

# Charitable Living in the Body of Christ

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## **Grace Protestant Reformed Church**

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For our scripture reading tonight, we'll read Romans 12 and the text we consider will be the last part of this chapter, verses 9 through 21. When the elders pick a family visitation theme and text sometimes it's better just to preach on a couple of verses, I considered that but I decided tonight that we'll, as much as possible, cover the whole of those verses 9 through 21. So we begin reading at verse 1 of Romans 12. This is the word of God.

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. 6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

And now the text we consider tonight.

9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. 10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; 11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; 12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; 13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. 14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. 15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. 16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. 17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of

all men. 18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ, here in Romans 12 and in the text that we consider tonight, the Apostle Paul is laying before us a lot of duties as Christians, and I mean a lot of duties. I tried to count how many commands, how many directives there are in this text, one time I came up with something like 27, another time 28, and thought I'll leave it at this tonight, there are at least 25 things that the Apostle Paul is saying you and I are to do as Christians. And then you can understand partly why the first point tonight is not simply the calling, the duty, but the exertion in order to communicate something to you and me tonight, the energy that we have to put into the calling before us to live the Christian life.

Now having said that, the apostle is telling us what we are to do as Christians, the question might arise: is it not somewhat dangerous to preach a sermon that focuses so much on what we are called to do? Is this not the preaching of man rather than the preaching of Christ? And if you're paying attention to what some people are saying about preaching in the Protestant Reformed churches, you might recognize that that's exactly a charge that has been made against preaching in our churches, there's too much man, and that charge has something to do with this kind of a text. If a minister takes a text that is the preaching of man's duty, man's responsibility, he's preaching man not Christ. We have to say something about that and, first in response to that, we note that the Apostle Paul is the one here in Romans 12 not only in the text but really in the whole of the chapter, and then you can add to chapter 12 all of the chapters that follow all the way to chapter 16, it's the Apostle Paul who's saying, "Now at this point in the book of Romans, I am going to emphasize what man must do, what Christians are called to do. This is your reasonable service." And now my question is: is anyone going to say about the Apostle Paul that he's preaching man and not Christ? And we know that the answer to that is, no, no one would dare to do that.

The Apostle Paul even here in chapter 12 to the end of Romans is preaching Christ even as he explains the duty of man, and I maintain not just about myself but about my colleagues in the ministry, that when we preach what the duty of the Christian is, the calling to live the Christian life in the church, we are still preaching Christ. Now how do you explain that? Well, it does go back to verse 1. The Apostle Paul says there, "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." Reasonable service, take it this way, your logical obligation to serve the Lord, and that points us to the whole of Romans 1, chapter 1 through Romans 11.

The Apostle Paul says, "If you think about all of my doctrinal teaching," and that's what Romans 1 through 11 is, it's doctrinal teaching, "it leads to this conclusion about the

practical life of the Christian." And what was all of his doctrinal teaching? Well, it begins in chapters 1 through 3 where the apostle says, "Now it doesn't matter if you're a Jew or a Gentile," which means this includes everyone, including you and me, "we are all sinners condemned before God in need of Christ." You see, in preaching sin the Apostle Paul is preaching Christ. You need Christ. Then in chapter 4, verse 11, you have the body, the long central section of the book of Romans where the Apostle Paul says, "And now let me tell you about your salvation in Christ, that you are saved by Christ alone," as was set before you in the preaching of the gospel but also in the sacrament this morning. Our deliverance from sin, our justification before God is on the basis of the cross of Christ alone. Our salvation is not by works but it's by grace through Jesus Christ.

Now when you put this together, you're a sinner, you need Christ, God in his love has provided salvation for you through Christ, this is the logical conclusion that you will present your bodies, your whole being, your whole life, as a sacrifice holy and pleasing to God. This is, I note here, what we find in the Heidelberg Catechism which may be patterned after the book of Romans. We need Christ. We confess, first of all, our sins and miseries; secondly, we have deliverance through Christ; and then thirdly, as those who have been saved by Christ we have the calling to live the whole of our lives as sacrifices of gratitude, thanksgiving to him for our salvation.

Now the question before us in the rest of Romans 12 and really all the way to the end of Romans is how do you do this? You and I are called to offer ourselves to God, our lives as sacrifices of thanksgiving to him, how do you do that? What is your reasonable service? Well, it begins in verses 3 through 8. You have gifts. God has given you gifts. Be humble when you think of that. Don't think too highly of yourself. Remember those gifts didn't come from you, they came from God. You have a position in the church, make sure you examine where you are in the church as an office-bearer, as a member, where has Christ put you in the church. And you are to use those gifts to serve God, to serve the rest of the church, this is your reasonable service.

But now in detail in the text that is before us the Apostle Paul lays that out even further, and this is in chapter 12, this comes at the beginning of the apostle's explanation of what it means to live your whole life as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God which means that we have to see this as very important. In large part, offering yourself to God, serving Christ is right here: you love the church, you love the members of the church, you dedicate your life to showing love for the other members of the church, or as the Consistory worded it in the theme they chose for family visitation, "Charitable Living in the body of Christ." Three things, charitable living in the body of Christ. First of all, it's exertion, we're called to be active in this. Secondly, its power, and there we're going to look at how living a life of love overcomes evil. What a power. And then thirdly, we consider its possibility.

The Apostle Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, begins here in the text tonight saying, "Let love be without dissimulation," which being interpreted for the children and young people is, "Let love be without hypocrisy." You may not be a pretender in the church of Christ, and if you are a pretender in the church of Christ, well, all your pretending is vain

and useless. Let's be specific. It doesn't do any good when the deacons come with the offering plate to put money in the plate so that you can show people on the outside that you are contributing to the causes of the kingdom while on the inside there's greed. "I really don't want to let go of this money. I really want to hold onto it." You might as well not give at all. That's hypocrisy. Your presence here today. If you're not here for worship because you love God and you're thankful for what he has given you in Christ Jesus, but you're here because the elders are watching, parents, friends, other people you know are watching, you might as well not be here. It doesn't do you any good.

There's no room for hypocrisy in the church of Christ. Why? Well, because the Lord Jesus Christ is not a dead idol. He is the living Lord who reigns from heaven, and if you read the book of Revelation, his eyes are described there as eyes that are of flames of fire, meaning that the Lord Jesus Christ sees and knows even the hearts of everyone here. Idols can't see or hear anything. They know nothing. But the Lord Jesus Christ knows what's in your heart. So you may fool the elders, you may fool other people in your life by your outward show of Christianity but that does not fool the Lord Jesus Christ.

So the Apostle Paul says here that we need to examine our hearts and make sure that this whole matter of Christian living, this whole matter of offering ourselves as sacrifices to God, is a matter of the heart of truth and sincerity, "It's because I love God and it's because I love Jesus Christ." Or let me back up, the Apostle Paul is saying, "First of all, think about God's love for you, think about the love of Jesus Christ for you, and then understand that your love is to be a response to that, your life is to be a response of love to the love of God."

Then in connection with loving Christ sincerely, "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good." Here's another matter of self-examination. Now the Apostle Paul is not at all calling us to be focused on ourselves tonight, he wants us to be focused on others, but he's saying before you begin to do anything towards other people, first of all, make sure that you have sincere love in your heart and then make sure that you are pure in your desires and in your life, hating what is evil. "Isn't it good enough that I don't walk in evil? I don't know about you, but often that's the way that I hope that the Lord will be pleased with my life. I'm not the one who's walking in fornication. I'm not the one who's using the filthy language. I'm not the one taking God's name in vain. I'm not walking in evil. But if I sort of dabble with it a little, is that all right? If I entertain myself with it on my phone, my tablet, on the computer or the tv screen?" We often want to think that way, don't we, that we can get as close to evil as possible and that's all right as long as we do not personally walk in it. No, the apostle says the standard for the Christian is that I hate it and I want to get as far away as possible from evil for the sake of my love for Christ, and then I love what is good. And what's that? The standard is very high, very high. The Christian does not walk around saying, "Well, I have liberty and so I'm going to be busy in whatever I can possibly do, whatever I may do." No, the standard is this, this is your reasonable service that you think about this, "My life belongs to God," so that I only want to do what's going to be glorifying to God, I only want to do what's going to express my devotion to Christ. That's the sincere love that we are called to have.

Then the apostle in verse 10 points to the brother, to others in the church, the sisters, "Be kindly affectioned to one another with brotherly love." There's Christ. There's Christ. Why are these my brothers and sisters? Physically you may be related to some of these people but not to all of them but there's a relationship that God has established in Christ so that we are the family of God so that spiritually these are my brothers and my sisters, which means that in the relationship that I have with the other people in the congregation among the body of Christ, I may never leave Christ out, I may never leave him out of any relationship here.

What will happen if you do that? If you leave Christ out of a relationship you're going to find all kinds of reasons not to love, not to be kindly affectioned to other people. You're going to find reasons why. "Well, do you know what? I'm going to ignore that person. I'm not going to love him or her." Or even if I don't ignore them, I might take it a step further, "I can positively do cruel things, unkind things to this one, after all, when I look at what he has done, when I look what she has done, look who he is, look what she's worthy of, it's not love." But brotherly love says all the reasons that I might see in other people not to love them, every one of them has been taken away by Christ so that in Christ, when? Always. Are there any conditions? Don't you see that, there's never a condition. As a Christian, you can't look for that condition, for that exception. "If he does this, if she does this, I won't...." No, brotherly love, constant love for one another is the calling of the Christian.

Love each other with the self-denying love of Christ. What's the standard here? Well, we read the summary of the law tonight, "I must love my brother as I love myself." There's an equality, right? No, Paul says we need to raise the standard a little higher, "in honour preferring one another." He's not below me. He's not even equal to me but he or she is preferred above me. Beloved, that's in harmony with what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2:3. There too he says something very similar, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." And now I'm going to move on but say this first: apply this now to your marriage. Apply this in your home. Apply this as a congregation. Humility towards myself, that's what the Apostle Paul calls for in verses 3 through 8, and then honoring, lifting up others.

"Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord." Here's where you can see the call is for labor, for exertion, expending energy. What is love? How do you define love? What do you think love is? Those are worthy questions for us to face but it's interesting that when you read what the Apostle Paul has to say about love here in Romans 12, or in his great chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13, it's as if the apostle says, "You know, that's not really the issue in the church of Christ. When I'm evaluating as an apostle the life of the members of the church, it doesn't seem to me that the issue is they don't know what love is, but the issue is the exercise, the showing, the living out of love." When I look around in the church of Jesus Christ, it's almost as if the Apostle Paul says sadly, too often that's what's missing. So read 1 Corinthians 13 and you'll see what I'm saying, it's all about living in love, showing love, demonstrating love to others in the church.

The Apostle Paul is saying, "Don't just think about doing things for others, don't just talk about doing things for others but put love into action." And then think about this as your reasonable service or, if I can put it this way, think about this as your job as a Christian. Why do I say that? Well, think about your job. Have any of you made any excuses recently, maybe last week, "I was just too busy to go to work last week. And I had too many difficult things going on in my life last week, I couldn't make it there." No, that's probably not what happened. Why? Because your attitude is, "That's my job." Well, now the Apostle Paul is saying this is the way it is for you as a Christian, you've been delivered from sin, you've been brought into the church through salvation through Christ, and now this is your job, to live diligently in love for one another in the church of Christ.

"Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer." I put those together, they're in the same verse this way. First of all, notice how important our outlook for the future, our hope for the future is for us in the present as Christians. The present may be difficult, the present may involve tribulation, the present may involve something that is not pleasant in your life personally or as a congregation or as a denomination, and yet your outlook is one of, I don't like to use the word "optimism" because there are people who have kind of a phony optimism, "No matter what's going on, I'm gonna put a smile on my face and have a sunny outlook on life." But it is kind of a believing optimism, an optimism that is grounded in faith, grounded in the truth of scripture that I know what's going to happen in the future. Christ is going to come and he is going to do away with, well, whatever we're suffering. Cancer, he's going to get rid of it. Persecution, he's going to eradicate it. Death. Satan. All the wicked people of the world who are opposed to us. And he's going to get rid of all those old things, that's what the book of Revelation calls them, old things. He's going to make a new heaven and a new earth. He's going to give me a glorified body and soul and there I will live with him and his saints forever. This means that no matter what's going on now, I'm not gloomy, I'm not depressed, I'm not using that as an excuse not to be fervent and energetic in my life in the church.

The people in the world are the ones who really have no hope, and they're the ones who really would have a good reason to be gloomy and depressed. Think about it for yourself, isn't this true that if you would take Christ out of your life, that you would join all of the people in their hopelessness? They don't have any hope in their money. They don't have any hope in their fame. They don't have any hope in the pleasures of the world that they are enjoying. He wasn't very prominent but last week the news reports did report on the fact that a retired major league baseball player at one time, a millionaire, very famous, had committed suicide because he had no hope without Christ. You and I know that Jesus is reigning and that he will go on reigning until he comes again.

So we are instant, continuing in prayer. I'm going to go over that quickly but note this is the way that we seek the kingdom of heaven, and here's an opportunity for the elders when they come into your homes to ask you what is your outlook on life? Are you looking at the present in light of the future and the coming of Jesus Christ? Are you continuing in prayer, seeking the things of the kingdom of heaven or are you seeking the

things here below? And if so, no wonder you may have some gloomy depressing things going on in outlook in your life.

Next in verse 13 the apostle says this is your life, "Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality." If you think that others are preferred in honor above you, others are better than you, it stands to reason that when someone has need you're going to say, "They deserve this. I'm going to give them out of the abundance that I have to help them." If you're proud like the Pharisees were in Jesus' day, you know what's interesting about that, when John the Baptist came and Jesus came and here you had these proud Pharisees and Sadducees rich maybe beyond what anyone here has in riches, and yet there were many people begging bread, many blind people on the roadside because the attitude of the Pharisees was, "We're doing pretty good. We're pretty much better than everybody else. All these other people are undeserving or deserving of their circumstances."

The believer must not think that way. Remember we look at everyone in Christ and we say this, "God gave liberally for me in my salvation and now when I think of a brother or sister in need, if I have opportunity and ability I will give for them." And perhaps you need, I don't know this, but perhaps you and I need a radical shift in our thinking. How many of us have only what we need? We have more? Why? Why did God give me more than I need, more money, more things? For me? That's the mindset in our country, isn't it? The word of God comes and says, "No, no, you have more than you need so that you can, first of all, care for the needs of the church and for others in the church. You have two coats? You have a brother who doesn't have one? I gave you that second coat so you can give it to him. You have more food than you need on your table? I gave you that extra food because if you have a brother or sister who doesn't have food, you can give it to them." Let's remember where it all comes from and why it's given. Not for us but for Christ and his kingdom.

Then we're to continue in hospitality which does refer to taking other people into our homes. That was very important in the early New Testament church when you had these itinerant preachers, evangelists, apostles, who were going from city to city preaching the gospel, very important that the brothers and sisters in the church open their homes to receive them, to support the work that they were doing. And that does apply to us today too. There ought to be a willingness to open our homes to one another. We are part of the family of God. Whatever we can do to increase our fellowship, our communion with one another we ought to be doing. But this doesn't apply only to having people in your home. There are going to be some of you who have exceptional gifts for that and some of you who maybe do not, but we can apply it generally this way: there needs to be a friendliness in the church of Christ. We're all of the same family so that we're open to have friendships with all of the members of the congregation. I'm going to come to that in a moment. No respecting persons. And the idea here then is this, even if you don't have people regularly to your home, don't be a loner. There's no room for that in the church. No room either for the attitude, "Well, I'm going to be a member of this church but I'm holding people at arm's length." No, you're part of the family of Christ. You want to

embrace the other members when you're thinking right and to have communion and fellowship with the other members of the family of God.

We're almost there, three more. Verse 14, "Bless them which persecute you: bless and curse not." That's going to fit in well in the second point coming up in a moment. What I will say here again is that this requires activity. It's not enough to say someone cursed me, someone did evil to me and I'm not going to respond. No, the Christian calling, and this is Christ-like, is I am going to do good. I'm going to bless those who curse me and do evil to me.

Then verse 15, "Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep." This might not sound very profound but, once again, notice how this is a showing an interest in others. The Apostle Paul did in Philippians 2 actually have to say that to the members of the church. You may not live in the church thinking only about yourself and saying everyone else and their lives and their problems, that's for them. No, if you're going to weep with others, you're going to need to know them, know when there are things going on in their lives when they are weeping. And then it's not enough to know that they're going through trouble but make yourself a part of their lives and weep with them, and then when they're rejoicing you're going to have to know them, know when they're rejoicing and make yourself a part of their lives and their rejoicing too.

Then finally the first point, "Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits." Lot of words but very simple. Be no respecter of persons. In fact, in the church of Christ things are really flipped around from the world. Instead of being attracted to and seeking out those who seem to be important, successful, whatever way you want to describe them, in the church of Christ those who are weak, those who are vulnerable, those who seem, and I use that word "seem," that's important, not that they actually are but they seem to us to be less important, they're the ones that we need to condescend to, they're the ones that we need to, to use the language of 1 Corinthians 12, bestow more honor upon.

I heard a man once, who I'm not sure if he was a Christian, say that if you want to test someone's character, look at how he or she treats someone who can do nothing for them. The Apostle Paul is saying that's really true biblically and spiritually. You want to know someone's spiritual character, you want to know how they're doing living the Christian life, look at that person and his behavior or her behavior in the church and ask not how they treat everyone else but how do they treat those who are of low degree, those who, you know, "If I talk to them or if I do something for them, there's no way that they're ever really going to be able to do anything for me."

Well, that's the way it ought to be in the church of Christ so that we are willing to befriend all the members of the family of Christ and even to look out for those who, "There's the one, there's the one who needs a friend. I will be that friend." And we look to Christ for that too, don't we? What could we do for him? We could do nothing for him and yet he came, as we were reminded this morning, while we were yet sinners and died for us.



There's a lot for us to do. Our calling is to be busy loving the other members of the church but now the second main thing that the apostle brings out in this text is the power that living in love has to overcome evil, and there's two things that I want to cover briefly in that tonight. First of all, what does this involve? The question here is what do you and what do I need to do to overcome evil with good? And it starts out simply with the first part of verse 17, "Recompense to no man evil for evil." If someone does evil to you, harms you and you respond with evil, you are not overcoming evil with good, obviously not, but you have been overcome with evil yourself.

So the first thing if you ask the question, "What am I to do so that I, by my actions, can overcome evil?" The first thing is don't respond with evil. And now you can apply that to all kinds of situations in the school, in the home, and here in the congregation. If someone does something to you, this is like the Sermon on the Mount, they strike you on the cheek, you don't strike them back, you don't repay evil for evil. And notice that there's no conditions here. The Apostle Paul does not give us an exception clause. "You may not repay evil for evil except..." Well, it's understanding if this person in the church did this to you or this person in your home did this to you. No, this is a blanket command covering every situation; someone outside the church or someone inside the church does evil to you, you don't repay them.

Then the positive comes in verses 17, the last part of verse 17 and 18, "Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." Now we covered that a little bit when the apostle said, "Now don't curse those who curse you but bless those who curse you," and the idea is that it's not enough for you to say, especially now in the church, "If someone hurts me I'm just going to avoid them." Right? "At least when he hit me, I didn't hit him back." No, you're called actively to pursue peace, to seek to love and to care for that other person especially in the church.

To use the Old Testament example that you can find in Exodus 23, the requirement of the word of God is this, if you have the opportunity to help your enemy, you must love him and do so. Here I'll quote from Exodus 23:4, "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again." Do you understand that? It's not enough to say, "I see my enemy's animal going away and I'm not going to take it for myself, and I'm not going to go shoot it, put it to death. I'm just going to leave it alone." No, God says this is your conduct as a member of Israel in the Old Testament and as a member of the church in the New Testament, you go, you get your enemy's animal and you bring it back to him. In this way you overcome evil with good.

It's not hard to understand, very hard to do, of course. Whatever is done to you, you say this, "I am going to do good to the other members of the body of Christ." And that means that good will triumph. Now we have to explain that. How can you expect good to triumph when you seek to overcome evil with good? Can you expect this? Can you expect that those who do evil to you might be pricked? Might see their sin and might confess, might reconcile with you and live in peace? Yes, that is something that the word of God holds before you and me as a possibility.

1 Peter 3 the believing wife is told, "If you have an unbelieving husband be kind to him, be submissive to him, act as a godly wife must do and it may be that you will win your husband to Christ." That ought to be our desire in our relationships, every one of them. There isn't a single person especially in the church or in the world that you can say, "Do you know what my goal is? My goal is to beat that man, my goal is to put that woman down, my goal is to destroy his reputation." No, the requirement here is this, "I'm going to turn the other cheek not only but I'm going to do as much as in me lies to do good to promote this person and maybe God will use me as a means to bring this person to Christ and salvation."

Now that's not guaranteed. It may be that when you do good to someone who's done evil to you, that they do more evil to you. Indeed as you show kindness to this person, this person may use your acts of kindness as a Christian as more opportunity to take advantage of you. There are people who look at Christians that way. "They're dupes. They're fools. They're easy targets. They'll give you the shirt off their back. And after you've stolen that shirt from them, they'll maybe give you another shirt off their back until they don't have anymore shirts anymore. You can take advantage of these Christians." But then you and I need to recognize that that does not mean that we as Christians are being defeated when people, evil people in the world take advantage of us because we walk by faith not sight.

I'm sure that to the people of the world who think this way, it looks like we as Christians are being defeated. Evil is overcome by good. But then we put our faith in the word of God which says here in verse 19, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." You believe Jesus is coming, don't you? You believe that he is a righteous Lord and Judge, don't you? The Lord doesn't say simply this, just grin and bear it, but he says that as a believer you may look forward to the future even with regard to this, all of the corruption, all of the evil that is done in this world, all of the evil people who live impenitently in sin, you may have this confidence and assurance, they will get what they deserve from the Lord.

So there may be no seeking of individual retribution of revenge against those who do evil to us. Now maybe it's in place here to mention that right away now in chapter 13 the Apostle Paul is going to say God does minister vengeance through the state, through the civil government, that's not evil when the civil government takes hold of someone who does evil and punishes him, but remember God does not give that right to you and me as individuals. We must wait upon the Lord and then know this, the Lord says, Because this is true, because I am the one who takes vengeance and will punish those who do evil, therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him, if he thirst give him drink, for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." That's not a goal that we have, that we're going about seeking to bring about the further condemnation of our enemies, but it is an assurance that we have from the word of God, know this, you're not fools, you're not dupes as you live in love even for your enemies. They may be taking advantage of you

now but in eternity they will have the condemnation, the defeat, you will have the victory in Jesus Christ.

So be not overcome of evil but overcome evil with good. What a beautiful thing. Do you see that? If that becomes characteristic of this congregation, this isn't a congregation of gossip and backbiting and slander and repaying evil for evil, but a congregation of people who say, "No matter what, for Christ's sake I will love and do good to my brothers and sisters in this family." That's a high calling. It's a hard calling. It requires great energy. It requires great patience. Why does the Lord call us to overcome evil with good? Because this is the reality, isn't it, that we live in a congregation where there are sinful people, including myself. We live in a congregation where there are going to be people who do evil to me, and there are people who do evil to me such that I am going to be tempted to repay them that evil with evil.

And so true is that, that if you're like me you're wondering how is it ever possible for me to live in charity in love in the midst of the body of Christ? The whole passage maybe not explicitly but by implication is pointing us to the power of the word of God. The Apostle Paul does not here in this text come up with anything on his own saying, "This is how you're to live as the people of God." As we saw in verse 19 where he literally says, "It is written," he is quoting from the Old Testament, so as you study the Old Testament, as you study the ministry and the teachings of Christ, you will see that the Apostle Paul is basically setting the word of God before the Roman congregation and before you and me. So when you ask the question, "How am I ever going to live up to the standard that God calls me to live in this text?" The answer is only by the power of God through his word.

That's the importance of the preaching of the word, you know? The Lord Jesus Christ doesn't come in the preaching of the word and simply lay demands before you and say, "Now you go and do that." But the Lord Jesus Christ through the word that is preached gives you the power to obey his commands. This is the importance of reading the Bible, the word of God, every day as a family and as individuals. How are you going to know what it is to live according to the will of God and to offer your life a sacrifice of obedience to God if you don't know the will of God that's found in his word?

So there are some serious questions for the elders to discuss with you this year in family visitation. Do you love Christ without hypocrisy? Do you know the love of God in Jesus Christ for you? Is that what drives you in all your thinking, in all your activities, everything you do in your life outside of the church but also in your life in the church? Do you really want to show to God your gratitude for the great gift he's given you in his Son? Then here's practically the question, "What does this word mean to you? And what role does the word of God play in your life?" And yes, the elders would be wise if they're asking how things are going spiritually in your home, to find out what your relationship is to the truth of God's word.

Then let me end with this, don't be distracted from the word of God as it very plainly lays out your calling as a Christian. Don't misunderstand me, I don't mean to say that living the Christian life is an easy thing. It requires the grace of God. But there is a certain sense

in which understanding the calling that we have as Christians is not complicated. Do you know you're a sinner in need of salvation through Christ? Do you believe that God has given you that salvation? That's all you need to focus on. It's all you need to focus on. Don't make it complicated. Don't make it complicated by looking at the circumstances of your life and saying, "Well, I'm going to respond to this. I'm having this trouble in my life and therefore I'm not really sure what I should do today or what I should do tomorrow." Don't look at the troubles in the church and the denomination for even in your own congregation that you've gone through recently and say, "That's where my struggle is. I really don't know what to do today, tomorrow, in response to that." Don't look at other people. Don't say, "Well, I have a real interest in knowing how they can do better living according to the will of God." Don't look at the elders and the other members of the church, decisions that they have made, things that they have done, things that may not have done that you don't approve of but stand before God and say, "It's really pretty simple. My calling today is the same as it was yesterday, to love God and to love the members of the church." And if you make that your focus, know things may not start going your way in everything that happens in the church or in your life, the problems that you think need to be solved won't be solved necessarily in the way you want them to be solved, those problems are in the hands of God and he will solve them in his time. Your troubles won't go away but if you make this your focus, "Each day I'm going to respond to the grace of God and the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ," you will enjoy peace and happiness in your life together as a congregation. May God grant his grace. Amen.

*Father in heaven, grant that thy word may indeed be a living power in our heart, apply that word to us by thy Holy Spirit that we may put into practice what we have heard in what is set before us quite clearly and plainly by the Apostle Paul. Give to parents who lead their children the ability to teach these things and to exemplify them to their children and give to the office-bearers, especially the elders, the grace that they need also both to teach and to set an example in the midst of the congregation. Lord, deliver us from all self-centeredness, pride, hypocrisy, and grant unto us true love for thee and for one another. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*