

Have you ever called in a consultant or a coach to help you sort things out? The good ones don't just tell you what to do. They help you to see what you are doing through new eyes. Let me be your coach for a day and help you see Romans 12:9-21 through new eyes.

Without some kind of coaching these 13 verses will overwhelm you. You will hear them and say, "That's nice," and forget about them as fast as you forget the recipe for a French pastry. If you see these verses as nothing more than religious rules for people who like that kind of thing, they will remain a closed book to you.

I want you to hear every short command in this passage as the voice of Christ at your side offering wisdom. I want you to know that wisdom is never satisfied with blind obedience. Wisdom always pushes us farther and says, "This short command carries one of God's secrets for the good life, but you have to figure out how it works in the circumstances of your life. You will have to use good judgment, seek counsel, and sometimes be confused, because you don't know what you are supposed to do in a particular situation. But stay with it until you know. Then do it."

Living with Christ at your side, whispering the wisdom of God into your ear, and then leaving you to figure out how it works in real life will renovate your mind. It is not a dull and predictable way to live. You will find it challenging and sometimes more than you bargain for. It's an invitation to see people through God's eyes.

Here's what I did to get ready for these few minutes with you. I kept a journal for 19 days in September. I organized these verses into 19 short commands. Then, I tried to remember the command for the day and figure out how to make it work in my life that day. I offer this brief record of my experience as an attempt to breathe life into your imaginations. Much of it may sound ordinary, but most of life is ordinary. I did not edit much. I tried to preserve the journal style.

A Journal

Day 1. **Love must be sincere.** The two hardest times for me to be sincere are when I don't like someone and when I am overly familiar with someone or something. I had to stop what I was doing and remind myself that the person I don't like is unique in God's eyes and merits my best efforts to take seriously what the person is saying.

Day 2. **Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.** The word "cling" suggests the presence of something perilous, which the good can protect me from. I don't think TV is evil, but a lot of what I am watching is not edifying. So, I will stop watching TV in the morning and at bedtime. I have never done that. If I have occasion to eat breakfast alone, I will read an article from *Christianity Today* or *First Things* that I haven't had time to read. Eating while reading is a good combination. At night I will listen to music or read something to build me up.

Day 3. **Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.** I feel trapped by something I've learned all my life. Love has to feel a certain way, or it isn't love. I refuse to believe that anymore. Feelings are nice, but feelings or no feelings, it's what I do that matters to the other person and to God. Maybe the devotion has less to do with feelings and more to do with my determination to be the best brother to this person that I can.

Day 4. **Honor one another above yourselves.** Philippians 2:4 helped me here. **Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.** I hate turning around and going back for anything. We were a quarter mile from home, and Carole

said, "We need the other car. The new lamppost we are going to buy won't fit in this car." I did not roll my eyes or complain. I turned the car around and went home. Is this also what it means for love to be sincere? This was particularly challenging behavior to practice all day. It forced me time after time to think about the other person's interests, and there were so many other people to think about.

Day 5. **Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.** Today was my day off. Someone needed me. Seeing the person took me away from my granddaughters and my wife. Traffic on I-95 held me up. I was running late for a night out with Carole. The idea of seeing the person the next day presented itself to my mind. I simply ignored the suggestion and met with the person. I'm glad I did.

Day 6. **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** I feel like I can't pray or have joy when life sucks. Where did I learn that? Isn't that the time I need to pray? Something a German pastor said to his congregation as they lived through the last hellish days of World War II sticks with me. "If there are any among us who are at their wit's end, they ought to try . . . to put aside all their grievances and perhaps even their petitions and simply praise God." (Thielicke, *Our Heavenly Father*, 155)

Day 7. **Share with God's people who are in need.** I am glad BVBC has its Love-in-Action ministry. Carole and I give to it, and I know it's there when people need help. I am also glad that by calling and temperament I can share with God's people another precious gift, my time. I can give them my undivided attention when they need someone to hear the issues that are closest to their hearts.

Day 8. **Practice hospitality.** I am glad for the many ways we make our church facility available for non-BVBC groups: Compassionate Friends, AA, NAMI, Joy-Hope Foundation, Youth for Christ, Coro Allegra, UMM Choir, Messiah College Choir, EMF, Youth Specialties, and Missions. We once seated 900 people for a funeral service for a Concord High School student who died of cancer.

Day 9. **Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.** I am not persecuted. Can I bless people who irritate me, disappoint me, or oppose me? The impulse to get even is very strong. Blessing the person I wanted to get even with meant that every time the fantasies of getting even started in my mind, I asked God to bless that person in some specific way. If the guy was driving recklessly, I prayed that God would keep him and others around him safe. Without expecting it, the challenge of Day One came back: **Love must be sincere.** "Do I really want God to bless him?" And I said, "Yes," every time – today.

Day 10. **Rejoice with those who rejoice.** The only way I knew how to do that was to get excited about something they were excited about. It is easy to hear someone's joy and do nothing with it. It's a little like hearing a TV ad and wanting to get back to the show. So, I tried to listen and ask questions and express delight at what delighted the person. And once again, **Love must be sincere.** Indifference was the biggest obstacle.

Day 11. **Mourn with those who mourn.** Sometimes the best and the hardest way I do this is to listen to another person's woes. I was slow to offer advice. I didn't have much to say. I am still amazed at how often people don't want counsel as much as they want a listening ear. Many problems have no obvious solutions. This morning at MOPS, a child cried continuously and inconsolably. Is there any way I as a grandfather can mourn with a small child?

Day 12. **Live in harmony with one another.** My mind immediately went back to Day Four: **Honor one another above yourselves.** Giving my full attention to another person's interests overcomes a lot of disharmony. It also helps to moderate my desire to win an argument. If I can find common ground with someone, real harmony becomes possible.

How does this work when I am in sharp disagreement with another person? The part of my body that is most dangerous is my tongue. I try to be slow to say anything. When I speak, I try to guard against sarcastic or hurtful words. Do I really know what drives the other person's disagreement with me? Have I asked?

Day 13. **Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.** It is hard to accept the stubborn and inevitable inequalities of life. I came across a man who did not have the education, the money, the social status, or the opportunities that I have. Do I shun him or talk down to him or congratulate myself on my superiority to him? I did not. I gave him my time and attention as I would give anyone else. I looked for ways to build him up and to congratulate him on what he did well. My mind and tongue are the instruments of my body most in play here.

Day 14. **Do not repay anyone evil for evil.** Back to my fantasies of getting even. These fantasies come without warning. I immediately ask God to forgive me and change my imagination. I occasionally remembered to pray for the people who are the object of my vengeful fantasies. If I do that to fight against the fantasies, maybe I can resist the temptation to act on the fantasies.

Day 15. **Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.** I hope I did it. I met with people all day. In the intensity of listening, speaking, and of give-and-take, I was not conscious of doing what was not right in the eyes of the people I was with. But how do I know? No one is likely to say something, unless my mistakes are flagrant.

Day 16. **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.** Once again, my obedience begins in my mind. Is my frame of mind argumentative or peaceful? I said something to Carole more harshly than I needed to, but I think we talked it out and were at peace with each other. Maybe the peace we are called to is peace at the end of the meeting, at the end of the exchange, or at the end of the day. Peace in the process is harder. Solving problems and fending off attacks and handling the unexpected crowd out conscious efforts to keep peace. That must come from long and disciplined experience.

Day 17. **Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.** My fantasies (again) are what torment me here. They appall me. Why did I take such delight in the Navy Seal's description of the killing of Osama bin Laden? Do TV crime shows feed my lust for revenge? The only thing I know to do is pray for the persons I am tempted to take revenge on in my fantasy. And ask God to forgive me and cleanse me.

Day 18. **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."** I wish the apostle had not put in the part about the burning coals. I'm already fighting the fantasy of taking revenge on the person. Am I feeding him just to watch him squirm and get satisfaction that way instead of knocking his block off? Or maybe the only thing that matters is just to keep feeding him, whatever his reactions and my satisfactions.

Day 19. **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.** I get so worked up by politics. I need to go somewhere and do something good that has nothing to do with politics: text a friend, write an e-mail, take a friend to lunch, help my wife with a project I've been putting off. Just stop mainlining the political poison into my soul.

Reprise

I don't see any possible way for this passage to be anything other than good intentions, unless we train ourselves to act on these short commands. The spiritual advice of the Apostle James has never been improved on: **Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says** – James 1:22.

Romans 12:9-21 says with relentless force, "Put up or shut up." If I were your spiritual director, I would ask you to identify the top five commands in this passage that you most need to work on. Then, I would ask you to work on them one at a time until they became second nature in your behavior. That kind of training moves the apostle's words from pious rhetoric to the renovation of your mind and a change in your habits.

Why don't you and your spouse or you and your closest friends or closest circle of friends make a covenant with each other to pursue the kind of training in righteousness that would translate these verses into habits for living?

You asked what you were getting yourself into, if you offered your body to God as a living sacrifice. You can't say you don't know after reading through these verses. What if hundreds of us in this congregation began the determined effort to live like that? We would be a church that no one in the Brandywine Valley expects, and everyone in the Brandywine Valley wants.

That determined effort emerges from the love in your heart for Christ. The love in your heart for Christ takes us back to the heart of the gospel. Verse 1: **I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy.** The letter to the Romans tells the story of God's mercy to man.

God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. – Romans 5:8. **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** – Romans 5:10. **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** – Romans 8:32. That is the gospel, and the gospel is God's way of extending mercy to ever-widening circles of humanity.

If you have any sense that this mercy of God is meant for you; if you have any hunger to say thank you to Him in some deep way; if any gratitude, any desire to please Him, then **offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices.**

This journey together requires a decision that only you can make. You can express the decision by saying, "Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee." You can say with the Apostle Paul: **It is my eager expectation and hope that I will in no way be ashamed but will have sufficient courage, so that now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.** – Philippians 1:20. For all who are ready to make or to reaffirm that decision, we will wait now in silent prayer for you to **offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices.**