

Our Romans lesson is really a challenging one. It's not challenging to understand. What's challenging is carrying it out. Paul's encouragement for God's people seems impossible: **“Love must be sincere ... Hate what is evil ... Cling to what is good ... Be devoted to one another in love ... Keep your spiritual fervor ... Be joyful in hope ... Patient in tribulation ... Constant in prayer”** ... plus 22 more.

Listening to his words is more exhausting than encouraging. Trying to follow his words causes more guilt for us than anything. Could the Holy Spirit ever create all of these desires in us? Paul's list leaves us wondering: *“How can a Christian do that? Where do I even start?”*

Let's say you take one of those 30 commands each day and work on it. On Monday, you take **“Love must be sincere.”** All day, you try to demonstrate sincere love. When you pass by someone and ask: *“How are you doing?”* you actually stop to listen and respond. On Monday, love is more than a casual greeting.

On Tuesday, you move on to **“Hate what is evil.”** And, if you were to do that for every command, it would take you a month to get through this list just once. That's overwhelming for the Christian.

So today, let's try this. Let's take that list of 30 and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze until we have it down to these 2:

1) *Demonstrate a self-sacrificing love.* 2) *Overcome evil with good.*

What exactly is a self-sacrificing love? How does one demonstrate it?

- A self-sacrificing love is **Sincere**. We genuinely care about others. We don't demand anything in return for what we do. Each day it's all about: *“You first!”*
- It **Hates what's evil**. Evil words and actions should make us sick to our stomach when we hear them or use them. It sees everyone, no matter the skin color or ethnic background, as just like us.

- It **Clings to what's good**. We take people's words and actions in the kindest possible way. We refuse to listen to rumors and gossip. We're **Devoted, loyal to one another**.
- It **Shows honor and respect**. We don't wait until someone compliments us. We take the initiative, because we know how much a compliment means to us. We show a humble attitude by considering others better than ourselves.
- It's also **Joyful in hope**. We look at life with optimism, our glass is half full. We're chomping at the bit to **practice hospitality**. We **patiently** go out of our way, even if it's inconvenient.

Demonstrating this self-sacrificing love is a huge challenge for us, who by nature are sinful and only want to focus on ourselves. And it doesn't help to hear things like: *“You have to love yourself before you can love others.” “Love yourself, you never know if anyone else will.”*

Complicating matters even more is the definition for love. Most identify love as an emotion, a feeling. Once that emotion wears out or the feeling dries up, people struggle to show love. Love is also viewed as conditional - what can we get in return? It's much easier to love those who are nice to us, than those who aren't, right?

But the love Scripture describes here is an action. It shows love and continues to show love to others even when it goes unnoticed or unappreciated. That's why it's self-sacrificing. Even if our actions go unappreciated or unnoticed, and no one knows about our selfless acts, God knows and they are valuable and precious to him.

Talking about self-sacrificing love, makes us think about Jesus Christ and his love. It was self-sacrificing. He said so: **“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends.”**

Jesus was under no obligation to do the things he did. There's only one explanation as to why the Son of God went through the agony of betrayal, rejection, crucifixion, death and burial — to give you and me forgiveness and life. He put our need for salvation as his top priority.

That means the love Paul encourages us to show is only possible from someone who has experienced Jesus' love in the first place. And when we demonstrate this kind of love to others, it points them to the greatest act of love done for them - Jesus' death.

Paul's advice is demonstrating love toward fellow believers. Now, he moves to our society, who neither understands nor appreciates Christians: **Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud. Be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.**

These qualities aren't demonstrated to gain God's favor. They're the result of God's favor having been experienced by us. It's not going to be easy to: **"To bless those who persecute you."** This advice is so extreme and so challenging that Paul explains in detail our Christian response to an unchristian encounter: **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

We've now squeezed these 30 encouragements until we have these 2: Demonstrate a self-sacrificing love! Overcome evil with good!

No one has to teach a child, teen or adult to retaliate. That comes naturally. When people hurt us, we want to make them feel the pain they've caused us. That's why we all need to be taught not to do that. We all need repeated training in overcoming evil with good.

As Christians, we get the strength to do that from the example of Christ and the energy we get through our connection to Christ. On the cross,

Jesus prayed: **"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."** Jesus overcame evil with good.

Overcoming evil with good is what God did on the cross, too.

- He overcame the wrongs we did to him with Jesus' flawless life and perfect sacrifice.
- He overcame our sins with mercy and forgiveness, not anger and judgment.
- He overcame death with death, the death of his Son.
- He overcame Satan's greatest hour - killing God's Son, with the greatest victory - the resurrection of God's Son.

But we'd rather retaliate. It comes naturally. That's why he has to tell us to do something that doesn't come naturally: **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."**

Be patient and leave the revenge business in God's hands. A just and holy God is still in charge even when evil people do evil things. All things will eventually work itself out in God's eternal court of justice.

What do we do when we encounter and endure evil? We show goodness and mercy by praying for, blessing and helping those who have wronged us. Doing the opposite to them has a purpose. When an enemy of Christ has vented their anger, and we've responded with kindness it may cause them to rethink their actions. Their regret will make it feel like they are carrying burning coals on their head. Things won't always turn out, but our goal is still to overcome evil with good.

Paul's list of 30 encouragements may seem overwhelming if not impossible for us. But when you squeeze them down to just 2 by: Demonstrating a self-sacrificing love and overcoming evil with good, we're pointing to Jesus and his overwhelming love for us and them.