

PM Romans 12:9-21 The Impossible Commandments? Part 2

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 October 2023

Preacher: Mr Michael Topple

[0 : 00] We still know that I am God, says the Lord, and as we turn once more to his word, we do remember that God is the Lord, and that his word must be treated carefully, because in it we find the words of everlasting life.

And so, it is my prayer that as we continue our study in the letter to the Romans, this may be so. Now this morning in our sermon, we explored verses 9 through to 14 of our reading from Romans chapter 12.

In it, we considered how our love should be genuine, how our relationships within the church should be as relationships within a family, how our spirits should be constantly on the boil, ready to bubble over, how our hope should be set in the Lord Jesus, allowing us to overcome all things.

Through him who strengthens us. How our kindness and hospitality should lead us to serve others, even when we ourselves are going without. And how our spirits should be spirits of blessing and not cursing.

When said like that, it does sound almost unattainable, and we mentioned that as well. Hence the title of my sermons, The Impossible Commandments, with the question mark.

[1 : 24] However, I hope we were also able to consider just how much work God puts in to help us attain this. After all, we can only hope to achieve these things if we rest fully in the Lord and lean on his understanding and not our own.

So this evening, we will continue our journey through this passage, taking the second half as our source of teaching. And it's my prayer that the Lord would enable us to see that in the second portion, as much as the first, we can trust in his providential grace to help us achieve these things through him.

And so we begin at verse 15. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Aha, I can hear you saying. Perhaps this is a more realistic expectation that Paul is placing upon us.

After all, we know that our emotions are in no small part determined by the company we keep. If we associate with grumps, we likely feel grumpy.

If we associate with rays of sunshine, well, we likely feel happier. I know this firsthand, and perhaps you do too. When friends of mine have experienced depressive episodes, it has made me feel gloomy too.

[2 : 43] Try as I might to be a ray of sunshine, it has normally ended with me being brought low as well. Similarly, which of us on seeing a friend rejoicing can help but break out in a smile?

Which of us on knowing that a family member or friend has safely given birth can help but breathe a sigh of relief and joy as a new life is welcomed into the world?

Maybe it is as easy as happy company makes one happy and sad company makes one sad. However, this is not really what this verse is getting at.

After all, if it were this simple, Paul wouldn't have to be telling us to do it if this were normal human behaviour. So what can he be getting at here?

Well, perhaps this can be seen most clearly when we have to empathise with folk we don't really like. Or have to try and experience feelings that we've never had to feel before.

[3 : 42] Perhaps this verse shows us that as much as it may feel to the contrary, our emotions are a wee bit more under our control than society would have us believe.

And what better example can we see of this than the current war in the Holy Land? Like me, I'm sure you will have been shocked, saddened, upset by the tragic scenes we have heard and seen unfolding in the news.

Like me, you will have held in prayer the innocent civilians on both sides. Maybe you will have come to know about this war with thoughts fairly well settled on the matter of the two-state solution, on the land of Palestine, wherever your feelings were.

Maybe you will have joined our governments in condemning the Hamas militants as terrorists. But these feelings become a little harder when we consider the innocent folk on the side that we don't support.

A more dated example could be found in the German city of Dresden during the Second World War. The Nazi city, or the German city I should say, that was flattened and in many cases burned alive by Allied bombing raids.

[5 : 04] Were the Brits of the time able to weep with those who wept? This is where it becomes more difficult. Ellicott feels that in considering this verse we should recognise that sympathy is perhaps, and I'm quoting here, more under the control of the will than might be supposed.

It comes so, however, not by isolated efforts, but by a conscious direction given to the whole life. That's to say, it's not enough just to see somebody we feel we ought to be sad about and flick a switch and become sad for them.

It's much deeper than that. What may this look like? Well, let's consider what empathy or sympathy actually is. It's not a well-timed, oh you poor thing.

It's not the tenor I might put in a collection plate for the victims of yet another natural disaster. It's not the perfunctory prayer offered for people in a far-off land of whom we know little.

Rather, as we can see of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, it is an unconscious effort, spurred and prompted, not by knowing how we ought to behave, but by an instinctive movement of the heart.

[6 : 21] As Matthew writes, when Jesus saw the multitude, he was moved with compassion for them. This phrase, moved with compassion in the original language, means that feeling we get in the pit of our stomachs as though we'd been punched in the stomach and winded.

Or that phrase, when we get cut to the heart and our heart skips a beat. It's all we can do not to burst into tears ourselves.

On Friday night, it was my father Andrew, my wife Jackie, and my privilege to attend the ordination service of Ian Morrison, our new assistant minister at Dow and Vale.

And in the service, much was said in the charges about the minister's private ministry, often one-to-one. So much of which goes unseen, where they come alongside those suffering or in need.

Now, this of course is not limited just to ministers, but to all Christians. I'm sure many of us will have had the experience and privilege of coming alongside a fellow Christian in need.

[7 : 29] Now, if Ian or Kenny or an elder or a minister or anybody else for that matter, came alongside you at your point of deepest need, where all hope seems lost and everything seems dark, and glibly said, there, there, there, well, you would most likely remain unhelped.

But lest we think this is something we have to train ourselves for, as if we were a police dog being trained to sniff out cocaine, let us remember that we can achieve this state of mind only by the grace of God.

We must pray that God would give us a state of mind and a true sense of compassion, a truly empathetic and sympathetic spirit, that we may worthily come alongside people to share in their greatest highs and lows.

For then and only then can we hope to tenderly show love one to another. Furthermore, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, that if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.

And if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. This is a natural response, most certainly, but it's also one that we need to nurture within ourselves.

[8 : 48] 16 says, Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, and never be wise in your own sight. And following on neatly from the last verse, is the instruction to be of the same mind toward one another.

And this is perhaps most clearly seen, of course, where we are able to sympathise or empathise with those experiencing life's highs and lows. After all, this verse doesn't mean we have to agree in every way with our fellow Christian.

As I said this morning, I prefer apple juice to whiskey, but that doesn't mean that a whiskey lover among us and I could never get on. Within a church, let alone within a denomination, there will be people of different political persuasions, different upbringings, different approaches to various issues.

Jesus surely doesn't want us to become a bunch of robots whose feelings have been artificially extracted like a monster from Doctor Who. However, all of these differences aside, we must make sure that our Christian family, that is the church, contains a oneness of mind that stems from a common purpose, a common aim, a common desire.

And that desire is nothing other than to follow our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to declare his unsearchable truths, the riches of his grace, to follow more and more fully in his paths, and to again, quote, question one from the short of Catechism, to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

[10 : 25] After all, the common denominator in all of this is the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the fact that we're all sinners saved by God's grace. It's the fact that we have been called from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light.

And of course, when we have these values, these essentials in common, and are working toward the shared values of the kingdom, our favourite kind of cheese, our love of or hatred for Marmite, or our favourite city, pales into insignificance.

What matters are not our own we opinions, but rather our shared need of and delight in God. Furthermore, we should remember that our talents, our gifts, our positions in society, our bank balances, whatever they may be, and the differences between them in each and every one of us are no excuse for differentiation among Christians.

Differences can be weaponised by the enemy, by Satan, to further his ends. After all, he looks only for the cracks in our relationships, and buries himself in, trying to separate.

Another example from Ian's ordination. Ian has become the assistant minister at Dowan Vale, and was charged in the charge to the minister, not to allow anybody to get in between him and Kenny, because that would be an absolutely wonderful way to ruin the ministry of those two men, if somebody or something was to get between them.

[12 : 04] It happens not just with ministers, of course, but within the Christian family. 1 Corinthians 13 says that our love should be that which seeks not her own gain, rather seeks the good of others.

Be not wise, as we heard the instruction, or be not haughty, as in this translation, is drawn from Proverbs 3, verse 7.

And to quote John Murray, as there are no social hierarchies within the church, neither should there be any intellectual hierarchy. The Christian who knows more than the other Christian is not a better Christian.

The Christian who knows less than the other is no worse a Christian. Now, if a person is condescending nowadays, and I should explain that in some translations, but associate with the lowly is translated as condescend to people of low estate.

If a person is condescending nowadays, we may think he or she is being cheeky, irritating, unpleasant, as though they look down upon us. We would as soon as thump them, as love them.

[13 : 27] A condescending person may think he is above you. A real Hyacinth Bucket sort of character, who famously said, I can't stand people who try and pretend they're superior, because it makes it much harder for those of us who really are.

However, none of us would accuse Christ Jesus of such behaviour. We're taught in Philippians chapter 2 how Christ condescended to become man. And here in verse 16, we are instructed to condescend to others of low estate.

Now, such phraseology, people of low estate, may not sit well with our egalitarian minds. Maybe that's why it's translated here as associate with the lowly.

But even then, many of us may not wish to think of lowly people and whatever the opposite of lowly is. After all, the days of the hierarchies of the 18th century are thankfully long gone, aren't they?

However, it is painfully true that our society is still made up of the haves and the have-nots. Those who know from where their next meal will come and those who fear it will never arrive.

[14 : 36] We may be from different backgrounds even within this congregation tonight, yet we are still better off than the vast majority of mankind who live in abject poverty. The statistics show that the richest 0.8% of the world's population owns over 51% of its resources.

The richest 20% own over 80% of its resources. Although the structured hierarchies of the 18th century may not exist, there are still the lowly and the not lowly.

This verse is therefore telling us in the words of J.B. Phillips to not become snobbish, but take a real interest in ordinary people. Or, as Keeble wrote, the trivial round, the common task will furnish all we ought to ask.

Room to deny ourselves, a road to bring us daily nearer God. To be not wise in our own conceits, as we mentioned earlier, is drawn from Proverbs 3.

And I wanted to hold this point over separately because I felt it was worthy of its own subheading. Because in considering this verse, we should also remember a verse from the preceding chapter, 11.25, where we read, Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers.

[16 : 02] And then it goes on. Lest you be wise in your own sight. Let us remember that humility is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It's a vital part of the Christian life.

Without humility, humility, we would soon forget that there are no better Christians than others. Furthermore, that we are no better than others. We might risk seeing ourselves as the uber-Christian, the uber-human.

God forbid, we may even see ourselves as equal to or better than God himself. Humility in a Christian is essential.

A lack of it will never do. But humility is not all about being humble and lowly, although these are two important aspects. It's as much about being malleable, about being manoeuvrable.

Think of it this way. If the potter picked up a piece of clay to be sculpted, but it refused to bend with his hands, he'd throw it away. Jesus spoke about this. The clay would be useless to him.

[17 : 08] The reason that the potter works with clay and not stone is because it can be moulded on the spinning plate thing, the name of which I've forgotten. It can be moulded, bended, formed before being fired and set.

Similarly, if we become wise in our own conceits, if we become wise in our own sight, we're no longer malleable for the kingdom.

We think we know it all. We're as useless as the stubborn clay. Pride, that is the opposite of humility, renders us useless in God's hands because we feel that we are sure of ourselves, that we are always in the right, that we have made our life, that we've made our bed and now we will lay in it.

We become unwilling or at worse unable to change even if we're in the wrong. We become big-headed, arrogant, rude.

perhaps we knew that one child at school, perhaps we were that one child at school who knew everything, the one who was unwilling to be taught, always answering back, counteracting teachers' claims.

[18 : 20] Perhaps we know that man or woman in the workplace, perhaps we are, no, no, who is unwilling to accept that he or she is ever wrong, has ever made a mistake. The inflexible, rigid person can never hope to learn, will never act according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and may as well just curl up in a ball and wait for the sweet release of death because they will never be able to be used in the kingdom of God.

The instruction to never be wise in your own sight is not about keeping us subservient, it's not about making us doubt everything we believed, it's not about making us feel as little as possible, it's about making sure we don't lose our flexibility, our elasticity, our usefulness in the kingdom work.

Now verses 17 and 18 sort of feed into each other, repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Now we'll come back to repaying no one evil for evil, but first let us consider what it means to provide things honest, and yet again we will return to Ian's ordination.

One of the most moving lines for me was when during the charge the minister speaking told us that we must never doubt how much Ian and Kenny love us as their people. This idea of never doubting can bring us back to the text for in telling us to what's the word give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all, we must remember, we must have faith in the same way that Paul was telling his hearers and readers to, that in our day-to-day lives people we come across are genuine, we may have been proven wrong on that on occasion, but going around assuming that everyone is a liar or a brigand or a false speaker will do no good for us whatsoever.

[20 : 40] Similarly, we should give nobody a reason to think that we are unreliable or untrustworthy, to think that we have a dubious character ourselves. after all, returning to repay no one evil for evil, this is very much the character of Jesus Christ that we're told to emulate.

Jesus who told his followers to turn the other cheek, who took the Roman beatings and ultimately endured the Roman cross. However, it is so important that we take a step back and think this entire passage over.

the title of today's sermons, as I've said, is the Impossible Commandments with the question mark, and it is important to note that question mark. On reading these, perhaps on hearing them, you would understandably think that Paul is off his head.

How can he expect us to live in this perfect way? Well, there are a couple of things at work here. Firstly, we read in Philippians 2 verse 5, let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.

I quoted it earlier. We are trying, in all of this, to be emulators of Jesus himself. We are trying to live our life following his example.

[21 : 56] To do so, friends, comes at a cost. The cost is giving up the right to act in ways that many folk around us might act. The right to exploit people, the right to exploit natural resources, the right to seek our own personal gain.

You could go on. Following Jesus is not an easy thing to do. But here is the crucial bit. Paul says, if it is possible as much as it depends on you, and I think this clause could easily be describing the whole passage, we are fallen people, we are sinners, we are human, we live in a world which seems totally unsuited to following Jesus.

We are selfish, we are petty, the world encourages that. we expect, expecting to live in this way may seem to people at best misguided and at worst impossible.

Elsewhere in his letters, Paul acknowledges that the things he wants to do, he doesn't do, but the things he doesn't want to do, he does. Does that sound familiar? It certainly does to me.

Paul is many things, but he is no fool. He knows that this is difficult. He says, if possible, sometimes we have to concede the fact that peace is not always possible.

[23 : 22] There are some occasions, as much as it must pain us to acknowledge it, where there will not be peace. Don't forget, Jesus himself said that he came not to bring peace, but the sword.

He came to challenge, he came to turn over the tables. Sometimes peace cannot be achieved, and sometimes in order to achieve it, there must be conflict.

Secondly, we're told as much as it depends on you. Sometimes, even if peace is possible, and we must pray it is at all costs, but even if sometimes it is possible, it may not be possible for you to achieve it.

It may be that somebody else needs to do the moving first, just because we should seek peace, and there is no doubt that we should seek it. It is not always our fault when it doesn't happen.

Believing that, again, gives Satan a back door into telling us how much we've failed, how useless we are. Sadly, it cannot always happen, but that should not stop us longing for it, that should not stop us praying for it, that should not stop us working for it.

[24 : 41] Indeed, this entire passage covering this morning and this evening's sermons is about our intentions. It's about how we wish to live our lives, how we try to live our lives, the pattern we seek to live our lives by and mould our lives to, and that pattern is, of course, the Lord Jesus himself.

Now, of course, nothing I've just said should look like it undermines the importance of these instructions. they are definite instructions. There's no arguing, oh, we don't have to do that one, we don't have to do this one.

It is important we seek to do these things, to act in this way, but it is equally, if not more, important to understand that these actions, or indeed any of our actions, are not what decides our ultimate fate.

It is not the things that we do or the things that we don't do that determines where we go when our soul leaves our mortal bodies up or down.

These actions are a response to our salvation through Jesus Christ. They are not a prerequisite. They are not a ticket towards it. We are not trying to earn our way into heaven.

[25 : 56] We're not trying to buy our ticket to heaven. Rather, this is the natural response to the most amazing gift possible, the gift freely given us by Jesus Christ, eternal life.

Lastly, I should just add that this verse, that we should repay nobody evil for evil, that we should always seek peace, doesn't in any way contradict the God-given role of the law, of magistrates, of the legal system.

To recompense evil for evil is when we exact vengeance ourselves. the Westminster Confession of Faith says, God, the supreme lord and king of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people for his own glory and for the public good, for the defence and encouragement of them which are good, and for the punishment of evildoers.

And this in turn references Romans 13 as examples of this. Justice is good and godly, revenge is not. Even though we should seek peace, it does not mean that we need to become doormats.

Secondly, to provide things honest in the sight of all people, in a sense is about not just doing good but being seen to do good. Because when we are seen to do good, when we are seen to be living a Jesus-led life, other people can take encouragement from this, can take our witness and apply it to themselves.

[27 : 33] to act otherwise, for people to see us acting in a way that does not befit a Christian, does a disservice to his name.

Just a few points to add on there. Verse 19, Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather leave it to the wrath of God.

For it is written, vengeance is mine and I will repay, says the Lord. I think of all the verses we've covered today, this one also sticks in my throat. And it sticks there because the verse seems to incite us to make space in our lives for wrath, which doesn't seem very godly, and B, because the natural human instinct is to push for vengeance, but this has been set aside.

I mentioned a little earlier in the morning sermon about the blacked down incident. Well, in the last year or so, Jackie and I have had to deal with some unpleasantness in my former denomination, some people acting in a way that left us wanting the worst for them, if I'm being absolutely honest.

At times, friends, and I admit I'm not proud of it, I would not have batted an eyelid had those people walked out of the door and never been seen again. As much as it pains me to say it, to admit it before you all, I have thought similarly of others, and maybe you have as well.

[28 : 58] But this verse reminds us of something crucial, something fundamental to our Christian faith, that God is just, God is good. We believe that as the creator and ruler of the earth, he has all things within his power.

Furthermore, we believe that as a good God, he will not leave the righteous to suffer, nor will he leave unrepented sin unpunished. It's essential that we believe this and trust in it.

when Paul tells us to leave things to the wrath of God, what Paul is getting at is that we should give place to God's wrath. That's to say, we need to allow for this absolute fact.

And the absolute fact is that when people mistreat us, when people behave in appalling ways, God's anger is kindled. God gets cross when people don't do what he wants us to do.

The solution to this, if I may call it that, is repentance. Honest repentance coming from the heart is all that God seeks for. And those who do turn to God, we trust the vilest offender who truly believes that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

[30 : 06] But to those who are unrepentant, there is the promise which many Christians leave unspoken or hushed, and some sing from the rooftops, of hell, of a distance between the unrepented person and God.

God does not leave sin unpunished, if the person does not repent. We're told not to avenge ourselves, and again, reiterating the fact that self-avenging is wrong, but again does not exclude the courses of legal action that I mentioned earlier.

But we should be careful not to overlook the general instruction in 1 Corinthians 6, where we're told that we shouldn't take our fellow believers to court. It's a gentle balance there. But we remember in Deuteronomy chapter 32, and we hear it quoted again, vengeance is mine and I will repay, says the Lord.

It reminds us that the unrepentant may escape earthly judgment, but will not escape heavenly justice. We shouldn't find this a thrilling prospect. It shouldn't give us joy to think that if somebody doesn't apologize to us here, therefore it's up there.

That isn't what this is about. But it is an encouragement to us that God isn't just ignoring things, and it is a warning to us that we must not usurp God's authority, because God is sovereign, not us.

[31 : 28] And in the same way we shouldn't punish evildoers on earth, we shouldn't seek to take his place either. Because of this, as I've just said, it is important that we allow God to have his place.

It's important that we remember our position in all of this, our position in life. We would not take somebody to court and then play judge, jury, and executioner ourselves. Rather, we would allow proceedings to follow their natural course, allow the court to make its decision, and trust that justice would be meted out accordingly.

Similarly here, if people sin or mistreat us, it is not for us to punish. Rather, that is a matter between them and the courts, in the first instance, and between them and God.

We should encourage those we know to be in the wrong. Yes, of course we should. We should rebuke if appropriate. To encourage our Christian brother or sister along the right path is a good thing.

But to punish is the prerogative of the Lord and creator of the world, to whom every knee shall bow. And to close, therefore, if your enemy hungers, feed him.

[32 : 40] If he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. How should people act? What should we do if we come across a person who mistreats us?

A person who behaves unacceptably? Let us consider how Jesus himself acted. When he was brought into the Roman courtyard, the soldiers beat him senseless.

But he didn't retaliate. When he was arrested and the disciple cut off the ear of the high priest's slave, he didn't gloat, ha ha, your ear's fallen off. He healed the man.

He instructs us to turn the other cheek. The way we respond to evildoers matters. The way we act in the face of adversity matters. It matters because of the example we set.

Christians who punch back are not a particularly good illustration of the servant king, are they? It matters because if we respond in a Christ-like way, it may turn people's hearts to realise that they are behaving unacceptably.

[33 : 47] Perhaps the sight of the other cheek will be enough to turn someone's heart to repentance. Perhaps the enemy will turn into the friend. This is what we mean. The heaps of coals upon the person's head are not, as some may wish or think, referring to the fires of hell, but rather to the shame that some will feel when they behave in the wrong way, the response is the right one.

If somebody mistreats us and we respond well to them, they will notice. And it is to be our prayer that this shame, if not our witness, leads to a change in their hearts.

be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, closes the apostle. And if this, if we were looking for a verse to sum up the whole text, it would surely be this closing one.

Ellicott describes it confusingly as a fine sentiment, and I never really know if that's a good thing or not. But whatever, it is a good way to be. It reminds us, as we've said, that exacting vengeance is not the sign of strength, but rather a sign of weakness.

It's not a marker of a good disciple, but rather of somebody who has erred and strayed from Christ's way. If we are able to overcome our base fleshly urge for revenge, it will mean that we have tamed the body.

[35 : 11] James speaks of taming the tongue in James chapter 3, of stopping our tongue, our words leading us into sin. So too, if we can hold off seeking revenge, if we can overcome our urge to delight at other people's misfortune, if we can condescend to people of low estate, if we can stop ourselves giving as good as we get, or avenging ourselves, then we will not be overcome with evil, rather we will have tamed our body through the grace of the Lord Jesus.

Not only is this way of life the more noble way to live, not only is it the way of life that's going to encourage others to follow Jesus, but this way will help us to overcome our fleshly desires and live for Christ and for him alone, friends.

As I said this morning, today's scripture passage is difficult. There is a lot of teaching in there, and much of it feels totally outwith our grasp. But let us not forget that in all of this, we are working with Jesus, not against him.

He is not standing there waiting for us to make the smallest mistake. He is not waiting for us to trip up on one of these commandments before condemning us. Rather, he is there cheering us on, waiting for us to stumble so that he can help us up.

Now, this week I have failed in part of this message, this passage, sorry, this week I suspect you have as well. The likelihood is that next week I will also fail again in some way.

[36 : 53] But we must press on, ever holding to these desires, to live according to the commandments of God, to live in a way that channels Jesus for those we encounter.

For in doing this, friends, we will live lives worthy of the gospel. In so doing, we will treat others as Jesus would have us treat them. In so doing, we will store up our own treasure in heaven.

We will exhibit the marks of a true Christian. This must be our prayer, that the marks of a true Christian may be found in us.

And now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy. To the only wise God our Saviour be glory, majesty, dominion, and power, both now and forever.

Amen.