

Loving the City

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[0 : 00] We're in a series on Romans chapter 12, nearing the end of it, but we're in a mini series within our series on verses 9 to 21.

And it's a mini series because from 9 to 21, it's all about love. So we're looking at love for four weeks. We started last week. And last week, we looked at what love is, so defining love. And now, this week, next two weeks, we're going to look at where you can love and how you can love. So getting into more specifics that Paul gives us here. And this week, we're going to think about loving our city, loving the city.

Now it's not a secret at all to anybody here that people in Edinburgh, in many places, many cities across the Western world, look at Christianity in different ways.

Some people are very antagonistic towards Christianity. They look at Christianity and they say it's a white-centered religion where the Bible condones slavery and all sorts of other things that we know are now wrong.

[1 : 04] And so they hate Christianity. And there's other people who are intrigued by it and look at it and say, actually, Christianity gives us a great moral foundation, but we now know that the historical Jesus is different from the Jesus of the myth of the gospel.

So there's people who really don't like it and people who like it but don't want to accept Jesus as what he said he is. And then there's people who are, and I think this is the most overwhelming category by far, completely indifferent.

So they just don't care either way. They think Christianity is not something that's very relevant for the modern world. It helped create the beauty of Edinburgh, but it's not something that matters that much to people's lives today.

There's a temptation as we live in the 21st century through the plight of the modern West for the church to do one or two things in the face of these types of reactions to Christianity.

On the one hand, we, some of us are tempted by our personalities to go in the offensive to say, you know, I'm going to fight for the truth. I'm going to stand up. I'm going to get people to see that this really is real.

[2 : 12] And so you go on Twitter and you're constantly posting proofs of the resurrection or something like that, you know, to really fight for the truth. On the other hand, your personality might drive you to say it's time to batten down the hatches, hide, build the institutional church's walls up, and stay away and kind of hold out until things get better.

You know, just say we've lost the West and we need to protect ourselves. And depending on everybody's personality, we probably tend in one of the other directions.

In the book of Acts, you look across it and you have this fundamental question being asked. What do you do when the culture, when your city rejects you?

And then what do you do when your culture or your city accepts you as a Christian? And Paul in his actions in the book of Acts and his words in Romans 12 gives you the answer.

So he says, if you're in an age where Christianity is largely being rejected or if you're in an age or in a place where Christianity is largely being accepted, you still do the same thing.

[3 : 22] And he says the answer is you love. You go forth and love, no matter what. No matter if you're being accepted or rejected, you go forth and love. It's not a fight mentality or a flee mentality, but a love mentality is the way that Paul cuts through that division, that temptation that we face.

And so in the first century, Christianity had emerged into these Greco-Roman cities all over the place. And they're really in some ways like ours today, like Edinburgh today, where overwhelmingly most people do not know about Christianity and have not encountered it in meaningful ways.

And the Christians in the first century were finding their feet and we're sort of back to that again, finding our feet. And the Christians in the first century said, how do we relate to the government? How do we relate to the city? How do we relate to the people? And Paul kept saying, look, no matter what, the answer is always going to be fundamentally a posture of love, a posture of love. So let's think about that today.

You love, we're called to love wherever we are, whatever place we're called to love the city. Two things to learn. First, the fact that love is our calling.

[4 : 31] And then secondly, two ways Paul's going to teach us to do that here. So first, the fact that love really is our calling when we go out from this place today. So the fact of love.

Now we read from verse nine to 21, this long list of imperatives, commands, ethics of the Christian life, all grounded in the concept of love. And you might look back through that and say, I don't see a single word about the city.

You say that the theme here is love the city. That's not what Paul says anywhere in these verses. That sounds like a very contemporary preacher, just trying to make it about the city in some way. Sort of. But it really is there. Actually the commentators, the New Testament scholars, talk about how there's this pattern through this list of commands from nine to 21.

It's a pattern without hard boundaries, a lot of overlap, but it's really there. Let me show it to you. Verse nine, he says, let your love be genuine.

[5 : 31] We looked at that last week. And then if you jump to verse 10, he says, now love one another with brotherly affection. There's a unity in those two commands, but there's also a division.

And the unity is that he's talking about love, but the commentators will say in the first command, let your love be genuine. He's saying agape, gift-giving love, that's the word he uses, to everybody. Let your love be genuine to everybody, including non-Christians, anybody that you might encounter, no matter what they believe in, what they think, what their political persuasion might be. Then he turns and says, and love with brotherly affection.

And in that second command, verse 10, he has shifted his audience. Now he's talking about the love that you give to the Christians, to the church. And he changes the word. It goes from agape to philostorgae in Greek.

And that second word, philoh, like Philadelphia brother, the city of brotherly love, the phil at the beginning, means brotherly, but storgae is a type of love. So he says, in other words, love everybody, love the city with gift-giving, God-like love, no matter what.

[6 : 39] And when it comes to the people in the church, love them like family. Storgae is the Greek word for loving people like you love your children, loving people like you love your spouse, loving people like you love your parents.

He says, when you're inside the church, you love like it's family. Outside the church, you gift-give, you go forth in agape. So he's talking about loving the city, everybody, and loving that it takes place inside the church.

We'll do inside the church next week. But you can see that there is this pattern, and it goes throughout the entire rest of the passage, where some of the commands are very clearly talking about your life in the city.

Some are talking about your life, your ethic in the church. And the big picture, you can basically get the message here, which is Paul is saying, go into the world and love people like God loved you so that strangers become part of the family of God.

So that you can shift people from just general agape love into family-like love. That's actually the movement that we're looking for. And let me just show you that division a couple more times. You can see it in verses 12 and 13.

[7 : 43] Rejoice and hope, be patient and tribulation. You're going to be out in the world, out in the city, facing all sorts of hard things in life. That's a command for the type of love you've got to have underneath when you face anything, being rejected.

You can see it again, verse 14, bless those who persecute you. He's talking about life in the city. Verse 19 and 20, verse 19, beloved, never avenge yourselves.

He's talking about a relationship to people that are not Christians there. But then you can go through and see verse 13, contribute to the needs of the saints, show hospitality. He's talking about life inside the church there.

So he's doing this split. There's no hard boundary. All the ethics overlap. We want to show hospitality in and outside the church. But he's talking about loving how to love the city and how to love the church back and forth here throughout verses 9 to 21.

Now, the lesson's simple. In the early church, again, Christians were asking, what do I do in relation to the city around me? How do I live?

[8 : 45] Do we go form our own cities? Do we hide in enclaves? These were the questions that early Christians were really having to answer. And the apostles looked backwards to the Old Testament and remembered what God said to the people of Israel when they were in the midst of Babylon in the book of Jeremiah.

He said, your number one goal while you're living in Babylon is seek her peace and prosperity. He says, you actually have been sent to this place. Not, we'll come back to this simply to build a great church, but to build a great city, to be a part of the greatness of the city, to seek her peace and prosperity, to be sent out.

And the way that you do that is through love. You see that in the book of Acts, they went straight, you know, where did they go? They went straight to Marcell in Athens. They went right to the heart of the city and they stayed over and over again implanted and said, we are here to seek the peace and prosperity of the city in love.

In Acts 11, Barnabas went to the most important city in the Eastern Empire, Antioch. And he stayed there and he lived in it and he poured his life out in it.

People were coming to Christ left and right and he did not plant a mega church. And instead in his mission of love, he realized my mission is not to build a great church, but to be a great church for the city that I live in.

[10 : 10] And that was the heartbeat to go out and love, love, love, right? To be for the place that you exist in, not just to build a great institution. You see what Paul, let me, we'll move on, but you see what Paul doesn't do here?

Paul in this list of commands gives not a word about ministry forms, right? So what's a ministry form? A ministry form is the concrete way you actually enact ministry.

You worship, you sing, you preach, you teach, all these things you pray, or you say, we're going to go start a homeless shelter. And when you think about things like that, you say, well, maybe we should, maybe we shouldn't.

Where are we? Does this really fit? Are there other ministries doing this better than we're ever going to do it? Where you say, we're going to fight human trafficking, very important ministry, but are we the right people to do that and how, or can we get involved in other people doing it?

Or you say, you know, I personally am going to go push against unethical forms of business practices within my workplace. These are all ministries that can all take shape in different ways.

[11 : 15] And you've got to ask, why am I doing this, for what reason, does it make sense? Is it the right application of love in whatever context I'm in? You see, these are ministry forms.

And ministry forms have to be tailored to exactly where you are, the city you're living in, the neighborhood you're living in. They're important. Absolutely. Paul does not say a word about ministry forms.

Not at all. He says instead, he says, this is not a how to do it guide, but a how to be guide, a how to go forth into the world in the person you need to be.

In other words, we said last week that love is the gatekeeper of the gifts. Love is the gatekeeper of all ministry forms. He's saying the posture you need when you go into the world, how to be is deeply rooted in love when you enact anything, whether it's a homeless shelter or street preaching or bringing a meal to your neighbor.

Love is more fundamental than any of the actions that might take place. He's giving us a how to be a posture guide here. All right, so let's think about that. Secondly, finally, only two points.

[12 : 23] We're almost done. The posture that love takes, he gives us two. He gives us a lot more than two.

We'll come back to more next week. But let me just highlight two. They are humility and chaplaincy. Okay, humility and chaplaincy. Look at each briefly.

Verse 16, you can see him say it halfway down. He says, do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. He's saying when you go out into the city, do not be haughty, associate yourself with the lowly and never be wise in your own sight.

So interesting, if you jump back up to verse three, if you have a Bible, you can see that he says, by the grace given to me, I say to all of you, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

Now in verse three, he was talking about fighting your pride within the church body. So he's saying, you might have a really great ministry gift within the church. You ought not to think too much of yourself.

[13:23] You come down to verse 16 and it seems like he's talking about humility outside the body when you go out into the world. And he's saying, also, when you go to the world, don't think of yourself very highly either, associate with the lowly.

Don't be haughty at all. But now he's talking here about humility and humility is the trait of a supernaturally changed heart.

In other words, very important, love, love is not vague. Love is vague. The word love is incredibly vague. But when you come to the Bible, what you find out is that love is not vague.

Love is not an emotion primarily. It's not a mere affection. When the Bible treats love, and we defined it last week, it says that love takes up very concrete forms.

We said last week, love is selfless affection and concern for the ultimate good of another for God's sake. And you see, when you take the first part of that definition, love is selfless concern for another's ultimate good.

[14:28] You just say, that's just the definition of humility, selfless, self-sacrificial concern for somebody else's good. That's just humility.

And you see, when you come to 1 Corinthians 13, which is the parallel passage to this, what does Paul say? He says, you know, love is sort of vague. And so let me explain it to you. He says, love is patience.

Love is kindness. Love is not boasting but being humble. You see, love is an affection, but love actually takes shape in the virtues.

You say, what do you see love? You see it in humility. What do you see love? You see it in being patient. What do you see love? You see it in kindness. It takes concrete form when we are humble. And humility across the Bible is by far and away the most important of a trait of a supernaturally changed heart.

Paul uses just a couple of things here. Paul uses the word haughty, which is a word for high self-regard. It's a word that connotes either being, you know, thinking you're taller than you are.

[15:33] I don't have that problem. Or it can mean being overinflated like a balloon. That's the connotation. So he says, you know, some of us, we do, we all struggle with being overinflated.

Our ego is being overinflated like a balloon. And it's got the sense of having your chest poked out, you know, you men walking around thinking you're big and fit with your chest poked out, that classic image of the 19th century ultimate macho man or something.

These are the words that Paul actually uses to give you an image, kind of a cartoonish picture that you've been puffed up and made taller, something like that. And he says, actually, that is the natural condition of the human heart to think of your ego in that way, to actually be always thinking of yourself comparing, trying to see, am I better than people around me?

It's just natural competitiveness. And then he says, don't think that you're wise in your own sight. And he says in your own sight, because pride has the tendency in a cartoonish way to constantly look at itself.

You know, he says, don't ever think you're wise in your own sight. In other words, stop looking at yourself so much. And so you get this cartoonish image of, you know, of a man with his chest puffed out and standing on his tiptoes and walking down Princess Street looking at his reflection on all the windows.

[16:52] That's the cartoon image that he's giving here. And he's saying, well, that's abstract. It's cartoonish. Let me make it more concrete when it comes to loving the city.

One of the ways we could show pride towards the city is that we look at Edinburgh. We look at the world. We look at the West in particular. And we say something like, you know, look what's going on out there.

It's an absolute mess. The moral decline. You know, I wish I would have lived in the golden age, in the better age. And you know, the state of the world these days, and we lament, we have a posture of sadness, anger towards the declineism, but actually what's really going on deep down in our

hearts is spiritual pride.

What's really going on is that we've forgotten the gospel because we've forgotten, we've forgotten that there is no one worse than me, that besides the grace of God, oh boy, what about me? What would I be like? You know, it's a spiritual pride. It's a puffed upness to be competing with the world and saying, we've got to batten down the hatches because the good guys are in here and the bad guys are out there.

[18:06] And we have a tendency towards that, and that's actually spiritual pride. And there's a couple problems with it, not only pride, but one of the problems is it's just actually not always true. So decline narratives, just a brief aside, decline narratives are always very complicated.

And for example, Christianity is growing, not declining. And in 2030, there will be more Christians in China than the United States of America.

And in 2050, there will be 40% of all world Christians in sub-Saharan Africa. Christianity is diversifying, spreading like wildfire. Because you know that there are four times as many Christians on planet Earth today than there were in 1920.

From 1920 to 2020, Christian professions quadrupled. Christianity is not declining, it's growing. And so these decline narratives can be really complex.

But at the same time, we know that maybe where we live, whether it's Edinburgh or somewhere in the West, we do see decline of Christian professions, household professions, changes in the sense of the moral order.

[19:12] And Paul is coming and saying, you know what, if it's going really well, go forth to your city in love. If it's going really badly, go forth into your city in love and do the exact same things no matter where you are.

And he's saying ultimately that the posture of humility is just simply to say, I go forth in love because I know I was loved. I was first loved. In other words, he's saying, you know, a Christian in their right mind, a Christian in our right gospel-centered mind can never say the good guys are in here and the bad guys are out there.

And instead, when we look at the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, we have to say, my sins, they are many and His mercy is more, you know, He came for me when I was totally unlovable and He loved me to the end.

And so if you see the gospel, if you've experienced the gospel, it pokes a hole right in that balloon that's been inflated in the middle of the heart, especially in how we relate to the city.

Jeremiah said, God said to Jeremiah, seek her peace and prosperity. We are here to actually build a great city, not a great church, but to be a great church for the city.

[20:26] That's actually the Christian calling. All right, let me apply it in one way and we have to move to the last thing because we're running out of time. How do you know if you're growing like this? If you're growing in love, manifest in real humility, real humility before people that are not like you at all.

One of the ways is that you look in your life for the freedom to serve. In other words, the freedom of self-forgetfulness, the freedom of self-forgetful service.

Do you have it? Do you notice yourself more and more since you became a Christian, serving people and loving people without thinking about it as much?

So, C.S. Lewis talks about it like this. At the end of *Mirror Christianity*, he says, don't imagine that if you meet a really humble person that they will be like what most people think of as humble nowadays.

This man, if it's a man, will not be a person who is always telling you that, of course, I'm a nobody. Probably all you'll think about him is that he seemed cheerful, intelligent maybe.

[21:32] But really, he took a real interest in what you said to him. If you dislike him, it'll probably be because you feel a little envious of anyone that seems to enjoy life that easily.

He will not be thinking about humility. He will not be thinking about himself at all. He'll be thinking about you. And so, you see, he says the mark of true humility is not that you have, that your balloon's been popped.

You don't have an inflated ego, but you do have a really low self-esteem. You say, you know, I'm a nobody. He says, actually, the mark of humility is just self-forgetfulness. It's just to think of yourself less and less and less.

It's just to forget about your own ego. And that means that you will have the freedom to just go and love on other people. All right, lastly and briefly, Paul gives us one more posture here.

And if we have the posture of humility, if we're thinking less of self, more of others, then that's going to lead very finally to chaplaincy, to being a chaplain. All right, what do I mean by that?

[22 : 34] A couple commands Paul gives. Verse 14, he says, bless those who persecute you. Bless them. Do not curse them. Verse 15, he says, rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. So we can only look at those two as we close. Verse 14, the scholars say that when he says, bless those who persecute you, you can read into that, pray God's blessing on those who persecute you or curse you.

So Paul says, if anybody tries to hurt you in this life, pray God's blessing for them. Go into the world, into the city, and no matter in what way somebody opposes you, mistreats you, doesn't like you, at minimum, you're called to actually pray for them.

Pray God's blessing over them. And so, very simple application. When you go forth having experienced the love of Christ in the gospel, you love because he first loved you, that simply teaches us that we've got to be respectful, loving, and kind even with people who oppose us the most.

No matter what it's about. In other words, Christians have got to take the lead in this world, in the modern West, and putting away any sense of demonizing the other, demonizing people for their views, for what they think, for what they say.

[23 : 59] Jesus Christ had every right to demonize me in you. And he came and became deep. He went to hell for me and for you. And so, we're sent out into this city to never demonize anybody, but to love them right through the midst of whatever it is that they're struggling with, going through doing.

He says, bless those who persecute you. If they curse you, don't curse them back. Actually pray for God's blessing upon them. I think this becomes really concrete in John 13, in the foot washing episode with Jesus.

It says, John gives one of my favorite lines in the Bible, having loved his own, Jesus loved them to the end. And so, he knelt down and he washed their dirty stinky feet.

And remember, he washed their feet in the first century household like a slave, and he told them, go in the world and do likewise. He told them, love me as I have just loved you.

Remember whose feet he was washing? One of those men was Judas. He got down on his knees and he washed Judas' feet, and Judas went out that night and betrayed him.

[25 : 08] And one of those people was Peter, and one of those people were all the other disciples that ran away from him. Oh boy, they didn't like him, they didn't love him, they betrayed him, and he got down and he loved them to the end.

He washed their feet and he says, now go and do likewise. Down in verse 20, I'll move on, but verse 20, if your enemy is hungry, if the person who hates you the most is hungry, he says, feed him.

Meet his needs, meet that person's needs in your life. He takes it that far, no matter what. Now who is it that you're loving like this in your life?

Who is it that you're praying for in your life like this? And one of the ways to maybe say, okay look, I don't know that this is present in my ministry in the city, simple love, caring for people's needs, loving them no matter what, no matter how much of a jerk they are.

One of the ways to think about it is sometimes what you can do is just pick your neighborhood, your street, your block of flats, your workplace.

[26 : 17] Maybe it's through hobbies, sports that you play. You probably can't focus on all of them, you're very busy, but what you can do is say, you know what, we're going to actually make this group of flats the place where we love people the most.

We're going to make these people that are part of this hobby we love, the people we focus on and love the most. You've got to actually do that. Have you done that? Think about doing that.

That's one way to get started in this. Last thing, verse, not only verse 14, but verse 15, he says, rejoice with rejoicing, weep with the weeping. All right, remember humility is selfless interest in another person's ultimate good.

Chaplaincy, this is the word we're using, chaplaincy, being a chaplain. You know, if you've got a posture of humility and you go out and you say, I love because he first loved me, he went to the

cross for me, you'll naturally become a chaplain.

What's a chaplain? A chaplain is a person that people come to in the midst of crisis. Every single human being, we talked about it last week, we have need love.

[27 : 25] We're needy creatures. We need to hear somebody say, we need to hear God say, I know you to the bottom and I love you to the sky and everybody in your people around you in your neighborhood, no matter how what they might think of you or you think they think of you, everybody needs a relationship in their life, a friend who loves them and knows them simultaneously.

And Paul says to the church, when you go into the city, you've got to be able to be a person that can rejoice with the rejoicing, weep with the weeping, be a chaplain, be a person that can celebrate with the celebrating and cry tears with those who are broken over something in their life.

That's chaplaincy. And when you're living a public honest faith, never pushy with a radically humble posture in whatever community you've decided to pursue, chaplaincy naturally arises.

And when chaplaincy arises and people come to you in crisis, that's when gospel conversation really starts to take shape and happen. People need to be known and loved.

That's ultimately what Paul is saying and that's actually our calling in command. All right, the point of it all, the point, here it is, provocatively, Paul is saying to us that the point of loving the people of our city is not to create gospel conversation.

[28 : 57] You see that? You say, what, well, here it is. There's a way of having a posture as a Christian that says, you know, I know that Matthew 28, I'm meant to go out into the world and make disciples.

And so I'll go out and I'll be nice and I'll bring a meal to my neighbor. But ultimately, my goal is evangelism. And Paul is actually saying, no, you've got it completely backwards.

The goal of loving people is not to get to gospel conversations. You know, in that posture, you say, you know, I only love people until I can actually say what I need to say.

And then I'll remember that that guy was a jerk to me and we're done. You know, that that might be an approach if you get this backwards. But in the Old Testament and the New Testament, you know what God does? He keeps saving Israel over and over again and he keeps saving the people of the nations over and over again and he comes in Jesus Christ and saves us.

And in Deuteronomy 9, it all is clear. They say, he says, don't ever think that I've come to save you because you're great or for any other reason than this.

[30 : 06] I love you because I love you because I love you because I love you because I love you. And that's it. Love is the beginning and love is the end. And that means that you don't love people to tell them about the gospel.

You tell them about the gospel because you love them all the way to the end. And Jesus Christ in John 13 says, I love you to the end. He didn't go to the cross and say, job done.

Now I'm done with him. I did my duty. No, the cross was because he loved us at the beginning and is loving us today and will love us all the way to the end.

Another way to say it is we don't need friendship evangelism. No, not at all. We need loving friendship, loving friendship between Christians and non-Christians, and loving friendship evangelizes.

You see, the gospel will come up when you love people. And so what kind of a community do we need to be to help someone say in this city, perhaps God's love is real and better than the forms of love I've been chasing?

[31 : 09] What do we need to be, what kind of people, to help somebody see the love of Christ is better than life itself? And Paul says, you need humility above all.

Let's ask for it. Lord, we ask for humility above all. So give us the posture of love that pops the balloon in our chest, but also doesn't send us down the road of low self-esteem, but just help us forget about ourselves and to go forth in the way that Christ forgot about himself when he loved us to the end, when he took up the cross for us.

So help us to be lovers of our city in all the right ways and give us a posture of true humility and service. Forgive us, Lord, we are not these people. I'm not this person.

So we preach and talk like this and read like this and say, I've never met this person. Shape us and make us. Help us to have little steps towards this.

So help us to love people so much that we do want to share the gospel. And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.