

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (ESV)

Text: Romans 12:9-21 A 1/23/22 2 Kings 5:1-15a Matthew 8:1-13 Ps. 111 Resp. Ps.: 119:1f.
Hymns: 537, 361, 348, 412

OUR LOVE FOR GOD AND FOR OTHERS

Dear fellow believers in Christ,

Jesus tells us, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind," and "your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). That is something we cannot do. In His love for us, God teaches us and enables us to love.

(In the original, our text is full of on-going directives from God to us, which I'll include in the course of the sermon.)

God says, "Abhor" (literally from the original, "keep hating utterly," "keep shrinking away from") "what is evil; hold fast to what is good." Love doesn't mean that we ignore sin. There are some who call themselves Christians who tell us that love means tolerating and even approving of certain sins. When Jesus threw over the tables of the money changers on the temple grounds (Mt. 21:12-13) and when He called the hypocritical religious leaders "white washed tombstones" (Mt. 23:27), He made it clear that He condemns wrongdoing. In the fourth chapter of Ephesians the Lord tells us that when we see sin, "Be angry, and do not sin" (don't lose your temper; don't let your anger become personal) (Eph. 4:26). Love for God means that we speak out against what He says in His Word is "evil," and speak up for what He says in His Word is "good."

The saying goes, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." When we must condemn someone's sin, we want to guard against having an unforgiving heart toward him. Our Lord warns us, "Do not be overcome by evil." Jesus tells us, "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt. 6:14-15). If we hold a grudge against someone and refuse to forgive him, it's a poison that we allow to keep working in us. If we hold onto anger and bitterness and refuse to let them go, we can drive Jesus out of our heart and end up in hell.

Life isn't always fair. Sometimes terrible things happen to nice people. Sometimes the innocent are treated unfairly and the guilty go unpunished. God says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." In the original the Lord very strongly emphasizes that vengeance is up to Him, not us. In His

own way and in His own time, whether in this life or in the life to come, God sees to it that justice is done. The Bible warns, *“It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (He 10:31). The psalmist was deeply troubled over the way the unbelievers so often seem to be doing fine and we believers so often have to suffer, *“until,”* he said of the unbelievers, *“I considered their end”* (Ps 73:17). What punishment could we possibly inflict on someone that would begin to compare with God’s punishment of eternal suffering in hell? It’s not your place or my place or the place of any other individual to take our own vengeance on someone. God tells us to leave that in His hands.

We’re told, *“Keep asking God to bless those who are persecuting you; bless and do not call down evil upon them.”* ... *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, continue to live peaceably with all.”* ... *“If your enemy is hungry, keep on feeding him; if he is thirsty, keep on giving him something to drink.”* God doesn’t expect us to make everyone like us and be nice to us. Some people just don’t like us. Some people are evil. What we can do, with the Lord’s help, is be kind and loving and forgiving towards others ourselves. Jesus tells us, *“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”* (Jn. 15:12).

We’re told, *“Do not be repaying anyone evil for evil.”* As Jesus was dying He prayed that amazing prayer for His enemies who had Him crucified: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”* (Lk. 23:34). Jesus willingly gave His life for you and me. There’s nothing in us that makes us deserving of it, yet Jesus loves us and forgives us and has saved us anyway. We sin every day. But when we ask Jesus to forgive us He always does. Jesus works that same loving, forgiving attitude in our heart toward others. Jesus tells us that in our dealings with others we’re not to be *“lazy in opportunity for service,”* but *“fervent in spirit, [serving] the Lord.”* The Bible tells us, *“We love, because He first loved us”* (1 Jn. 4:19). Jesus’ love for us undeserving sinners takes away our hateful, vengeful, unforgiving feelings toward others. With Jesus’ help, and for Jesus’ sake, we can forgive and love even our enemies and treat them with kindness. The Bible says, *“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma”* (Ephesians 4:30-5:2).

The Lord tells us that when we’re kind, even to our enemy, we *“will heap burning coals on his head.”* If someone is being mean to us, he isn’t surprised if we’re mean back to him. But he may well be surprised if we try to be nice instead. It’s like *“[heaping] burning coals on his head.”* The idea from the original is that our kindness may make him feel ashamed of his meanness, and have a change of heart. *“Continue to love one another with brotherly affection.”* ... *“Continue to live in harmony with one another.”* When we’ve had a fight with someone, we always feel better when we’ve told each other we’re sorry, forgiven each other, and with God’s help, put it behind us.

“Do not be overcome by evil” (from the original, *“Do not let yourself be conquered by evil.”*) *“Overcome evil with good.”* God isn’t promising that if we’re nice to people, everyone will be nice to us. What He is saying is that if there’s any hope of someone who has been mean to us having a change of heart, it won’t happen by our being mean back to him. But it could happen if we treat him with love and kindness. A person who is mean and hurtful toward others is in

conflict with God. If I take personal vengeance on him, how is that going to help bring him to Jesus?

Sin is at the heart of all human problems, either directly or indirectly. Jesus' love is the only thing that truly changes people's hearts. When we understand what sin is and see the sin in ourselves and understand our salvation in Jesus, He changes us. We come to understand right and wrong. We're moved by His love to love Him and our neighbor. *"The love of Christ controls us,"* the Bible says (2 Cor. 5:14). As we demonstrate Jesus' love in our dealings with others, He can work real change in them.

We're encouraged to *"keep on [rejoicing] in hope"* (from the original, *"keep on rejoicing in patient expectation of good"*), *"patient in tribulation"* (from the original, *"remaining patient under pressure."*) It can be very difficult and painful to deal with the hurts and the injustices someone inflicts on us. It's hard to let go of our hard feelings and forgive him and treat him kindly. But we *"keep on rejoicing in patient expectation of good"* as we look to our Lord for inner healing and peace and strength. We know that the Lord can change the person who is hurting us so he stops hurting us. We know that the Lord will change us and help us to grow in our ability to deal with hurts. The Lord helps us to *"[remain] patient under pressure."* Peter tells us, *"Who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you are blessed. And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled"* (1 Pet 3:13-14). *"For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ... For you were called for this purpose, because Christ also suffered for [you], leaving [you] an example, that you should follow His steps"* (1 Pet 2:19, 21-22). On the cross Jesus suffered so very unfairly because of us, and for our salvation. Our Savior will help us when He calls upon us to bear up under unfair suffering for His sake.

He encourages us to keep *"persisting in prayer."* Pray for that person who has hurt you. It really helps to take away hard feelings toward that person, and to forgive him. Jesus tells us, *"Pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"* (Mt 5:44). Ask the Lord to help the person who is hurting you by changing his heart. Ask the Lord to help you to love that person and treat him with kindness. God can heal any hurt.

"Keep on living in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but keep associating with the lowly. Never be conceited." *"Continue to outdo one another in showing honor."* *"Continue to contribute to the needs of the saints and to seek to show hospitality."* *"Continue to rejoice with those who rejoice, to weep with those who weep."* By nature we think only of ourselves, and we put ourselves first. Jesus' love working in our hearts makes us willing and able to put others before ourselves, and help them with their wants and needs.

Our Lord tells us, *"Let love be genuine"* (from the original, *"Let love be without pretending like an actor"*). This *"love"* is *"agape"* (ah-GAH-pay) love – the love we see especially in God. God, who sees what's in our hearts, knows that we can't love Him as He deserves, or love others the way He tells us to. In His love for us in His Son, God teaches us and enables us to love. Amen.