

Introduction

If you are visiting with us let me just say that we are very glad that you are here, and that you have joined us as I and my fellow elders are preaching through the book of Romans with the theme “Transformed by the Gospel”.

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Our take-home message today is that when we are transformed by the gospel we will hate evil and hold on firmly to what is good.

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We are currently learning from Romans 12. Our text is Romans 12:9, but let us look at it in its context:

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Rom 12:1-10

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

3 For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. 4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

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6 We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. 7 If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; 8 if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

9 Love must be sincere.

Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

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Prayer

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Romans 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

There are four things we can learn from this verse

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1. We are commanded to love sincerely

Why does Paul mention love here, and then go on to talk about hating evil? I think perhaps for several reasons, but I will only mention one. It is important to look at the context here. As Sandy pointed out when he spoke on spiritual gifts two weeks ago, this command follows immediately after Paul has taught about spiritual gifts. So it is as if he is saying “you have different gifts, so use them for the benefit of the body, and don’t get all puffed up about them. And be sure you use them in sincerely loving ways.” And the reason I believe that this is at least a part of Paul’s meaning here is that on the two other occasions he teaches about spiritual gifts he also puts teaching about love in the same passage. So in I Corinthians 12 he writes

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1 Cor 12:7

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

And then, after discussing the various kinds of spiritual gifts, he goes on to remind us that spiritual gifts without love are useless

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1 Cor 13:1-3

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

And then in Ephesians 4 Paul talks about the gifts Christ gave to the church, and then teaches about speaking the truth in love, and the church growing and building itself up in love.

Jeff Highfield will be preaching next week on the next verse, Rom 12:10, which reads: Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. So I will say no more on this subject today, but invite you to come next week and hear Jeff speaking on loving and honoring one another.

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2. There is such a thing as good and evil.

We are commanded to cling to what is good and hate what is evil. But where do these ideas of good and evil come from? There are some things that most people would agree are evil; the genocide of a Hitler or a Stalin, the driving of cars into people, whether in New York or Charlottesville; or the rape and sexual abuse by powerful men of vulnerable women, to use just a few examples. But it goes beyond such obvious examples as these. If you grew up in a family with brothers or sisters, or if you have young children of your own, I can pretty much guarantee that you will have heard the words “that’s not fair” many times. “It’s not fair that he gets to stay up later than I do”; “It’s not fair that he got a bigger piece of cake than I did!” My brother Peter and I only differ in age by 15 months, so we were especially alert to any perceived favoritism of our parents. In the end our father gave up trying to divide the last piece of cake equally and decided that one of us should divide it and then the other one would get to choose which piece he wanted. So this idea of fairness or justice is ingrained in even quite young children. Even secular writers acknowledge this; thus the Canadian-American psychologist Paul Bloom writes:

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“Humans are born with a hard-wired morality: a sense of good and evil is bred in the bone. I know this claim might sound outlandish, but it's supported now by research in several laboratories.”

But where does this idea of fairness and justice, of right and wrong, of good and evil, come from? What makes good good and evil evil? Why do we value love and justice and mercy, and despise powerful men who rape and assault vulnerable women? How is it that there is such a thing as objective good and evil? Paul does not answer this question, but he does give us a clue:

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Rom 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will.

So ultimately the answer is that good can only be understood in relationship to God. If God exists, and He is good, then the good and true and right and beautiful have an objective foundation in God, and in his self-revelation, Jesus Christ. But if God does not exist, and if we are just the random products of blind evolution, then it is difficult to see any reason to think that human beings are special or that their morality is objectively true. In that case might makes right, and truth and justice reside at the barrel of a gun. All sorts of terrible things then result.

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The mathematician-philosopher William Dembski puts it this way “The problem of good as it faces the atheist is this: Nature, which is the nuts-and-bolts reality for the atheist, has no values and thus can offer no grounding for good and evil. Values on the atheist view are subjective and contingent.” This is an academic way of saying “without God there is no such thing as good and evil”. And this is true, as shown by what happens when people

have no knowledge of God. As one example, Richard Wurmbrand, a Romanian Christian pastor who was imprisoned and tortured in Soviet prisons, writes:

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“The cruelty of atheism is hard to believe when man has no faith in the reward of good or the punishment of evil. *There is no reason to be human.* There is no restraint from the depths of evil which is in man. The Communist torturers often said, ‘There is no God, no hereafter, no punishment for evil. We can do what we wish.’ I have heard one torturer even say, ‘I thank God, in whom I don’t believe, that I have lived to this hour when I can express all the evil in my heart.’ He expressed it in unbelievable brutality and torture inflicted on prisoners.”

In our present culture the idea of good and evil, of right and wrong, has been attacked by everyone from Hugh Hefner and his Playboy philosophy to those who justify killing babies as giving women the freedom of choice. Ultimately this boils down to the question “Is there a God?”, because without God the meaning of life becomes nothing more than one’s own self-interests, pleasures, or tastes. Without God, the world is just stuff, thrown out into space and time, going nowhere, meaning nothing. As Shakespeare has Macbeth say as he faces his own end;

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Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Macbeth Act 5, scene 5, 19–28

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So let me add a sidebar to anyone who is not sure that God exists. Maybe you came this morning out of curiosity, or with a friend, or you came seeking answers to life’s questions. One of your questions is probably “Does God exist? Is there really a Supreme Being who is good and who hates evil?” And you know in your heart that good and evil exist. Even the men who tortured Richard Wurmbrand and many others knew that what they were doing was evil; remember that one said “I can express all the evil in my heart.” And remember the psychologist who said “Humans are born with a hard-wired morality: a sense of good and evil is bred in the bone.” Let me suggest to you that the only logical explanation for our knowledge of good and evil is that this knowledge is based and grounded on the existence of a God who is holy and good and all-powerful, and who created us with an implanted moral compass. There are of course many other reasons to be sure of the existence of God, beginning with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but our knowledge of good and evil is a good starting point. God does exist, and He is the reason for the meaning of life.

If anyone has questions on this or on anything else I say this morning, I will be in the lounge across from the middle doors of the auditorium after the service, and I will be glad to meet with you.

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Romans 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

3. The verse is a command, and thus it must be possible to obey it. God does not give us impossible commands, as long as we are willing to obey them in His power. So we can, by the grace of God, love sincerely, hate what is evil, and cling to what is good. But how are we to do this? By what miracle can our very human hearts be reprogrammed to do these things? Jim Krouscas talked about this in his message on January 7 on Romans 12:1, where he contrasted the Nike approach to Christian living (“just do it”) with the gospel way of having our minds transformed by truth, our hearts moved by mercy, and our bodies redeemed for service. But we also need to remember that Christ followers are not left to live this way on our own, because all Christian believers have received the gift of God’s Holy Spirit.

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Rom 5:5

5 And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Rom 8:9-11

9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

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Rom 15:13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So Jesus' followers have the Holy Spirit's power to set our minds on spiritual reality, such as showing genuine love, hating evil, and clinging to the good. We are not left to "Just do it"; we are given the God the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, to help us live Christlike lives.

And let us not forget that love is the very first of the fruits of the Spirit that Paul lists in Galatians 5

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Gal 5:22-23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

And Paul, after writing to the Ephesian Christians on salvation by grace and on marriage and the church, ends his letter with a section on spiritual warfare, introduced by these words

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Eph 6:10

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

So we can summarize by saying that the Christian is not left to live as a Christian in his or her own strength.

That would be a recipe for disaster! The Christian man or woman, boy or girl, is first of all a *forgiven* person by God's grace through Christ's death on the cross. But it does not stop there; he or she is also a *spirit-filled and spirit-empowered* person. So when Paul writes "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good," he is not saying this in a vacuum. In effect he is saying "Since you are filled with God's Holy Spirit, love sincerely, Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." This does not mean that doing these things will necessarily come easily and without effort; but it does mean that as we trust God to enable us to love sincerely, to hate evil, and to cling to the good, then God will give us the strength and the power to live in obedience in these and other areas of our lives.

We now come to the specifics of this verse

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4. We are commanded to hate evil

Paul writes "Hate what is evil"

And perhaps you say "Whoa!" Are we not commanded to love others? What is all this about hate? But listen again: Paul writes "Hate what is evil", not "Hate who is evil". In other words, we are to hate the sin but love the sinner.

If we are to hate evil, we can do one of two things. We can decide for ourselves what sort of evil we are going to hate, or we can look to Scripture to see what sort of evil God especially hates. Now we need to be clear here; God hates all sin, as the prophet Habakkuk reminds us

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Habakkuk 1:13

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you cannot tolerate wrong.

But there are several things that the Bible specifically says God hates. Let us look at some of them.

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Prov 6:16-19

There are six things the LORD hates,
seven that are detestable to him:

haughty eyes,
a lying tongue,
hands that shed innocent blood,
a heart that devises wicked schemes,
feet that are quick to rush into evil,
a false witness who pours out lies
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.

I find it significant that this list contains a mix of things that we would all recognize as evil, such as hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, and feet that are quick to rush into evil, with other sins that we may be tempted to minimize, such as haughty eyes and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers. Indeed, the very first thing on the list is haughty eyes, or the sin of pride. It is this sin that in many ways is the root of all sin. It is the sin of saying "I am a great person, and I don't need any help with my life." That person is saying to God "I do not care about you; I am the captain of my soul". Instead of saying to God "Thy will be done" he is saying "My will be done"

But there is more

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Amos 5:21-24

21 "I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.

22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

23 Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

In these verses God, speaking through the prophet Amos, says that religious observance without right living is something that God hates. So again we come back to the truth that God hates hypocrisy; pretending that we are godly and good, while all the time we are only going through the motions of religious observance. And God also says the way that I know that your heart is right is not by the money you put in the offering boxes or how well you sing your songs of praise, but by your actions, and in particular your actions towards the weak and the downtrodden: "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" God is a God who cares about both justice, which we can think of as right horizontal relationships, and righteousness, which we can think of as a right vertical relationship with God.

When the Bible speaks of God hating something, another way of saying this is that God is angry at it. As one example of many, Isaiah describes God's anger in these words:

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Isa 5:20, 23, 24b, 25

20 Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,

23 who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
but deny justice to the innocent.
for they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty
and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.

25 Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people;
his hand is raised and he strikes them down.

In this passage Isaiah is telling the nation of Judah that God is angry because they have rejected His word, they have called evil good, and they corrupted justice.

David Powlison, in his book “Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness” writes

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“God is slow to anger, patient and generous. But He also gets angry—really angry. At the same time, He is always fair. He is fiercely fair-minded. In reference to God, wrath and fury don’t describe a mere irritable mood or a momentary tantrum. They express God’s whole-hearted decision to destroy things He finds utterly despicable. It’s because God loves so intensely that He must get angry. “That matters, and that’s wrong!” Without such anger, so-called love would be a bland, detached tolerance. If He’s going to get up close and deal personally in a world that has a lot of wrong in it, then He must get angry.”

So we are called to hate sin, to get angry with it, just as God hates sin and gets angry with it.

But finally we need to make very sure that we hate the sin but show God’s love to the sinner. A wonderful example of this is the story of Rachel Denhollander; her story comes from the Colson Center Breakpoint radio series

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Years ago she was a vulnerable teenage gymnast under the supposed medical care of Larry Nassar, the Team USA gymnastics doctor who may be the most prolific sexual abuser in American history. A year and a half ago, Rachel bravely filed a police complaint that ultimately led to his conviction on sexual assault charges and a prison sentence of 40 to 175 years.

Two weeks ago in a Lansing, Michigan, courtroom, 156 of his victims gave statements detailing what Nassar had done, how his serial child molestation had been overlooked for decades, and how the system had failed these girls and women. Rachel was the last one to speak.

Leaving the judge to serve justice, Denhollander spoke directly to Nassar—and served grace. But not before forcing Nassar to face the enormity of the evil he had inflicted on innocent children. Denhollander clearly defined what Nassar did as sin. “You have become a man ruled by selfish and perverted desires,” she said. “You chose to pursue your wickedness no matter what it cost others.” Yes, there is such a thing as good and evil! And then amazingly, Denhollander, now a married mother of three, expressed pity for the monster that Nassar had become. “In losing the ability to call evil what it is without mitigation, without minimization,” she said, “you have lost the ability to define and enjoy love and goodness. You have fashioned for yourself a prison that is far, far worse than any I could ever put you in, and I pity you for that.”

“The Bible [speaks of] a final judgment where all of God’s wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you,” she continued. “Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet,” she continued. “Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.”

And then Denhollander did something that only Jesus Christ could inspire—she offered Nassar *her* forgiveness. “I pray you experience the soul crushing weight of guilt,” she said, “so you may someday experience true repentance and true forgiveness from God, which you need far more than forgiveness from me—though I extend that to you as well.”

An amazing story of God’s grace at work, and of forgiveness being offered from a victim to her abuser.

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5. We are commanded to cling to what is good

And what is good? We do not have the time to go into this, so let me quote our Lord

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Luke 18:18-19

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good — except God alone.

So ultimately if we are to cling to the good, we will need to cling to God himself and His Son

And how do we do this? For those of us who are Christ-followers it means committing ourselves daily to His service, to our spiritual exercises of prayer and Bible Study, to not forsaking getting together with other Christ-followers for encouragement; in other words, all the simple basics of living the Christian life.

As we close we will sing the hymn “May the Mind of Christ My Savior”, a hymn of commitment to living life guided by our Lord. Please sing it as a prayer of commitment to our Lord; and please do not sing it unless you mean it!

As I said earlier, I invite anyone who wishes to join me and other leaders in the parlor after the service. This includes newcomers and anyone who would like to be prayed for or who has any questions about the message. I just ask that those of you in the center aisle give me 30 seconds after the benediction so I can leave the auditorium without having to push past you!

2 Thess 2:16-17

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.