for your love for one another, Father, Son, and Spirit.

We praise you for your love in creation all around us, and your love in redemption to save us. Help us to hear your voice in the Scriptures, and so reshape us and refashion us, that we would be people who reflect your love.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Well, this was the week that things started heating up in the hunt for who will be the next Prime Minister. We've had Boris' neighbours recording a domestic in the flat next door.

But before that, we had the candidates reduced down to two, and Michael Gove was eliminated in the voting. And for the media, it was a classic story of revenge.

I don't know whether you saw that. In 2016, Boris had stepped forward to launch his bid with Michael Gove at his side, thinking he could be the next Prime Minister. Gove was right there.

[3 : 26] He thought he'd be backing him. And Gove stepped forward and said, I'm going to stand too. And ever since then, the angle the media have taken, at least, is Boris has been harbouring revenge, the desire to get even.

And so it was said, and we don't really know what role Boris had in this, that his affiliates and friends were trying to rally support for Jeremy Hunt as a dirty trick to try and make sure that Gove was eliminated.

And when that emerged, it was all spoken of as, finally, Boris has got his revenge for what Gove did to him. And that's generally, in our culture, how we think about being wronged, isn't it?

That if someone wrongs you, there might be nothing you can do about it at the time. You might just have to bury it away for a while. But one day, you might have the chance to get even.

And if you get even, you're perfectly entitled to do that. Nothing wrong with that. That's your right. Because you can make them pay for what they did to you. Well, what does God say?

[4 : 30] How do we behave like that as people who are loved by him? That's the theme that starts to dominate this passage as it goes on and moves from love within the church community to love

for those who actually do wrong to us.

And more generally, this passage, Romans 12, helps us answer the question, what are the marks of a supernaturally changed church? What are the marks of a supernaturally changed life?

A supernaturally changed heart. A heart that's gripped and changed by the truths that were in the first 11 chapters of Romans. So far in Romans, we've been working through it as a church since last September, we've had this incredible clear setting out of the gospel.

Paul writes to kind of straighten out our understanding of the gospel about Jesus Christ. And in truth, I meet Christians and have conversations about what they believe and think and think, I really wish you'd read Romans.

It's just such a helpful letter. It just straightens out so much about what we believe that people get confused about. But sometimes you can look at a church and think, well, they seem to have grasped Romans 1 to 11, but it doesn't seem to have changed them very much.

[5 : 44] They don't really look very different from the world. It's as though we might read Romans and we read chapters 1 to 11, but we stop there and we never really get into chapters 12 to 16. Whereas for the apostle Paul who wrote the letter, what we believe about grace, 1 to 11, should completely reshape our lives, chapters 12 to 16.

So this section is about what should happen to our lives if our hearts really have been gripped by the grace of God. And we're going to see that in how we love. We're going to see the sincerity of love, the practicality of love, and thirdly, the victory of love.

So firstly, the sincerity of love. And when we look at verses 9 to 12, what we see binding together these commands is that love has to be genuine.

It comes from the heart. If you notice, verse 9 is a bit like a headline. Love must be sincere. And then a direction of the whole self on the inside. You hate what is evil and you cling to what is good. And that inward love, that inward direction, is passionate, sincere, and patient. So that's the subsequent verses. It's passionate in verse 10. Be devoted to one another in love.

[7 : 02] It's strong language, isn't it? If you just think about what you're devoted to in life, something that you're really devoted to. You might think of a hobby or a person or a sports team that you're devoted to.

But the command here is to be devoted like that to our church family. That somebody could look at your diary, they could look at how you spend your time, and they could say, you're clearly devoted to your fellow Christians.

You've devoted yourself to them, to your church community. And then we honor one another, verse 10. Honor one another above yourselves, that we speak well of each other.

We're not embarrassed to be associated with each other. People say, oh yeah, I met this guy from your church. We speak well of them. We're not embarrassed by that.

And the love is passionate in verse... So it's passionate in verse 10. It's sincere in verse 11. The sincerity, verse 11. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

[8 : 03] Now I think they're quite unusual words today, aren't they? Zeal and fervor. But we might talk about being enthusiastic, about being driven. The message translation of the Bible, which is basically a rewrite, but the message, quite helpfully here says, keep yourself fueled and aflame.

Now that's not something that's just going to happen to us, and we just let go and let God. We have to keep our own spiritual fervor. I think of an older Christian I can think of, you might be able to think of many, who in later life, she's still just thrilled by the privilege of knowing Christ, and serving Christ.

And you can see it in her joy. You can see it in the way that she's just joyful by what she hears at church, by being with God's people, by what she's reading, by seeing other people coming to faith and growing in faith.

You see it in her humility, in her other person-centeredness. She's kept her spiritual fervor. But it takes work to do that, to end the race like that.

Let me just paint an alternative possible picture, just as an example, and whoever we are, we maybe think about the danger that it could be for us. So think of a guy who meets a girl at church.

[9 : 19] They're committed to church. They meet there. They get married. They're stuck in serving together for a few years. They have children. But the man is in a demanding career, and his wife has gone part-time.

She's not working so much outside the home. So what happens over time is the woman is meeting up with Christian friends. She's got the time to do that, and women are generally better at communicating than men.

So she's feeling encouraged. She's growing. She's getting equipped for ministry. She's reading helpful Christian stuff. She's meeting up with younger Christians to serve and help them. But the husband is working long hours, and so his wife gradually starts taking on the duty of reading the Bible with the children as well, and he just decides that really he'd rather just get on with work because that's where he feels competent.

That's where he feels valued. That's where he gets his identity. So when it comes to time on the train in the morning, he stops wanting to read the Bible and pray. He just would rather get on with his work, make a good start to the day.

And eventually, he's not really sure he believes it all anyway. Well, verse 11 is saying, just don't let that happen to you.

[10:33] Keep yourself aflame. Watch yourself that you're keeping a close, disciplined walk with God. So, you know, it's summer coming up, isn't it? Maybe you could ask yourself, if you know what would help you, just something like, well, what good Christian book am I going to take with me on holiday?

What talks could I listen to on holiday? What worship music could I bring with me to listen to, to spend time just reflecting on God's goodness to me and worshipping him?

Maybe just thinking more about the pattern of your life. Could you find a prayer triplet? Find two friends to meet up with regularly, or just one friend to meet up with one-to-one, so that you and one or two others are encouraging each other to keep your spiritual fervor.

So our love is, it's sincere, it's passionate. And then in verse 12, we see that it's patient. Verse 12, be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Now, all three of those commands are about enduring something because our eyes are fixed on the future. So we're faithful in prayer because of our confidence of what's coming. We're joyful in our future.

[11:45] We're patient in what we bear now. And we need to keep our eyes on that. New Scottish Hymns Band's new album, it's called Joy Will Follow. It's that idea of just reflecting on how we can endure what's going on now because of what's coming later.

And some of you will remember Peter Adam coming from Australia a couple of years ago to preach here, and I said to him, you can preach on whatever you like. So when Peter Adam comes, he can do whatever he wants. And he preached on 1 Peter chapter 1, which is about living hope, being people of hope.

Because he said, as I travel around the world, the biggest thing we're missing in the Western church today is that we're people of living hope. So we can endure trials now because ultimately, our hope is for the future.

So verses 9 to 12 explore this theme of the sincerity of love. Now, a couple of weeks ago, 10 of us from St. Silas were on a conference, Christian conference, and there were these great talks.

And at one point, one of the speakers used an illustration that I thought was a bit naff. And as he was doing it, I thought, I'm surprised he's done this. This is a really naff illustration. I wouldn't use that.

[12:54] And now I'm going to use it because as I looked at this passage, I thought it fitted quite well. So he said, he was American, and he said, well, he's Scottish, but he's in America. He said, there's a country music song where the singer is singing to her husband.

Obviously, things aren't going very well. And she says, she has this line, I want you to hold me, not because you have to, but because you want to. That was the line.

So look, it's a bit sentimental, isn't it? But in a similar way, verses 9 to 12, they're calling on us to nurture such a deep, devotional life towards God, that our love for him is genuine and sincere.

So that when it comes to our church family, we love them, not because we know we have to, but actually because we want to. So how do we nurture that? Well, we must remember all the way through this section that verse 1 of chapter 12 is like a headline that stands over the whole thing.

We looked at it last week, and it infects the whole of these chapters. In verse 1 of chapter 12, Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.

[14:08] So we keep a bigger view of God's mercy, chapters 1 to 11 of Romans, in our hearts, and that's what motivates us to keep these commands. We're commanded here, cling to what is good and hate what's evil.

We can do that if we see a Savior who was so committed to goodness, He was tempted in every possible way, and He never sinned. And He did that. He endured that. He went through that trial so that His Heavenly Father could count His obedience as ours and welcome us home.

And He calls us to honor one another and be devoted to one another because Jesus now stands before His Heavenly Father and He remembers you and me by name. He's not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, so surely we can honor each other.

And we're called in verse 12 to be patient and just think how patient Jesus is with us. Think of what He bears with. You know, I look at my life and I think, how has God's patience not run out yet with me?

I can't get over that. God's patience. patience. So we reflect on Jesus and His love for us so that our hearts burn with love for Him and we can love sincerely.

[15:28] And that inner love overflows into practical love. So that's our second point, the practicality of love. And we see that in verses 13 to 16. It's costly in verse 13.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. It's a bit like in Galatians 6. It talks about doing good to everyone, especially the family of believers. There's a priority in our charity towards Christian brothers and sisters who are in need.

And I think of people in our own church family who are lonely. People who have mental health needs. Lots of people. People who have financial needs. And it's costly to look after people like that. Not just wish them well, but actually practically help them. And we can look beyond our church family, can't we? With Open Doors and Release International, we can think of people who've stayed in, Christian brothers and sisters who've stayed in Syria and it's really difficult for them.

Suffering believers in Sri Lanka after Easter Sunday. Secret believers in Pakistan and North Korea. And we can help them. It's easy now to help them through Open Doors.

[16:43] Then Paul goes on in verse 13. He says, practice hospitality. And one of the real encouragements for me at St. Silas actually as a church family is that the way that our tea and coffee servers and our welcome teams, they recognize it's a ministry of hospitality.

It's not just filling a rauter. It's actually obeying God's command to be hospitable. It's an act of love. And hospitality is something we're all commanded to do.

As individuals opening our homes to other people. There are tens of thousands of international students in Glasgow every year. Many of them just for a year. And very few of them will ever be invited into a Scottish home.

That's the reality. Now for lots of us it's a hard challenge to be hospitable. We feel time poor. Maybe we get home and we just want to pull up the drawbridge and just have a break.

But to have people who within the church family have people over after church on a Sunday it is such a valuable ministry.

[17:46] It has an extraordinary effect on people. And it's not about the food. You don't have to be a great chef. People don't leave your home thinking the food was terrible. People just don't think that.

They think about the welcome, the warmth, the offer of friendship. Someone being interested in them. That's a key mark of a supernatural church. There's empathy in verse 15.

Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. And then humility. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position.

It's amazing isn't it how programmed we are to judge people by their position in society. We don't even think about it. We meet someone new and we immediately form judgments about them don't we?

From the way they greet us. The eye contact. The handshake if there was one. From their clothes. From their accent. We start placing them in a pecking order that society has given us to rank people.

[18:51] And if we can't quite work them out we ask a couple of questions that help. Where do you stay exactly? What do you do? Now all of that can be innocent enough.

It can be part of just getting to know somebody. But the danger is when it actually affects how we associate with them and whether we'll associate with them. And we can even excuse it. We think

well I'm just quite different to them.

So I need to look for people who are more like me. We wouldn't really have much common ground. That's how society thinks. And what a great opportunity for us as a church family to be different. One of my closest Christian friends his parents are not Christians. Grew up in a home where they weren't Christians. And he's a bright guy.

He's a sharp guy. I remember the first time I asked him how he became a Christian. I was expecting some sort of intellectual arguments that had persuaded him that the gospel was true.

[19 : 51] He said when I was at school it was a pretty hard place to be secondary school. He went to a school that was very hierarchical as lots of schools are where the people who were older at school would look down on the people who were younger.

They would never hang out with them. They kind of expected you to serve them. There was bullying. Then there was other hierarchies. If you were in the first team at certain sports you could look down on everybody else and you knew everybody else looked up to you.

And he said one day one of his friends when he was in the lower school invited him to the Christian Union meeting. The kind of SU meeting if you like. And he said he went in and it was the most extraordinary contrast from school he ever saw.

Because here were guys who played in the first team sports serving the younger children. Asking them how they were. Looking after them. Genuinely interested in them. And he wanted to go back. And week by week he went. Initially not at all for the Bible teaching but because he'd never seen anything like it. The way that there was love for one another in this Christian community that stood so distinctively from the rest of the school.

[20 : 58] It spoke more powerfully to him about the truth about Jesus than any intellectual arguments could have done. And wouldn't it be wonderful folks if we could be like that in our church family.

That we display God's love to the world by how we care for each other. If people could visit us and say look even if they're still saying I'm not sure about what they believe. They could think what a diverse group of people.

And you'd never find that together anywhere else. And the way they don't seem to mind what in terms of who serves each other what they do for a living the rest of the week.

And they share each other's joys and they carry each other's burdens. It's a great vision isn't it? If people who might not ever come in our church building could come into our homes and meet Christian friends of ours and think well look things are a bit messy in this home but it's transformed. There's something different about it. So where do we get the power for that kind of costly practical love? Well again it's from our view of God's mercy. Romans 12 verse 1.

[22 : 01] That we look at God the Father and we see a Father who would have seen us running away from him and bringing sin and death into his world that he had made. And he was so moved by his love for us that he sent his only son to deal with it.

To take the darkness and the sin and the death on the cross. So Jesus calls us to share our homes with each other because he's opened his home for us and it was costly for him to do that.

And our love for each other as we keep our eyes on God's mercy spills out from the church into the world. So that's our third point. We thought about the sincerity of love. The practicality of love.

Thirdly we see the victory of love. So from verse 17 the focus is on how we love under pressure when we're wronged. If you look at how it starts and ends at the beginning of verse 17 he says do not repay anyone evil for evil.

And then verse 21 do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. They're like the sort of headlines the bread of the sandwich. Why is there this section?

[23 : 09] Surely it's because it's when we're wronged by others that we are most prone to doing wrong aren't we? When somebody else is evil towards us we do something self-centered because we think I deserve this.

I've been badly treated. We treat them wrongly or rudely because we think their sin justifies that.

But what we've got to remember is that when we're sinned against the enemy is not the person who did that.

The enemy is sin. So if we respond sinfully to sin it's sin that wins. Evil wins when we respond with evil. So instead we have to respond with goodness.

How do we do that? Well it's implicit in these verses but I think the first thing that we clearly see implicitly is that we need to pray for people who do wrong to us. So if you look at verse 14 he says bless those who persecute you bless and do not curse.

It's very reminiscent of Jesus' words where he said pray for those who persecute you. Ultimately it's God who blesses. And so we look to do good for people ourselves but we also we pray for them.

[24 : 22] And as we look at that and we think about this command to bless those who persecute you you might be someone who can immediately think of people who you feel have persecuted you or are persecuting you.

And you they spring into your mind. People in the out in the public square or people in your own life. But if you can't think of anyone it's good to be forewarned by these verses isn't it?

Because it might come. And it might come very soon here. You know as a church we were in the Times last week for taking a stand for for the Bible for God's word.

And it might mean that in the coming weeks some of us experience persecution we've never had before. That neighbours pick up on gossip or pick up on something in the media and they they're critical of us for our association with this church family and the stand we've taken for God's word. So how are we going to respond if we find someone said something about us that's not even true or we get maligned and we realise that's not even right. That's so unfair. Well in verse 14 we pray for God's goodness on them.

[25 : 34] Now if you can do that for somebody who has wronged you you are well on the way to overcoming evil with good. Miroslav Wolf said this the reason we justify doing wrong to our enemies is he said I exclude my enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners.

See what he's saying? So we think we can justify doing wrong because we don't think of them as human and we don't think of ourself as a sinner. So the self-righteousness kicks in. Well when you pray for somebody who's doing wrong to you it liberates you from that because even if your first prayer for them your first prayer is something like almighty God please bring X to his senses.

Help him to see how horrible he has been to me and make him say sorry. You know even if you start there that is big progress right. Because it sounds pretty negative at first but it is the first step back towards them isn't it?

You're asking for reconciliation. You're asking for a changed heart in them for their good. And once you start doing that if you're genuinely thinking about what God is like as a holy God it's hard to keep thinking of them as subhuman and it's hard to keep thinking of yourself as not a sinner.

You recognize your own what you have in common with them. That actually we're all sinners. We're a community of sinners and when we spend time in prayer it reminds us of God's grace to us.

[27 : 04] So that you start thinking the only reason I'm different to this person who's made themselves my enemy is the grace of God. That's the only reason. When we pray we also hand the situation over to God and we can trust him that ultimately he'll do what's right.

So in verse 19 Paul says do not take revenge my dear friends but leave room for God's wrath. In other words eventually everyone is going to get what we deserve from God.

God is going to put right every wrong. We don't need to do that for him. So we can entrust judgment to God. We leave that to God.

And that frees us to focus on doing good for people who are out to harm us. And so we get that in verse 20. 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. Now I'm not sure totally what Paul has in mind with that picture. He gets it from Proverbs. But I think it's picture language about someone feeling ashamed.

[28 : 10] Heaping burning coals on their head. That by your extravagant goodness. A consistent goodness towards this person who's been horrible to you. you expose in them how inconsistent it is.

How wrong it is what they're doing. And it brings them to shame. And what you're longing for in that is that that shame would move them to repentance. So they could be forgiven by God and reconciled to him and to you.

That would be an amazing thing. But even if not that it's just simply exposing the wrongness of what they're doing. So in verse 21 he uses this word overcome.

Overcome evil with good. And it's a military term. It's the victory of love. As we go out and we consistently extravagantly love people who do evil there's a victory for love.

Martin Luther King spoke powerfully about that when he was campaigning for civil rights. He was stabbed. He was beaten. He was incarcerated over 20 times. And people urged him to respond with a violent uprising.

[29 : 11] And he said it's love that we have to do. Love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms people. Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.

So where do we get the power to do that? Well again chapter 12 verse 1 God's mercy to us in Jesus Christ. If anyone ever had the right to condemn their enemies it was Jesus.

To take the law into his own hands. He had the knowledge to judge his enemies. He knew everything about them. He knew what was in their hearts. He had the power to judge his enemies. He could have just commanded angels to condemn them.

He had the right to judge his enemies. His status was that he was God. God in the flesh. The one who can judge. And instead he said John 12 I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. And of course Romans has shown us that's particularly good news for us because we were his enemies. Romans 5 for if while we were God's enemies we were reconciled to him through the death of his son how much more having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life?

[30 : 24] We see how he treated us as his enemies and we treat our enemies the same. So folks let's reflect we'll have a moment of quiet shortly a chance to do business with God.

You might look at this list and think what one thing am I really going to pray about this week? What are the marks of a supernaturally changed church? We display the sincerity of love be devoted to one another in love keep your spiritual fervor we demonstrate the practicality of love practice hospitality share with the Lord's people who are in need be willing to associate with people of low position and we strive for the victory of love do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good we praise you heavenly father we thank you for the gift of your spirit your spirit who brings us new life and moves us to holy living holy spirit we pray that you will so strengthen us in our hearts to grasp more deeply your mercy and love to us in the Lord Jesus that we are full of spiritual fervor and it transforms us into lives of love for Jesus name's sake

Amen