BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Romans 12:9–21

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Hollis McGehee

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BIBLE STUDY NOTES

Romans 12:9–21

Love Overcoming Evil

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About these notes: These are study notes prepared for a Bible study class. They were compiled with the help of the commentaries listed under “Sources” at the end, and much of the background and commentary is drawn from those authors. A number in brackets, like [3], shows which source a thought comes from. All credit belongs to them.

The Passage — Romans 12:9–21 (ESV)

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.

11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

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

17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

19 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.”

20 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.”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Verse 9

Romans 12:9 (ESV) “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.”

Commands: Genuine love — hate what is evil — hold fast to good.

Cross References

John 3:16 | 1 John 3:18 | Proverbs 8:13

John 3:16 (ESV) — 16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

1 John 3:18 (ESV) — 18 “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

Proverbs 8:13 (ESV) — 13 “The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Pride and arrogance and the way of evil and perverted speech I hate.”

Commentary

The Greek word anupokritos (sincere) is the negative of hupokrites, from which derives “hypocrite.” The hypocrite was the Greek actor who wore masks to portray emotion — sincere Christians wear no masks[1]. Love is not theatre; it belongs to the real world. Love and hypocrisy exclude one another. As John Stott wrote, “If love is the sum of virtue, and hypocrisy the epitome of vice, what a contradiction to bring these together!”[3]

It may seem strange that the exhortation to love is followed immediately by a command to hate. But love is not blind sentiment. On the contrary, it is discerning — so passionately

devoted to the beloved that it hates every evil incompatible with their highest welfare[3].

Greek Words of Significance

ἀνυπόκριτος (anupokritos) — without hypocrisy, sincere — unmasks, not theatrical

ἀποστυγέω (apostygeō) — abhor, loathe, express strong aversion (unique in the New Testament)

κολλάω (kollaō) — hold fast, cling, bond as with glue

Reflection

John Stott observed that pretence-love was displayed in its vilest form in the betraying kiss of Judas[3]. Genuine love demands both emotional authenticity and moral discernment — you cannot truly love someone while remaining indifferent to what destroys them.

Verse 10

Romans 12:10 (ESV) “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

Cross References

1 Thessalonians 4:9 | 1 Peter 1:22 | Philippians 2:3

1 Thessalonians 4:9 (ESV) — 9 “Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves

have been taught by God to love one another."

1 Peter 1:22 (ESV) — 22 "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart."

Philippians 2:3 (ESV) — 3 "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."

Commentary

Paul brings together two family words. "Be devoted" translates philostorgos, which describes natural affection for relatives — typically love of parent for child. The other word is philadelphia, "brotherly love," denoting the love of brothers and sisters for each other. Both words were applied originally to blood relationships, but Paul reapplies them to the tender, warm affection uniting the family of God[3].

Love in the Christian family expresses itself in mutual honour as well as mutual affection. Whether the command means to "esteem others more highly than yourself" or to "outdo one another in showing honour," in either case believers are to accord each other the highest possible honour[3].

Greek Words of Significance

φιλόστοργος (philostorgos) — tenderly affectionate, devoted — natural family love

φιλαδελφία (philadelphia) — brotherly love, familial affection

τιμή (timē) — honor, respect, high regard

Reflection

The Christian community should function as a family bound by affection deeper than mere obligation. This transforms the church from an institution into a household where members genuinely delight in elevating one another's worth and dignity.

Verse 11

Romans 12:11 (ESV) “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

Cross References

Colossians 3:23 | 1 Peter 4:10–11 | Ecclesiastes 9:10

Colossians 3:23 (ESV) — 23 “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.”

1 Peter 4:10–11 (ESV) — 10–11 “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies — in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Ecclesiastes 9:10 (ESV) — 10 “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”

Commentary

This verse emphasizes the energy and intensity required for authentic Christian service. Spiritual fervor cannot coexist with laziness or half-hearted commitment. The exhortation moves from internal disposition (fervent spirit) to external action (serve the Lord), indicating that genuine zeal manifests itself in concrete service.

Greek Words of Significance

ὀκνηρός (oknēros) — slothful, sluggish, reluctant — shrinking back from effort

ζέων (zeon) — boiling, fervent, burning with intensity

δουλεύω (douleuō) — serve, labor as a slave — total devotion to the master

Reflection

Authentic Christian service flows from passionate devotion to Christ, not from obligation or social expectation. Mediocrity in ministry reflects a deficiency in love for the Lord himself.

Verse 12

Romans 12:12 (ESV) “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Cross References

Romans 5:2–3 | 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 | Philippians 4:4–7

Commentary

Paul identifies three marks of spiritual maturity: hope-filled joy, patient endurance, and persistent prayer. These are not passive virtues but active disciplines. Rejoicing in hope means anchoring joy in God's promises rather than present circumstances. Patience in tribulation reflects confidence that suffering serves redemptive purposes. Constancy in prayer demonstrates dependence on God's sustaining grace.

Greek Words of Significance

χαρά (chara) — joy, rejoicing, gladness

ἐλπίς (elpis) — hope, confident expectation — not wishful thinking but certainty grounded in God

ὑπομονή (hypomenē) — patience, endurance, steadfast perseverance under pressure

προσευχή (proseuchē) — prayer, petition, intercession — the constant posture of dependence

Reflection

These three disciplines form a unified response to hardship: joy sustains the spirit, patience protects against despair, and prayer maintains connection to God's power. Together they transform tribulation from a threat into an occasion for spiritual growth.

Verse 13

Romans 12:13 (ESV) “Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”

Cross References

Galatians 6:10 | 1 Peter 4:9 | Hebrews 13:2

Commentary

Practical generosity and hospitality are not optional expressions of love but essential marks of Christian community. Contributing to saints' needs reflects the principle of mutual care established in Acts 2:44–45. Hospitality extends this care beyond the church family to strangers, embodying the principle that Christ identifies with the vulnerable and marginalized.

Greek Words of Significance

κοινωνία (koinōnia) — fellowship, sharing, participation — community marked by mutual giving

χρείαι (chreiai) — needs, necessities, requirements

φιλοξενία (philoxenia) — hospitality — literally “love of the stranger”

Reflection

Generosity and hospitality are not luxuries for the spiritually advanced but fundamental obligations for all believers. They demonstrate that love moves from sentiment to sacrifice, from feeling to action.

Verse 14

Romans 12:14 (ESV) “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

Cross References

Matthew 5:44 | Luke 6:28 | 1 Peter 3:9

Commentary

This command represents the radical reversal of natural human instinct. Blessing persecutors — speaking well of those who harm you — contradicts every impulse toward self-protection and retaliation. The repetition (“bless and do not curse”) emphasizes the difficulty and necessity of this discipline. Blessing is an act of will, not feeling.

Greek Words of Significance

εὐλογέω (eulogeō) — bless, speak well of, invoke divine favor upon

κατάρασθαι (kataraomai) — curse, invoke evil upon — the polar opposite of eulogeō

Reflection

Blessing persecutors demonstrates that Christian love transcends tribal loyalty and self-interest. It mirrors Christ's prayer from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This practice breaks the cycle of retaliation and opens the possibility of redemption.

Verse 15

Romans 12:15 (ESV) “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Cross References

1 Corinthians 12:26 | 1 Thessalonians 5:11 | Job 6:14

Commentary

Empathy forms the emotional foundation of Christian community. Rejoicing with others requires genuine happiness at their good fortune — overcoming envy and comparison. Weeping with others demands entering into their suffering rather than remaining detached. Both require emotional

availability and vulnerability, not merely intellectual assent to their circumstances.

Greek Words of Significance

χαίρω (chairō) — rejoice, be glad, take pleasure — an active, chosen response

κλαίω (klaiō) — weep, cry, lament — entering fully into another's grief

Reflection

Emotional participation in others' joys and sorrows creates genuine community. A church where members remain emotionally isolated from one another has failed to embody the body of Christ, which experiences suffering and joy collectively (1 Corinthians 12:26).

Verse 16

Romans 12:16 (ESV) “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.”

Cross References

Philippians 2:2–3 | 1 Peter 5:5 | Proverbs 3:7

Commentary

Harmony requires humility — the willingness to descend socially and intellectually. “Associate with the lowly” challenges status-consciousness and social hierarchy. “Never be wise in your own sight” warns against intellectual pride that prevents learning from others. These commands directly address the Jewish-Gentile tensions in Rome, where cultural superiority claims threatened unity.

Greek Words of Significance

φρονέω (phroneō) — think, have regard for, be minded toward — the direction of one's mental energy

ὑψηλοφρονέω (hypselophroneō) — be haughty, think too highly of oneself

ταπεινοί (tapeinoi) — lowly, humble, of low social status — those the world overlooks

Reflection

True wisdom begins with recognizing the limits of one's own understanding. The proud person cannot learn; the humble person remains open to correction and growth. Community requires members willing to humble themselves and genuinely value those society dismisses.

Verse 17

Romans 12:17 (ESV) “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”

Cross References

1 Thessalonians 5:15 | 1 Peter 3:9 | Proverbs 20:22

Commentary

Retaliation is forbidden absolutely — not conditionally or reluctantly. Instead, believers must deliberately consider what is “honorable in the sight of all,” suggesting that Christian conduct should be defensible even to critics. This protects the church's witness and prevents cycles of revenge that destroy communities.

Greek Words of Significance

ἀνταποδίδωμι (antapodidōmi) — repay, retaliate, return in kind — the instinct Paul forbids

καλόν (kalon) — good, honorable, noble, beautiful — that which is right in every eye

Reflection

Refusing retaliation is not weakness but strength — the strength to break destructive cycles and maintain moral integrity under pressure. It demonstrates that Christian

identity is not determined by others' actions but by commitment to Christ's character.

Verse 18

Romans 12:18 (ESV) “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Cross References

Hebrews 12:14 | Matthew 5:9 | Mark 9:50

Commentary

The qualifications “if possible” and “so far as it depends on you” acknowledge that peace sometimes requires the other party's cooperation. Believers are responsible for their own commitment to peace but cannot force it on unwilling partners. This realistic assessment prevents guilt when reconciliation fails despite genuine effort.

Greek Words of Significance

εἰρήνη (eirēnē) — peace, harmony, absence of conflict — the shalom of God

δύναμις (dynamis) — power, ability, capacity — “so far as it lies within your power”

Reflection

Christians must pursue peace actively and persistently, but they are not responsible for outcomes beyond their control. This distinction protects believers from despair when others reject their overtures while maintaining the obligation to keep seeking reconciliation.

Verse 19

Romans 12:19 (ESV) “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.’”

Cross References

Deuteronomy 32:35 | Hebrews 10:30 | 1 Thessalonians 4:6

Commentary

The address “Beloved” softens what follows, acknowledging the difficulty of the command. Vengeance belongs exclusively to God, not to individuals or communities. By appealing to Scripture (Deuteronomy 32:35), Paul grounds this prohibition in God's character and authority. Believers who take revenge usurp God's prerogative and deny His justice.

Greek Words of Significance

ἐκδίκησις (ekdikēsis) — vengeance, retribution, avenging justice — belongs to God alone

ὀργή (orgē) — wrath, anger, divine judgment — God's settled response to sin

Reflection

Relinquishing vengeance requires profound trust that God will ultimately judge justly. It means believing that injustice will not go unaddressed, even if earthly courts fail. This faith liberates believers from the burden of playing judge and executioner.

Verse 20

Romans 12:20 (ESV) “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.’”

Cross References

Proverbs 25:21–22 | Matthew 5:44 | Luke 6:35

Commentary

The verb psōmize (feed) comes from psōmos, a morsel, and means to feed crumbs to babies, then to feed in general[4]. The “coals of fire” are burning or live coals — a metaphor for keen anguish. The Arabs have a proverb: “coals in the heart,” “fire in the liver.” Such kindness may lead to repentance also[4].

The paradox is striking: active kindness to enemies produces internal conviction (burning coals). This is not manipulation

but the natural effect of undeserved grace — it awakens conscience and creates possibility for transformation.

Greek Words of Significance

ψωμίζω (psōmizō) — feed, provide food for — to give nourishment to the one who opposes you

σωρεύω (sōreuō) — heap up, pile upon (appears only here and 2 Timothy 3:6 in the New Testament)

ἄνθρακας (anthrakas) — coals, burning embers — the image of conviction and awakened conscience

Reflection

Feeding an enemy is not sentimentality but strategic spiritual warfare. Unmerited kindness disarms hostility more effectively than any argument. It demonstrates that Christian love operates by a completely different logic than the world's reciprocity.

Verse 21

Romans 12:21 (ESV) “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Cross References

1 John 2:13–14 | Proverbs 16:32 | Ephesians 6:10–12

Commentary

The Greek nikaō (conquer) appears in the passive form here: “Stop being conquered by the evil (thing or man).” The active form follows: “But keep on conquering the evil in the good.” This means to drown the evil in the good[4].

This final command synthesizes all preceding exhortations. Evil “overcomes” when it determines the believer's response — when hatred, retaliation, and bitterness become the dominant reality. Good “overcomes” when it remains primary, absorbing and transforming evil rather than being absorbed by it.

Greek Words of Significance

νικάω (nikaō) — conquer, overcome, be victorious — used in both passive and active forms in this verse

κακόν (kakon) — evil, wickedness, harm — that which is morally destructive

ἀγαθόν (agathon) — good, beneficial, morally excellent — the weapon Paul prescribes

Reflection

Paul's first word is “hate what is evil; cling to what is good,” and his last is “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”[1] — creating a frame around the entire passage. Victory over evil is not achieved through force but through the

persistent practice of goodness. This is the church's distinctive power in a hostile world.

Summary

A sacrificial believer will overcome evil with love in all personal relationships, especially those in which he or she is persecuted[1]. Paul focuses on agapē as the essence of Christian discipleship, and Romans 12–15 are a sustained exhortation to let love govern and shape all relationships[3]. The passage moves from love within the Christian community (verses 9–16) to love toward enemies (verses 17–21), demonstrating that genuine faith transforms not only how believers treat allies but how they respond to opposition.

Sources

[1] Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 6:373–374.

[3] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 330–331.

[4] A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933).

Commentary offered not as authoritative but as a view of the verse drawn from the scriptures presented, other scriptures, and various commentaries. If these thoughts do not line up with the Word then they must be rejected. It is my belief and prayer they are consistent with the Word and are offered as a simple teaching on the Word and as every teaching on the Word each must be carefully compared with the one true and living Word of God.