



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2005  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Romans chapter 12:9-21

**Attempting The Impossible**

1) The Impossible Dream for Human Life

Listen again to this: *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love...Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction...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...live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge...On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* (vv 9-10a, 12a,b, 13c, 14-16, 17a, 18b, 19a, 20a,b, 21). And we want to say, "If only...! If only...!" What a dream! What a wonderful dream for human life! It's just too good to be true. Everything in me longs for a world where men and women act like that. But we settle for lower ideals in life, don't we? Because a world like that seems beyond our grasp.

The greatest British philosopher of the last century, Lord Bertrand Russell, wrote in the prologue to his autobiography:

'Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and the unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair.

'I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of my life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one's shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss...

'With equal passion I have sought knowledge. I have wished to understand the hearts of men. I have wished to know why the stars shine. And I have tried to apprehend the Pythagorean power by which number holds sway above the flux. A little of this but not much, I have achieved. Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens.

'But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.'

We all know such passions, to some degree, and we all know what it is to settle for lower ideals in our lives, don't we? So we end up pursuing achievement, or relationships, or a career, or pleasure, or general niceness, or a half-hearted combination of them all. Because the transformed human life described here in Romans 12 is beyond us...unless...unless there is some vital ingredient we are missing.

## 2) The Vital Ingredient for Human Life

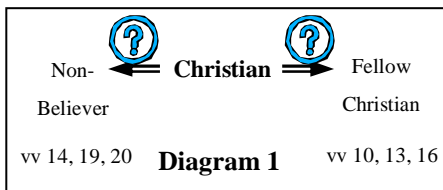
I am not much of a cook, and I am sure most here are far better in the kitchen than I, but you may have had the experience of leaving an essential ingredient out of a recipe by an oversight, and ending up with a dish that is a great disappointment. Perhaps it failed to rise because you left out the baking powder; or perhaps it looked right, but it proved to be completely tasteless. Some hidden, vital ingredient was missing. (Rest assured, if you ever come to the vicarage for a meal, I leave the cooking entirely in my wife's hands). Well, there is a hidden vital ingredient in Romans 12:9-21. And if we miss it, we've missed everything that matters in human life.

Remember again the general theme of the passage: ***Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*** (vv 9, 14, 17a, 21). It actually all sounds so bland, because I do not need to be told those things, do I? I know already that I should act like that. But how can I?

And the answer is the Grace of God. And Paul has spent 11 chapters of his letter explaining that grace to us—how ***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*** (5:8). And that, by His mercy, God has broken into our lives with forgiveness for our sins and new life through His Spirit.

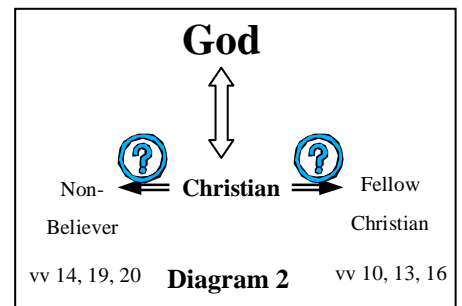
He began this chapter with verses 1 and 2: ***Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** Do you remember the balloon I used to illustrate that—you can't inflate it by pulling on the outside skin; there has to be a new pressure within: the mercy of God, new life in the Spirit.

All of Romans 12:9-21 only makes sense in that context, once that ingredient is added to the mix. If that is still a puzzle to you, don't give up! But acknowledge you've got to come to terms with the grace of God first.



Commentators on this passage struggle to decide whether Paul is talking about the Christian's relationship to other believers or to non-believers (those inside or outside the church) [Diagram 1]. Some verses seem to look in one direction; some in the other. But I don't think the horizontal dimension was at the front of Paul's mind at all. I think it was

the vertical dimension [Diagram 2]. There are only little hints of this in the passage: ***serving the Lord...faithful in prayer...Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord*** (vv 11c, 12c, 19). But there is a wider context to all this. We're looking at 13 verses out of a 16 page letter, and we must bring the rest of the letter to bear on these few verses. And it makes all the difference—the vital hidden ingredient of grace.



## 3 Working it out in Practice

***Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good*** (v 9). This is not mere moralism. This is not Confucius providing some wise sayings for the ethical guidance of the human race in general. This is the grace of God breaking into the life of the Christian believer. So why must love be sincere (verse 9)? Because that is how God loves us. (To understand how we are to behave we look upward [diagram 2].) And why in the rest of that verse is a command to love followed immediately by a command to hate? Because God is of purer eyes that to behold evil and cannot look on wrong (Habakkuk 1:13). So our love can never be mere sentimentality, a warm feeling toward another person; it must be coupled to God's holy hatred of evil.

***Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves*** (v 10). Because God in Jesus humbled Himself to death on a cross, putting our interests before His own life, He has made us His brothers, members of His family. It is extraordinary what sacrifices family members will make for one

another—think of those photographs coming out of the Pakistani earthquake this week.

***Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord*** (v 11). The only way we will respond to God as He deserved, with an appropriate zeal, is when we keep our eyes on what He has done for us and not on what we should be doing for Him. [How often on the sports field is ‘keeping your eye on the ball’ vital. How do those footballers do it? With their amazing ability to keep their eye on the ball while they weave through their opponents—Sean Wright-Phillips, Wayne Rooney, Michael Owen. And the moment they take their eye off the ball they get dispossessed, don’t they? For the Christian it is not a leather ball: it is what God in His grace has done for us.

***Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer*** (v 12). To do that we need to keep our eye on God’s destination for our lives and this world. [Remember that long distance swimmer—Florence Chadwick who gave up some huge sea swim just a couple of hundred yards short—because there was a thick mist and she couldn’t see the shore. She came back on a clear day and did it easily].

***Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality*** (v 13). We need to remember God’s extraordinary generosity to us. Paul is not advocating a pleasant social experience among friends (the showpiece dinner party), but to use our homes for the sake of the gospel. Have we begun to do that? Or are they our own little castles?

***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*** (vv 14-16). There is only one way into that sort of behaviour. Think Jesus: think what He gave up to live among us. Think how He conducted Himself. I am not a great one for Fish symbols and bumper stickers and Christian lapel badges and those sorts of things. But I have to say that those bracelets with ‘WWJD’ on them carry the best bit of ethical guidance anyone of us could ask for. I cannot ask myself a better question in any life situation than “What would Jesus do?”—the complete man, who revealed true greatness to us by dying in the place of sinners.

And we will never come to grips with the final verses of this passage unless we remember Jesus. ***Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody*** (v 17). (Not what they think is right; but what is actually right, done in front of them: in other words, live out the gospel before them). ***If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone*** (v 18) And remember, for Jesus, it was not possible: they put Him to death. ***Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord*** (v 19). Again we remember Jesus at the cross Who did not retaliate, but entrusted Himself to the One Who judges justly. But the instinct to get even is almost impossibly strong in the human heart. From time to time I come across a situation in a family where someone is saying, “I’ll never forgive. I just can’t forgive him or her. I can’t find it in me”—and no—we won’t ever find it IN US. Not to behave in that way, the way of the world. We have to find it...in Jesus. ***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”*** (v 20). It is not quite certain what that final expression means, but in the context it cannot be vindictive. By treating our enemy in this way we are demonstrating to him the reality of both God’s love and God’s judgement as far as we are concerned, in a manner that may convince him of their truth for him as well. It must have some sense like that.

***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*** (v 21). This is not to ignore, not to resign ourselves to it, not to rise above it; not to defeat it by force. It is to overcome it. Where in Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism or Confucianism or Communism or humanism or agnosticism, do you find a moral precept like this? ***Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*** (v 21). “As if!” the world of men retorts, “As if!” Is it possible? In the early 1970s I hear a man speak just across the road behind me in Christ’s College Chapel. He was Pastor Richard Wurmbrandt from Romania and he had spent 16 years in solitary confinement in Communist jails, and he told us this story of the persecuted Church from those days in Romania: A small boy with a bunch of flowers was shown into the office of the commandant of a Communist prison camp, and he said, “Today is Mother’s Day and every year on Mother’s Day I go to the market and buy some flowers to give to my mother. But she was imprisoned last year for being a Christian

and she died here in your prison camp. And so this year I have no one to give my flowers to, so I have brought them here for you, to give to your wife.” And he handed him the flowers. The world cannot answer that, but it saw the end of that atheistic Communist regime.

I began by quoting from Bertrand Russell’s autobiography. T.S. Elliot’s widow used to tell a story about him. She said her husband got into a tax cab in London once and the cabbie said, “you’re T.S. Elliot” (a writer and poet well-known at the time) and T.S. Elliot said, “how did you recognise me?” “Oh,” said the man, “I’ve got an eye for a celebrity. Only the other day I picked up Bertrand Russell, and I said, ‘Lord Russell, what is it all about then...what is it all about then?’ And do you know? He couldn’t tell me!”

If there’s no God (as Bertrand Russell believed there wasn’t), then this teaching we’ve been studying is nonsense. It’s impossible idealism. It’s an impossible dream for you and me. But, if there is the God revealed to us in Jesus, then it is how we are meant to live, by—and only by—the grace of God.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*