

**Romans 12:14-21**  
**Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**God's Church Revealed**  
**Filled!**

**Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church**  
**Winchester, VA**  
**Pastor Paul Krueger**  
**February 24, 2019**

<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Virginia is for lovers. That unofficial motto of our lovely commonwealth is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. When you think about it, that's a pretty impressive feat for an advertising slogan. I think one of its endearing characteristics is that its meaning is rather vague. You can interpret it a number of ways. Virginia is for beach lovers. Virginia is for mountain lovers. Virginia is for history lovers. Whatever you love, the phrase suggests, you can find it in Virginia.

Today I'd like to suggest another slogan: God's Church is for Lovers. That's a sentiment which is nearly 2000 years old. Ever since Jesus first spoke to His disciples commanding them to love one another. And not just one another, in our Gospel lesson today (Luke 6:27-38) we heard His command to love even our enemies. It's clear that as God calls us into His Church, He is calling us to a life of love. But what does it mean, that Christians are to be loving? It might be nice to keep our understanding of that as vague as possible so that we can make it mean whatever we want, and I believe we are often guilty of doing just that.

But the Scriptures don't leave unclear what love is. There are a few places where God spells it out for us in considerable detail and our lesson from Romans is one of those places. Before we dig into it though I'd like to make an observation. This entire passage is law. It's God telling us what He expects of us—telling us what to do, how to live our lives to please Him. There's no mention of Jesus and His love for us. There's no gospel communicating what God has done for us. And that's what we get when we take 13 verses out of the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of a letter. But we can't just look at this passage alone. We have to consider it in context.

Chapter 12 starts out with the phrase, **in view of God's mercy**, and the first eleven chapters tell us all about that mercy. **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**

(Romans 3:23-24). **He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification** (Romans 4:25). **The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Romans 6:23). **Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death** (Romans 8:1-2).

The Apostle Paul didn't start by telling us what it means to love each other. He started by telling us what it means to be loved by Jesus, showing us what Jesus did for us, and assuring us of what that means for us eternally. So we want to look at this passage from Romans chapter 12 in view of God's mercy—with our love cup filled to the brim and to the point of overflowing, filled with the love our God has lavished on us through Jesus. Because we have been genuinely loved by our Savior, we can now genuinely love one another. What does that look like? Paul lays it out for us with 18 short little sentences. 18 simple rules on what genuine Christians love in action looks like.

**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.** Love is not simply an emotion that we feel or a pleasant something we say to one another. It is an ever-present, ongoing mindset and attitude which we have toward one another. It is a selfless commitment to other people to honor them and place their needs even before our own. And it may be surprising to hear the word *hate* mentioned in a section on love, but it's true, in order to be truly loving, we must hate that which stands in the face of love. In order to cling to Jesus and His gospel, we must hate sin, Satan, false teachings, and anything else that would threaten to separate us from Him.

**Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.** It takes energy to love. Loving others is wonderfully fulfilling but it is at the same time exhausting. In order to remain zealous toward loving others we need to stay in top spiritual condition. We do that by making regular use of the means God has provided to reenergize us and refuel us with His love: His Word and His Holy Supper. Strengthened by God's love we will find ourselves able to **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.**

**Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.** Love means sharing what we have to meet the needs of others. Maybe that's sharing some of our wealth, but maybe time, abilities, encouragement, or counsel. Maybe it's sharing once again the message of forgiveness with someone who is confessing their sins. Part of our loving commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ is to devote ourselves to finding out what their needs are and then doing whatever we can to help meet them.

True Christian love, however, doesn't stop at the doors of our church building here. God calls on us to show love not only to each other but to everyone. **Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** We do that by sympathizing with one another: **rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn.** We do it by **living in harmony with one another**, trying our utmost to get along with other people and not cause divisions. And we find that much easier to do when we are **not proud** or **conceited** thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to.

**As far as it depends on you, Paul says, live at peace with everyone.** But living at peace with someone doesn't just depend on one person. It takes two people to have a peaceful relationship. And when you as a member of God's Church show true love by hating what is evil

and clinging to what is good you are going to be met with opposition. In a world that has been led astray by Satan's lies, there will be many who hate you for holding forth the truths of Scripture. They may persecute you, ridicule you, visit evil upon you and your life. And what are we to do then? **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

Filled with Jesus' love, we are able to continue showing love even in the face of evil. Consider the example our Savior set for us on the cross. As He looked out at those who were crucifying Him, His prayer for them was not that the Father would smite them with ruin and destruction, but that He would forgive them (Luke 23:34). Jesus shows us what it looks like to bless those who persecute you, but He also enables us to do it. By connecting us to Himself through our Baptisms He instills us with His love making us a new creation. Through the good news of salvation which He gives us in His Word, He fills us with so much love that we are able to share it even with those who are not being loving to us.

He reminds us that even when evil people do evil things, He is still King. He is still just. And they will answer for what they have done. Carrying out retribution over sin is His prerogative, not ours. Ours is to be ambassadors of love, share the message of peace and forgiveness and reconciliation through Jesus.

By doing good to and sharing love with those who sin against us, Paul says we will **heap burning coals on their heads**. What does that mean? I don't think it's that difficult for us to understand. There is no greater example for us of someone who loves unconditionally than our Savior God. He loves me unconditionally. He loves you unconditionally. Far more than providing us with food and drink, He lived and died for us to provide us with everlasting salvation. You know this and so do I. And yet we sin against Him. That feeling when you've sinned against God and you consider His perfect love for you and your shameful, selfish acts of rebellion? That's burning coals heaped on your head. And yet He does not allow us to be overcome by evil, but rather overcomes evil with the goodness of His love. The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.

In the same way, by showing love when people act wickedly toward us, we give them cause to pause and think about their actions, it may even lead them to see that they were wrong, and then we have a perfect opportunity to share the good news with them that they too have forgiveness through Jesus their Savior.

God's Church is for Lovers. God loves you; He has redeemed you from sin; He has made you His child and given you an everlasting inheritance in heaven where You will live in His love forever. Take that news to heart, revisit it again and again, let it fill you up and overflow to everyone around you.

Amen.