

**Love in practice**  
**Romans 12:9-21**  
**March 22nd 2026**  
**Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers**

**A Question and a Puzzle**

A question and a puzzle! The question is this: what change in a believer's life most reveals true spiritual growth?

- Is it **hope**—their outlook for the future, both in this world and beyond the grave has been transformed?
- Is it **knowledge**—they comprehend more doctrine today than they did in the past?
- Is **it faith**—they have a stronger confidence in God's good ways?
- Is it **love**—their love for God and his people is growing?
- Is it **holiness**—they are repenting of their sins?

Advancement in which of these is the greatest litmus test of the work of the Holy Spirit in the human soul? What do you think? Here is Scripture's answer:

*"If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13*

By all means, let us grow in faith, hope and holiness and knowledge, but the supreme litmus test of spiritual prosperity is this: do I love God more, and love my brothers and sisters in Christ more today than I did say a year ago?

During the Reformation in Europe, 1500s, there was an explosion of true understanding of Bible truth, centuries of superstition and error were rolled back. An exhilarating time of "doctrine growth." But one of the reformers, Martin Bucer, concerned that love was not keeping pace with truth, wrote

“Instruction in Christian love” where his main point was, “Everyone should live not for himself but for others.”

That’s the question answered. What about the Puzzle?

...Paul has moved from doctrine, teaching, the Gospel, chapters 1-11, to the outworking truth in our lives, chapters 12-16.

The hinge between doctrine and practice that connects them together, is the first two verses of chapter 12. “In view of God’s mercy (1-11) offer your bodies as a living sacrifice..” (12-16) Since God has done such wonderful things for you, offer the whole of your embodied life to him in gratitude—that’s the way you do true worship under the New Covenant. And the way to offer your body as a living sacrifice is “don’t be conformed to the pattern of the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind:” all the worldly views you used to have before you were converted, whether about marriage, money, people, state, family, children, whatever, get rid of them now, and put on new thinking, as your mind is renewed by God's Word.

Paul’s very first sphere of application to this new life, is how we relate to our brothers and sisters in the church. Paul encouraged us to think of ourselves as just one part of a body, an ear, an eye, a hand, a foot, and he has urged us to find out what our gift is—and use it and just get on with serving one another; that was last Sunday...and today Paul shows us how to love one another. There are 18 exhortations in verses 9-21, and most of them are about how to love our fellow believers and unbelievers, such as “be devoted to one another in brotherly love,” “Practice hospitality,” “Do not take revenge” and so on.

But here’s the puzzle, scattered among the 18 exhortations five seem to have nothing to do with our relationships with others, like “Hate what is evil, cling to what is good” like, “do not be conceited (proud).”

Why has Paul scattered five individual exhortations among the “how to relate to others” encouragements? This has puzzled me all week! I believe the answer is this: who we are, personally, will determine how we relate to one another. We can’t separate what we are in here from how we relate to others out there can we? This surely explains these otherwise surprising “sort yourself out” exhortations scattered among the “how to love other” guidelines:

I was explaining this puzzle to Yvonne and she said “I’ve got just the illustration for you.” She told me about the TV program “Sort your Life Out.” where the presenters will go into someone’s cluttered house, remove absolutely everything into a big hall. Together they decide what needs chucking out—return the rest of it and a week later the family say how much better life is—they’ve got more room to cook in the kitchen, the family can eat round the table, and so on. Family relationships have improved.

Something like that is going on in Romans 12: if you and I are going to be able to love others, we've got to sort ourselves out first. So this morning, from Romans 12:9-21

1. Sort yourself out!
2. Love your Christian brothers and sisters – here's how

### **1. Sort yourself out!**

If we are to love one another well, we need to deal with stuff in our own hearts at the very same time, stuff that will hinder us from loving our brothers and sisters.

(With so many exhortations, I believe the way to hear Gods Word this morning, brothers and sisters, is to ask the Lord, what one or two things is God pointing out in my own life?)

#### ***We need to personally hate what is evil***

*"Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." (v. 9)*

We must hate relationship-evils such as envy, pride, malice, revenge, unforgiveness, gossip, hatred, anger, evil moods division and slander. And cling to relationship graces such as humility, kindness, forgiveness, unity, gentleness.

#### ***We need to maintain our own spiritual zeal because apathy will harm those around us:***

*"Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. (v. 11)*

Zeal is infectious, but so too is apathy! Anyone here growing spiritually cold, apathetic, dropping off attendance at your home group, not serving today as you once did? (Read the verse again)

#### ***Paul calls us to ...***

*"Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." (v. 12)*

- When we find ourselves waiting in hope for something to happen, let us be resolved to wait joyfully, not miserably!
- When we're suffering affliction, it's all too easy to be impatient, but let's "wait patiently."
- When we're asking God for something, let's not faint, but be faithful in prayer

What we are in hope, affliction and prayer affects everyone else around us!

### ***Let's not be proud:***

*“Do not be conceited” (v. 16)*

Because proud people always cause strife reads Proverbs 13:10, “Where there is strife, there is pride.” When I grew in my knowledge as a young man I became very proud and I argued with anyone and everyone. I even argued with my missionary parents—I thought I knew doctrine better than them! Cringe! O Lord, “remember not the sins of my youth.” Proud people never get on with others.

### ***And the fifth personal exhortation,***

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (v. 21)*

Someone else's evil behaviour can stir **us** up to respond in kind. Never rise to evil or be overcome by it, but instead overcome evil with good—the example Paul gives is loving our enemies, which, consider next time God-willing.

If we are going to grow in love for one another, these things must happen in our own hearts at the very same time, that's what Paul implies here.

## **2. So, how exactly, are we to love your brothers and sisters**

We need to learn how to love, because before we were converted, Paul explained in Titus 3:2, “...we lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.” (Titus 3:2).

In view of God's mercy to us, we must put those evil ways behind us and learn to love one another with the Spirit's power and the Word's direction.

So wonderfully different is Christian love from our pre-Christian experience, the NT writers took a rare word in Greek, Agape, and filled it with new glorious meaning! We'll need to skim these verses... you & I must work them out in our own lives....

### ***1. Love must be sincere:***

*“Love must be sincere.” (v. 9)*

Quite literally without hypocrisy:

*“Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18)*

### ***2. Let us love as a family loves***

*“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. (v. 10)*

Brothers and sisters in the flesh are bound together by bonds of family love—how much more should Christian brothers and sisters who are members of the only eternal family, be devoted to brotherly love?

### **3. Honour one another above yourselves.**

*“Honour one another above yourselves.” (v. 10)*

That can't mean “she is a better singer than me” if she is not, “he is a better runner” if he is not. No, this exhortation is to counteract the sinful tendency to big ourselves up.

### **4. Share with those in need**

If we hear of a genuine need in another believer, do what you can to help them.

*“Share with God's people who are in need.” (v. 13)*

### **5. Invite people into your home**

It follows does it not? We invite your family members into your home do we not? Well then invite your new spiritual family members into your home. Hospitality, a requirement for church elders, is encouraged for all believers, here and in Hebrews 13 & 1 Peter 4.

*“Practice Hospitality” (v.13)*

### **6. Empathise with one another:**

*“rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (15)*

Isn't this exhortation designed to counteract that old sinful attitude of being jealous of those who succeed and secretly rejoicing when misfortune knocks?

### **7. Live in peace**

*“Live in harmony with one another” (v.16)*

I remember a young man in a church I once belonged to; every single conversation he had with everyone seemed designed to stir up controversy! Sinful behaviour! “Walk gently in the fold,” “don't rock the boat.”

### **8. Be friends with everyone:**

*“Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position.” (v.16)*

Of course there are no people of low or high position in the church, for we are all one in Christ. Paul's talking about the social divisions out there in the world, which we can so easily drag into the church...

Last Sunday I mentioned the old white-collar / blue collar division, where the suited and booted shirt and tie office workers wouldn't want to eat with oily boiler-suited blue collared workers. One sister in our home group on Wednesday mentioned a certain retail organisation, which had not two, but four catering layers, starting with the directors at the top, down to the shop workers at the bottom.

We're not to bring such sinful class behaviour into the church. Who do you hang out with in the coffee hall? People just like you? Or do you reach out to everyone, all sorts?

### Conclusion

Although we see and experience much of God's love among us at MHC & MPC, thanks be to God, we all have much further to go, do we not, as we are formed into the image of Christ Jesus, whose love for us is the ultimate example of this divine agape love:

*"This is love: not that we loved him but that he love us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin." (1 John 4:10)*

Let's sing of his love and pray that it may fill our hearts.

*Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of Heav'n to Earth come down,  
Fix in us your humble dwelling,  
All your faithful mercies crown;*