

Radical Love

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're going to go back and look at this passage today, Romans chapter 12 from verse 9 to verse 21.

For those of you who are visiting with us today, we have just taken up again our study of this book, this letter, of Paul to the Roman church, a foundational letter, a really significant letter in all that it says.

And we've looked at the first eleven chapters in 2018 and in 2019, we're pushing towards the end of this letter.

And this is the more practical end of the book. The first eleven chapters have been kind of meaty theology, and we've seen how important that is as a foundation to bring us to practical Christian living.

So we're looking at this section. I'll be dipping into last week, okay? So I'm really sorry if you weren't here last week, because you'll not know what I've been saying, but I'm really sorry if you were here last week, because then I'm going to be repeating myself.

[1 : 0 9] But hopefully it'll be meaningful, because it's all really one section, even though we're dividing... It's divided by chapters and by headings and everything else.

So okay, I'm going to ask you a question, a rhetorical, you don't need to answer. Every morning, every morning, what is one of the first things you do?

I guarantee, oh, at least 99% of you here do the same thing every morning. Maybe not immediately you get out of bed, but I guarantee before you come up the stairs, every single one of us will have looked in the mirror.

We will have. We will have looked in the mirror, wouldn't we? You look in the mirror. That's one of the things we do when we get up. We look in the mirror. We go to the bathroom, we look in the mirror. It's a good thing to do.

It's good to remind yourself of who you are first thing in the morning. It stops you from being delusional about your looks. You may have been dreaming about how gloriously beautiful or handsome you were all night, and then you get up in the morning and you look at yourself in the mirror, and it brings you back down to earth.

[2 : 2 0] And it may be that you'll need a hairbrush, in some cases, maybe not, but you may need a hairbrush, but you certainly can't get an airbrush when you look at yourself in the morning, okay?

You can't change your looks. That's what you are. That's what you see every morning when you get up. And that's a good thing. That's a good practice to look at yourself. I think we all do that. We all look ourselves in the mirror in the morning.

And you know, the great thing about the Bible as well, God's living Word, is that it is a mirror into our being. It's a mirror where we see ourselves and we see who we are, who we really are.

We see our true selves as we come face to face with the living God through His book, through Jesus Christ as He's revealed in the world.

And that's a great thing because unlike the mirror we look at in the morning, which just is a reflection of us, what we are on the surface, the Bible takes us way beyond the surface of what we look like physically, and it reminds us of who we are inherently as people.

[3 : 26] And the message of God's Word is always that our true self has been lost because of sin and because of rebellion against God. And it is lost until Jesus Christ rescues and redeems us.

You know, that's one... We always keep that from... It's that... That's why we have the Bible. That's why we encourage the spiritual disciplines as believers of looking at the Bible, the Word of God, the Person of Jesus, praying every day because it's fundamental to us, just like looking in the mirror every morning.

It's really important that we're looking in the mirror of Scripture regularly. I don't think this Word would ever come from this pulpit. It's our daily mirror.

It's a different one. Okay, but it should be our spiritual daily mirror if we can talk in these terms. I know that seems like an oxymoron, but it's something that we should look at every single day because it reminds us, it gives us the perspective of who we are and the world in which we live and how we respond to that.

Because of the brokenness of the world and because of sin that enters the world in the world in which we live, there is for you and there is for me and there is for the world an identity crisis.

[4 : 46] That's at the very core of our reality is that our identity is in crisis as we have turned our backs on God.

That's the reality of our ongoing lives. If we turn our back on God, we have an identity crisis because we're facing the wrong way from our Father.

No amount of motivational quotes can change that. No amount of telling us how good and how significant we are in ourselves will turn that around.

You'll find that increasingly, don't you, on social media, all these meaningful memes that tell us to look out for and to look after ourselves and just to look into ourselves and trust in ourselves and that's where we find that identity.

Note to self, you've got to do this for you. This is for you. This isn't about anyone. Live for you, honour you, never lose sight of that.

[5 : 49] Or put yourself at the top of your to-do list every single day and the rest will fall into place. You've all read them. We've seen them all the time. There's these motivational quotes that tell us how to live and tell us just to love ourselves and to find our identity in ourselves.

The trouble with that is that it's fraudulent and it's mistaken and we are left in a crisis if we will not turn round and reckon who we are before our Creator that we were speaking about, before the living God.

Just like we're living in a spiritual hall of mirrors. It's a bit old-fashioned now because of technology and everything else, but used to walk into places with a hall of mirrors that were distorted and so you kind of have really fat, stumpy legs and enormous long back and a wide head or whatever it was until I realised that was a normal one for me.

But that's how it is, isn't it? You go in and it distorts everything and it makes it look crazy. Our broken image as we face, or we're not facing God, it's a distorted view that we receive and have of ourselves.

And so you have, I guess you've got a spectrum really. At one end of the spectrum of that identity crisis is where people will say, I hate myself.

[7 : 14] I really hate myself and I need to find some kind of other people to love me and their opinions are so important that no amount of motivational jargon makes me feel better.

I just try and find my security and my acceptance through other people and what they think of me and that leaves us insecure, tense, fearing, losing other people's love, unwilling to challenge people in case we upset them in any kind of way, a dishonesty, a people pleasing, a vulnerability, a passive tendency to be abused.

That's at one end of the spectrum where we just hate ourselves. But maybe the other end of that spectrum of our identity crisis is I love myself. I absolutely love myself and I don't really need other people.

I'm first-centered and proud, but ultimately enslaving and abusing and we see relationships as purely functional, what we can get from them.

Pleasure's everything because we're at the center and it's about putting ourselves first. But that ends up on that end of the spectrum and the dissatisfaction and uncontrollable appetites and addictions and loneliness.

[8 : 30] So you've got two very extreme identity crises and we're probably all somewhere in the middle, naturally. Some are just not quite right, hating ourselves or loving ourselves in ways that are not facing who we are before the living God.

So our identity, our secure identity can only ever be as Christians in Jesus Christ. And that's what this passage is about.

It's founded, and I'm going back here to the first section of chapter 12 that looked, it's founded on God's mercy. Remember we looked at that last week? That the first to lift that huge massive section of theology could be summarized by saying God's mercies, God's grace, God's goodness to us.

That is what our identity is founded in. It's in founded in the work, the love and the work, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We're created and loved by God our Father through Jesus Christ, our Savior.

And that's where we learn our identity. That's where we find our identity. And that's where we learn to love ourselves properly.

[9 : 42] Love ourselves properly. We're broken sinners healed by His love. And that's the key, isn't it? That's the key that we looked at last week that we could see that we are more sinful than we could ever have imagined, but we are more loved in Christ as we put our faith and trust in Him than we could ever dream of.

And that's where our identity lies. And that's what helps us. Remember last week we looked at not thinking too highly of ourselves, but with sober reflection.

That's what gives us the right attitude and the right identity. Not too low. We're not scum of the earth, not too high.

The world revolves around me. But just right. It's not about self-loathing or about self-loving. It's recognizing and seeing that we are God's children as we are redeemed and as we trust in Him and put our faith in Him.

So we, to meet with the faith that we've been given, we measured ourselves against grace. Lost sinners like everyone else before God. So don't point the finger at other people and think you're better than them.

[10 : 58] And we mustn't do that. Lost sinners before a holy God, but also justified and loved as we have come to God through Christ.

So my friends today as Christians, you have nothing to prove. You're already accepted. You have nothing to prove to anyone. You're free to serve.

We to serve God and others because it's the purest expression of God's grace in our lives. And it's the fullest expression of our true humanity as we serve others and as we love others and as we give ourselves to others, because that's really the theme of this section.

And we see that even, I think, even in society in common grace when things, when people see that that is a beautiful way to live. I watched an advert this week.

It was on social media, but it was from Norway, a Norwegian ad. I don't know if anyone saw it. It's been kind of going around the social media outlets. It's an advert to encourage and promote fostering.

[12 : 04] So it's a little blonde boy in a classroom with 30 other kids around him. And it's lunchtime. And they all take out their packed lunches that they're going to eat at the table.

And he opens his packed lunch box and there's nothing in it. And everyone else has full packed lunch boxes. And he's embarrassed by this. And so he asks to be excused. He leaves the room so he could go to the bathroom and drink, drinking water because he doesn't get anything to eat.

So he takes his drink of drinking water and then he comes back to the classroom to sit rather embarrassed while everyone else is eating. And he's about to put his sandwich, his lunch box away in his bag and he feels it's a bit heavier.

And he looks around and he opens it and it's full of food, grapes and sandwiches and chocolate. It's absolutely full. And of course all the kids around about them are kind of pretending not to look but they're smiling quietly because while he's been out of the room, everyone's given a little bit from their packed lunch to his and put it in.

And it's just a story of common grace and it's a story of the beauty of sharing and recognizing that and it's in a very simple way, it speaks of the kind of heart motivation that we should have in our Christian lives.

[13 : 22] We serve others. We serve God and we serve others. Not as a way to feel valuable, not as an enabler or a codependent, but we serve because we are valuable.

We serve because our identity is in the one who has served us and who has given himself for us and who has died in our place. It's not about being needed or never being able to say no.

It's about recognizing that this is an action and this is a life of beauty to serve. It reflects who we are.

And so our identity in Christ, I'm going to just talk about that briefly, our identity in Christ, oh I said that briefly word. Sorry, you'll not get that unless you were at the wedding yesterday.

I was accused of saying briefly by someone and then going on to speak for ages. So ministers, habits, that's what they do.

[14 : 22] So our identity in Christ is fixed and we love because we are first love. We don't think ourselves too highly that we love. But how then, so really what I'm trying to get to today and I've taken an awful and an ordinarily long time to get to it.

How then do we live as we love Christ? How do you go from here and live your life because of who Christ is? And that's really what this section, following on from the previous section is all about.

We remember that our identity is founded in God's mercy and that's the home where we belong. That's where we belong in Christ. And that place of belonging enables us then to serve in the world in which we live.

You know what you're like at home? You feel at home. It's a great place to be. And when you understand who you are in Christ, it's a great place to be because it affects every single relationship that you have.

And so we're going to look briefly at concentric circles, having a right attitude to ourselves which means we have a right attitude to other Christians, which means we have a right attitude to everyone, which means we have a right attitude to our enemies.

[15 : 40] And that's very important as we think of that. So as love in our life must be genuine, so we need to have that right attitude to our faith first.

Love, he says in verse 9, must be sincere. Let love be sincere, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. So that's really where the sober reflection comes in in your Christian life.

What kind of relationship do you have with Christ? Is it one where you've accepted His grace and it's not phony? There's nothing hypocritical. As you look in the mirror of Scripture, do you understand what loving Him looks like?

The love that we are to share. It's to be genuine. It's to be sincere. It's unhyprocritical. You're not to be, you're not to have a veneer of pleasantness, but inwardly you're seething other people and you're raging against them.

And it's not a blind love of other people. It's a love that hates sin in ourselves and other people because it destroys us and it clings to God's good.

[16 : 52] Let love be genuine, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. So it's having this understanding, first of ourselves, that in Christ there's no pretence.

You can't put on a show with God. You can't hide from Him. There needs to be that sincerity that you know your own heart, that you know that you're blacker and darker than you could ever imagine as He looks at you.

But you're more loved than you can ever dream of because of what He's done for you. And that is the sincerity that must be at the basis of how we go from here and live our lives.

And then in this concentric circle, Paul goes on to say, then the way that then reflects how you act with other people, kind of verses 10 to 13. Love one another, will have affection, outdo one another in showing honour.

Don't be slothful in zeal, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, patience, and tribulation, constant in prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, seeking to show hospitality. Now, there's not hard and fast divisions here between the different groups, but fundamentally saying if you love Jesus Christ, then you will, in terms of your relationship with other Christians, you will, as Philippians 2 says, consider them better than yourself.

[18 : 15] So that's a great challenge to us this morning. You know, you've maybe not, and I wouldn't blame you for not having listened thus far, because it's been a bit ramby, but how would you describe yourself as a member of this church, as someone who's in this church?

Would these few verses that I've just read, verses 10 to 13, would they describe you? Would they describe me? Is that the way we think of other Christians, here or in other places?

And I'm not saying, I'm not saying read these verses and say, well, I know some people that don't live like that or think like that in the church. I know people that are just critical and not hospitable and don't rejoice in hope and are certainly not fervent in spirit.

I'm not asking for that. I'm saying, how does that reflect our understanding of who we are and our attitude and relationship to other Christians?

He's saying here, you are family. That's the word that's used. He's saying, you're family, love one another with brotherly affection.

[19 : 21] It's a phrase that's speaking about family love. You have spiritual blood ties with one another.

We value one another above it. That's quite the attitude, isn't it? We're saying other people above ourselves and we're to be, as you read these verses, I don't need to explain them, we're to be examples of servant-heartedness in this community.

It's really more than just turning up. It's about being a community for Jesus Christ as we live our lives and we're to reflect on the zeal, joy, hope, patience and commitment in prayer.

We're to share with those who are in need together and we're to become friends with the people you don't know. That's what it speaks about when it says showing hospitality.

I think I mentioned that recently here. Hospitality means the love of strangers. That's actually the meaning of the word, love of a stranger.

[20 : 33] We often mean hospitality, say, get our mates round. Have all the people we know and loving that are easy to be with. And it involves that, but it's more than that. It's broadening your circle of acquaintance and knowledge and friendship beyond just your mates to any within the Christian community.

And so they cease to be strangers and that's such a powerful testimony that we open our lives, open our hearts, open our homes.

Now, today's a connect meal day and there's still time to sign up. If you want to have bacon rolls at someone's house, there's three homes open today and there's details in the book.

It's a great way to build a relationship. So you've got this concentric circle, right attitude to ourselves, which then becomes reflected in the right attitude we have to other people, other Christians, first and foremost.

That's interesting because most of the problems in churches revolve around people and about division and separation. It's not often about theology, to be perfectly honest.

[21 : 41] It's usually about people. So there's that relationship with other Christians. Then he broadens it, I think, again, to not just Christians, but everybody, Christians and our friends and people around us.

He's blessed 14 to 17, blessed those who persecuted, blessed to not curse, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, live in harmony with one another, don't be hotty, associate with the lowly, never be wise in your own sight, don't repay evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

So you've got that, it does reflect our attitude to Christians, but to just generally, when you go from here and when you go into your life tomorrow, these are the kind of characteristics he wants from us.

We are to be a blessing. We're to bless those who persecut bless and don't curse. That's the acronym that's been used for the city groups, studies, is blessing.

You know that Abrahamic promise, that believers are to bless all the people of the earth, the be attitudes, the bringing of God's goodness, speaking well, conferring goodness into this world, being Christ-like.

[22 : 57] That's what we're to do. We're to be the conferring people. We are to confer blessing to our neighbors by being Christ-like with them in our workplace, in our place of study, particularly maybe those who have bad mouth to you or given you a hard time, those who give you a repose to you.

Just fundamentally speaks about being part of the world in which you live, being part of your community, and their highs and lows when they weep, when they laugh together.

You empathize and sympathize. Jesus really hated snobs and people who are snippy and proud. And so should we not hate them, but hate the attitude.

And we should never show that attitude ourselves, and we shouldn't show favoritism, there should be that honesty and openness and joy and love because we've been accepted undeservingly.

We are not worthless, but we are unworthy, and yet we've been accepted by Jesus. And that's hugely significant. And so we should be reflecting the living out shalom, living out the peace of the gospel in the world in which we live.

[24 : 09] We should reflect Jesus, not reflect the culture and the thinking of the world in which we live. That's really, really difficult. In fact, it's impossible.

And if you go out tomorrow without looking in the mirror spiritually, you'll not really understand who you are and who your identity is and how that impacts on your life.

So when you look physically at the mirror tomorrow morning, think of this, what we've been looking at. And remember that you need Christ with you in the day to reflect in the concentric circles.

There's one last concentric circle I think that he especially mentions, and that is your enemies, utterly and entirely radical and counter-cultural teaching, that as believers we have an attitude to those who wish evil to us that we wish good for them.

That is completely different. That is the opposite of revenge. Okay? Now admit it. If someone does the dirty on you, the initial reaction is we want to do the dirty back, because that's at the very heart of our being.

[25 : 30] We want to revenge, don't we? We want to get our own back. And yet Jesus says, if you've been the specific target of opposition as a Christian, people who wish you harm, and there's a real spiritual kind of underlying opposition here, maybe it's something unwarranted and irrational dislike to you as a believer.

You know, if anyone, beloved, never avenge yourself, but leave it to the wrath of God for his written vengeance, it's mine, I will repay his Lord to the contrary. If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he's thirsty, give him something to drink, for by sure doing you will keep burning coals.

They said, do not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. You see that? You see how utterly radical that is? That he says, don't seek revenge, don't wish people's destruction.

Now, we've said that, haven't we? I really wish they were dead. We probably didn't mean it, really. But we just wanted them away, or we would love to get our own back.

But we're never to repay the evil we've been shown with the same evil. We're not to stoop to mean words or tactics to get even, because that will only destroy us and provide a victory for darkness and evil.

[26 : 58] You know, I'm going to morph into a kori for a moment here and use it a lot to the ring's illustration. You know, the ring bearer, if the ring bearer tried to use the ring's power to defeat evil, it only brought evil into their experience.

You can't use evil to overcome evil. You can't use revenge to overcome those who have been violently opposed to you.

And that is our natural response. Why don't we respond, because on the cross that we're just very shortly going to remember, Christ has overcome evil with good.

He loves his enemies, and we were his enemies before we came to faith. And this is a fighting term, and it were to over, we're to wrestle, we're to fight good against evil, God's goodness and God's grace.

Because what does evil do? What does evil do in your life? You think, well, I'm not particularly evil, but okay, you may think that. But what does evil do? What's its fruit? Its fruit is division, separation, hostility and estrangement.

[28 : 12] That's what it always does. That's what it does relationally. It separates, it divides, it brings hostility and estrangement. And that anger and that division from within our hearts is an outworking of sin in our lives and in relationship with others and in relationship with God.

So when we repay the darkness of evil with feeding our enemies and with giving them something to drink and doing something good in their lives, then we are showing that what Christ has done in His power, we are living a different way.

It's a recognition of God's mercy. It's also a recognition, can I say, of God's justice. Because we're saying God will deal with those who work and live in a violent and oppressive and evil way.

God vengeance is mine, God says, I will repay. So, we do the very opposite of what every natural sinew of our body and mind might be straining towards, getting your own back, showing who's boss, being in charge, repaying evil with evil.

You submit to God, you leave things in His hands and you seek to do as much as it possible with us in every situation we are to seek to live at peace.

[29 : 52] What a difference that would make in our family. What a difference wouldn't it make in our churches? What a difference it would make in Edinburgh? What a difference it would make in the world we live in if that were the case.

And that is what Christ seeks to do in our lives. The key is that we love other people well, enemies or friends, whatever their circumstances, whatever their needs, whatever their behaviour towards you.

And that comes from having our identity grounded in Jesus Christ, that we are darker and more wicked than we ever imagined. Yet we are loved in Him as we come to Him in faith more than we could ever dream.

And that is where our identity is fixed. Keeps us from thinking too highly of ourselves but with sober reflection. And it is important because then it reflects how we live with one another.

Isn't that the key all the time? That we always want to find the faults with others, with God and with others.

[31 : 01] But grace changes everything so we find the answer with God and the need in our own hearts to be transformed and we leave others up to God but we love them.

And that's the gospel. And that is the hardest thing in the world. That's why we can't lightly say that we're Christians, nor can we lightly take part in the Lord's Supper as if it's some kind of ritual or some kind of cultural engagement.

We need to be these kind of people by grace. Marks of a true Christian. Our love needs to be genuine. Our faith, our profession, our testimony needs to be genuine before the living God.

Be the person, be the kind of Christian that looks in the mirror daily, spiritually, that looks to God, that sees Him, that rejoices, absolutely rejoices in the impossibility of grace and that He provides for us.

And that anything He asks of us, He enables us to do because He's given us a spirit. It's a remarkable salvation. And to be out of Christ is to be under the dominion of evil.

[32 : 15] Even if we don't feel that, it's to be under the dominion of death and darkness. And that is a truly desperate place to be because you're facing the wrong way.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, we ask and pray that you would guide us and that you would keep us and that you would show us your love and show us your grace.

We pray that we would understand a little bit more about what it means to belong to you and to have our faith grounded in you and to have that right opinion of ourselves that helps us to love other people, to love our fellow Christian like family, to love everyone around us just unconditionally and especially to love those who wish us and who do us harm.

It's a truly remarkable way to live and yet you, you example that in coming to be the Redeemer and you example that in your life again and again in the world, it wasn't that you sought acceptance because you had a low opinion of yourself or that you weren't willing to call out evil because you knew it's destructiveness but yet you still loved.

Maybe recognize that loving people isn't just always just being nice, it means being honest and a gracious and kind and gentle and respectful way.

[33 : 50] Warning about evil because evil is destructive and sin is destructive. Remind us of that in our own hearts and remind us of that in the depth of the relationships we seek to build with one another that are trusting and allow that honesty and that love to prevail.

Bless us Lord as we now celebrate the Lord's Supper. We thank you for the bread and the wine that is set before us as a reminder to us of your death and resurrection and promise of return.

Wonderful foundational truth. We thank you for it today. Amen.