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SERIES: The Gospel Is
MESSAGE: A New Way of Living
PASSAGE: Romans 12:9-21
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

In the beginning, everything was just right. Until...it wasn't. Through Adam and Eve's rebellion, sin and death and evil entered the world. And ever since that day, there has been a cosmic spiritual battle that has been raging, and it rages up to this very day. We all know that story. We live in a world affected by that story every single day. So as this battle rages on, there are some things that are very important for us as believers to understand.

First, this is a point of hope. We need to understand, we need to know and be absolutely assured, that God will win the battle. God will win. In fact, he has guaranteed it by his work through his son on the cross. That's the first thing we can know.

The second thing we sometimes can forget, God has a part for us to play. God has a part for you and I, his children, to play.

Which leads to the third thing that we must understand. In the pages of scripture, God has made his strategy, how we are to engage in this battle, abundantly clear. It's very important that we pay attention to it, because it's not how we would naturally think a battle would unfold. It's not a strategy that we, in our human ingenuity, would come up with on our own. Because of that, if we don't pay attention, we might get confused. We might miss it. And I know you don't want that. And I don't want that. So it's important for us to pay attention to what God has to say. That's what we want to look at tonight.

Open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 12 as we finish out the chapter that we began last week. You may have noticed last week, as we continued, as Tyce led us through verses one to eight, there was a shift in the mood or the tone of that text, and it's a shift that is fairly typical of Paul in his writing. The way that Paul's letters typically work is that he front loads a lot of theology in his letters—full of theology, dense—but then, about halfway through, or a little past halfway in the case of Romans, he then becomes very practical. He starts talking about the implications or the application of that truth.



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Now, that began in earnest last week when we began chapter 12, but it's going to continue through to the very end of the letter. But because of that, I just want to remind us of something very important. As Paul takes on a tone that is full of commands, full of things that we ought to do, we can't lose sight of the theology that undergirds it all.

Well, Paul said last week what he's going to say this week—as we continue, all of it is grounded in all of the theology that we have discussed for weeks on end in Romans 1 through 11. All of it is grounded in the gospel. Everything that Paul has to say, move forward, is possible—it's a natural outflow, of the truth of the gospel.

You might remember in Romans 6, Paul talked about how we have been buried with Christ in his death, and now, as he has been raised, we too can now walk in newness of life. And that newness of life is what Paul is going to describe today and in the chapters to come.

And it's so important that we understand it is not an add-on to the gospel. It is an outflow of the gospel. It's what the gospel produces. When we believe, God brings us into a moment where we are now free to walk in newness of life. We are free to enter into a new way of living. Critical that we don't forget that.

So now Paul, as he continues, is going to get very practical, very specific. And as he does, he's going to help us understand God's intent for how we make our way through a world that is filled with hostility, with evil. How do we engage in this world where there is a cosmic battle, a spiritual battle, that is raging? He begins in verse 9. He says:

9 Let love be without hypocrisy.

Is that what you expected? I think all of us can say that may not be where we would have begun if we are going to talk about how Christians live in this world filled with conflict. Let love be without hypocrisy. This concept of love serves as an overarching theme for everything that Paul is going to say in the verses that come. He's going to talk about love expressed, the way it's expressed in the body of believers, and the way then it is expressed as we engage with the outside world.

While his strategy, his word, this theme of love might surprise us, if we think very long about it, it shouldn't surprise us too much because it clearly was a theme that was very prevalent in Jesus' teaching. Do you remember in the upper room? John 13 to 17. In that moment that Jesus is anticipating his death. He's talking to them, and I think at that moment his disciples very clearly thought, this was the moment. This is it. It's all leading to this climactic moment, maybe even the kingdom is going to physically come. Maybe Jesus is going to go up on the throne, kick out the Romans. Maybe it's all about to happen.



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And in that moment Jesus says to them, “By this, all men will know that you are my disciples.” That you’re part of my team, you’re my squad. Here’s how you’ll know. I don’t know what they expected him to say. I may have expected, “You’re going to be—you’ll be the secretary of state in my new kingdom. We’re gonna move forward with power. They’re gonna know it.” But Jesus continued, and he said, “if you have love for one another.” If you have love for one another.

This is a distinguishing mark of God’s people. Love. Paul said, let love be without hypocrisy, which is kind of a clunky phrase, but it essentially means this: let the love that is in you and among you not be an act. Let it be real. Let it be genuine, authentic love. We’re not to be people who merely act loving, just do things that appear loving—we are to be people who actually are, at the core of our being, we are loving people. That’s the call. It’s only possible because of the gospel. Only possible because of the gospel.

I think we can all agree, love is a central New Testament theme. But I think every time we talk about love, it’s important for us to remember what it is, because I fear that in a world where pop songs and magazines and reality TV and our culture in general try to define it for us, it’s easy to start to get confused about what it is. But I think it is absolutely critical in the moment that we are in. And as we move forward as a church, in our culture, it is critical that we reclaim and we embrace a biblical value of love, and we define it according to the Bible.

Our world would define love this way. It might be something like strong affection. Intense desire. That’s how the world generally thinks about love. It’s an emotion. But the New Testament reality of love is this: love is a determined choice to seek what is good for someone or something else. It’s a choice. It’s an act of the will. And that means love is something that we are called to and we can do—we can enact—whether we feel like it or not. We can seek what is good, seek what is good for another person. That’s the biblical idea of love. Love seeks what is good.

That definition goes well with what Paul has to say next. He continues in verse 9. Now, here is a specific manifestation of love. This is the beginning of what it will look like.

9 Abhor, what is evil; cling to what is good.

Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. It’s important that we understand biblical love is not soft or permissive or weak, not at all. The biblical call to love is a call to be repulsed by and opposed to evil, to hate evil. That’s what that word abhor means. And to be firmly committed to what is good, to cling to it.



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Now, this contrast between good and evil puts this cosmic battle, the spiritual battle that exists in our world, in the spotlight. It's a battle between what is good and what is evil. And what is evil is opposed to what is good and is opposed to God because everything that God does is good.

Last week we were reminded, as Tyce preached, that when we give up our bodies to be, offer our bodies as, living sacrifices, we then enter into a process where our mind is transformed, and the outcome of that is that we begin to know the will of God. And he defines the will of God, or describes it, as that which is good and acceptable and perfect. Good and acceptable and perfect.

See, genuine love clings to what is good. That's a strong word—hate, abhor, and cling—both very strong words. We draw what is good close, and conversely, we hate that which is evil. And I think we can admit, on our own, in our flesh, that is not who we are. Our flesh is drawn to evil and not drawn to good. But because of the gospel, all of that changes. Because of the gospel, we can become people who are free now to be filled with genuine love. With genuine love.

Now, because our world is so confused about this concept of love, what it looks like in action, it would be helpful, wouldn't it, if we had some examples of what that might look like? What's that look like on a Monday when I'm interacting with people? And that's precisely what Paul does. He's going to paint us a picture of genuine love in action. You know, talk about first what it looks like in the body of believers within the church. Now as I read these four verses, verses 10 to 13, I want you to ask yourself this question: is this description, this community that Paul is describing, is that a community that I would want to be a part of? So he says in verse 10:

10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Now, I think we can all agree Christian community is not perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect church. This is not a perfect church. We all know that from experience. But I think we can also agree that there is no community that is capable of soaring to greater heights than Christian community. Because there's no other community that is grounded in the gospel, and therefore is able to produce people and fill a community with people marked by genuine love. No other community on earth can do that. The church is not perfect. It is not perfect, but it is capable. Capable of going to depths of intimacy and love between its members that no other community is capable of.



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Paul describes what this community would look like, what genuine love looks like, when it's lived out between brothers and sisters in the church. And I am very confident if I would walk up to any person on the street and I didn't tell them it was a church, but I said, "Hey, would you like to be part of a community? A community that's devoted to one another? A community that's fervent in spirit, a community that takes up responsibility? A community that is passionate, is serving, and it rejoices in that which is good? And it's a praying community, a generous community, a welcoming community?"—every single person alive would say that sounds amazing. I want to be a part of that community. That's what the gospel enables. That's who we can become together because of the gospel.

Now, here's the challenge, I think, as we read that description. If we read Paul's description, I think this is what it's very easy to do. I think it's easy to think of this community—let's just say Lincoln Berean Church or we can even go more refined, more confined, we can think about our Life Group. And it's easy to ask this question: is that how they act towards me? Am I receiving that in my community? And if not, should I possibly go and try to find a better one? Should I try to go find a community that would offer me these kinds of things?

And, the answer to the question, "are you receiving that perfectly in your community," I can answer it with great confidence: the answer is no. No. That can lead to discouragement. But that's to misunderstand, misread, what Paul is doing here. I don't think Paul is intending to send us on a search of every Christian community with a checklist to find the one that meets all the requirements.

In fact, as we go to this text, I think we're asking the wrong question if we say, "Is that who they are to me?" The question is, "Is that who I am to them?" I'm a part of this community—is that how I'm showing up? Is that the way I'm interacting with others? Is love, genuine love, overflowing me in me in this way such that I am an encouragement to others?

Church is not a perfect community. It will never be. We are all a group of recovering sinners. All of us are in process. We are being transformed by the power of the gospel, and that is going to be a lifelong process, but because of God's power we can be confident that, as we are transformed by him and by his Spirit, we will become people more and more marked by genuine love. And that will have an impact on our world, on our community.

First thing that will start to transform is the way we are together—this community, our life together. But Paul doesn't stop just inside the walls of the Church. He now turns his attention to outside, the way love manifests itself outside the walls of the Church. He offers this encouragement, this charge, that certainly will strike us as radical, but also should sound very familiar to us. Verse 14 he says:



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14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Now, in Paul's letters, there's no place where he quotes Jesus exactly, but this comes about as close as we're going to find. This sounds a lot like what Jesus said and what we call the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6. There, Jesus says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

The question is, how does the truth of the gospel free us to do what Paul here calls us to do? Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Remember, we can't divorce this from the deep teachings that we studied all last spring, and this fall still when we were in Romans 9, 10, and 11. The question is, how does the gospel impact us? How does it free us to actually live this way?

Think about persecution. I think it's very natural that when we are persecuted, when someone mocks us, wrongs us because of our faith, it is very easy, very natural to feel demeaned and to feel threatened. It's a natural feeling. And as human beings, when that happens, what we want to do is we want to respond in kind, don't we? Our natural flesh says, curse that person that just made me feel small because of my faith.

But what does the gospel tell us? Where do we stand because we believe the gospel? What the gospel makes abundantly clear is that because of Jesus Christ, because of the cross, we've been made alive to God. And we stand now in a position where we can be absolutely confident nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. We have a God who is love, and he promises nothing will ever separate us from him.

That means wherever we are, whatever we're going through, we are with him. We are with someone that is bigger than all the trials we are facing. We are with someone that is sufficient to everything that we are going through. And we live an unending relationship with that God.

But not only that. We learned in Romans 8 that God also has given us his very Spirit to empower us, to free us and empower us, to respond to those who persecute us with blessing rather than cursing. We can't do that on our own, but the truth of the gospel is that we've been given the Spirit. The very same Spirit that was in Jesus, that freed him as God Almighty to say, "Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing." That same Spirit resides in each one of us.

So the gospel allows us now to stand in a brand new place, such that when we are wronged, what can come out of us is no longer to wrong in turn. We're free. We're free to offer blessing, and blessing is an expression of love. To bless someone is to ask God to bring good into their life, ask that God's favor would be upon them.



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And I will admit that sounds incredibly counterproductive in that moment in terms of what I am inclined to do and what I want to do. What I want to do is ask God, "punish them." That's what I want to ask. But see, we are people of genuine love. Genuine love, love clings to what is good, hates evil, and longs to see good come into the lives of others.

And therefore, I know as someone of genuine love, I know that the best thing for the person that persecutes me is this: it is to have God come into their life. For them to be encountered with the gospel and radically changed. The thing the persecutor desperately needs is an encounter with the living God, an encounter with the gospel of grace. And so I, as a person of love, grounded in the gospel, knowing that I stand secure because the God of love is always with me, can say, "Lord, they need you. They need you more than they need my curse." And so bless them. Bless them. Bless them. That's the way that we can respond to those who make fun of us who mock us because of our faith, but we can't do it on our own. We can only do it through the gospel.

Now, as Paul continues in verses 15 and 16, he's going to turn back quickly to the community of faith. I think these verses are, again, referring to life between brothers and sisters. This is what we do when we are together. He says:

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

In other words, genuine love enters into the joys and the sorrows of our brothers and sisters in faith. It thinks rightly about ourselves and about others. It doesn't think too much of ourselves. It's not haughty. It's not full of pride. It understands that the gospel makes everyone work and come to God on a level playing field. All of us are in only because of grace, not because of anything we've done, not because of anything that we are inherent to ourselves. Don't be wise in your own estimation. Embrace humility. Embrace humility in your life together. That's the call.

Now, he turns in verse 17 back to our interaction in the broader world. He says:

17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

And we mentioned at the beginning, and we've referred to it throughout, we are in the midst of a spiritual battle, good versus evil, raging all around us, and we have a part to play. Here, Paul gave us a little insight more specifically into God's methods for us, his strategy for us in a hostile, an evil world.



lincolnberean

Now, all of us live in this world. All of us live in this world. Every day, we walk out into it. And what that means, quite literally, is that every day, each one of us enters in to a battlefield. It's a battlefield. There's no neutral. There's a war that is raging on. And we have a part to play. And that means that when we go to work, we have a part to play. It's real there. We interact it with our families. It's real there, in our neighborhood. It's there. We can't be blind to it. We can't relax as if this is not reality. There is a war that is raging.

And God intends to use us in that very war. Isn't that interesting? On Monday morning, you're going to get up, you're going to go to work. You're probably going to do some tasks that feel quite monotonous. You're going to interact with coworkers. And inevitably, in a world like ours, filled with people who do not have the Spirit of God living in them, they will bring evil your way. What Paul says is that God's strategy is when that happens, we don't pay them back in kind. We don't return evil back to them.

And this is an opportunity. An opportunity on the front lines of this spiritual war to deploy the very strategies of God, the way he is asking us and calling us as his people to operate in the midst of this spiritual battle. And when someone brings evil to me, someone brings evil to you, and you don't bring evil back to them, you are quite literally engaging in the advancement of the kingdom of God in the world. That's what you're doing. That's what you're doing.

We don't return evil for evil. Just as we already said that genuine love clings to what is good, when someone does something, that which is right, something good, we respect it. We can acknowledge it. When you have a coworker who accepts responsibility for something they've done wrong. We affirm that. We say it's good. That's good when they try to seek reconciliation with their kid. We can be honest, we can say that's good.

See, we acknowledge there is a war, there is a battle in the world, but we operate completely differently than the world. That's God's strategy, the way he's called us to live, to operate differently. Now, Paul continues in verse 19. He says:

19 Never take your own revenge, beloved,

Now that word "beloved," it's small, but just think of it this way: never take your own revenge, one loved by God. That's who you are. Never take your own revenge, beloved.

19 but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord.



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To never take your own revenge is essentially the same thing as saying, never pay back evil for evil. But this time Paul adds a word of assurance that we can cling to. He says vengeance is God's. And we need to leave room for the wrath of God.

You'll remember the wrath of God is God's appropriate response to wrong and evil in the world. And we can be assured because God is a God of justice that, while it seems at the present time that everyone's getting away with evil, at the end of the day, our God, who is a God of justice, will set all things right. That's his job.

Therefore, we can stand confidently with him as we're enduring evil, not saying it's okay, not saying they ultimately are going to get off scot-free—not any of that—but say saying, I trust my God. I trust my God to respond appropriately. I trust that at the final day, I don't need to take revenge because God himself, God himself will set all things right. There will be a day of judgment, can be assured of that when we're encountering evil. We can be assured God, one day, will set all things right. All things will be laid bare. But not only that, he gives us a second motivation as well. Verse 20, he says:

20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

Now, this is a confusing quote straight from Proverbs, chapter 25, verses 21 and 22. And both in Proverbs and here in Romans, commentators really wrestle with what this means. We can be certain of the first part of it. To feed or to give water to an enemy is certainly a way of blessing them, of doing good for them. The more confusing part is what exactly it means when the Proverb says, heap burning coals on his head.

There's essentially two ways the commentators go. I will tell you where I lean in a moment. The first way is, some commentators think that in blessing someone that is our enemy, you're essentially building up more judgment for them. That's one view. The view that I think makes more sense in the context of Romans is that we do know that in the ancient Near East, and the world where Proverbs was written, to have burning coals on your head, to carry them, was a sign, a show of guilt and shame and, ultimately, repentance. It'd be something someone would do when they are repenting when they acknowledge wrongdoing.

It seems as though what Paul is suggesting, and even what the Proverb is referring to, is that as we bless those who curse us—as we feed our enemy, give drink to our enemy—in the sovereignty of God, it is quite possible, and it is our hope and prayer, that God would use that strategically to bring some people to repentance, and, ultimately, maybe even through our blessing of them, they might be saved.



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God's strategy. We can be confident that he ultimately will judge, but we also, as we bless those who curse us, we can prayerfully hope. Lord, as I'm, as I'm even praying for their blessing, ultimately, what we are hoping, what we are asking is, that they might be saved. And Paul is saying, by quoting this Proverb, that might happen.

And in some cases, I think probably all of us can think of times where it did—because a response of love in the face of cursing was so outside the realm of what is reasonable and rational to humans, it made someone say, “Why? How can you do that?” And the only answer is, because of the gospel! Because of God, that's the only reason I can do that.

All of that now is summed up in verse 21. Says:

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Don't be overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good. Is there evil in the world? Yes. Does God hate evil? Yes. As we are with him and transformed into his likeness, as we become people of genuine love, will we also hate evil? Yes, absolutely. Will God ultimately set things right and judge evil in the world? Absolutely.

But we also can't miss this from verse 21. In this spiritual battle, evil wants to overcome us. It's why Paul says don't be overcome by it, but rather, overcome evil with good. That is God's strategy. As we engage in love, as we seek to do that which is good, it is an advancement of God's very ethics, God's very way, God's kingdom in the world. God's strategy. God wants us to be people so filled with his love that we return blessing for curse, and in doing, we are part of the process of overcoming evil with good.

It is a surprising strategy. I think when we're in the midst of conflict, it requires an abundance of faith. And I can admit to you, I don't know if it's the strategy I would have come up with on my own. When I think about Jesus' disciples, they were questioning his strategy. Remember when they were interacting with him and considering how the kingdom was gonna move forward and people that were rejecting Jesus and they turned to him and they said, “Hey, do you want us to call down lightning and incinerate everybody?” That's what we think. That might be how you and I would do it. But it's not God's strategy.

The question is, will we trust him? Do we trust that he knows better? So I read this text, I'll just be honest with you, I am liable as I read this text to start to feel some some guilt. Because I can be honest with you, I read some of these things that Paul says, you know, show hospitality to everyone and encourage and weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice and I think, “I do some of that some



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of the time. But not as much as I'd like." They seem aspirational to me. I hope to be more that kind of person.

So because of that, you know, I was thinking this week, if Paul were here, I'd want to say to him, "Paul, that all sounds so good. How do I do that?" You know what I think Paul's answer would be? Go back to the gospel. Go back to the gospel. Go back to the gospel and know that even as we fall short, God loves us. Even when we don't do it all right, God loves us. Forgiveness. Love. God's presence all available in the gospel.

But I think he'd also say, go back to the gospel, and by that he would mean, draw near to God because you, because of the cross, now have free access to the God who is love. He is the source of all love. And so I think Paul would say, run to him. Draw near to him. Abide in him, offer yourself up to him. Hold nothing back from him, that he might transform it all. That he might help you be genuinely loving by the power of his spirit. Run to him, that he might transform you, allow you to step in to this new way of living, only available through the gospel.

Our Father, we thank you for the gospel. We thank you that you've not only forgiven us, but you also have now set us on a new path of life. And as we make our way through a world filled with evil, Lord, we don't have to be people overcome by it. Rather, through the gospel, empowered by your Spirit, we can respond in love and we can overcome evil with good. And we pray, Lord, that you'll help us never forget all of that is grounded in what is true about us because of your gracious work through Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

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