

AM Romans 12:9-21 The Impossible Commandments? Part 1

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[0 : 00] world that he gave his only begotten son to the end that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. In the name of Jesus Christ I declare that all those who confess their sins to God are forgiven. Thanks be to God. Our reading this morning is from the letter of Paul to the Romans chapter 12 verses 9 through to 21. It's a bit of a long reading and we will be exploring that both this morning and God willing this evening as well. Romans chapter 12 beginning at the ninth verse where Paul writes let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation.

Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty. But associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 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. Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, vengeance is mine and I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

[2 : 31] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Thanks be to God for his word and most gracious Lord, we pray that as we have heard your scriptures read, we may so read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that they may be for us food for the journey and encouragement along the way. Amen.

Our third item of... You will have seen in your notice sheets the title for this morning and this evening's sermon, The Impossible Commandments, with a question mark at the end. And when reading this morning's scripture passage, you would be forgiven for wondering whether there's any chance of us actually managing to fulfil Paul's instructions. Particularly when we look around the church, and I don't mean this church necessarily, but the church at large. We seem to see far more examples of these rules being broken than we do them being followed.

Indeed, I have a relative who complains that the reason she doesn't attend church is because church is full of hypocrites.

[4 : 03] And unfortunately, time and time again, she has been shown to be correct. Furthermore, given the state of the early church, it's easy to wonder what Paul's readers made of these instructions.

Surely there's not much chance that the Roman church was able to live by them either. They're difficult, aren't they? So why would Paul bother?

Why would he give instructions that we could likely never achieve? I'd argue that it's to give us something to aim towards. After all, where there is no vision, the people perish.

But he that keepeth the law happy is he, say the Proverbs. So let's look more closely at these verses. Because that question mark at the end of impossible commandments is important.

I don't think they are impossible. Rather, I think, through God, all things are possible to them that believe. So to begin, Dr. Ellicott, who was a famous biblical historian and theologian, explains that these instructions that we heard read this morning are, and I'm quoting here, a number of general exhortations, not addressed to particular persons or classes of people, but to the church at large.

[5 : 39] Now this is worth us remembering. These instructions that we heard read are, they're not just intended for church leaders or preachers or elders. They're not just intended for new converts.

They're not just intended for the young or for the old. they're not intended just for those who've been a Christian since Adam were a boy. They're intended for the church at large.

They are as much for thee and me as they were for the man or woman in the Roman pew. So Paul begins, let love be genuine.

Above what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Now I'm sure you'll agree it is one thing to be loving and it is another thing to love.

We can all do loving things, but whether we have true love beneath the surface is another question altogether. To have love without dissimulation as the King James Version puts it, means to have a love that is unfeigned, that acts without hypocrisy.

[6 : 51] It's a love that is loving for the sake of loving. How many of us have been loving or kind to somebody just to show ourselves in a good light?

I suspect we all have. I know I have to my shame. It's part of our sinful human nature. We take something good, that is love, and we use it for our own selfish gain.

we might love somebody to, I don't know, get a promotion, to whatever it may be. We know from scripture that God is love, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him, 1 John chapter 1.

And yet, all too often, we show love for the sake of our own selves, for the kudos that comes from being that nice guy, for the approbation or appreciation of others, or just to make ourselves feel good.

I am a theological student at the University of Glasgow, and as with the whole Scottish university system, the first two years of a degree, you're allowed to take courses from outwith your particular subject.

[8 : 16] And so, in my case, last year, I took a philosophy module. I thought it would be interesting. And I was challenged in one of these lectures as we were asked, is it possible for mankind to ever do anything truly unselfishly?

Or, are all of our actions actually for a selfish purpose? Why do we give to the poor? The lecturer asked. Is it to help them in their plight?

Is it to make us feel better about ourselves? Is it because we'd want people to do the same to us if we were in that situation? Is it because we think our salvation depends upon it?

Is there any action of ours that is totally and utterly selfless? As difficult as that was to wrestle with, and I could see an element of the argument that the lecturer was making, I do think it is possible for us to act selflessly, but only if, to quote Philippians, we let this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus.

One way that we can seek to love unfaintedly without hypocrisy is to truly abhor evil. And let's be clear here, this isn't wanting us to hate evil because evil makes us feel bad, it isn't us wanting to hate evil because it has a bad effect on our society, it's wanting us to hate evil because it is the opposite of good, it is the opposite of God.

[9 : 53] We know that God and evil cannot coexist. It thereby follows that by living in God, we cannot live in evil. If we truly abhor that which is evil and leave to that which is good, we will come close to living and loving without guile, selfishness, deceit or malice.

Paul continues in verse 10, we are to love one another with brotherly or sisterly I guess, affection, outdo one another in showing honour.

Paul's word brotherly is timely and pertinent, not for a gender reason, but those of us who are blessed with siblings know that from time to time they can really get on our wits, can't they?

There have been times where my brother has really wound me up and I suspect there are a few sly grins in the congregation this morning that suggest that the same is true for some of you as well.

But under all of this there is a bond, a family bond, a bond of blood that would be very hard, perhaps even impossible to fully break.

[11 : 12] They say that you can choose your friends but not your family, and this is true. This is the sort of love that comes from a loving family. Now of course we acknowledge as a result of mankind's sin and the presence of evil in the world that not every family is united in love, and this is tragically sad.

But in this verse Paul is instructing us to see our Christian family in the same way that we should see our blood family. That's to say we should be united by something thicker than water, thicker even than blood.

For whereas Matthew, my brother and I are united by blood, by a shared gene pool, by similar DNA, whatever, we are also united by the blood of Jesus Christ.

for we are fellow sinners, saved by grace, called into a covenant relationship with God and with each other.

Kenny MacLeod explains this by talking of the cross, having an up and down motion and a side to side motion. The up and down motion dealt with mankind's relationship with God and the side to side dealt with our relationship with each other.

[12 : 30] But what does kindly affection look like? is it just being civil to each other? Well, for some Christians that might be a jolly good place to start, but it goes deeper than that.

Because as we learned in our previous verse, this is not about surface level civility. It's about a changed heart, an altered attitude, a new way of seeing each other, seeing ourselves through the lens of God.

change. A big way that this change can be seen is through our church family. In honour, preferring one another, as the authorised version puts it.

But what does it mean to prefer? Well, I prefer Cadbury's over galaxy. I prefer apple juice over whisky. And I'm being very brave in telling you that.

But surely that isn't it. To prefer. We could understand this word prefer as anticipate.

[13 : 38] We should anticipate each other's needs, treating each other well, not as a result of being treated well ourselves, but in initiative.

I'm reminded of a television programme I once watched. It detailed the life of a group of monks in a monastery. And in this monastery they had shared meals in silent.

And they were encouraged these monks to be attentive to each other's needs. They didn't wait for somebody to say, excuse me brother, may I have the salt? Instead, they were always looking around thinking, ah, he may need the salt.

They were getting ready and they were offering before they were asked. Not simply answering a fellow brother's desire for help, nor reciprocating when somebody else is kind to them, but anticipating the need, acting upon it before the request came.

Can we say this is how our church looks? We should be ready to outdo one another in showing honour. Verse 11, Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

[14 : 55] When I was trying to think of this, I thought about what a sloth in business looked like, and it wasn't some tree-climbing marsupial sitting at a board meeting.

To be slothful in spirit is to be uninterested, to be uncommitted, to be a bit disconnected.

For business, it would be as well for us to read zeal. We should not be slow to show zeal, commitment, and that commitment and zeal we should show should be genuine.

Not the half-hearted commitment that a teenager may show to tidying his bedroom when asked. It's not something that should take a while to warm up.

It's something that should be immediate as much as it within us lies. We should be ready to commit 100% from the get-go. The literal meaning of the word fervent is boiling or seething.

[15 : 54] We can all imagine, can't we, the boiling pot of water on the hob, bubbling away ferociously, at any moment, liable to overflow.

Or perhaps we have been seething in another, slightly less pleasant way, as more and more of the weights of the world have piled upon our shoulders.

At any moment we know that we are going to snap like a coiled spring. The tension has risen and we're ready to explode. Well, I don't think that last example is quite what Paul had in mind, but there was a certain urgency in his mind as he wrote these instructions.

We can all imagine that Christian whose spirit is on the constant rolling boil at any moment ready to overflow, to flood around them, to be seen by others.

This overflowing is far from a problem. In fact, it's a joy to behold. This, of course, is the very essence of serving the Lord. For in serving the Lord we're allowing his spirit, which came upon us, to quote the hymn, the hour we first believed, to overflow into our lives and the lives of others.

[17 : 13] For when we act in this way, it is, as Paul was later to write, yet not I, but Christ in me. Verse 12 asks us maybe a challenging question, for we're told to rejoice in hope, to be patient in tribulation and constant in prayer.

What is the hope of a Christian? Christian? Now there's a conversation for an elevator or a long bus journey. What do we hope for as Christians?

Is it the easy life? Is it the warm, fuzzy feeling that we get inside us? Is it the thought of sitting on a cloud and playing a harp?

As Christians, our gospel hope, and indeed promise, is that of everlasting life. When the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace?

And how else could one respond to this? But by rejoicing. This is amazingly good news. This world is not all there is.

[18:26] We have a future in heaven for sure, there in those mansions sublime. hope. But what does this hope give us? Maybe a certain smugness as we consider those who don't have this gospel assurance.

Maybe a fear for our family and friends who have not accepted the way of Christ yet. Sadly, one or both of these is often the common response that a Christian shows when he or she lives in Christ. But there is another, a more positive response to this. Patience in tribulation. And without doubt, this virtue was more needed in the first century church than it is in the 21st.

After all, the greatest opposition that many of us face is the odd snarky comment from a stranger or the general antipathy towards what we do.

For the early Christian, this patience in tribulation normally involved chains or a lion or blood or starvation or loss of family or liberty or life.

[19:44] Allow me if I may to quote from William Sangster and it's a slightly longer quotation but I think you will appreciate it. Sangster wrote, the life of God does not depend on circumstances.

circumstances. That is, our circumstances. When it first spread through the world, the Romans were the masters. They feared a secret display and disloyalty to Rome at the heart of this new transforming life of Christ.

The Romans persecuted people who possessed this new life. They cast them to the lions but those victims, mauled by the lions, were the happy ones. There was a harder, more bitter, more terrible sentence passed to the Christians in those days called *Damnatus Ad Metalla*, condemned to the mines.

Their sufferings, their beggar description. Under scourge, they rode their own galleys to North Africa and then trekked through the scorching mountains to the Numidian mines.

Arrived at the mines, their chains were shortened so that never again could they stand upright.

They were branded on the forehead with red-hot irons.

[21:04] As like as not, one of their eyes would be gouged out and with a lamp and mallet thrust into their hands, they were whipped underground, never to return. For company, they had the scum of the earth.

They worked beneath the lash of jailers who killed for amusement. If the poor prisoners were fortunate, they caught the fever and died. Yet many lived on.

We can read of their sufferings and trials and triumphs. Many, it seems, wrote messages with charcoal on the smooth rock walls. Prayers, some of them.

The dear names of loved ones and remembered friends. But one word, says Sangster, appears again and again and again on the walls. Like a flight of swallows chasing one another towards the light.

The words *vita, vita, vita*. Life, life, life. Because they had it there. When circumstances were so hard that they could barely have been worse in Belsen, life.

[22:10] And that life was life indeed. That was Sangster writing. If the hope of Christ was strong enough to sustain those brave, poor, early followers of Jesus Christ, it should certainly be enough to sustain us in our time of need.

But how else can the Christian life change us? We read in verse 13 that we should contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

community. In Dauwen Vale on Wednesday we had our weekly prayer meeting and while we were there we prayed for the work that's going on in this church.

I know there have been some really good acts of mercy shown by members of this church. There have been real kindnesses offered. We saw earlier that in preferring others to ourselves we take the initiative to serve their needs.

the illustration passing the salt before it was asked for. This is seen most clearly in this verse where Paul commends the act of charity, distributing whatever they had and let's face it they didn't have very much to those who were in most need.

[23 : 27] You see the Christian faith was not a solely middle class thing in the ancient world. Indeed many Christians, particularly those in the church in Jerusalem, were in dire need. Yet throughout his epistles and his ministry, Paul commended the work of charity to his readers and hearers.

Often it's through going without that God is able to bless us. For we often, without realising it, make the object or position another point of worship in our lives.

We cushion ourselves, we muffle the voice of God by surrounding ourselves with things, things, things, power, power, position, position. Jackie, my wife, who some of you will meet this evening, tells a story of when God told her to give up her car.

She loved her car. It was a lovely car. It was a lovely colour. It had an excellent sport button that you could press to drive faster. Not that I ever did, of course. It had plenty of space.

It made her feel good. But there was just one problem. By her own admission, her car had become a sort of idol in her life.

[24 : 37] It was her status symbol. She had her name on a customised number plate. She was obsessively careful of this car. She parked it right at the end of the supermarket car park so that no one would knock into it.

She never wanted anything bad to come of it. She would sweep the seats after somebody she considered a bit dirty had sat in them in case they marked. After a while, God laid it upon her heart to give the car to a family who were in greater need.

It was also a convenient thing. God had clearly timed it thus because we were moving up here from where we used to live and didn't need it anymore. But we weren't going to get rid of it unless God had told her to.

After thinking and praying it over, Jackie complied with God's request. And only once she had done this did she realise the place that that car had taken in her life and only then was she able to go deeper in her relationship with God because no longer was that car muffling God's voice.

Rather amusingly, the car was given to a family with two young children and so protected, clean and snatch free, it most certainly isn't now.

[25 : 57] God has a sense of humour. Even from their little, Paul was encouraging his readers to give generously, to show hospitality. Let's remember an account in 1 Kings where the prophet Elijah was in need of a drink and something to eat.

Coming across the widow, he asked her to draw him some water from the well and bring him some bread to eat. And she replied, as the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruise.

And behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for my son, that we may eat it and die. 1 Kings chapter 17. It was only when prompted by Elijah to use that last amount of flour and oil to make him that cake that she found that neither the oil or the meal ran out.

To receive the bigger blessing of God, she had to first be a blessing to Elijah. And lastly, we consider to bless those who persecute you, to bless and curse not.

And this verse, verse 14, has a striking similarity to our Lord Jesus Christ's instruction in Matthew chapter 5. Here Paul instructs us to bless the very people who cause us harm.

[27 : 18] Of all the instructions that he is giving, I think this one troubles me the most, because I know how often I fail in it. A few days ago I received a text message from a friend.

This friend attends a church that about a year and a half ago I was a trainee minister in. This friend informed me that their minister there had lost his black preaching gown that he wears, and wondered whether I knew where it was or whether I had it.

Now, unfortunately I neither have nor know where this gown was. But in replying to the message I really felt prompted by God to offer the minister the use of my black gown.

I mean, I don't use it for a great deal. Now, as things turned out it wasn't needed. He didn't need this gown. But that prompting to offer it was quite a difficult one for me to do, because it was that minister who in the last year had been a very difficult person to get on with.

In fact, he was almost solely responsible for me having to leave the course I was on because just of the way he behaved. I've already felt a huge blessing since God delivered me from that course.

[28 : 37] But that night I was faced with a challenge. did I pretend not to hear God, or did I offer the man who had done me great harm the use of this gown? Now, this may seem a silly decision to have to make.

It's only a piece of black cloth. But as we'll all know, these kinds of highly emotive decisions can be really big. In the end, I knew it was the right thing to do. I made the offer, and as I mentioned, it wasn't needed.

But I can't help thinking it was a test of obedience on the Lord's part. Was I willing to bless them which persecute you?

As I said at the beginning, friends, we're only halfway through this passage, but here feels a good place to bring this morning's sermon to an end. We've seen the importance of a genuineness in our love, a family bond in our church relationships, a spirit at all times ready to bubble over in praise and in service, a hope that can help us to overcome even the greatest of challenges, a kindness and a hospitality that allows us to serve others even when we ourselves may be poor and deprived, and a spirit of blessing and not cursing.

These are some difficult things to be going on with, so I'd encourage you, friends, over the next few days and weeks to really read over and pray into these commandments.

[30 : 04] Pray that the Lord might show you where you are struggling to meet them and that he might give you the strength to live up to the Apostle Paul's instructions. And if you want to hear the second half, return this evening.

And now to God alone be all honour, glory, worship and praise this day and forevermore. Amen.