

Romans 12:9-21 - 30 instructions

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[0 : 00] Hello everybody, the reading will be Romans 12 verses 9 through 21, page 1139.

! 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. Never lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

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. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath.

[1 : 13] 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. Great. Thank you, Zane, for reading for us.

It's going to help you if you can have a Bible open in front of you to follow along, so that you can see where we're going. We're going to work our way through that passage. I'm going to pray and ask for the Lord's help as we begin. Let me pray.

Heavenly Father, we do come this morning hungry to hear your voice from your words.

We long, Lord, that in the midst of all the different things that are going on in our lives, the things that trouble us and are on our minds right now, we want to pray that above the background noise of all of that, you would clearly speak to us from your words.

[2 : 17] Encourage us. Strengthen us. Help us. Speak words of grace and truth to us, we pray.

Help me as I speak. Pray that I'd speak clearly and faithfully, and that despite all of our weakness, that you would be honored and glorified. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Well, we're back in the book of Romans, having had a two week excursion into the book of John.

And we're back in these final few chapters as we're going to finish off the book just on our way up to the summer.

And what I hope that you might have noticed as Zane read the passage this morning is that what we've got this morning is just a long list of commands. There are 30 commands, depending on how you count it.

Some of them are very difficult and we're going to see that together later. But all we have here is a list of do this and don't do that. Now, maybe this morning you're new, you're new to church perhaps, and you're thinking, well, I knew this is what church was like.

I came to church this morning and I thought they are going to tell me I should do this and not do that and do this and not do that. That's exactly what I thought about Christians all my life, you might be thinking.

[3 : 30] Or maybe you're here this morning and you've come, you're a church member even, and you think, do you know what? Oh, just another list of unrealistic expectations for me to feel rubbish as a Christian about myself again.

Well, if that's you and you're thinking either of those things, well, and even if you're not, I'm going to start by trying to show you something really important about this list of instructions. And that is this, that none of these instructions are new.

None of them are new. Now, this might not be immediately obvious, but I think it is the key to understanding this passage, which is that what is here has been said before in the Bible. So these aren't 30 new instructions, but are 30 long established commands. And sometimes that's obvious, right, because the Old Testament reference is explicitly stated.

Look down at verse 19, for example, Paul says, for it is written. Okay, so he's obviously quoting the Old Testament. This is what has been written in the Old Testament.

[4 : 30] Then verse 20 is even inset and in quotations in our Bibles to show to you that that is an Old Testament quotation. But once you start digging into the list a bit, you find there's more than just that.

Let me give you a few examples. Amos chapter 5, verse 15 says, hate evil and love good. Which is pretty much what Paul directly says in verse 9, isn't it?

Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. In Psalm 97, verse 10, the psalmist says, let those who love the Lord hate evil. Again, that's what Paul is saying, isn't it?

In verse 9. Proverbs 3, verse 7 instructs us not to be wise in our own eyes. And in verse 16, Paul says, don't be wise in your own eyes.

It's translated by our NIVs, don't be conceited. But the words are the same. Don't be wise in your own eyes. In Psalm 138, verse 6, we find that though the Lord is exalted, he looks kindly on the lowly.

[5 : 31] In other words, God is a God who looks on kindly those with low position, which is what Paul says in verse 16. Verse 19 of our passage quotes both Proverbs 20, verse 22, which says, do not say I'll pay you back for this wrong.

Wait for the Lord and he will avenge. And Deuteronomy 32, verse 35, which says it's mine to avenge, I will repay. And then like I mentioned earlier, verse 20 is a direct quotation of Proverbs 25, verse 21, which reads, if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat.

If he's thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heat burning coals on his head. Now, what's the significance of that? What's the significance of this list being given in the Old Testament before?

How does it help us understand it? You know, is Paul here just flexing the fact that he is an Old Testament scholar with a long education? No, I don't think that's it at all. He's not even just run out of ideas.

So he started quoting either. That's not it. Rather, this is it. And this is the key to understanding what's going on here. Paul thinks that the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that he's been preaching for 11 chapters, that gospel of Jesus Christ enables obedience to the unchanging moral demands of the Old Testament.

[6 : 50] Let me say that again, right? Paul thinks that the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, salvation in his name, enables obedience to the unchanging moral demands of the Old Testament.

Let me try and explain why this is significant and how this works. Just think about how you put your whole Bible together, right? The Old Testament starts with Adam and Eve, okay?

Adam and Eve sin. They break God's law. They are excluded from the garden. They are put under the curse of God's judgment for their wickedness. All of humanity after them are under the same curse.

We all sin. We all die. But amazingly, in the midst of all that, God promises grace. He says, I will undo the fall, undo sin, conquer justice, save people, crush evil through the seed of a woman, he says.

So suddenly, in the midst of the garden, where all things have kind of fallen apart, still God promises grace and salvation, and it's brilliant. Zoom forward in the Old Testament, and then the Old Testament law is added to the promise in order to teach the promise.

[8 : 00] And it's given to Moses at Mount Sinai, and it's preached by the prophets. It's articulated by the wisdom literature in the Old Testament. And the law, as it's given, essentially outlines three things, okay?

One is how to run a nation. Two is how to run a temple. And the third is how to please God. And if you've read even a very small bit of the Old Testament, or can remember a bit of the Old Testament from school, you will know, won't you, that the Israelites are rubbish at all three of those things, yeah?

So the nation is sent into exile, it's defeated by foreign enemies. The temple is destroyed, and it's taken down brick by brick and burned. And all the moral commands of the Old Testament are broken, even by the kings and the priests.

And then you get to the New Testament. And it's not plan B in the New Testament, oh, goodness, that didn't work, so I'm going to send Jesus. No, it's not. Well, the Jesus comes as the fulfillment of all of those things.

So Jesus came to be the true king of God's people, which turned out to be the kingdom in his name and not a nation. He's born in the royal town of Bethlehem, like David, in the line of Judah, like the kings.

[9 : 10] And then Jesus says, I'm the temple as well. The temple is my body. You come to me to meet with God, you don't go to a building in Jerusalem, he says. And I'm going to be the sacrifice for sin that was made in the temple as well, as I give my life on the cross, he says.

So it's in him that we receive forgiveness. It's in him that we receive reconciliation with the God who made us. It's in him that we receive the promise of a place in his resurrection kingdom where sickness, death and sin are done away with.

The curse is crushed and Satan is crushed. In him we receive new life by the Spirit. Now think about it, right?

When Jesus does all of that and he gives new life by the Spirit, what is it then that that new life by the Spirit wants to do? Well, it doesn't rebuild the nation of Israel.

It doesn't rebuild the temple because the kingdom is in Jesus's name and the temple is Jesus. It doesn't seek to earn salvation. Jesus has done that.

[10 : 14] But it's not not interested in the Old Testament. It's really interested in the Old Testament because it really wants to keep God's moral commands. It really wants to love God and please God. Because instead this new life looks at the moral commands of God and goes, that's exactly what I want to be like.

That's who I want to be. That's what I want to live like. That's the goal. That's the roadmap. That's where the way I want to go. And it knows I'm not going to be able to do that in my own strength. Israel tried that and failed. But now I'm empowered by the Spirit to follow God's moral law. Let me try and illustrate how this works. Have you ever heard of Hypershell X?

Ever heard of Hypershell X? Perhaps you've not seen this. You'll all go away and try and buy this afterwards. Or maybe you'll even be looking at it while I'm speaking. But Hypershell X is one of those exoskeletons that's powered by AI.

So you strap it on and it enables you to do stuff that you could never have done before. So it enables you to run, climb, cycle, walk up things and down things and along things that you've never been able to before.

[11 : 17] It gives you power that you didn't have. It says on their website, this isn't just an exoskeleton. It's the power to rewrite your story.

Right? Sounds brilliant, doesn't it? Enables you to go further and do more. Now, in a way, that is Paul's claim with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives you both a new desire to please the Lord that you wouldn't have had on your own.

But alongside that, it also gives you the power to do that by the Spirit to please the Lord. Literally, the Spirit gives us the power to rewrite our stories, to go further and do more than we ever could do in our own strength.

And so Paul here is not inventing a list of moral commands. He has no need to do that. They already exist. Instead, he restates the moral instructions of the Old Testament with confidence that by the Spirit, his words are not wasted.

Because not in our strength, but in his strength, we will live like this. There was a Christian band called Fatfish in the early noughties.

[12 : 22] Probably some of you are too young to remember them. And the rest of you might not be cool enough to remember them. But anyway, do you remember, anyone remember a band called Fatfish? They wrote a song and it went like this. Okay? I'm not going to sing it. Don't worry.

I'm going to rap it. No, I'm not. It went like this. Run, run, run. The law, it beckons me, but it gives me no limbs. Fly, fly, fly.

The gospel bids to me and lovingly gives me some wings. So I will fly. That's it here. The law instructs you to run, but it gives you no means to do it.

The gospel invites you to fly and it gives you the wings to do it. And that's what Paul is saying here. Now I start there because we must keep this in mind because the truth is by nature, we are all hardwired, aren't we, when we read a list of commands to think, oh, okay, this is what I need to do to earn God's favor.

And some of us think we do that rather well and we get proud and others of us think we do it rather badly and we become discouraged. But that's not what this list is about at all. It's not doing this list that will save you.

[13 : 29] God in Christ has saved you if you've trusted in him. This is rather the description of the mountain that the spirit is enabling you to run up. I could never do that.

I could never be like that. It's obviously too steep. It's too high. I'm never going to be able to get up there. And the spirit says, no, I know you couldn't. That's why I'm here. Let's go.

Now I mentioned at the beginning that there are 30 commands. You might notice that 12 of them are related to the life of the church inside the church and 18 of them are related to life outside the church in the world.

So we're going to deal with them in those two blocks, right? The first 12 for church life and then 18 for life in the world. So 12 instructions to be a community of love. Look down at your Bibles and let me just read the commands to you again.

So you get a picture of the scale of the mountain. The spirit is inviting us to run up. Love sincerely. Hate what is evil. Cling or literally unite to what is good.

[14 : 28] Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never lack zeal. Keep spiritual fervor. Be joyful in hope. Patient in affliction. Faithful in prayer.

Share with Christians in need. Practice hospitality. That's some hill, isn't it? It's a steep mountain. But notice the theme. We looked at it with the kids. It's really the theme is love, isn't it?

Love must be sincere, says Paul at the beginning. Literally without hypocrisy. That is love in the church is not to be self-interested, but other person-centered. To say to someone, I love you.

When what you really mean is, I love what I get from you. Or I love what you do at church. That's not love. That's hypocrisy, says Paul. If you say you love the other, while loving yourself, it is not sincere.

And love must be sincere. In verse 10, you're told to devote yourself to one another in love. And the word devoted is really another form of the word love. It's really the sense here is you're to lovingly love.

[15 : 28] Lovingly love. And the love that you're to lovingly love with is literally a brotherly love. A family love. Now these instructions are so strong in the list that they almost work as a summary for everything that follows.

A family of love that is sincerely concerned for the other above itself. That's what church is to be like. And what does that look like in practice? Well, it hates evil in itself and in the church and in others.

It holds on to what is good. It's competitive in honoring one another. In verse 11, it's zealous for the Lord. It's earnest, eager to grow and see others disciplined with a spiritual fervor.

Literally, they're a boiling spirit, which is hot for serving the Lord and obeying him. In other words, church is not to be passive, right? Church is to be a discipleship machine where in love for one another, we are always seeking to push one another further on and further up.

I've not seen you at church for a few weeks. How are you doing? How have things been? How can I pray for you? Do you know what? I want you to know I am so thankful to God for you, for all that you do, for all that you are, for all that he's making you.

[16 : 34] You know, the way you prayed in church the other week, that was such a blessing to me. You put into words, words that I was feeling and thinking, but I couldn't have articulated them like that. I'm so thankful.

I just want you to know that you're doing a really good job of being steadfast in the Lord in this situation. I know life is really terribly difficult for you right now, but I can see the Spirit is helping you to keep going.

In verse 12, this discipleship machine is marked by joy, patience and prayer that doesn't give up. In verse 13, it's like a practical care which shares with those in need.

It doesn't just practice hospitality, literally it pursues hospitality. It's almost like, so hospitality invites the love of strangers, right? To pursue the love of strangers, it's like you're chasing them down.

Not waiting for them to land in your lap, but actively looking for them and finding them. So let me ask us, how are we getting on? It's a beautiful mountain, isn't it? But we're not supposed to be just looking at it, we're supposed to climb it.

[17 : 36] And we're not going to get to the top in our own strength, but still our effort is required. We are required to put in effort here. So how's it going? Are you still climbing?

Or have you stopped? Are you stuck somewhere? Do you need some help or encouragement? About 25 years ago now, I was involved in student ministry in the Midlands, the West Midlands, in fact.

And in the summers, a friend and I, we used to take groups of students climbing in the Welsh mountains. And the plan was, climb the mountains in the day, study the Bible at night, right? And we would work them hard in both areas, right? So we'd climb difficult mountains, and we'd push them hard in the Bible study. So the first thing that we would do is we'd drive from Birmingham to the foot of a mountain called Trifan.

And Trifan is not one of those mountains that you can just walk up. You have to scramble up it. You are literally using your hands and feet to get up. And it's not gentle. You come out of the car and you walk straight up it.

[18 : 39] So your calves are burning and you feel sick almost straight away. It's brilliant. And it's a real shock for all these young students who kind of think they're really super fit and healthy.

They get out of the car and they think, yeah, yeah, right. And then after about 20 minutes, they're all like beside themselves. I know this isn't what I signed up for. You didn't tell me it was going to be like this. Can we stop?

Do we really have to go all the way to the top? Now, I confess to you, I wasn't very good in those situations. My inclination, which is a weakness of mine, was just to tell them to stop moaning and get on with it.

But the guy that I was with was much better at inspiring people to carry on. Because the way to inspire people to carry on is not to shout at them, but is to show them just how far they've already come.

And how great it is that they've made it so far. Look down. Look where we've come from. Can you see the car that we left? It's like a little dot, isn't it? Look at the view up here.

[19 : 38] You can already look down on the RAF planes that are flying beneath us. Can you imagine what it will be like at the top? It's fantastic here, isn't it? And that's it here, right?

You might read this list and think there's loads of things that we could do better. I'm sure you're right. But look for a moment at where we are. Look at how you see love in our church. How you see what God by his spirit is doing here.

You can see people here who love one another, who care deeply for one another above themselves. That despite all their differences, they get as much joy out of the success of another as they do out of their own.

You look around, you can see church members who battle chronic pain with great patience and even joy. You can see the grieving who are continuing to hope in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You see how people reach out to one another. They include each other in their lives. They welcome strangers into their social circles. You know, are we perfect? We're not perfect, are we? Do we have further to go?

[20 : 40] Yes, of course we do. Might we stumble at times? Might even slip down the mountain a bit? Yeah, of course we will. Will it be better when we get further up the mountain? Of course it will be. Did we get here in our own strength?

No, we didn't. Will it be our strength that takes us further up? No, it won't. So keep your spirits boiling. Don't lack zeal. Press on and keep going and see what God will do.

Secondly, 18 instructions to face the world. In verse 14, Paul switches from talking of the life of the church to the family of brotherly love to how we interact with a wicked and hostile world.

And let me say, as we look at these 18 commands, that I know that these are hard commands. I know especially that for some of you, what I might have to say here as we look at these and we look at them honestly might trigger some of the really difficult situations that you personally have faced. Maybe some of the ways that people have really badly hurt you and treated you. If that's you this morning, please do bear with me. I am not trying to upset you. I want us to find grace and hope in these verses, not an extra burden to carry.

[21 : 52] I want to show you that the theme here is essentially for us to know our place. You might put it stay in our lane. Specifically, when it comes to our interactions with the world, we are to leave the mess of the world in the hands of the Lord and not take it on ourselves to fix.

See how this works with me. Paul's technique in a list of instructions is to emphasize things by repetition. You know, if you want someone to notice something, you need to say it more than once. And if you say it twice, people are more likely to notice.

If you say it three times, people really will notice. So if you have a look at verse 14, you'll see twice we're told to bless our persecutors. Bless those who persecute you.

Bless. And then it's further underlined by do not curse. So really what you've got is a triple instruction. Bless, bless, bless. And the idea is that that should jump out to you as an emphasis of Paul's.

In verse 21, the passage repeats the word overcome. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. And again, this repetition is meant to underline the same theme.

[23 : 04] When we encounter the wickedness of the world, we are to meet it with goodness. We're not to be squashed or destroyed by the evil, which is so prevalent and so close.

But we are to seek to squash it or overcome it with goodness. Not in our strength, but with the spirit's help. But there's another way in this list that you bring out the emphasis, not only just by repetition, but you also by grammar.

So you can use stronger words if you want to emphasize something. So you could tell the difference, couldn't you, if I said to you something like, do you know what?

I wouldn't touch the fire if I were you. I wouldn't do that if I were you. You could tell the difference between that instruction and the instruction that says, do not touch the fire. Right?

The second one is an emphasis because of the grammar of the words. One is a passive suggestion. The other is a command. And Paul has a command like that in verse 19, a full on command.

[24 : 04] Look at verse 19. 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.

And you might look at that and think that the shouted command there is don't take revenge. It's not. The command there is leave room. You might say, butt out.

Right? Butt out of trying to fix everything. Fixing everything is above your pay grade. You cannot hold the world to account. You cannot fix every evil. You cannot right every wrong.

That is God's job. God will do it and can do it. And you need to leave the room for him to do it. You can't do it and shouldn't try. Paul here is not cross, he's full of compassion.

The verse starts with the word beloved, which the NIV has translated later as dear friends, I think. Paul is deeply concerned for them. He wants them to understand in their suffering of injustice, endure and don't take revenge.

[25 : 09] Leave justice with the Lord. Now we'll see next week that he doesn't mean just let everything slide until judgment day. This is not an instruction for you not to phone the police if you've been mugged or an instruction to stay in abusive relationships.

God's wrath we'll find next week is not just future. It's worked out today in the authority structures that he has put in place in the world. There will be times in this world where you will need to phone the police.

You'll need to press charges. You'll need to blow the whistle. You'll need to run from abuse. But still your posture in those situations, even to those who have hurt you and wronged you, is not to pretend that you stand over them as their judge.

You are their witness. God is the judge. And if you get that wrong, if you get that dynamic wrong, it will not help you.

You need to leave room for God to do his job. So you can bless, you can forgive, you can overcome and not take revenge. You can, verse 20, feed your enemy.

[26 : 17] You can give them something to drink. Not to let them off, but actually the opposite, to heap the coals of God's judgment on them. Because God is a better and more thorough judge than we are.

Now, of course, this is not easy. I know enough of your stories in this room to know that many people in this room have been the subjects of terrible, terrible injustice.

