

August 30, 2026

Romans 12:9-21 “Pretending or Becoming”

Okay, this is the last week we get to spend in the book of Romans before we shift over to Matthew next week. Wow. What a ride. Even though I didn't plan this ahead of time, we visited Romans quite a bit during Bible study too! A lot of folks in the Bible scholar community say it's a “theologically dense epistle.” No kidding. It has for sure been a challenge for me. We've dealt with grace, faith, salvation, Jews and Gentiles, the law, God's faithfulness, God's mercy, and plenty of other theological matters. But it wasn't until chapter 12 that Paul *finally* started talking about what it means to live all of this in our daily life!

Last week we heard Paul say: “Offer yourselves to God as a living sacrifices.” And, “Do not conform yourselves to the patterns of this world but let God transform you by the renewing of your minds.” And now, in the second half of this chapter, Paul is describing what a renewed life *looks* like. And honestly? It's a pretty beautiful list. Let love be genuine. Honor one another. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of others. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't repay evil for evil. And then, at the end, he gives us this remarkable little summary: **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

I love that. Because notice what Paul is mostly talking about here. He's not giving us a long list of things we're supposed to stop doing. He's talking about things we're supposed to **do**. Practice love, honor, hope, peace, generosity and hospitality. Have patience. Engage in prayer. Bless others. Live a life marked by peace and goodness. In fact, if you read this passage carefully, there are a *lot* more positive instructions than negative ones.

But even some of the negative ones point us toward something positive like, “Don't repay evil with evil.” Okay. What should we do instead? **Overcome evil with good.** “Don't curse people who persecute you.”

What should we do instead? **Bless them.** “Don't take revenge.” What should we do instead? **Feed your enemy if they're hungry. Give them something to drink if they're thirsty.**

But Paul isn't simply describing a Christian life with fewer bad things in it. He's describing a life that is **overflowing with good things.** And that makes me wonder: **What if this is what the church became known for?** What if when people saw a person who they *suspected* was a Christian, the first things that came to mind weren't the things Christians are against? Oh, they don't believe in ... let's pull from the old-timey Baptist playbook – *dancing*. What if they thought: “Christians? Oh, those are the people who are always showing up for others.” “Those are the people who welcome strangers.” “Those are the people who are patient when things get difficult.” “Those are the people who forgive.” “Those are the people who seem to have hope even when things aren't going well.” “Those are the people who don't seem to need enemies.” Wouldn't that be something? Do you think this is what most people think today when they see someone who represents the dominant expression of the Christian faith these days? What if we became known more for what we're **for** rather than what we're **against**? Oh, and by the way, this *was* what the church was known for in the early days. Around 197 CE, historian and theologian Tertullian of Carthage wrote that the Romans often said, “see how they love one another” when they described Christ's followers. 20 centuries later? Mmm ... maybe not so much.

I think that's part of what Paul is getting at here. And it's not just Paul. If you've spent any time reading the Sermon on the Mount, you'll recognize Jesus' words. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Jesus teaches us to respond to hatred differently. Paul says, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they're thirsty, give them something to drink.” And both Jesus and Paul are describing something more radical than simply “being nice.” They're describing **a different way of being human.** A different way of responding to the world. A different way of responding to suffering. A

different way of responding to people who hurt us or who disagree with us. A different way of responding even to our enemies. And that brings us back to what Paul said last week: “Do not conform yourselves to the patterns of this world but let God transform you by the renewing of your minds.”

Because here's the problem. It's one thing to read this list and say, “Yeah. That's a good idea.” It's another thing entirely to actually *live* this way. I mean, I can get behind “rejoice in hope.” I can get behind “practice hospitality.” I'm pretty comfortable with “contribute to the needs of others.” But “bless those who persecute you?” “If your enemy is hungry, feed him?” “Do not repay evil for evil?” That's getting personal.

And here's where I think we can misunderstand what Paul is saying. If this is simply Paul telling us, “Try harder. Be nicer. Be more patient. Stop being so petty. Don't get revenge. Be a better person,” then I'm not sure where the good news is. That sounds exhausting. That's not transformation. That's just behavior modification. It's just trying to make the outside of our lives *look* Christian while what's inside of us is still fighting the same old battles. But Paul isn't talking about *pretending* to be this kind of person. He's talking about **becoming** this kind of person. And there's a difference. That's what he means by the renewing of our minds. That's what God is doing *in* us.

And that's why grace matters. We don't become people of love and mercy and patience and forgiveness by gritting our teeth and just trying harder. We surrender ourselves to the God who is already at work transforming us. There may be real changes that happen quickly when we begin following Jesus. But most of the time, transformation is a process. It's learning to let go.

Jesus talked about this when he said that if we try desperately to hold onto our lives, we'll lose them—but if we're willing to let go, we'll find them. And I think there's a lot of truth in that. We cling to anger because it feels *safer* than forgiveness. We cling to resentment because letting go

can feel like losing. We cling to superiority because humility makes us vulnerable. We cling to revenge because we think somebody has to pay. We cling to the things that hurt us because, in some weird way, they have become part of who we are. And Jesus says: **Let go.** Trust God enough to let go.

The greatest obstacle to our freedom is often our tendency to stay attached to our chains. But when we begin to let go—when we surrender those things to God—that's when transformation can begin. Now, that doesn't mean there's no work for us to do. There is. But our work isn't to manufacture the transformation. Our work is to cooperate with it. To pay attention to what God is doing in us. To be honest about where we are. To notice the places where we're still being shaped by the old ways of the world. And to bring those things to God.

So I'd like to try something with this passage. Instead of reading Paul's words as a list of things you're supposed to do, try hearing them as a picture of the person God is making you into. Imagine what it would sound like if you put Paul's words in the first person. What if you said, *I am* a person who rejoices in hope. I am patient during suffering. *I* persevere in prayer. I contribute to the needs of others. I practice hospitality. I bless those who persecute me and I ... *try* not to curse. I am not conceited or haughty. I associate with the lowly. I do not claim to be wiser than I am. I do not repay evil for evil. I overcome evil with good.

Now, maybe some of those things felt natural. And maybe some of them made you think, “Well...not yet.” That's okay. Actually, that's important. Don't beat yourself up over the places where you're not quite there yet. But don't hide them, either. Bring them to God. “God, this is where *I am*. *This* is where I want to be. So help me get from here to there.” That's what transformation looks like. And we don't have to do it alone. That's another thing I think is easy to miss when we read this passage. Paul isn't writing to a bunch of isolated individuals. He's writing to a **church**. A community. People who are learning together how to live differently. Because we *become who we are* partly through the people around us.

When we practice patience with one another, patience becomes more natural. When we practice hospitality, hospitality becomes part of our culture. When we forgive instead of retaliating, forgiveness becomes the norm. When we bless instead of curse, blessing becomes part of who we are. When we care for the stranger, the stranger *stops being* a stranger. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, something begins to happen. We become a little community that lives by a different set of values. A little **colony of the culture of God.**

A place where people can come and experience a different way of being human. A place where our motives and actions are genuine. And maybe that's what the church is supposed to be. Not just a group of people who can tell you what they're against. But a people who have learned to say **yes** to the things of God. Yes to love. Yes to mercy. Yes to hospitality. Yes to forgiveness. Yes to peace. Yes to hope. Yes to generosity. Yes even to the difficult work of loving our enemies. And the more we live that way, the more we begin to look like Jesus. And maybe—just maybe—when people encounter the church, they won't say, "Well, it's clear what *those* Christians are against." Maybe they'll experience something that makes them say: **"Yes. That's the kind of life I want, too."**