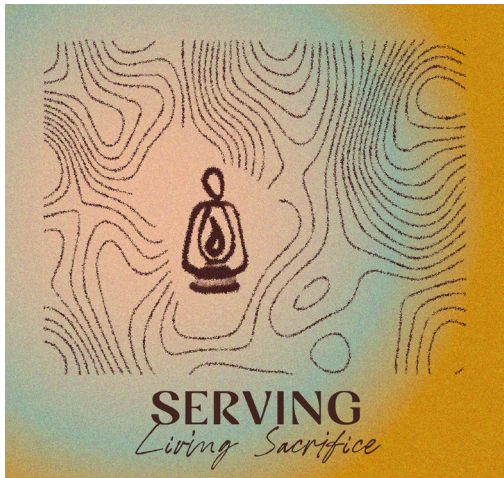


Sermon Growth Guide

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SERVING | Romans 12:9-13

August 9, 2026

Key Verse: Romans 12:10 - “Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.”

Big Idea: As a result of God’s mercies (Rom. 12:1-2) and in the execution of our spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:3-8), the church is to develop a moral culture of agape love (Rom. 12:9-13) with a specific view toward building up the church as a whole.

Foundations

Last week, we heard from Nate Stratman on spiritual gifts and serving in the church as members of the body of Christ. Now, we learn more about the characteristics that we are to embody as we carry out our service of love. Verse 9 begins a rapid-fire list of behaviors that we, as believers, should prioritize and seek to develop—things such as love and fervor, sincerity and integrity, devotion and honor. We serve; we share; we show hospitality. It is akin to a Christian list of virtues that responds to the list of vices from Romans 1:29-32.

The first ethical exhortation, “Love must be sincere,” sets the stage for all of Paul’s subsequent commands. If love defines the Christian life, then, as Tertullian said, “See how they love one another” is what pagans should be saying when they observe an authentic Christian family. We should pursue honor not for ourselves, but for others, and neither should we be complacent in our service to God.

Interestingly, the trio of rejoicing in hope, enduring affliction, and faithfully praying (Rom. 12:12) mirrors the exhortations of Romans 5:2-5 and 8:24-27. We see hope fostering endurance, and endurance in turn requiring constant prayer. And finally, out of the abundant overflow of our hearts, we are to share with others in hospitality.

Understanding God’s Word

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said, “The best defense against hypocrisy is love; indeed, it is not only a defense but a chasmic abyss; in all eternity it has nothing to do with hypocrisy. This is also a fruit by which love is known—it secures the loving one against falling into the snare of the hypocrite.” Is Kierkegaard right? Does sincere love protect against hypocrisy? What does sincere love entail, how do we identify it, and how can we cultivate it?

Applying God’s Word

How are the trio of hope, endurance through suffering, and constant prayer all interconnected with each other? Is there a way for you to better put one or more of these elements into practice in your life?

Witnessing God’s Word

When the world looks at our church, what do you think they see? Do they see a religious social club? A community service organization? A collection of hypocrites? (Hopefully not!) Or do they see a family united in love? How can we better demonstrate a culture of agape love to the rest of the world?

Researchers in Washington state are finding lost varieties of apples. It's called the Lost Apple Project. They track down apple records, old orchards, lost trees in the woods, and genetically identify and reproduce apples that have been gone for generations. Some of the apples they have produced have been, absolutely disgusting. Terrible. Spit it out! But some they bite into and say, "Now that is what an apple was always supposed to be!" Romans 12 is making Christians. The theology grows legs. Pastor Chip Ingram created an entire discipleship program just on Romans 12. The "R12 Christian." What kind of Christian are we becoming? I've had seasons when I ate an apple every day. I love a good apple. But then you get a bad one and just stop wanting apples. Not even consciously, you just don't reach for one for months. Who wants the risk? The right kind of Christian...wow! The world wants more of that. The world needs more of that. They shine like light, like stars. Some hate the light and flee from it or attack it, but the right kind of Christian, oh the flavor! Bite into the wrong one... Also, please don't bite the Christians, but you know what I mean. The world washes out the true Christian character we are made to reflect. Romans 12 restores that DNA.

Romans 12 is a shaping passage. This is spiritual formation. In our walk through Romans, you may have noticed, we slowed the pace from skimming over twenty verses to crawling along and taking in every phrase. It all starts with those first two verses. "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:1-2) In view of all God has done for you, the mercies, offer your body as a Living Sacrifice—a sacrifice that is on the altar, laid out on the altar, and is still alive. The will must keep it there. Give your life to Christ. Lay your life down on the altar, at the foot of the cross before Jesus Christ.

Because there are two tracks, there is a choice, a difference. Do not conform but be transformed. Formed you will be. Will you allow yourself to be pressed into the form of the world? Will you be shaped by the values and culture and trends of this world in all its rejection of God, rejection of good, pursuit of impurity, addiction to evils toxic to body and soul...or will you be transformed by Christ? Conformed or transformed?

And we see that it's a body question. This isn't just about what you think or believe, but also how that belief plays out in bodily decisions. It begins with the mind, doesn't it? Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then it plays out in will, and action, and decision. Offer your body as a living sacrifice. How do I do that? Where do you go with your body? What do you do with your body? Whatever you'd like? Whatever seems to please? If your body had a tracker, what would the map show? If you were pulled over on the highway in Egypt by ISIS, like the 21 Coptic Martyrs of 2015, and they grabbed your phone and looked up your calendar, your bank account, your location tracking, would there be enough evidence to convict you of being a Christian? Offer your bodies as living sacrifice. Here are practices, ways, disciplines you might call them. Romans 12 is a training ground.

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." (Romans 12:9) If I were translating that from the Greek I would have said, "Love is un-hypocritical." Love is sincere, or it's not love. It's something else. Love isn't fake, false, mask-wearing. "Hypocrite" comes from the practice of ancient Greek drama where an actor used different masks to play different characters. Love is pure, sincere. Not masked up. We have all been in relationships that felt false. You feel more manipulated than known, more used than seen. Being transformed, not conformed, means a different kind of love. Love is sincere, it is un-mask-wearing, or else it isn't love. It's something else. That doesn't mean love abandons truth. For the sake of good feelings, some abandon the

difference between good and evil. No. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. I was just listening to a podcast that talked about the importance of revulsion. There are things we get accustomed to that used to be repulsive to us. Their point was that we actually need that repulsion, like a head snap when you open some old milk. Love, real Christian love, does not wash out the difference between good and evil. Cling to what is good. Love purity. Love the peace and clarity; love the cool clear stream of what is good. Truth telling is part of unhypocritical love.

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” (Romans 12:10) Be as devoted to Christian community as if it were your own brother or sister. That’s what this says. To be a living sacrifice is to use, again, your actual time and space and energy and resources to demonstrate love to one another as brothers and sisters. Isn’t it interesting how Christ commands us? In John 13 Jesus said they will know we are his disciples by our love for one another. In John 17 he says our unity and love will demonstrate the truth of Jesus’ message. In 1 John, the Beloved Disciple says God’s love is made clear in Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, then says, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:11) God’s love turns into one another love. Love one another.

Honor one another. Honoring someone else above yourself. We live in the age of the all-dominating autonomous self at the core and center of everything. What if, just as an exercise, you tried truly to hold someone else, anyone else, in a higher place than your own needs and preferences? What would that look like? You know, as early as Aristotle people claimed selfless service is actually impossible. We only do what we most want to do, nothing else, even with what we call self-sacrifice. “I don’t do what I want to do. I went to work last week.” You went to work because you wanted to not lose your job, so ultimately you decided it was better for you to go to work than to not, and get fired. True selflessness is

almost impossible to find. Attempt to actually, fully, serve another person this week. No ulterior motive. Nothing in it for you. Give it a shot! It will stand out like a diamond. “Honor one another above yourself.” To honor is to accord recognition and show appreciation. Extra credit if you can honor someone else’s contribution without any reference to your own. It’s hard sometimes. Service can be its own reward. Serving others is good for you. Sacrificial service, studies claim, relieves depression, increases purpose, adds resilience, lowers blood pressure. Service triggers the release of endorphins, oxytocin and dopamine creating a rewarding feeling not unlike being given money or a good meal. If you’re running a business, in place of bonuses just give your employees opportunities to volunteer and serve. Better than cash! “Oh, there will be no bonus, but...” What if you could serve with no gain?

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” (Romans 12:11) How are we doing at zeal? How are we doing at letting the fire of the Spirit move in us? Come to worship expecting to warm up, to glow, like that coal that was out of the fire and gets kicked back in and starts to glow? How about a white-hot faith in Jesus? A living sacrifice faith in Jesus? Spiritual fervor. What moves your heart? Are you keeping your flame alive with Jesus; or are you keeping your faith on ice? Let it melt you. Let it warm you. It serves others for you to be more devoted to Jesus. You will love your husband better, you will love your wife better, you will love your kids and grandkids better for loving Jesus first. Fight for the fervor.

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12) Be joyful in hope. There is more hope in Jesus, there is more reason for hope because of Jesus, than any other basis. Because the tomb is empty; because Jesus rose from the dead, we have an endless supply, a bottomless reservoir of hope. Not positive vibes, not optimistic vision, but actually knowing the good is coming and letting that future reality change your current condition. Hope. Be joyful in it. Joy is a protest against the darkness of this dying world. Joyful in hope. Be patient in affliction. Hard times can suck the wind out of your sails. Patience is also sometimes called long-suffering. Endurance.

When you are at the end of your rope remember, Jesus lives at the end of the rope. He loves to meet you there. Third, be faithful in prayer. Keep praying. Don't give up. The story isn't over. The suffering isn't permanent. We are headed for the Kingdom of the Living God. Keep praying.

Finally, how do I not get conformed but stay transformed? How do I keep my true Christian, good apple, DNA? How does devotion to others count as living sacrifice? "Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." (Romans 12:13) Look for opportunities to give, to share what you have with the urgent needs that emerge. I have a friend who carries \$100 bill in her pocket at all times just waiting for a prompt of the Holy Spirit. Scanning for the urgent need and divine opportunity. Her stories are remarkable. And finally, practice hospitality. It means love for the stranger; it's the very opposite of xenophobia, it's xenophilia. How can I love and serve and draw near to someone different from me? That's how God loves us. How can I reflect that unexpectedly this week?

Chip Ingram says about this passage, "Authentic community occurs when the real you shows up and meets real needs for the right reason in the right way." The real you, no masks, no hypocrisy, meets real needs, devoted to one another, for the right reason, not looking for gain or show or recognition, in the right way, rejoicing in hope, enduring hard times, praying without ceasing. Do you know a community like that? Could we be a church like that? That's the good apple. It begins with the living sacrifice. Do not be conformed; be transformed. How? Lay your life down before Jesus. You will find yourself living a life you never dreamed. First you have to let go. First you have to give it up. Then, as he gives it back to you in new ways, you will live. Drop your life at his feet. "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life

for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25) The living sacrifice. It doesn't just lay down on the altar once. Again and again. "When did you give your life to Christ?" Answer: forty years ago, and last year, and this week, and this morning, and this moment, and... "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) The living sacrifice. I am given over. All I have for Jesus is yes. Yes, yes I will. Yes, Lord, Yes, Lord, Yes, Yes, Yes.