

“Do Just the Opposite!”

Romans 12:9-21

By Pastor David Nygard

Preached at Messiah Lutheran, Joliet Illinois

September 13, 2026

All Bible References Are Taken from The New International Version (NIV)

Romans 12:9-21 Paul wrote ⁹ **Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.** ¹⁰ **Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.** ¹¹ **Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.** ¹² **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** ¹³ **Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.** ¹⁴ **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.** ¹⁵ **Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.** ¹⁶ **Live in harmony with one another.** Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.** ¹⁸ **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** ¹⁹ **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.** ²⁰ **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.”** ²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. I am glad that we can talk together. I'm happy that you came to church.

There are six reasons why I come to church on Sunday: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. When I miss church, I feel like I am running on empty. I need to hear that I am loved and forgiven. I need to be reminded that we serve a risen Savior. It helps me to see that I belong to a family of faith, sitting all around me. Your faith gives me encouragement. Let my faith strengthen you. We miss a lot by skipping church.

My sermon is called “Do Just the Opposite”. In **Romans chapter 12: 9-21**, Paul shares wonderful Christian advice. Each verse could be a thoughtful sermon. Some verses stand out. Paul writes ⁹ **Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.** I read that and think, “Oh man, sometimes I love what is evil and give into temptation.” **How about you?**

Paul tells us ¹⁰ **Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.** I wonder “How can I do that when I love

getting pats on the back and being the center of attention?" **How about you?**

Paul tells us, "¹¹ **Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.**" Sometimes I don't have any zeal for the Lord. I think that if something needs to be done at church, someone else can do it." **How about you?**

Paul writes "¹² **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.**" If I am honest, I sometimes lose hope, become impatient and struggle to pray. That often happens on Monday. Tuesday is worse. **How about you?**

Then Paul takes it too far, "¹⁷ **Do not repay anyone evil for evil.** ¹⁸ **...live at peace with everyone.** ¹⁹ **Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, ..."It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.**" Live at peace with everyone? Some people are difficult for me to love. Some people I struggle to forgive. It's easy to think "Revenge would be sweet". **How about you?**

I read these verses and realized that when it comes to Paul's good advice, that I often do just the opposite. I feel the same way when I read the Beatitudes: Matthew 5-6-7 where Jesus tells us to be peacemakers, to forgive our enemies and to share our time and riches. I do just the opposite. **How about you?**

Can you say "Pathetic"? Can you say, "Have mercy on me, Jesus"?

Paul isn't surprised that although we know what is right, we do the opposite. It turns out that we are wired that way. It's in our DNA. Paul writes in **Romans 7**. ¹⁵ **I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...** ²⁰ **Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.**" I didn't say it. Paul said it. We are sinners. Church is a hospital for sinners.

Paul writes, "**What a wretched man I am? Who will rescue me?... Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ Our Lord!**"

Simply said, we have a sickness inside of us called sin. Sin is stronger than our good intentions. Sin fills us with excuses. Sin feeds on our insecurities and selfishness. Sin pushes God away.

Here's wonderful news. When Jesus died on the cross, he made it possible for us to be forgiven. We read in **Isaiah 53:5-6**, **"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed..."**

Jesus paid the price. Whatever sins we confess to Jesus, God forgives. Whatever God forgives, God also forgets. Even on our best days we are nothing more than sinners saved by God's grace. The pressure to be perfect is off.

Why does Paul give us a list of good things to do, that we can't do? I think that Paul is showing us what is important to God. It's important that what matters to God starts to matter to us.

Sometimes we wonder about God's plan. What can I do differently? What will heal my relationships? How can I become the person that God made me to be? So, Paul gives us suggestions. Jesus gives us guidance. The Spirit gives us the desire.

Now loving people and forgiving our enemies won't earn us God's love. God loves us already. Feeding the hungry and helping those in need won't get us into heaven. God's love and forgiveness are always a gift.

As sinners we fail many times a day to do the right thing, but we can still learn from our mistakes. We can build better relationships. It is God working in us when we overcome an addiction, or forgive an enemy, or feel genuine love. It is God at work. It feels amazing.

I think that when Paul and Jesus give us these difficult things to do, they remember the usual way that we act and think. And they are telling us to do just the opposite. If our pettiness and selfishness mess up our lives, then we should do the opposite. The opposite course of action is to obey what Paul writes in Romans 9 and Jesus preaches in the Beatitudes. The word "repentance" means that we take responsibility for our actions and change the direction of our lives.

I remember an episode of "Seinfeld". George is a complicated character. He tells lies and makes excuses. He can't keep a job. He blames others. He feels sorry for himself. One day George realizes "Maybe if I do everything just the opposite, my results will be just the opposite."

So, he sees a beautiful woman in a restaurant. He tells the woman, "My name is George. I am 35. I can't hold a job. I live with my parents." She tells him, "It's wonderful to meet an honest man." They start dating. He admits his faults in a job interview and gets the best job ever. George is thrilled. Unfortunately, he can't stop being the old George.

George never has a change of heart. There was no repentance. He never realizes how his sinfulness wounded others. It never occurs to him that he has an emptiness in his heart that only Jesus could fill.

Here's the answer. We read in **Isaiah 55:6-9** **"⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.... ⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord."** God's ways are always better.

Let's consider one of Paul's verses, **"¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, ...for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,'" says the Lord."** What does this passage mean? I have a story to share. I don't look very good in it.

I served as pastor in my first congregation for eight years. Nice people. We got along fine. But then we got a new senior pastor who hated me from the start. He lied to me. He lied about me. He had church members break into my office. They emptied my desk and files and put the boxes in a corner.

It was his subtle way of saying "It's time to leave." Karen and I had no money, no job, no place to live. The hurt ran deep. I am not making this up. I started to plan revenge. On my last day I still had keys to the church. My plan was to come to the pastor's office late at night and hide about four dozen eggs. He wouldn't notice it at first, but after a few weeks, the office would stink like him. I spent hours planning it. But God said "No".

I eventually became one of the pastors at Messiah. It was wonderful. Kind people of faith. But I was still wounded. I lost my confidence. It was hard to trust people. Two years went by. I preached a sermon on forgiving others. I said that God's love is a gift. We are meant to forgive others freely just as God forgives us. I said, "I feel like a hypocrite, because there are people that I cannot forgive."

When I shook hands with the worshippers, a man from my first church came up to me. He said, "You are talking about me, aren't you?" He had never been in the church before or since. I said, "Yes". I felt sick.

The next day he called me on the phone. He apologized. I didn't want to hear it. I was angry. But then I remembered the many times that Jesus had forgiven me... as a gift. I realized that the man would always control me, always know how to hurt me, until I forgave him and let it go. Jesus nudged me. The moment that I said, "I forgive you", fifty percent of my anger hurt left me... in an instant.

Two days later another former church member walked up my driveway. I felt like throwing up. I wanted to punch him out. He started to cry in my kitchen. He asked my forgiveness. I thought "No way". But I was tired of being a victim. I remembered that Jesus said that if we don't forgive others, he won't forgive us. Jesus nudged me. I said, "I forgive you." Immediately the other fifty percent of my hurt left me. I didn't feel like forgiving him and then said the words. I said the words and Jesus made it real.

I had my own way of dealing with those who hurt me. It included rotten eggs. Jesus helped me to do just the opposite. I know that sometimes it takes years to forgive others. We need to let go. But in this case, the moment that I said the words, I was set free.

In another verse Paul writes, "**Honor one another above yourselves.**" We often put ourselves first. What is the opposite thing for us to do? The best honor we can give someone is our complete attention. Be a listener. Never assume that you know what someone might say next. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Ask questions. Listen to them like Jesus listens to you.

In another verse Paul writes, "Never be lacking in zeal..." Zeal is excitement and enthusiasm. Here's how it works. We don't have zeal and then volunteer in church. It's the opposite. We volunteer. Then God fills us with zeal. The little bit that we give of ourselves comes back 100% in satisfaction and joy.

We can't outgive God. If you believe it say "Amen." Amen.
Thanks for listening. I next preach on November 9th.