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[0:00] Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

! Fairly recently, I ran into a meme that's making the rounds on social media. The meme showed a church. It was kind of hand-drawn, but it showed the front door and the back door.

At the front of the church, there's this sign that says something like, Welcome to our awesome church. That's the front door. The view behind the back door was altogether different.

Out the back door, there was a dumpster, and it was full of people. Just want to take a second to assure our visitors this morning that that's not what is happening here.

But, ouch, right? I have to be honest, I can't count the number of people I have met who used to be church members and no longer are.

[1:21] Sometimes that's a matter of not wanting to get out of bed on Sunday mornings.

Sometimes that's a matter of someone falling away from the faith. But that does not account for all of it.

Some people who used to be churchgoers and no longer are stopped going to church because church leaders or other church members treated them like garbage to be thrown away.

And that sort of treatment can take many forms, and some expressions of that treatment is unspeakably awful. It's a widespread problem.

What is the antidote to that problem? Well, I think we find the answer to that question in our section from Romans 12 for this morning. I would invite you to look there with me in your Bibles.

If you remember from last week, we talked about the section of the book of Romans that begins in chapter 12.

[2:26] Up to this point, Paul has been laying out the theology of the gospel. That we are sinners who have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That we are justified by the blood of Christ.

That we have peace with God, forgiveness of sin, and eternal life because of what Jesus did for us on the cross when he took the punishment that we deserved in our place.

This earlier section of Romans could essentially be thought of as a thorough response to the question, what is the gospel?

The section of Romans that we're in now is kind of a follow-up to that question. Knowing what the gospel is, having been saved from our sins by Jesus, how does that impact the way that we live, individually and as a church?

The verses that we are looking at this morning could be summarized, I think, with a couple of questions. The content could. What does Christian character look like? And how does the gospel impact the way that we treat other people?

[3:34] We've already gotten a hint of where this is going. There's no room for dumpsters full of people out back. Let's consider these questions in light of our text for this morning.

Please look together with me at Romans 12, starting in verse 9. You'll see that for a while our text sort of alternates between the kind of character the Christian should have and the way that the Christian should treat other people.

I'm going to venture to say that this is no accident because the way that we treat other people is a clear reflection of our character, isn't it? Let's keep that in mind as we delve into our text.

In verse 9 we read, Let love be genuine, abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good. So how do we begin here?

We begin with the charge to love others genuinely, not pretending to love others because it makes us look good, not acting as if we love others because that's what Christians are supposed to do and

we want to be thought of as loving.

[4:43] In other words, Paul is saying don't just act the part. Say no, love others genuinely. Love that is informed by our opposition to what is evil, love that is informed by our holding fast to what is good, love that is driven by our awareness that we have a God who loves us perfectly, even though we don't deserve it, so much so that he gave his only son to save us when we were his enemies.

If that is not motivation to genuinely love, to genuinely abhor evil, and to genuinely hold fast to what is good, I don't know what is.

As Paul continues, he expands on how we live that out. In verse 10 he says, Love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor.

Take a look around the room right now. Never mind the fact that we're all in disguise, but um...

You're looking at your family. You're looking at your brothers and sisters. Our love for one another should match that reality, shouldn't it?

[6:08] It is to be expected that our bond with our brothers and sisters in Christ is so strong and so deep that it's stronger even than our bond with our natural family members who don't know Jesus.

And to put it bluntly, we'd better love each other with brotherly affection now because we're all going to be stuck with each other forever, and eternity is a mighty long time.

But if we love each other like that, any dumpster at the back door of the church is going to be empty.

And it's also going to be empty if we're serious about trying to outdo each other in showing honor. In the church, you and I, we're not called to seek honor for ourselves.

I'm not called to seek honor for myself. We're not competing for recognition. What Paul describes here is quite the opposite. If there's any competition in the church, and he does kind of frame it that way, it is a competition who can show the most honor and respect to their brothers and sisters.

[7:22] Can you imagine what the church would look like in the world today if every Christian took that seriously? If all of us said, you know what?

I'm not going to make a big deal of myself. I'm not going to strive after honor or recognition. First of all, I'm going to make much of Jesus, and then I'm going to treat my brothers and my sisters as the most important people in the church.

Wouldn't that be glorious? Jesus gave himself up to a truly humiliating death on the cross for us.

Why shouldn't we strive to outdo one another then in showing honor and respect? That requires us to consider, of course, that it's not all about us, which can be hard for us to wrap our minds around. But as those who believe the gospel, we should already know that. It's not about us, is it? Paul continues. Do not be slothful in zeal.

[8:26] Be fervent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation. Be constant in prayer. So Paul's bouncing back to the basics of Christian character again, and let's break that down.

As believing Christians, Paul is saying, don't be lazy. Don't be on spiritual autopilot. Don't coast. I think he's saying that because it's really easy to be on spiritual autopilot, isn't it?

Commit your attention to what Jesus wants you to do. Commit your attention to the word and to prayer. Commit your heart to the Lord's service. And by the way, that's not just when things are going well and when we feel like we have a lot to be thankful for.

It's also not just for when things are rough and we're more aware of our need for God's help. No matter what happens, Paul is saying, no matter what comes, be constant in prayer.

Be consistent in your walk with the Lord. Let your hope be characterized by godly joy. Let your time of trial be characterized by a patient assurance that God is in control and that he will work all things together for your good, no matter how overwhelming it might seem.

[9:46] That is what Christian maturity and contentment looks like. That's what being content in Christ in all circumstances looks like in practice.

And Paul wasn't just talking the talk. He talked about being content in his epistle to the Philippians while he was sitting in prison. So that's what Christian maturity looks like.

And mature Christians can also be identified by how they treat other people. They're not difficult to spot. So we'll see. As we go on. Paul continues, contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Paul is clear. If we see a brother or a sister in Christ who is in need, we have a responsibility to do what we can to help. I just want to mention that Paul does make one exception elsewhere.

If someone is able to work and just doesn't want to do it, Paul says in 2 Thessalonians, that they might change their mind about that when they get hungry enough. But under ordinary circumstances, Christians are part of a family that looks out for each other's needs.

[11:02] Paul also instructs us to show hospitality. That's a crucial thing. We might look at that and say, well, that is for someone else. I don't have the gift of hospitality. I don't have the gift of people being in my home, eating my food.

Paul is clear. He doesn't say to show hospitality if you have the gift of hospitality. He says that we should show hospitality. Period.

Why? We who were strangers to God have been welcomed in Christ. If that is the case, if that is what defines our lives, then shouldn't we be the most welcoming people in the entire world?

So up to this point, Paul has been alternating between the basics of Christian character and how that impacts the way that we treat each other.

The rest of the chapter, Paul focuses in more directly about how Christians are supposed to treat others, including those outside the church, and even to include our enemies.

[12:10] What we're about to read is going to present us with some real challenges. So put on your seatbelts. In fact, Paul hits us pretty hard with verse 14.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. You might say, wait a minute. We're talking about people who hate us.

We're talking about people who are cruel to us. In some cases, in some parts of the world, we're talking about people who want to kill Christians. And we're really expected to love and to bless them.

Yeah, we really are. Being a Christian is a radical thing, isn't it? Why would we bless even those who persecute us?

Well, think for a second about why those who would persecute us are doing what they're doing. They do it because they are lost sinners, fundamentally. And haven't all of us, haven't all believers been lost sinners?

[13:16] We've been there too. And God had compassion on us when we were lost sinners. Think about the witness the church gives to the world when Christians bless those who persecute them.

And that's something that the world cannot replicate because that's something that only the Holy Spirit can bring about. Does anyone remember the bombing of churches in Egypt on Palm Sunday a few years ago?

I think it was about three years ago or so. In the wake of those attacks, there was an Egyptian priest who stood up to preach and in his sermon he addressed the terrorists.

I'm not going to go over the whole sermon, but in part he said this. The Christian doesn't make enemies because we are commanded to love everyone.

And so we love you because this is the teaching of our God that I am to love you no matter what you do to me. So I love you very much.

[14:27] And I want to say one last thing to you. We are praying for you because the one who told us to love you told us to bless those who curse you and pray for those who spitefully use you.

So my instructions from my loving God make it my duty to pray for you. Think for a second about the impact that kind of witness has in this dark world.

Think about that. The Christian life is a life of radical compassion towards others. Paul spells it out. Rejoice with those who rejoice.

Weep with those who weep. The Christian is called to share in the joy and the sorrows of others because we serve a compassionate God don't we?

And in case it isn't obvious that also means that we aren't to find joy in someone else's misery even if we think they deserve it. I say that because it can be a struggle.

[15:36] I remember one time I was talking to a mentor of mine about examination of conscience and he happened to say to me well in the guide for examination of conscience that I use there's this question that I'm supposed to ask myself.

Have I taken secret pleasure in the misfortunes of others? Well I have to admit that I've never taken secret pleasure in the misfortune of others. Yeah.

I think most of us if we're being honest can relate to that right? It's a struggle. We like poetic justice when it happens to other people but the Lord calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

Paul then circles back around to how we treat not just our enemies or those outside the church but also how we treat each other. He writes live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Live in harmony with one another.

[16:51] We need to be reminded of that because as human beings we are so often tempted not to live in harmony with one another.

One of my seminary professors passed away a few days ago. I'm reminded of something he once told my class. I think we were in one of our parish ministry courses. He said there is no fight as ugly as a church fight.

He's right isn't he? Church fights have a way of putting people in the dumpster out back and have a way of doing that like few things can.

So we must take the call to live in harmony with our fellow believers with the greatest seriousness because each one of us harbors one of the greatest threats to the harmony of the church in our own hearts.

We all do. Do you know what that threat is? It is that inflated sense of our own importance. I have wisdom that others don't.

[18:04] I'm a special person and I only associate with special people. And that quickly turns into well it's my way or the highway.

Quickly leads us to treat our brothers and sisters in Christ with scorn and beyond that leads us to be wise in our own sight. It leads us to be haki as Paul puts it.

That has an impact to the church's mission outside of the church too because that causes people to write off unbelievers that are deemed unworthy. and they need to know Jesus.

Haughtiness is a destructive thing. Paul continues with warning against something else that is destructive. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

So I'm about to confess one of the secrets of my own heart to you guys. Are you ready for this? I have to admit if someone says something to me that gets under my skin I have this temptation to replay that conversation over and over in my mind this time adding that witty response that I should have given to what they said to show that person what was what.

[19:33] I see some nods out there. As I have grown in Christian maturity that is less of a problem but most fortunately I think the Holy Spirit has a way of snagging me before I follow up on that urge.

Let's be clear the temptation to get even that's from the flesh isn't it? The commitment not to repay evil with evil is something that comes only from the Holy Spirit.

And the commitment to live peaceably with all is also the work of the Holy Spirit and on that point Paul continues if possible so far as it depends on you live peaceably with all.

Now to be clear sometimes it doesn't depend on us. If we were reading this verse in the wrong way we might come to the conclusion that a Christian should never say anything that might offend someone.

I raise that point because I think that that sentiment is a common one in the church and the culture that we're living in today. And that would be a real problem because the message of the gospel can be offensive, right?

[20:57] If we hear that we are lost sinners who are under God's judgment that has a way of offending us. If we hear that Jesus is the only way to eternal life and that whatever other religions we're practicing aren't going to cut it, that has a way of offending us.

Hearing that our best attempts at being good people aren't good enough to get us into heaven and that only the blood of Jesus can get us into heaven, that has a way of offending us.

There's no way around it. The gospel builds up and unites but it also offends. Does that mean that we shouldn't proclaim the gospel?

Not at all. But it does mean that we as Christians should be careful not to give cause for offense or to create conflict in any other way.

The gospel is offensive to human pride and sometimes that means that others aren't going to live at peace with us. But to be clear, we must not add additional stumbling blocks.

[22:03] The gospel message is challenging enough. And even then, we are called to love those who are determined not to live at peace with us.

Paul continues, Beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, Vengeance is mine, 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 doing so, you will keep burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. The thought of revenge sure is appealing to us, isn't it?

To say, you know what, I have been wronged and I need to make sure that the offender gets what's coming to him. We always tend to think that our cause is just and that it's our place to make sure that justice is served.

[23 : 15] But it doesn't work that way, does it? First of all, we're not always right. Hard for us to accept, isn't it? we don't always judge rightly.

Sometimes we can be the offending party and walk away thinking that we're the victim. But in any case, God is the judge and not us, so we must not seek to climb onto his throne.

we don't overcome evil with evil and the end does not justify the means.

So for example, if someone is gossiping about me and I respond by gossiping about that person, what have I done? I haven't overcome evil, have I?

I've just added more evil to the pile. Insert any other sin and the same holds true. ungodly methods do not produce godly results.

[24 : 22] On the other hand, think about everything that God's word has shown us this morning. Can you imagine what would happen if all believers took this teaching to heart?

There wouldn't be hurting people in the dumpster. there wouldn't be additional stumbling blocks to people coming to Jesus and the church would better reflect the glory of God.

But if you're anything like me, you find this morning's passage convicting. Is there anyone here this morning that has perfectly lived up to the standard that we find here?

here? I don't. I haven't. So what do we do? I think the first thing we are called to do is to examine our own hearts and repent if we have fallen short in any of these areas.

And that we do so with the understanding that our failures to love our brothers and sisters and to love our neighbors, those failures have hurt people and harmed our gospel witness. I'm going to venture a guess that part of the reason that our culture is in such a mess is because the church in our day has not taken the Bible's teaching in this passage seriously enough.

[25 : 53] And I believe our failure has done incredible damage to our witness. How is that? Well, to put it simply, people are going to ignore a message that comes from lips that are hypocritical and mean spirited, aren't they?

So, we are called to confess if we have not walked in a manner worthy of our calling, remembering, of course, that if we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

and we should cry out to the Lord to help us. As I was preparing this morning's message and thinking of this passage, the contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit kept coming to mind.

I'm going to close with us taking a look, quick look in Galatians chapter 5 where we read this. Now the works of the flesh are evident, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

I warn you as I warned you before that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

[27 : 37] Against such things there is no law. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit will increase these things in me and make me more like Jesus. I urge you to pray the same thing for yourself.

the stakes are high. The stakes We live in a world, we live in a society, we live among people who desperately need Jesus Christ.

We are called to keep in step with the Spirit, we are called to walk by the Spirit, and we are called to bear faithful witness to the gospel together.

Because the gospel is the only source of light, the only source of life, and the only source of hope in this dark and broken world. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.