

Sermon      *Living God's way*

Last week, I shared on the first 8 verses of Romans 12 – and reflected that, if we are truly the body of Christ, we will be, effectively, Christ's body in the world. We will be Christ's eyes, and see people, we will be his feet and walk to them, we will be his hands and reach out to them, we will be his mouth and we will speak them, and we will be Christ's heart, and we will love them. And really, love is the heart of what we are called to do as the body of Christ – as the church.

At the start of today's reading, Paul tells us about that love: Love must be sincere, he says. Love isn't just saying that you love someone, it is showing that you do. Love isn't simply a feeling, it is an action. Love is a doing word.

So... can we love someone we don't like? Or can we love someone who does things that we don't like? As Paul talks about love – yes, we can, because love isn't about simply having warm feelings, it's about caring, practically.

But it's not just about practical, physical things – it's also about praying for them. And part of our prayers for people we don't like might be that God will change them to be more acceptable to us. Or it might be praying that we could be more accepting of them.

It follows that if our love is sincere, we will hate what is evil and cling to what is good.

We need to remember that love isn't simply an instantaneous thing – it is ongoing: Paul writes "*Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.*"(12:10)

'Honour one another above yourselves' or in the NRSV translation, 'outdo one another in showing honour.'

That's not to say that you are worthless, and that everyone else is more important than you. Instead, it's about being humble, and being considerate of and caring for others – as I said last week, being humble doesn't mean thinking less of yourself, it means thinking of yourself less.

As always, Paul encourages the Romans – and us – to hold fast to, and work out enthusiastically, their faith in Jesus. Verse 11 "*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.*"

And then he begins verse 12, "*Be joyful in hope...*" Be joyful - rejoice! I think we often forget to be joyful in our Christian lives.

Of course, as we look around at the world and our lives, there's a lot going on that no-one's going to be joyful over. People are living in circumstances where they don't seem to have hope.

But as Christians, we always have hope - hope because of what Jesus has done – and we should always have that hope – and have joy too. We do sing of joy often enough, though: Joyful, joyful, we adore thee; Joy to the world, the Lord is come; Rejoice the Lord is king! and so on, but sometimes – perhaps even often – the joy that we sing of isn't reflected in our lives.

Just like we sing Amazing Grace, but so often we forget how amazing that grace really is. As John Newton wrote: "how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed".

We get tied up in the routines and rhythms of the world, and for that matter the routines and rhythms of church life, and the sheer wonder – the joy – of God's grace can get lost in our lives...

What Jesus did for us in his life and death and resurrection, is good news – it is joyous news – and as the psalmist said: *this is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!* (Psalm 118:24)

Paul tells us to be joyful in hope – and that hope is the sure and certain hope that we have in Jesus and in the offer of eternal life which comes to us because of his death and resurrection.

While Paul tells us to "joyful in hope", he also tells us to persevere through all the things that happen around us, to "*be patient in affliction,[and] faithful in prayer*" (12:12).

He tells us to "*Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. 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.*" (12:16-18)

In really, really simple terms he's telling us here to be nice to each other. We can complicate it a lot, of course, but the heart of what Paul tells us, is simply to be nice to each other.

Paul gives us examples of being nice to each other - Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. (12:13)

As Jesus said in the sermon on the mount *“In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.”* (Matthew 7:12a)

But Paul doesn't stop there: He goes further than simply telling the Roman believers to be nice to each other. He says *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”* If that sounds familiar, it should be – go back to early part of Jesus' sermon on the mount - Matthew 5 - *“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”* (Matt 5:44)

In loving others, we need to share in what they feel – Paul spells it out in verse 15 *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn”*. So, even more than being nice to others, we mustn't resent other people's success or happiness, and we mustn't turn our backs on people who are down, either.

Coming back to the theme of the earlier part of this chapter, that we considered last week, we need to work together. *“Live in harmony with one another.”* Paul says, *“Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”* (12:16)

I think probably the easiest way to feel better about ourselves is to put others down. Then we can say *“At least we're not like them”* – whoever 'them' might be.

It goes back to Paul's earlier point of honouring one another above ourselves.

Of course, if we know the easiest way to feel better about ourselves is to put someone else down, then I think the second easiest way is to get even. If someone hurts you, then you hurt them back. An eye for an eye is biblical, isn't it?

But Paul, says 'no' to that: Verse 17 *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil.”* He's again sharing what Jesus' preached in the sermon on the mount: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”*. (Matthew 5:38-39)

Paul urges us not only to be good people, but to be seen as good people as well: *“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.”* (12:17b-18) So, we as followers of Christ don't have to agree to everything, we don't have to be pushed around – because living at peace with everyone doesn't trump hating evil and clinging to what is good. But if it is possible, and if it is up to us, then let's seek to live in peace.

Paul said *'Do not repay anyone evil for evil'*... and that seems not very fair. It seems that people will hurt us, or others, and go unpunished. People generally like the idea of judgement, like the idea of punishment for crimes committed... right up to the point when it's them or those near to them being judged.

We can be comforted, though, that ultimately there will be judgement, but that will be judgement from God. Paul picks it up in verse 19: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written," Paul says, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

And I think that's heartening for us in the face of all that is wrong with the world – the tyrants, the exploiters, those who cheat and steal... well, at some point, they'll get what's coming... but it's never up to us!

Clearly, there were significant issues in the church in Rome that Paul was writing to address in this letter. In these twelve verses, you can see the same points being hammered home. Love one another. Live together peacefully. Don't judge or take revenge. Over and over again.

And again, here at the end of the reading, Paul says it once again – firstly with a quote from the book of proverbs *"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."* (Proverbs 25:21)

And finally he warns us *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"*.

We are the church. We are the body of Christ in the world, and the world is fallen. There is evil in the world. Some Christians have historically thought that all things of the world are evil.

But we need to remember that there is also good in the world – we read in Genesis 1 that *"God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."*

And, you know, most of the time it's pretty easy to tell what is good and what is evil. Not always, perhaps, but most of the time. Sometimes we'll get it wrong. Sometimes I guess we may be fooled, and sometimes we will fool ourselves.

Paul is clear in his instruction: *Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.* You know the difference, he says, so simply do it. If we do that, we will be living God's way.

And if we are really clinging to what is good,

- We won't be putting ourselves above others,
- We won't be lacking in zeal for God,
- We will be joyous, and patient, and faithful in prayer
- We will share with those in need
- We will welcome others into our homes, our lives and our church
- We will bless and pray for those who persecute us
- We will celebrate with those who rejoice and will be compassionate to those who mourn and suffer
- We will live in harmony with others
- We won't be proud - we'll associate with all people
- We won't seek revenge
- And we will do our best to live at peace with others

So... how are you doing with all that? Because it is a struggle, isn't it?

As I said, so often we will get tied up in the routine of it all, of the weekly and monthly and yearly cycles of the church and of our lives. We need to get things done by certain times and dates... and as we do those things, its easy to forget the grace, the love, the zeal, the joy and the hope.

Our reading opened with the words "Love must be sincere". And no love is greater than the love God has for his creation; John's gospel reminds us that Jesus said "*God loved the world so much that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16)

In all things we should be following Jesus' commandment "to love one another" – and by that people will see us as Jesus' followers, and they will see his love reflected in our actions and in our lives.

Hate what is evil, cling to what is good, and let your love be sincere...

...to the glory of God.

Amen.