

Romans: The Good News of God

Love and the Law of Christ

Romans 12:9-12

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans 12. Let's read Romans 12:9-12:

⁹Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. (Romans 12:9-12)

Introduction

Romans 12 is the continuation of Paul's exposition of the righteousness of God, the theme of the entire letter to the Romans. In this chapter, however, as in all the final chapters of Romans, the apostle expounds his theme concretely and not theoretically. He teaches that duty is the right product of orthodox doctrine.

The beloved defender of the faith claims that it all begins in the wholehearted offering of our bodies to God and is seen in humble service to one another *to* whom we are spiritually united but *from* whom we differ in spiritual gifts (Romans 12:1-8).

The remainder of Romans 12 contains a number of commands to deep, vibrant and practical love. The love that Paul wishes to see is one that produces holiness and right living.

Thomas Watson, one of the Puritans, said, "Faith deals with invisibles, but God hates that love which is invisible."

And another of the Puritans said most pointedly, "Affection without action is like Rachel, beautiful but barren."

Of course, the kind of love that Paul sets forth is a far cry from the sentimental softness that the modern world calls "luuuuuuuve." In the Bible love is in complete harmony with di-

vine righteousness and holiness, and thoroughly congruent with the punishment of sinners.

For love to be true love, it must be love “in the truth” (cf. 3 John 1; Philippians 1:9). There can be no compromise of God’s holiness and, if there is a compromise, God must judge it as sin.

Love to our world is gushy and mushy. Biblical love has a ruggedness about it, mixed with the tenderness of the deepest commitment of the will to the object of divine grace. It is holy love, free, distinguishing, and gracious.

Lesson

Romans 12:9-12 contains three triplets of graces. We shall look at them in the order in which they appear in the text.

Our response to the mercies of God, Paul says in Romans 12:1-2, is the “Christian Offering,” the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices to God. That is the foundation of the life that pleases God.

The method of achieving this is found in nonconformity to this world and transformation by the renewing of our minds. Along the way to the accomplishment of the divine command is the recognition of our true place before God and men in humility (12:3), of our true unity in the one body of believers, and of the diverse spiritual gifts that have been given by God to believers (12:3-8).

Paul now expresses more specific commands, directed to the accomplishment of the “Christian Offering.” These more specific commands are not random commands, but they are closely related to one another, as we shall see.

I. The First Triplet: A Love That Can Hate (12:9-10)

The first of the exhortations, in verses 9-10, structured as a triplet of grace, reads, **“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”**

The opening words of Paul are important, “**Let love be genuine**” (12:9a). Paul is speaking of a sincere love, not like that of men described in Scripture whose words are “smoother as butter,” but whose true feelings are “drawn swords” (Psalm 55:21).

One might ask at this point, “How can I possibly measure up to Paul’s command?” The answer lies in the context, which has to do with the melting influences of “mercies of God” (12:1).

Reflection upon the extent of the divine mercy shown to us in our lost condition ought to be sufficient to bring us to authentic love for one another (cf. 1 Peter 1:22).

It is clear that if God has loved and saved others as he has loved and saved us, then we can and must love them, too. In the love of them we share in the love of Christ for his people.

In the second part of the triplet Paul urges his readers to “**abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good**” (12:9b). Is this an irrelevant interruption? Not at all. This is just as essential to the noblest love without hypocrisy as is sincerity.

One notices that the second precept, the cleaving to the good, is the ground of the first, for, if one is to hate evil, he must love the good.

This command will cause certain character differences among people to surface. Some types of individuals seem to naturally hate evil more easily than to love the good.

And then there are those who seem to find it easy to love the good, but at the same time are more lenient with regard to evil.

Thus, two things are to be avoided, if we are to fulfill the command. Spurious love is to be avoided, and unprincipled toleration is also to be spurned.

We live in a society today in which these pitfalls often catch our leaders. It is my view that this is the result of our society’s attachment to liberal Christianity, in which love has swallowed up the holiness and righteousness of God. God forgives all, and he forgives without requiring that a penalty be exacted for sin.

Thus, God becomes simply a softhearted old man, whose principles are advisory only. “And be sure your sin will find you

out” (Numbers 32:23) may be true, but you will not have to suffer eternally for it, even if Jesus Christ is rejected.

“There is always danger that love shall weaken the condemnation of wrong, and modern liberality, both in the field of opinion and in regard to practical life, has so far condoned evil as largely to have lost its hold upon good,” Alexander Maclaren wrote many decades ago, adding, “The criminal is pitied rather than blamed, and a multitude of agencies are so occupied in elevating the wrong-doers they then lose sight of the need of punishing.” That almost reads as if it were a comment on our society by a contemporary author, and yet it was written about a hundred years ago.

The failure to hold to the holiness and righteousness of God impoverishes the doctrine of God. It is impossible to really know the Triune God, the only true God, if we do not know him as the holy God.

Further, one cannot possibly understand his rule of the world. The principles by which he rules in the affairs of people are seen only if we see him as he really is. We cannot read our newspapers with understanding unless we know him as the holy God, who can at times use unholy instruments to chastise his people, who may be holier than the instruments of his chastisement (see the problem of the prophet Habakkuk, who puzzled over this, until he came to see that God was of purer eyes than to behold evil and could not look upon iniquity).

Perhaps the clearest illustration of the two facets of the character of God, his love and his holiness, is seen in the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. As he drew near to the city of Jerusalem, overcome with the emotion of a deep love, he movingly lamented, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matthew 23:37). The statement is a magnificent expression of divine love.

But, then, notice the next statement, “See, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:38). There is the severity of the

judgment of God that must come when love is rejected and holiness must ask to penalize for the broken law of God.

It is evident that both love and righteousness exist in the one divine person. Mercy and truth are met together in him; righteousness and peace kiss each other in him (Psalm 85:10). Hating the evil and cleaving to the good characterize the Lord and ought to characterize his saints, too.

Finally, in the last line of the triplet comes the exhortation to family love within the family of God. Paul here speaks of a more restricted love.

The sentiment is similar to that expressed by him in Galatians 6:10, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Here, in Romans 12:10a it is, **“Love one another with brotherly affection.”**

The words rendered **“love another”** refers to family affection, like the love of a mother for a child, or of a father for a son, or simply the love that members of one family have for other members of the family, no matter how wayward they may be.

The supreme illustration of family love is that manifested by the Lord Jesus when, the same day he gave his great discourse on the parables, he was told that “his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.”

But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”

And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:46-50).

It is one of the most amazing of our Lord’s amazing utterances. We in the body of Christ are closer to him and to one another than to the members of our own blood relatives—closer than to our mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers.

What does that say about the love and affection that should characterize the members of the body of Christ? I am closer to my

Christian brother and sister than I am to my blood relatives, if they are not members of the family of God. I am so close to my Christian brother and sister because we are related through the blood of Christ.

How meaningful, then, is the command, **“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”** As far as that last phrase is concerned, **“Outdo one another in showing honor,”** it means that there shall be no squabbling over the chief seats in the synagogue. The wider application of the words is obvious.

II. The Second Triplet: Whole-Hearted Service (12:11)

We are still in the context of the “Christian Offering,” and we are dealing with things that spell out in detail what it really means to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

That whole-hearted surrender is seen in the virtues represented in the apostle’s commands in the verses that follow Romans 12:1-2. Most of his commands take the form of triplets of graces. He says in Romans 12:11: **“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”**

The second triplet has to do with zealousness, fervency, and service.

Paul begins by saying, **“Do not be slothful in zeal”** (12:11a).

Paul is exhorting us to be zealous in all that we do. We are to love God whole-heartedly. We are to love one another whole-heartedly. We are to be zealous in all that we do for the honor and glory of God.

The apostle continues, **“be fervent in spirit”** (12:11b). The word rendered **“fervent”** comes from a root that means, “boiling.” Paul refers to a fire below that makes the soul’s depths boil with fervent earnestness. He does not ask for painted fire, but the real thing, a divine enthusiasm that comes from God himself.

There is really no genuine deep Christianity which is not fervent. And Paul does not have in mind the indolent kind of emotion

that emotes, but does not lead to work for him. Biblical fervency is yoked to work for the Lord.

The words of Paul are found in Luke's description of Apollos, the Alexandrian Jew, who came to Ephesus and preached. He was an eloquent man, and mighty in the Scriptures, instructed in the way of the Lord, but he knew only the baptism of John. Priscilla and Aquila, those lovely disciples of the Lord, seeing in Apollos a potentially mighty instrument of God, took him home and gave him private instruction in the truths of the new covenant.

Later Apollos went to Achaia and there "he greatly helped those who through grace had believed" (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos, Luke says, was "fervent in spirit" (Acts 18:25), using the same words Paul uses in Romans 12:11.

How can one be "cool" in the light of "the mercies of God"? He who understands his true condition before God when lost and now when saved can and must be spiritually fervent. And if we are not, then we must again go over those "mercies," so wonderfully expounded in Romans 1-11.

As for a precise method of how to **be fervent in spirit**, there is no better suggestion than that found in our Lord's encounter with the Emmaus disciples. After they had heard the stranger expound the Old Testament to them, they described to the apostles and others in Jerusalem the effects upon them.

They did not say, "Now we understand the doctrine of the resurrection of the body," although that is important.

What they did say was, "Did not our hearts burn within us *while he talked to us* on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Luke 24:32, emphasis added).

And, notice, it was *not* "while we talked to him" (which has to do with prayer), but "*while he talked to us*, . . . while he opened to us the Scriptures."

It is by the word that we become **fervent in spirit**, for it is there and preeminently there that we commune with Jesus Christ in truth. May God make us **fervent in spirit** that arises from the fires of the word of God.

Paul concludes with, “**serve the Lord**” (12:11c). That, too, sets the spirit boiling.

To think that we are serving “the Great Taskmaster”! What a privilege!

And why should we be diligent? Why, consider the greatness of the work, the greatness of the enemy of the souls of men, the brevity of the time in which we are able to work (the night soon comes when no man can work), and the extreme gravity of the issues involved, life and death.

Perhaps *the* personal reason for our diligent service is Paul’s word in Galatians 2:20. We serve Christ “who loved me and gave himself for me.”

There was time in World War II, after the fall of France and the defeat of the allies by Hitler, when the Fuehrer was in total command of all Western Europe. Winston Churchill called the British Parliament together to give them the gloomy news. He said to them, “The whole free world is dependent upon England now.” Then, after pausing a bit for the full effect of the words to take hold, he added, “Gentlemen, I find that rather exciting.”

That’s what the service of the Lord God means for every fervent Christian, who in his home, in his work, and among his friends is always at war for the Lord.

III. The Third Triplet: The Inner Secrets (12:12)

The final verse of the section, verse 12, is the only verse that refers to the inner secrets of the Christian life. Paul says in Romans 12:12: “**Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.**” Let’s examine each triplet briefly.

First, “**Rejoice in hope**” (12:12a). Paul asks for Christian rejoicing in the light of our hope. Joy is not a matter of temperament, as some contend, nor of circumstances.

Joy comes from faith in the promises of God, which remind us that we have an omnipotent Father, a divine continuing providence that guards our way (cf. Romans 8:28), the abiding presence

of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 28:19), and a heavenly home (John 14:1-3).

I recently read the following letter that was sent to Dr. Michael Youssef, pastor of The Church of the Apostles in Atlanta. The letter was sent by Mrs. Lane, who has been a primary school teacher for 38 years:

Dear Michael,

One day I was trying to teach my students the difference between happiness and joy. They seemed to understand, so I suggested that maybe they could write about the color of happiness and the color of joy and then tell some of the things that they thought would bring them those feelings. They were all excited and they had used the whole gamut of colors to express themselves. It was an enlightening morning. However, one little boy said that he knew that joy was black! I was devastated. I was sure that he was depressed and totally without joy. So I invited him to come give me a private audience and tell me about his paper. He said, "Well, Mrs. Lane, you told us that happiness was something that you felt when you went to a birthday party or when you went on vacation or got a new pair of shoes, but that it didn't last. Then you said that joy was deep inside of you and that nobody could ever take it away from you. I figured if it was deep inside of you where it was dark, it must be black!" I could have cried! How could I have been so stupid not to have seen that at first? I hugged him and told him that he was a lot smarter than I was. He just grinned.

Second, Paul says, "**be patient in tribulation**" (12:12b). If we are joyful, then we can endure, too (cf. Romans 5:2-4). And we shall have tribulation in this world, because we are related to him whom the world hates.

In fact, the world's hatred of Christians is simply the continuation of its quarrel with Jesus Christ (cf. John 15:18-19; 16:33; Acts 14:22). The Lord, however, has promised us peace and good cheer in the midst of the tribulations in the world that we face.

William Temple, a former Archbishop of Canterbury and a believer, once said, “Not all that the world hates is good Christianity (there are ‘religious flakes’ about us on every hand these days), but it does hate good Christianity and always will.”

Finally, Paul concludes with, **“be constant in prayer”** (12:12c), reminding us that we endure as we pray (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; Colossians 4:2; Ephesians 6:18). It is a fitting way to conclude the three great triplets of Christian exhortation.

Conclusion

May the Lord enable us to present our “Christian Offering” to him. We cannot help but be impressed with the contrast presented between the practices of modern Christians who so vociferously claim the experience of being born again and these commands of Paul.

And, of course, if we are unable to offer the offering, because we are not yet Christians, may we flee to the cross of Jesus Christ where, on the basis of the atoning blood shed there, we may have the forgiveness of sins and enrollment in the glorious family of God. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Taken from Ray Ortland's *A Passion for God*:

O God of love, your mercies have claimed us, and we have surrendered. You now call us to follow you in pouring ourselves out for others in a lifelong series of thousands of small gestures of love, various in form and wide in distribution.

Yes, Lord, we affirm your commands. Give us now the privilege of obedience. Deliver us from big-talking, self-congratulatory good intentions which feel so good but bear no fruit, and impart to us the qualities of a real, working love.

Enable what you command, O Lord, and command whatever you wish.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.