

## #36 One Gospel, One People: “Community of Love” (2017.11.19)

“It’s not a mess. It’s a system!”

I may have been guilty of saying something like that a time or two as people peered into my office. Whether or not I was making excuses, I will leave you to decide, but a similar thing can be said about the section of Romans we begin today.

At first glance, it seems to be an assorted pile of sayings that Paul has thrown up into the air and let land wherever they may, but it really isn’t as it appears. It is not a mess, it is a system!

**Please turn with me to Romans 12, beginning with verse 9, pg. 959**

For the past few weeks we have been talking about what our reasonable, or rational response, as Christians, should be when we consider all the mercies of God we’ve received in Christ Jesus. Paul frames that response in the image of making ourselves living, or continual sacrifices, and we understood that the way we become a living sacrifice is by refusing to be conformed to the culture that surrounds us, and instead, seeking to be transformed, by God, through the renewing of our minds.

Last week we came to understand that the way that our minds are renewed is in community. The culture seeks to conform us through community, so we need the context of community to resist being conformed and to encourage transformation. And, part of that transformation takes place as we use the gifts of grace that God has given us to serve one another. We cannot be transformed without community, and neither can we be transformed, if we don’t live out our faith by using the gifts God has given each one of us to serve His purposes and will.

Today, Paul moves to into a section of teaching that continues to build on the idea of how the living-sacrifice-renewed-mind thinks and responds. Once again, we are reminded that the renewed mind is renewed in the context of community, but this time, Paul moves from how we are to serve one another to how we are to love and relate to one another.

As we go through Paul’s teaching, you are going to have a hard time connecting one thought to another. This is Paul’s “messy desk” section of Romans, but the mess is deliberate.

By that I mean that everything Paul writes has a purpose and a point, but here in Romans 12, the statements that Paul is making are not arranged in an organized, logical fashion.

You see, in Romans 12:9–21, Paul writes in an ancient style called “paraenesis”.

“Paraenesis” has three main characteristics. (1) It was used for moral instruction —to urge people to adopt certain attitudes or behaviors. (2) It depended heavily on tradition, meaning that the writer freely borrowed from many sources. In the case of Paul in Romans 12, he refers to Old Testament instruction and the teaching of Jesus. The reason for such a connection was to add authority to the instruction, since it contained teaching that was already respected. (3) Finally, it was loosely structured. The writer or speaker deliberately moved quickly from one topic to another. The idea was to create an unsettled stop and go quality in order to make people think more intently about each individual instruction. The letter of James has a similar style as does the book of Proverbs.

Beginning with verse 9 we read: *“Love must be sincere.”* Let’s stop there. Many commentators treat this phrase as kind of an informal heading to the entire passage. If that is the case, then, the rest of the passage is a description of what sincere love looks like.

A living-sacrifice-transforming-life has as its goal the renewing of the mind characterized by love.

Jesus himself puts love at the core of his “new covenant ethics” when he told his disciples: *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”*<sup>35</sup> *By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”* **(John 13:34-35)**.

Loving one another is the essence, the summation, and the foundation of the Christian life. Now, clearly loving one another wasn’t an idea that Jesus came up with. Loving one another is nothing new, but loving one another as Jesus loved them was! Jesus’ love would take him to the cross to die for our sins. His love is rooted in His willingness to sacrifice himself for our benefit and happiness.

*“As Paul has already stated in Romans, God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* **(Romans 5:8)**.

The word used for love in verse 9 is the familiar “agape.” This Greek word was basically co-opted by the Early Church and used in an entirely new way to refer to a specific quality of Christian love. This is the “new” part of Jesus command to love one another. “Agape” refers to Jesus’ quality of love: a love that isn’t motivated by feeling, but rather is a choice of selfless sacrifice for the well-being and happiness of another.

But the point of this first part of verse 9 isn’t so much the quality of love because everyone in Rome already knew about Jesus’ new command to love one another with the kind of love He exhibited in going to the cross, but Paul’s point is that our Christ-like love must be sincere.

The word for “sincere” is literally “not hypocritical.” The Greek word for hypocrite refers to the mask actors would use onstage to play a different character. So, Paul is saying, “Don’t play act at love” or, “Don’t pretend to love.” Your love must be sincere. It must be genuine.

Now our minds have been so engrained by cultural fluffiness about love that the word has become vague. Love can refer to everything from the coffee we love, to the sports team we love, to the people we love. It can mean whatever we want it to mean. But, regardless of whatever definition of love we might insert into this command to love, Jesus’ selfless willingness to sacrifice Himself for our benefit and happiness, is our unchangeable standard.

Part of our problem is that we can’t get away from the idea that love is a feeling that we fall into and out of. Love comes and goes. Love is chemistry. It is emotion. It is passion. But, let’s think this through logically: If Jesus says that His new kind of love is a command for His followers, then Christian “agape” love is a choice, not a feeling. It is a decision we choose to make. Does that mean that feeling has no part in Christian love? Not at all, we will get to that in a moment.

The point is that we must be genuine in our choice to love others as Christ has loved us. It must be our desire. Of course, this isn’t possible without the redeeming, transforming work of God’s Holy Spirit in your life, and you are never going to be completely consistent in your choice to love, but the point is, you can’t pretend. You can’t just pretend to care about people and sacrifice for others, while you are secretly trying to work the system to get a response for your love that gives you benefit and advantage.

Remember that Jesus died for us while we were still His enemy. He showed his love before any of us even cared. Jesus’ love was extended without any payback. There were no strings attached to His free gift of love. And His sacrifice was just as lovingly offered to those who remained His enemy and never chose to acknowledge or benefit from what He has done. In other words, “Agape” love has the giver as its source, not how good, or worthwhile, or likeable is the receiver of that love. It is love given because the giver must give it.

Next, if we are to have a sincere love, we are to *“Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (12:9b)*. The word for hate is very strong. It means to loathe, to be disgusted by, to be repulsed by evil. Then we are to cling to, cleave to, be joined to what is good.

I don’t think we have to say much about the “cling to what is good” part, but what is it about love that suggests the hate of evil is necessary?

Well, the thought behind the word translated as evil, is very strong. It is a pernicious, malignant, destructive evil that seeks to harm, belittle, take advantage of, and destroy others. It is the kind of evil that rips the wings off butterflies and kicks dogs. It is the kind of evil that lies and steals and harms others for enjoyment and profit. It's the kind of evil that created reality shows. So, the question becomes, if we love, how can we not hate this kind of evil?

It is the kind of evil that we see in all the recent abuse cases in Hollywood, where people in power, use that power to get whatever they want, and it doesn't matter if they victimise and abuse people for no other reason than they can, and they enjoy it. This kind of attitude and activity is the opposite of "agape" so how can we love without hating it? Christian love involves seeking to sacrifice to make others happy, so how can we not hate what makes others depressed, broken, discouraged, devalued and worthless?

Moving on, next we are told to *"Be devoted to one another in love" (12:10a)*. This is an interesting exhortation because the word "devoted" is actually a compound word made by putting two words for love together. The first word is used to indicate a tender affection among friends and the second word is a word used to describe the love of a family for one another. This is the quality of love that describes the affection and devotion a mother has for her children. The last word for love is the Greek word for "brotherly love." So, Paul is literally saying, "Have a family love for one another in brotherly love."

You can't just read this verse and move on. Paul has packed it with tremendous significance. He's got warm affectionate love all over the place!

When we were talking about Christian love being "agape" love and the fact that love is a choice, not a feeling, I asked the question: "Does that mean that Christian love has no feeling?" Well here you have your answer. Of course it does! It is interesting that it starts with "agape" love, which is a choice, and then moves into love that is warm and deep and full of emotion and affection and feeling. The message I get from this is that in community, we begin with a choice to love, but as we make that choice, we will also develop deep, caring family love for one another.

Think in terms of what this section of Romans is all about. It's about no longer being conformed to this age so that we can be transformed for the age to come, by the renewing of our minds. It is about moving away from the culture around us and moving into the new culture that awaits us. What Paul is actually saying is that your new family is the congregation of which you are a part. This is going to be the place where you find joy and meaning and encouragement and love. It is where you are going to mature, and be built up and

challenged to live according to the character of Yahweh, the Father that adopted you, and Christ your co-heir, and brother. Just as your old family has shaped you, now your new family will shape you and they will do it with a warm, generous love that protects and nurtures.

What Paul is saying is that the church is intended to be a family. And we are to cultivate the kind of tender affection and devotion that is appropriate for brothers and sisters.

Then Paul instructs us to *“Honor one another above yourselves” (12:10b)*. The honour one another is straight forward. We are to respect one another. We are to give honour to one another, but then we are told that we are to honour one another above ourselves. That’s not so straightforward.

The Greek here can also be translated, “Go first and show how to honour one another.” Be the example, in other words. Now, we might not pick up on how radical Paul is being. We understand the challenge to honour others above ourselves, but many of us are not from an honour-based culture like that of the Bible. In that culture, honor was everything! You would never do anything to bring dishonour to your people or your family. One’s honour was more valuable than anything else, so to honour others above yourselves goes radically against the culture. It is radical renewed thinking.

The living-sacrifice-transformed life cares much more about honouring others than receiving honour. And it isn’t just about others receiving honour, it is about us actually honouring others above ourselves. How do we honour someone? We do it by paying the proper respect. We do it by valuing them, and by serving them, with great humility.

Now, I don’t think that Paul means that we shouldn’t care about our own honour, but what he is saying is that this kind of honouring-one-another-attitude creates a culture in which no one is honoured above another. It is a culture of equality and mutual respect where everyone is valued.

Next Paul directs us to *“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.”*

The thought behind “never be lacking in zeal” conveys the idea of not being lazy in living out your faith. The kind of person Paul is describing here is one that gets by with as little work and inconvenience as possible. It is the kind of person who thinks they should be paid for showing up for work, rather than actually being paid for the work they do. It is the person that says, “I showed up, that’s good enough, but don’t expect me to actually do anything!”

The phrase, “keep your spiritual fervor” is literally “in the Spirit—on fire.” Paul is speaking about a supernatural empowering by the Spirit to flame our hearts into passionate service. It describes someone being caught up in the gracious work of God’s Spirit, so much so that, we have a passion and enthusiasm that can’t be contained. Notice, though, that this passion and enthusiasm is not some kind of an ecstatic experience. No, it is in serving the Lord.

Again, remember what we are talking about here: “In view of God’s mercy offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” How can we imitate the kind of love Christ exhibited for us, if we think showing up is good enough? Is that what Christ did as he prayed in the garden before His arrest? Did He tell the Father, “Lord, I showed up, that’s enough, my will, not yours be done?” I don’t think so.

Jesus was passionate about everything He did! Everything He did mattered, whether it was proclaiming the Sermon on the Mount or pointing out the faith of a widow giving her last penny at the temple. Jesus was passionate. He was as passionate in the time He took to listen to a woman at a well, as He was in His zeal to cleanse the temple. He was as passionate about feeding the 5,000 as He was about correcting His disciples so that He could take a little child in his arms to bless them.

And when He was tired, and beaten, and forsaken, and betrayed, and bleeding, and hanging on a cross, He was passionate enough to keep going until He declare, “It is finished.” No one was more on fire than Jesus, and He did it for us. He was passionate about what He could do for us, so how can we feel satisfied and feel like we have done more than enough by just showing up? How can we not, as we love each, other give our best efforts and make our biggest sacrifices for Christ?

Moving on, Paul continues, *“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”*

Paul covered these ideas in more detail in Romans 5:3-5. As Christian we are to be joyful in hope. I like the way the NEB puts it, *“Let hope keep you joyful.”* The idea here is our hope in what God is doing and what He has promised He will do, should always give us joy.

We can have joy regardless of our circumstances because our joy is not found in what we are going through: it is found in who is going through it with us! Our joy is grounded in the firm hope of God’s promises for tomorrow, so we can be patient in affliction, and all of this is fueled with a foundation of prayer. Paul tells us to be faithful in prayer. The word translated “faithful” means “to persist” or “to persevere” in prayer.

I think it was last week when Sheila told me she was anxious about something, so she prayed. But she didn't just pray. She later told me that she prayed until she had peace. She prayed until her patience and joy returned as she placed her hope in Christ, not herself, and not her circumstances. Her comment really struck me. "Pray until you have peace." I wonder if sometimes our prayers are seemingly ineffective just because we stop too soon. We don't persevere. We don't pray until we have peace.

Moving on, next Paul tells us to, *"Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."* Of course, as Christians we are to share with everyone who is in need as we are able, but just like a father must provide for his family first, we are to care for each other first, as family, and then also do what we can to reach out and show Christ's love to those around us.

Given the overall context of the next few chapters, I wonder if Paul is speaking to the Gentiles about the Jewish Christians in the congregations? The Jews in Rome were poor, and think about what being kicked out of Rome, away from your work, away from your home, would do to you financially and socially. How easy would it be to find work in neighbouring areas knowing that you were there as a temporary refugee, waiting for the day to return home?

Such a context is certainly possible, but regardless, Paul tells us that we need to take care of those who are in need in our midst. This means sharing our time and money to support, love, and encourage.

To practice hospitality seems old fashion today, but it was essential in Paul's day when travelling Christians couldn't afford the expensive accommodations that were notorious filthy. And don't forget Rome was the capital. It was a cultural hub. People were travelling there all the time. For their safety and their encouragement, hospitality was extremely important.

And, perhaps, for the very reason that practising hospitality has become a thing of the past, we should seriously think about its importance once again. To open your home to someone and make them feel loved and welcome is a gift that touches hearts on the deepest levels, particularly as people move here and are trying to get established. I know that many of you have been powerful examples of hospitality and I am humbled by your examples. Nothing says we are family more than opening our homes to one another, particularly when there is a need.

In the next command, we have a shift of focus. Paul writes: *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."* If this command seems familiar it is because this is a paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew 5 when he declares: *"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* **(Matthew 5:44).**

It's interesting, Paul depends more on Jesus' teaching in this part of Romans than he does anywhere else in his letters. But, notice that he isn't quoting Jesus, neither is he citing Jesus as his source. Why is that? Well, first of all, he didn't have to because his audience would recognize this teaching had come from Jesus, but more to the point Jesus teaching had become a part of Paul's life.

We may read the words of Scripture, but do we allow them to soak in? We need to do more than just read God's word, we need to meditate on it. We need to absorb it. With all the increased information we take in each day and the shortening of our attention span, our minds are like dry patches of parched land. We read, and the words fall on hard, dry ground and immediately run off. What we need to do is learn how to give them time to soak in so that they become a part of us.

Here is an idea: read the Bible like it is a cookbook. How do you read a cookbook? Well, you read it over to get the overall picture, then you look at the various ingredients to make sure you have them all, and then you read a little, and then follow the instructions. You read a little, and then you follow the instructions. What would happen if we read a little and then followed the instructions? I think that is a recipe for transformation!

Going back to Paul's paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:44, what exactly is Paul asking us to do?

Well, we find ourselves as a community under persecution for our faith. Perhaps we are hated. Most likely we are marginalized. Certainly, we are misunderstood and mocked and ridiculed. Perhaps we are discriminated against, like the Christian couple in Alberta this week that were refused the opportunity to adopt because they believed the biblical teaching on marriage. In other parts of the world, it is far worse than this. What does Paul want us to do? He wants us to bless and do not curse them.

What does that mean? It means that he wants us to pray for them. To bless someone is to invite God to work in their lives in a way that benefits them. To curse someone is to invite God to work in their lives to bring justice and punishment. But we are not to curse. We are to bless.

Now that could take the form of praying for their salvation certainly, but what it really is about is short-circuiting the "us" and "them" mentality. Again, it is about respect. It is about seeing those who persecute as people that God loves. We may be treated as the "thems" of this culture, but we are always to look at our enemy as an "us!" The idea here is not just enemies in general, but the very people we come in contact with that actually persecute us. It is those we are to ask God to bless.

I think a big part of the reason behind this command is that it is very difficult to ask for God to bless someone and hate them at the same time. The more we pray blessings on someone, the more we see them as people in need of God's blessing and then we are in a position to love.

Still, this is hard. It goes against our nature. It is so easy to get defensive. It is so easy to cry out for justice, but we are to bless those who persecute us. Impossible you say? Yes, without the renewal of our minds, but remember we are talking about being a living sacrifice, and that means even offering God our pain and our injustice and reacting in a way that is holy and pleasing.

Moving on, Paul continues: *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."*

This is very similar to Paul's instructions in **1 Corinthians 12:26**, *"If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."*

Again, Paul's instruction is simple to understand, but let me just point out that it is easier to mourn with those who mourn than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice. Our hearts goes out to those who are mourning. We can identify with pain and sorrow and sympathy is a natural response, but pride makes rejoicing with those who rejoice a lot harder. If someone is doing better, if someone is having more success, if someone seems more blessed, we become like all of the losers at the Academy awards and we clap half-heartedly and put on fake smiles just in case the camera focuses on us.

You know, as a preacher, it is possible, and even quite common, to be jealous of how successful another preacher's ministry is—especially when you don't feel very successful yourself! How twisted is that? How can we be jealous of God using someone else to share the gospel? We aren't competitors, we are on the same team, right? Well, that doesn't stop it from happening. To rejoice with those who rejoice means that we understand that we are not competitors, but rather, we are brothers and sisters in the same family.

Finally, Paul says, *"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."* **(12:16)**

Could it be that Paul is thinking about the tensions between the Jews and Gentiles in Rome as he wrote this command? It is certainly possible, but I can't think of a congregation where this exhortation isn't relevant.

The idea behind, "Live in harmony" is to think the same. But this isn't a call to think the same way and have the same opinion on everything. We are individuals with differing gifts and personalities. So, the idea

isn't that we are to think the same thing AS one another, it is more like we are to think the same thing ABOUT one another. Again, this issue of equality comes up and again the enemy to equality is pride and conceit.

Paul says, "Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position." It is possible to also translate this phrase, "Do not be proud, but be willing to give yourself over to the humble tasks." In other words, don't think you are above some aspects of service to others. Either way, the idea is to have an attitude that prompts unity in relationship, because there is mutual respect and value given to each person, by each person.

Pride and conceit destroys such harmony, because we consider ourselves better, not equal, and as soon as we consider ourselves better, there are things that we won't do because they are beneath us. And there are people we will avoid, because they are of a lower class, or a different economic, or social, or ethnic, or even racial background.

We are all equally in need of God's mercies and we are all gifted by His grace. We are all adopted into the same family, and anything that we accomplished can only come from God working through us. If that is the case, then how can we not have unity in relationship? How can we not think of each other in the same way? This week consider what it means that we are each others' family. We are a family being transformed by the renewing of our minds and that renewing begins and ends with love.