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Romans 12:11-12 “Spiritual Responsibilities of Every Believer”

Intro. In Romans chapter 12 Paul gives a series of commands concerning some of the most important practical aspects of living the Christian life. He lays the foundation for Christian living in vv.1-2. Then he deals with the important role of a believer in the local church in vv.3-8. Then, most of the rest of the chapter deals with day-to-day Christian responsibilities, mostly in relationship with other people. It may seem strange that the only verses that deal with the deeper aspects of spirituality are the two verses of my text today. The lesson from this may be that God doesn't have much use for a spirituality that does not make you a Christlike person in relationship to other people.

In these verses of my text we will learn more about the inward qualities and activities of the Christian. Let's suppose that you have just become a Christian. What should you now do? Well in our text of Scripture we will cover three important areas of the Christian life. First, you need to serve the Lord. Then you need to learn how a Christian should respond appropriately to the trials of life. And then finally, you should learn to pray. In this text of Scripture Paul gives a series of 6 brief commands¹ that are full of meaning. So look with me first of all at the fact that:

I. WE SHOULD SERVE THE LORD

In v.11 Paul says, “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord².” The first two statements probably modify the last command of this verse, “serve the Lord.” So that is the main thought here. However, Paul could be saying that love, exhorted in vv.9-10, is manifested with zeal and fervency. Yet I can certainly say that our service to the Lord is motivated by love and is manifested with the zeal and fervency that I will talk about.

So let's focus first on the fact that Christians are to serve the Lord. Think about how we can serve the Lord. We have already seen from vv.3-8 that we all have received a spiritual gift to enable us to serve the Lord effectively in the local church. So I encourage you to serve the Lord through the ministry of your church. Volunteer when invited to do so. Even participating actively in worship is one way to serve the Lord, whether by singing praise to God, or praying with other believers, or by hearing God's Word in order to obey God's Word in the coming week. While service in the local church is one of the best ways to serve the Lord, there are other ways to serve the Lord. If you work hard at providing a good Christian home for your children, you are serving

¹ These are actually primarily participial phrases but they are translated in the ESV as commands, for they are essentially commands or exhortations for Christian believers.

² I believe the correct reading is “Lord” (*kurios*) rather than “time” (*kairos*). The consonants in both words are the same. Barclay, Bruce, Calvin, Leenhardt and others support “serve the season” instead of “serve the Lord” on the basis of context. Rom. 8:18 mentions “the sufferings of this present time” (*kairos*). Rom. 13:11 says, “you know the time (*kairos*), that the hour has come for you to wake....” In Eph. 5:16 Paul said that we should live wisely, “redeeming the time....” Few translations follow this reading and *kairos* has little textual support. There is not other place where “serving the time” is mentioned in the New Testament. Douglas Moo (p.410) says “serving the time” in the ancient world usually had the nuance of selfish opportunism, and it is doubtful whether Paul would've used the expression.”

the Lord. If you are a good Christian wife or husband, you are serving the Lord. If you are a witness for Christ on the job and elsewhere, you are serving the Lord.

Are you obedient to this verse, actively serving the Lord? I didn't ask if you merely attend church. I asked if you are actively serving the Lord. Every Christian is to serve the Lord.

Having extended that challenge, let us now consider the manner of our service, which is what most of this verse deals with. In what manner are we to serve the Lord? First of all, we are to serve the Lord:

A. Obediently – In v.11 the word translated “serve” (*douleuo*) literally refers to the service of slavery. Unfortunately for many, slavery was a common way of life in the Roman Empire. The emphasis here is that we see ourselves as willing slaves of Christ. Also, the word “Lord” points in the same direction. A Lord was to be obeyed. Thus, we are to serve the Lord with total obedience. Whatever He tells us to do, we should do. Serving Jesus Christ obediently should not be considered optional for the Christian.

How can we serve the Lord with such obedience? Perhaps the best way is to remind ourselves of what Christ has done for us. He was obedient to His Heavenly Father's saving mission for Him. Thus, He faced rejection, humiliation, and heavy affliction even before He was nailed to the cross. He bore God's wrath and died for us, saving us from the condemnation of sin. He is now working to save us from the curse and power of sin. We should respond with loving obedience. Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Are you obedient to the call to serve the Lord?

Furthermore, we are to serve the Lord:

B. Continually – The word “serve” is a present tense. This indicates that Paul had in mind service that is of an ongoing nature. We are not to serve the Lord only on Sunday or at special times of the year, like Christmas and Easter. Furthermore, we are to serve the Lord in all realms of life. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (NKJV). In everything we do, we are to do it as unto the Lord.

Do you serve the Lord regularly, or only occasionally?

We are also to serve the Lord:

C. Diligently – In v.11 Paul says, “Do not be slothful in zeal.” “Slothful” is from an adjective (*okneros*) which is based on a verb that means, “to be slow, to hesitate.” Some people are slow, reluctant, or hesitant, especially about doing something they don't want to do. The word also refers to lethargy or laziness. We are not to be that way. “Zeal” is translated from a Greek word (*spoude*) that has an opposite meaning from the one translated “slothful.” Instead of being slow and hesitant, it refers to haste, speed; eagerness, earnestness, diligence, to be energetic. Basically, Paul is saying, “Do not be lazy but energetic about serving the Lord.”

Yet avoiding hard work is the trend of our day. Have you noticed that employers can't find enough people to work? When I was 18-19 years old, I worked at the Georgia Kraft paper mill during the summers. I was a committed Christian at that time and I believed in working hard at my job. I was surprised that the job foreman told me to slow down and quit working so hard. These days they provide a remote control for just about everything. Even my gas logs have a remote control! All those remote controls sure make it easier to be lazy. Yet when I was growing up, we had to get up to change the channel on the TV. Imagine that! Actually, my parents had a

remote control. It was when my dad said, “Steve, change the TV to channel 5.” I would get up and turn that TV knob.

Now let’s see how we should apply this command. After all, Paul does not specifically say how our zeal is to be directed. First, we are not to be lazy in our spiritual life. In contrast, we often are diligent in the physical realm of life. We spend much time keeping ourselves healthy and attractive. But spiritual laziness is the cause of spiritual defeat. Every Christian should ponder this matter of lazy spiritual living. Many church members need to write this verse out in big letters, and pin it up on the ceiling above their bed on Saturday night! Don’t be lazy about coming to church on Sunday morning!

Secondly, based on the context, we should be diligent in our service to the Lord, and in His church. Spiritual warfare calls for zeal not lethargy. The time may soon come when we are not as free to serve the Lord. Jesus said in John 9:4, “...the night is coming, when no one can work.” Teachers, be diligent about preparing your lessons. Ministry team workers, be diligent about attending meetings, and doing the work assigned to your team. Leaders, we have already seen from v.8 that you are to be diligent in your duties. We should be very conscientious about doing a good job in serving the Lord. Yet many of us, if we would sit quietly down and think of how we go about our Christian life, which ought to be our highest business, would have great cause for being ashamed. Don’t grow lazy in the work of the Lord.

Finally, we should not be lazy, but diligent in other realms of life. There are a number of other scriptures that speak against being lazy in general. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says, “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might...” Proverbs 18:9 says, “Whoever is slack in his work is a brother to him who destroys.” You see, Ecclesiastes 10:18 says, “Through sloth the roof sinks in, and through indolence the house leaks.” Students, be diligent in your school work. When I committed my life to the Lord at age 17, I became much more diligent in my schoolwork, and my grades improved quite a bit. Employees, be diligent on the job. All of us should be diligent with our responsibilities at home, whether it’s cleaning house or your room, doing the laundry, taking out the garbage, or just picking up after yourself! The key to such diligence is found in Col. 3:23, which says, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men.” Eph. 5:22 says, “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” Eph. 6:7 says that servants should render service “with a good will as to the Lord and not to man.” If all you do is “as unto the Lord,” then you will not be lazy but diligent.

Finally, we are to serve the Lord:

D. Fervently – In the middle command of v.11, Paul says we are to “be fervent in spirit.” “Fervent” is from a word (*zeo*) which means, “to boil.” We should be passionate about serving the Lord. Yet we have too many lukewarm or cold Christians, and in Rev. 3:15-16 Jesus rebuked Christians for being lukewarm. Fervency is the fuel that empowers diligence. Apollos was described as being fervent in spirit. Acts 18:25 says “And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus...” Paul the Apostle was a zealous worker. Yet we can become weary in doing good (Gal. 6:9; 2 Th. 3:13). We can lose our zeal and excitement. So the Christian life needs to be filled with dynamic energy. There is a need for zeal in the work of the Lord. The Christian life ought to be filled with enthusiasm, zeal, excitement, and dedication. There ought to be a glow and enthusiasm about you as a Christian that causes others to want what you have.

People can get excited about many *other* things. Have you noticed that? They get excited over a new house, a new car, or new clothes. They get excited over a sports team. Sometimes

they act like idiots in their enthusiasm, not only at stadiums, but even in front of the TV! When some people fall in love, the bells really ring. I wonder if we've ever experienced the same or greater intensity and fervency in serving the Lord Jesus Christ? Serving the Lord should be an exciting and joyful experience. And if you are not "fervent in spirit," you need to ask yourself why?

You say, "Preacher, how can I be fervent? Sometimes I just don't feel energetic. It's just not my personality to be fervent." The answer may be found in how we interpret the phrase "fervent in spirit." "Spirit" either refers to the human spirit (ESV, HCSB, NASB, Murray) or to the Holy Spirit (RSV, Moo). Perhaps most commentators believe it is a reference to the Holy Spirit, partially because of the definite article before the word "spirit."³ If so, Paul is saying that we are to rely upon the Holy Spirit to produce this fervency from within. We should be so filled with the Holy Spirit that we radiate with the presence of Jesus Christ. This glow of the Spirit is the warmth of the soul touched by the love of Christ. The Holy Spirit, who dwells in all believers, will glow through those who allow Him to fill and direct their lives. On the other hand, Paul may simply be saying that we should have spiritual fervency,⁴ and not just fervency in the flesh (locative of sphere), or produced by the flesh.

But this boiling love and joy and diligence should do something in our lives. Boiling water makes steam, does it not? And what is to be done with the steam that comes off the "boiling spirit?" It is to fuel our service and obedience and dedication to the Lord. I cannot understand any man believing the truths of the New Testament and keeping himself cool or "moderate."

If you serve Christ with diligence and zeal, you will usually face adversity from Satan and others. Many Christians in Paul's day faced persecution, and the Roman believers would soon face persecution under Emperor Nero. I believe that even in our country, we are going to experience more and more persecution as we take a stand for the Lord. So Paul goes on to deal with another important command:

II. LIVE FOR THE LORD IN ADVERSITY

Paul said in v.12, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation..." The word "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) literally refers to pressure, and so Paul has in mind those troubles and trials that tend to create stress in our lives. Job once said, "As sparks fly from an anvil, so is man born unto trouble" (NKJV). Trials and tribulations are just a part of this sin-cursed world in which we are living, and Christians are not exempt. And so people have developed different ways to cope with life's adversities. In Paul's day there were the stoics. They endeavored to keep a stiff upper lip and make a bold show, as though they were self-sufficient to meet life. They tried not to let troubles bother them. The Epicureans dealt with life's troubles in an opposite way. They shrugged their shoulders and decided that it was best to compensate for life's troubles by living wholly for self, and suck every possible pleasure from each day. When troubles come, they try to act as though they don't exist and pursue pleasure. We have plenty of people who follow that philosophy today. The entertainment industry tends to fair better during recessions and depressions than other industries.

³ However, the article is used at the beginning of every phrase of vv.10-13, so this argument is not conclusive.

⁴ The one other place where these words are used is in reference to Apollos (Acts 18:25), even before he was saved, so "in spirit" in his case would not refer to the Holy Spirit.

Then we have the “Go with the Flow” types. When things are going well, they are happy. When things are not, they are unhappy. They just accept the reality of life’s troubles, and often sadness and a general grey tone comes over them, broken only by occasional bursts of foolish laughter. Others simply try their best to escape or avoid life’s troubles. If they have trouble on the job, they change jobs. If they have trouble in the marriage, they change spouses. And when they can’t avoid trouble, some escape through drugs and alcohol.

Yet how is a Christian to face trouble and tribulation? Paul gives 3 important ways to face adversity and troubles:

A. We Should Rejoice in Our Hope – That’s what Paul says we should do in v.12. It is easy to be glad and rejoice when circumstances are going well. But Paul encourages us to rejoice even in times of trial. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians that we should be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (6:10; NKJV). Several times the apostles rejoiced even after being arrested and beaten (Acts 5:18, 40-41; 16:23-25). It is a Christian duty to be joyful (Phil. 4). Many of us have just enough religion to make us sad and somber, but not enough to make us glad.

But how can we rejoice, even when things are bad all around us? True joy is not a matter of circumstances. It is not a matter of temperament, so much as a matter of faith. Paul is saying here that we should rejoice because of our hope. So instead of focusing on your troubles, focus instead on our Christian hope. You realize that things may be difficult right now, but our sovereign and omnipotent God has promised us a much brighter future, and we can rejoice in that, for He will surely bring it to pass. So you see, hope is the cause or the ground of the joy. We continue to hope, anticipating what has not yet happened and joyfully celebrating as though it has.

We all know that certain hope brings joy. I remember when I was in college; I had a tough schedule and some tough courses. But one thing that kept me going was the hope that in a few months or weeks the semester would be over and I would be able to go home to Georgia and relax with my family and see my girlfriend Cheryl! If we by faith can grasp the certainty of our hope, then we too can rejoice in anticipation. It is our hope for the future that keeps us going.

That me illustrate how we can experience joy now by anticipating the fulfillment of our hope in the future. Consider an opposite scenario. You remember and look back on some hurt you have experienced in the past and you relive that hurt all over again. The past is permitted to cause pain in the present. Likewise, if by faith you think about the fulfillment of your hope of heaven, you can experience present joy.

There are two objects of hope in particular that give us joy. First of all, based on the previous verse, we can rejoice in our hope of heavenly reward. Our service to the Lord is motivated by our hope for the day when we will rest from our labors and be rewarded. Jesus said in Mt. 5:12, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven...” I serve because someday I want to stand before the Lord and hear Him say, “Well done good and faithful servant.” Elsewhere Paul exhorts us to “be...steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58; NKJV). Secondly, we rejoice in our hope of eternal life and heavenly glory. No matter how dark the world is, or how hard the task is, we eagerly anticipate future glory. Recall that Paul said in 8:18, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” If we are sustained by hope, we are following Jesus, for Hebrews 12:2 says that we should look “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross...” (NKJV). Because of our hope we can rejoice even

when the circumstances are bad. Hope delivers us from the present fear of death. It comforts us when our saved loved one dies. It helps us see the present world of misery in a different light, knowing that it shall end in God's time. Since God is God and we are His, this is the only way to live. Rejoice in hope!! Praise Him!!

So as you face tribulation and trials, remember to focus on your hope as a Christian, and you will be able to rejoice even in the midst of your trials.

Furthermore, as we face trials and difficulties:

B. We Should Remain Steadfast – In the middle of v.12 Paul says, “Be patient in tribulation.” “Patient” (*hupomeno*) is not referring to passive patience but it translates a word that literally means “to abide under.” When trouble comes your way, what is your first inclination? It is to pray for deliverance and for God to deliver you quickly. Yet in this verse Paul says that we are not to try to escape our tribulations, but remain under them until God removes them. You see, God has a purpose for allowing problems in your life. So we are to remain under the test in a God-honoring manner to learn the lessons it was sent to teach. As already noted, most people seek to escape troubles.

Why should you be willing to patiently remain under trials? Why not escape from trials and tribulations?

1. Because adversity provides a great witness opportunity – Sometimes God demonstrates His power by delivering us from trouble. But perhaps more often He demonstrates His power by enabling us to continue with joy even under the most trying of circumstances.

2. Because adversity makes you a better person - I believe that one of the reasons the Lord allows the pressure to remain is to keep us in communion with Him. We can grow spiritually during such times. Back in Romans 5:3-4 Paul said, “More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” James 1:2-3 says, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” Every problem has a purpose. So instead of trying to escape your problems, you should ask God for the strength to persevere until He has accomplished His purpose for allowing this trial in your life. Trials build character.

How can we acquire such steadfastness? One way is found right here in the same verse. The more we rejoice in our hope, the more we can persevere through our trials. We can stay under pressure because we know what's coming. Perseverance is also a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Trust in the Spirit to give you the strength to abide under trials.

Another way we can persevere and a third way we should respond to the trials of life is this:

C. We Should Pray - Of course, trials tend to drive us to our knees in prayer. In fact, I read in *Christianity Today* that 97% of patients pray the night before they have heart surgery (2/4/2002). Prayer is the means ordained of God for the supply of grace sufficient for every crisis and particularly against the faintheartedness to which affliction tempts us.

However, prayer is not just something we do in times of crisis. So another major responsibility of the Christian is this:

III. WE SHOULD BE DEVOTED TO PRAYER

In the last of v.12 Paul says, “Be constant in prayer.” Prayer is one of the most important things you can do as a Christian. It is an important aspect of our service to God.

Now Paul says one thing in particular about prayer here in this verse. He says that we are to “Be constant in prayer.” “Be constant” is from one Greek word (*proskartereo*), to be steadfastly devoted to, to persist in. We are to be busily engaged in prayer. The same word is used with reference to prayer in Acts 6:4, where the apostles said, “but we will give ourselves continually to prayer...” (NKJV). So we are not to pray just when troubles come our way, but we are to pray with regularity, and persistently. 1 Th. 5:17 says we should “pray without ceasing.”

What are you devoted to? You should be devoted to your family, and most people certainly are. Some of you are devoted to keeping up your appearance and you will spend at least an hour each day on that. Some of you are devoted to a TV program. You will not miss it. Your DVR is set to record that program. Some of you are devoted to watching your football or baseball team. You wouldn't miss their games if at all possible. But the question is, are you as devoted to prayer as you are to some other things in life? If not, what does that tell you about yourself? Is there a need to rearrange your priorities? Do you need a closer walk with the Lord? Don't put yourself in a situation where God has to allow some trial into your life just to hear from you more often. Be devoted to prayer. Set aside time *each day* for prayer. Some are devoted to our monthly Sunday evening prayer meeting. Some of you are devoted to the times of prayer we have in our community groups. Whether we are facing trials or not, we are to be devoted to prayer. Do you know what we call our time of daily Bible reading and prayer? We call it a devotional. That's because we are to be devoted to Bible reading and prayer.

So how can we become devoted to God in prayer? One way is by remembering how devoted Jesus Christ was to you. If Jesus Christ was devoted to you, even though it meant suffering and dying on the cross, then you should be devoted to Him. A second way we can be devoted to prayer is to get to know God better. Some people are wired for talking. You can freely talk to just about anybody. However, for most of us, we find it hard to carry on a conversation with someone we do not know. If you find it hard to talk to God in prayer, perhaps you do not know Him, or you do know him well enough. So make sure you have entered a saving relationship with God by faith in Jesus. Read God's Word and get to know him better, and then you will find that it is much easier to talk to Him. In fact, as you read God's Word you can pray about the truths, commands and promises you have just read.

Conclusion: I have shared with you some of the more important aspects of living the Christian life. We should serve with Lord diligently and fervently. We should face the trials and troubles of life by rejoicing in our hope, and with perseverance and prayer. Have you been falling short in any of these areas of living the Christian life? If so, it may be that you are not yet a true Christian. To live the Christian life, you must first become a Christian! So I invite you to repent of your sin, and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Others of you just need to confess your failure to God, receive His forgiveness, and make a commitment to put into practice the commands that we have looked at today. Tomorrow night you should be able to reflect back on the last 36 hours and see a difference in how you have lived. It's time for a new beginning in your Christian life.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, “God's Discipline” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle*

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