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**Title:** Romans: Renewed

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**Text:** [Romans 12:9-21](#)

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[Watch Service](#)



Today is the last of our four-week series on the book of Romans. I hope you've been reading along. We'll close out Romans today with chapters 12 through 16. We'll spend most of our time in chapter 12, but you'll know that it's time to wake up because near the end of the sermon, we'll jump to chapter 16. You'll remember that Romans was written by Paul. He persecuted followers of Jesus until he was converted to be one of Jesus' most vocal followers.

Paul wanted to go to Rome and then on to Spain to take the news of Jesus there but never got the chance. Who knows? If Paul had been able to make that trip, we may have had a book of the Bible called the Letter to the Church in Spain. But, as it is, Romans is the last of Paul's writings that we have, and many believe it is his best. Some of that stems from the fact that he's not dealing with settling disputes like his other letters but, rather, can share what he knows in his heart—that this Jesus is indeed the son of God, the long-awaited Messiah.

I won't spend much time reviewing the previous three sermons. They are still online if you missed one and would like to catch up. But I will review the "R" words that grounded us these past three weeks. The first is a made-up word—"RIGHTEOUSFY"—because, well, justified doesn't start with "R." But God through Jesus "RIGHTEOUSFIES" us, God through Jesus "REDEEMS" us, God through Jesus "RESURRECTS" us, and today, God through Jesus "RENEWS" us. That's the good news of Romans.

If Romans is a summation of all of Paul's other letters, then our passage for today—12:9-21—is a summation of Romans. Paul is starting to wind it down. I started looking at this passage, and I understand how there could be multiple sermons from this passage alone. Did you hear it, too? 1. Let love be genuine. 2. Outdo one another in showing honor. 3. Be ardent in spirit. 4. Be patient in suffering. 5. Persevere in prayer. 6. Contribute to the needs of the saints. 7. Extend hospitality to strangers. 8. Bless those who persecute you. 9. Do not claim to be wiser than you are. 10. Live peaceably with all. TEN. At least ten things to live by that would change the world.

Scholars have long been vexed by these thirteen verses because, on the surface, this looks like a hodge-podge of advice thrown together willy-nilly with no overarching theme. In the original Greek,

verses 9-16 don't even use any verbs. Literally translated it sounds like, "Love, genuine; mutual affection, to each other; in hope, joy; in suffering, patience." It's almost as though Paul is ticking off a laundry list of virtues, piling them up quickly so that he doesn't forget to include them before he runs out of ink in writing this letter, like writing them on a Post-It note, so he'll remember to add them later.

But others have come to view this section as unified with the opening phrase setting the theme for the words that will follow: "Love must be sincere." In Greek, the word Paul uses that we translate "sincere" means a love free of hypocrisy. A hypocrite was literally an actor. In ancient Greek theaters, actors usually wore masks as part of their on-stage costume. Hypocrisy eventually became associated with play-acting, with having a false front, with hiding your true feelings behind a mask. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something they are not.

For Paul, this renewed life in Jesus starts on the inside. If Christ does not live in your innermost thoughts, if the most you can do is fake a Christian attitude toward other people, then something is fundamentally wrong. It makes duplicity your lifestyle. You spend your days keeping people from seeing what's really going on in your heart. It begs the question of how you can claim to live in the light of Christ if you spend most of your time keeping others in the dark.

Paul tells us we need "agape," we need God-like, Christ-like love at the private center of our existence so that when we show this love out in public, it will be a natural extension of what is inside us and not a hypocritical cover. In fact, love needs to be in control, even when we are confronted with people who are genuinely nasty. Sooner or later, we encounter truly difficult people—individuals who wound us, wrong us, betray us, and make us want to strike back.

Justice, we think, demands that those who wrong us must know what they've done to us and get punished for it in some way. We have the right to strike back, we think. We have the right to take some satisfaction in seeing the guilty get their just desserts. But Paul, taking a cue from the revolutionary ethics of Jesus, says "no" to all that. Paul says that a sincere love must set the tone even when our desire for a greater justice makes us want to respond in kind to evildoers. And, before you're tempted to think, "well, that's easy for him to say!" keep in mind that Paul was writing this letter to people living in Rome. For those Christians, talk of persecutors, evil people, and nasty neighbors was not an abstract subject!

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had for many years a key political operative as his assistant named Louis Howe. For you local history buffs, Howe was actually born in, of all places, Indianapolis, Indiana. Howe was a chain smoker and hard drinker and was initially disliked by first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. But he was hard-driving and shrewd, and FDR needed this as his own tendencies to go along to get along sometimes did not serve him well in the hardball arena of politics. One of Howe's characteristics is that he never forgave anyone who had ever slighted FDR even a little. At a party one evening, Howe was in the presence of Eleanor when he was sharp and dismissive of a man who came up to greet the first lady. Eleanor asked Howe why he had done this, and he then reminded her of something unkind that man had said to FDR a quarter century earlier. "Goodness" Eleanor exclaimed, "I forgot all about that." Howe replied, "I NEVER forget!"<sup>1</sup>

When we live our lives in such a tit-for-tat, vengeful, unforgiving way, there is little room left for sincere love. What remains is a pile of bile where our soul should be. I don't need to tell you that today's culture

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration found at Center for Excellence in Preaching, [www.cepreaching.org](http://www.cepreaching.org), Sermon Commentary for Sunday, September 3, 2017. Romans 12:9-21 by Scott Hoezee. Also, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis\\_Howe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Howe).

is deeply divided. We find it very difficult to agree on important matters regarding politics, theology, and even science. What concerns me about a divided culture is not the disagreement but how it seems to be an increasingly short trip from disagreement to vilification. We, more and more, seem to label those with whom we disagree as enemies and not simply as people who don't share our perspective. As a result, it can be tempting to hate those with whom we disagree. It's important to note the words that Paul chooses. Paul does not say, "Hate WHO is evil," but, instead, "Hate WHAT is evil."

Few of us remember the names of athletes who made their mark during the 1996 summer games in Atlanta. If you recall anything about those games, it might be the detonation of a pipe bomb in Centennial Park that killed one person and injured more than 100 others. Eric Rudolph, who spent five years hiding in the North Carolina wilderness before his apprehension, was responsible for this and other bombings. At his sentencing hearing, Eric Rudolph apologized for maiming innocent people. "I would do anything to take back that night," he said before two dozen victims and their families, all of whom had a range of different reactions to this man and his words.

Fallon Stubbs spoke at the sentencing. She was the daughter of Alice Hawthorne who was killed, and she herself was wounded by shrapnel. She offered Mr. Rudolph forgiveness. "Because of you," she said, "I have become a tolerant person. Not for you, but for me, I forgive you. I look at you. I love you, and if I cry," she added, "it's not for me. It's not for my mother. It's not for my father. It's for you."<sup>2</sup> Memrie Creswell was injured in another one of Rudolph's bombings. Ms. Creswell told reporters after the sentencing hearing, "He rolled his eyes when I said that I'm going to overcome his evilness with love for the rest of my days."<sup>3</sup> I had originally stopped this scripture reading before the part about being kind to those who wrong you will be like heaping hot coals on their head, but it is such powerful imagery that I decided to include it. "I'm going to overcome his evilness with love for the rest of my days." Some hot coals right there!

I don't know where these women came up with the courage to speak these thoughts or with the faith to embody these convictions. Maybe their courage and faith came to them as gifts of God, which is often how courage and faith seem to show up. Or maybe each of these women own well-worn Bibles, and they have read them thoroughly enough to be well-acquainted with the 12th chapter of Romans. Either way, their words are powerful for one simple reason: they fly in the face of the human temptation to retaliate. Fighting back and responding in kind seem to be basic human impulses when we are mistreated. When we have the chance to implement a little justice of our own, any commitment to love can sail right out the window.

Maybe you've used the expression before or had it used on you, "I have my scruples and I'm going to stand on them." We rely on that phrase when we're getting ready to stand against someone. Most of us assume "scruples" mean "principles" and that is what it has come to mean. But the history of a scruple is that a scruple is really a sharp stone. You can look it up. The phrase "to stand on your scruples" comes from the idea of being bothered by the nuisance of a small sharp stone in your shoe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Quote found in *New York Times* article, "Olympics Bomber Apologizes and Is Sentenced to Life Terms," by Shaila Dewan, August 23, 2005 found at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

<sup>3</sup> Creswell illustration found in sermon, "Trusting God to Settle Scores," August 28, 2011 by Peter W. Marty found at [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/scruple#word-history>

That small stone in your shoe may feel problematic, but you stand there anyway. You stand there faithfully. "Standing on your scruples" means to stand firm. It implies—because of that little stone—that we are going to stand with sensitivity or with tender feet. Jesus teaches a kind of walk through life that involves tender feet and sensitivity, not a stubborn stomp believing that we are always right.

Paul has laid out a whole set of scruples in our reading—and, in fact, these last five chapters of Romans—as little sharp stones in the shoes of Christians that encourage us to walk with lots of sensitivity:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

This is how you find RENEWAL—renewal of mind and heart and soul.

Author and pastor Barbara Brown Taylor comments in this way on evil inflicted upon us: "The only way to conquer evil is to absorb it. Take it into yourself and disarm it. Neutralize its acids. Serve as a charcoal filter for its smog. Suck it up, put a straitjacket on it and turn it over to God, so that when you breathe out again the air is pure."<sup>5</sup> I have a sneaking suspicion that Ms. Stubbs and Ms. Creswell used their courtroom encounter with bomber Eric Rudolph to try and disarm evil in some way. Their words suggest a desire to breathe in the pure air of a new future. Love shown to a victimizer is never popular. But these two women seemed determined, at least through their words, to keep the acidic effects of evil from further burning their lives. Our challenge is taking this from a personal scale to a national scale because I understand applying this in Ukraine or Israel is not as easy but it should always be our goal.

Now to the end. I told you we'd get there. The entire 16<sup>th</sup> chapter—the last chapter—of Romans is the longest farewell in the New Testament. Twenty-nine individuals are mentioned, twenty-seven by name of which one-third are women, some designated by high positions in the church. There are Jewish, Greek, and Latin names in the list. After all of those names being commended by Paul and one final bit of instruction, Paul brings it to a close, and so will I as it is a fitting benediction.

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 16:25-27)

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/january11/9t1074.html>