

# God's Greater Plan for You - Living in Love

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God's Greater Story / Love; Peace; Power / Romans 12:9–21

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- › Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text from Romans this morning is challenging, especially in the nature of our society today. Paul writes to encourage God's people, but his words are overwhelming to us. *"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another...be fervent in spirit...rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer"* and that's only a small portion of the first three verses. His list goes on and on.

Listening to his words it's easy to feel exhausted. To feel unworthy. To wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever form within us all these desires of God. Paul's list is overwhelming and leaves us wondering: "Where do we start? What should we pay attention to? What is a Christian to do with all of these words?"

Let's say you were to take on exhortation a day a really work on that one. So, for Monday, you take, *"Let love be genuine"* and all day, you try to demonstrate genuine love. Passing by someone in the hall at work and interacting with them on your Zoom Call, you say, "How are you doing?" Today, love is more than words of a casual greeting. It involves action and interaction, genuinely experienced and genuinely expressed. Who are you going to work on loving? Tuesday you move to next exhortation and work on *"Abhor what is evil."* There are lots of evils to abhor. Which one will you work on? If you were to do this for a everyone one of these exhortations, it would take you almost a month to the through the list. And that would be spending only one day on each one and assuming that you could actually do these things. Paul's list of exhortations is overwhelming to the Christian.

Yet, maybe Paul was trying to overwhelm God's people - not with commands about what they had to be doing, but with a glimpse, just a glimpse of the kingdom of God, coming alive in their midst. In our text, this morning, Paul is not setting out a twelve-step program to "build the better spiritual you" but rather revealing the varied ways in which God is at work in the world. And Paul invites us to consider that vision this morning so that today, in our small corner of this vast world, we too can participate in this ever-living kingdom of God.

The city of Rome was overwhelming. Think of what it was like for the early Christians in Rome. Rome was considered the center of the world. Its public spaces were filled with monuments,

arches, forums, and images honoring military victories and the imperial family. There were temples for worshipping not only gods and goddesses but even past leaders who were now proclaimed gods.

Consider the Altar of Peace. It was a monument built on the Field of Mars. This space was once used for military training but now, at the time of Paul's letter, it was the site of much building activity. This monument to peace was built and dedicated about 13 years before Jesus was born, and, in just a few years, Nero would have an image of it stamped on a coin. It was a monument that captured the glory of Rome and the imagination of her people. It invited Roman citizens and foreign dignitaries to participate in a much larger story. The story of power and glory leading to peace in the Roman world.

Surrounding the altar were walls of marble, beautifully decorated, each side measuring about the length of a large mobile home. At the top of these walls were figures, human figures carved into the marble. These figures were not small. They were life size, towering over you, as you looked up from the ground. They were also very realistic. People you could identify, people within living memory. On one side was a panel of Roman senators and priests. On another side was Caesar Augustus, leading his servants and family in procession to the altar. Through his military victories, he had established Roman peace and now invited all people, those in the past and those in the present, to live in the glory of Rome. The Altar of Peace invited Romans to live in the world of imperial power. They were to trust in Rome's military might and service to the gods for the establishment of peace. If you looked closely, within the panel, there were even small children, from different nations, suggesting that all nations would come and worship at this altar and live within the power and peace of Rome.

Now imagine being a Christian, living in Rome, surrounded by such images of power. It would have been easy for the early Christians to question the power of God. They were gathering in small house churches. They did not have political or military strength. They did not have a system of colleges and seminaries for training pastors and other church work vocations. They did not have libraries of theological texts defining the Christian faith. They did not even have what we know of as the New Testament. They had the Old Testament Scriptures and the proclamation of the apostles, including this letter from Paul. Surrounded by images and temples of the imperial cult, the Roman Christians may have wondered about the Kingdom of God. How could the Kingdom of God come in a place like Rome? And when would they know that they were experiencing it?

For these Christians, the Apostle Paul paints an overwhelming picture. He gives them a glimpse into the ways of God. Paul would agree that there was a war going on, a conflict that threatened the lives of God's people; His listing includes the figures of war. He speaks of enemies of God's people, tribulation, persecution, and evil that needs to be abhorred. Yet, surprisingly, Paul does not call for aggressive military action – or even violent protests. He does not celebrate massive military victories with this listing. Instead, he calls the people to service.

Paul writes, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Overcome evil with good. That’s really what you and I need to hear today! And we need to live it!

Paul knows that the hope of the Christian lies not in the figure of Caesar Augustus but in the figure of Jesus Christ. The one who overcame evil with good. The work of Christ our salvation was not a triumphal march toward victory through the streets of Rome, but a journey self-sacrifice ending in Jerusalem. In the gospel reading for today, Jesus speaks of his passion. Here, He gives us the story of God that saves the world.

I don’t know if you have ever seen Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*. That movie is extremely violent and graphic in the depiction of the passion. Probably the closest to what happened when it comes to the violence. It reveals the power of Rome was a force to be reckoned with. Behind the marble friezes and the beautiful monuments to peace with brutal power and system or punishment that stripped all enemies of human dignity and ruled by force. Hidden within the brutality, however, was the self-sacrificial work of God. And it is that one small story, not walking in triumphal process through Rome, but making its way through the streets of Jerusalem, that is our source of peace and hope.

There is a scene in that movie that captures this vision of God and the sacrifice of Jesus brings peace. It isn’t in Scripture, so Gibson took some poetic license, but it does reflect Scripture and what God is teaching us by faith to see. It’s that moment when Jesus speaks to his mother Mary on the way to the crucifixion. Jesus is bloodied and beaten. He is carrying his cross through the crowded streets of Jerusalem. He falls for the third time and Mary, his mother, reaches out as if to catch him. Her mind is filled with images of the past. She remembers him running to her in the streets of Nazareth. These images of the past only make the present more painful. She realizes that this time she cannot catch him, she cannot save him. This day her Son is going to die.

But when Mary reaches out to Jesus, Jesus stops and reaches out to catch her with a word. We have a moment where we see Jesus. His face bruised and bloodied. In the background is the cross. But his eyes are gazing at us with wonder. He turns to his mother Mary and says, “Behold I make all things new.” When Mary’s mind is filled with images of the past, Jesus offers her a promise of the future. When Mary’s heart is breaking over the end, Jesus comforts her with the new beginning. When Mary sees death, Jesus reveals to her life. Jesus teaches Mary to see this horrible destruction as God’s most creative act.

God is in control and at work for the world in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. While Rome flexes its military muscle and the religious leaders implement their deceptive strategies and God’s people give in to despair and give up their hope, God is in control, at work for his world. Jesus walks through the streets of Jerusalem to offer his life as the one true sacrifice that forgives all sins for all people for all time. In Jesus is our source of peace with God and hope for the world. This is the peace that Paul knows and proclaims to Roman Christians and to you today. But this peace isn’t something that we only look back at, remembering an even in the annals of history.

No. Paul invites the Roman Christians and you today to live in this peace, now, as you experience the kingdom of God.

What does such life look like?

In the gospel for today, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks that they follow him.

*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

We know these words. We've heard them before. Some of us have committed them to memory. Many of us have sung them in hymns. But what does it look like to live the? What does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

This is what Paul gives us in a glimpse of in his letter today? Notice the type of things that Paul celebrates in his listing. For Rome, it took massive military campaigns to lead to the erection of this monument. Rome had begun its conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 218 BC. It took over 200 years of fighting and infiltration until they could finally declare victory over Augustus and celebrate the victory in this massive altar to peace. This listing Paul offers contains no massive military victories. Instead, it celebrates small, seemingly inconsequential ways of God. Acts of brotherly affection. Caring for the needs of the saints. Taking notice of the lowly. And even loving one's enemies. Offering a cup of water or a gift of food to an enemy who is thirsty and hungering. Our list could continue onward. It's putting down weaponry and coming together to figure out peace. It's putting away the fire to civilly talk about what is going on in our society. It's listening, it's waiting for details. It's loving the unlovable. It's protecting the lives of the threatened, the marginalized, the elderly, the sick, and those still in the womb. These are the ways of the kingdom of God.

The Romans carved figures of leadership into marble and made them into gods as a way celebrating peace. God forms his kingdom not with stones but with flesh and blood. He takes you as his people, washed you in the waters of baptism, fills you with his Spirit and brings you to life. His work may not be noticed by the world. It may not be celebrated as a major turning point in history. No, it may simply be a moment when you rejoice with someone who rejoices or weep with someone who weeps. But this is the working of God. A real-life tangible expression of God's Spirit, at work in our world, bringing about different kind of peace.

When encountered as a listing, a series of exhortations that come over us all at once, these words can be confusing and challenging. We don't know where to start. But when encountered as a community, a way in which God's Spirit works through flesh and blood in this world, these words are comforting and encouraging. They open our eyes to see the ways in which God is near us, very near us in daily life.

Once you hear these words from Paul, you begin to see God at work among his people all the time. And the vision, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, can bring you an

eternal joy. Consider the pastor who went to the hospital to visit a parishioner. She was in the last stages of cancer, heavily medicated, unresponsive, but he went to weep with those who weep. When he rounded the corner, he was surprised by what he saw. Her daughter was there at the foot of the bed. She had taken the sheets and thrown them back and was putting lotion on her mother's body, starting at the feet. This was the some expensive lotion. More than the daughter could afford. As he walked into the room, the room smelled beautiful. The daughter gave him a mischievous smile and made him promise not to tell her children. Her kids had given her the lotion for Mother's Day. "Because you never do anything for yourself," they said. And here she was, putting that lotion on her mother's feet. Her mother was unresponsive. She wouldn't know the difference. But the pastor did. That day, he saw a vision of the kingdom of God. Not carved in marble, but formed in flesh and blood. Immersed in suffering. Yet alive in love. Mother and daughter. Giving mercy. Receiving mercy. Surrounded by death and dying, yet living in an act of selfless love.

This is the vision Paul invites us to see this morning.

You can go see the Altar of Peace if you want. You will need to catch a flight to Rome and go to a museum. Once there, you can stand in the stillness and coldness of that room and look at this monument, this celebration of the power and the glory of Rome. At the time, it challenged the Roman Christians. It offered a vision of peace and glory in the power of Rome. Now, the monument is a relic. A museum piece. An object of art. The victories it celebrated, the empire it served, the peace it promised...all those are gone!

But the vision of God that Paul wrote about in this letter. The kingdom of God that came in Jesus. The peace of God that his Spirit works among his people. These remain. Paul wants you to see God alive and at work today in your midst. To do that Paul doesn't need to take you to a museum. No, he invites you to look around you at the people God has gathered in this place. Your brothers and sisters in Christ. Here, is God at work in love. He has called you in Christ to be his people. He has forgiven you and made you his own. And now he works in you and through by the power of his Holy Spirit. You can see God at Work. Not in great stories of massive military victories, but in small stories of self-sacrifice and everyday acts of love. In these ways and with these people, God continues to work in human history, leading us all in holy process to that day when he will return and bring to earth his heavenly kingdom that shall have no end.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.