

“Christianity Applied”

Romans 12:9-13

October 25th, 2020

We do not come into this world knowing how to live in it. Nor are we born with an instruction manual accompanying us. There are many ways that knowledge gap is closed. We learn from our life experiences. *How many times must a child put his/her hand on a hot stove to learn not to do that a second time?*

We also learn from others’ life experiences. We gain knowledge from those with many and varied years, often different from our own. But they can – and do- teach us.

As good as those options are, there is at least one way that is far better. *Do you know what that way is?* I refer to the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (as we recited earlier in this service) is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy God. The Bible teaches us how to live like Jesus.

We acknowledge the Protestant Reformation in our worship today, which exploded onto the church scene 503 years ago next Saturday, October 31st, in the year 1517. At the center of this reformation (apart from God Himself) was an Augustinian friar by the name of Martin Luther. God worked through Luther to bring about several reforms in the church, among them, and perhaps most foundational, the importance of sacred Scripture in the life of the Church and her members. It became known in the Latin vernacular as *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.

The leaders of the church saw Luther as an enemy of God. When Luther was interrogated by church leaders at the Diet of Worms in 1520, a spokesman, Johannes von der Ecken, asked him to defend his theological positions. After Luther answered, von der Ecken said, “Martin, your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wycliffe and Hus.”

In his now famous response, Luther replied, “Since then your serene majesties and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or clear reason, for I do not trust in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me. Amen.” (Quoted in Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man who Discovered God and Changed the World*, 215, 16)

We’re studying the next 5 verses of the Scriptures in our weekly Sunday sermon series on the New Testament Book of Romans, ‘Christianity Explored.’ Those verses, **Romans 12:9-13**, are the foundation of a message I’ve prepared entitled, “Christianity Applied.”

Romans 12:9-13:

⁹Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.”

Depending on how we divide these clauses, there are at least 13 descriptors of Christian behavior the Apostle Paul includes in rapid-fire sequence. I've come up with a way to divide them into three parts. The first part is this - **Christians are to Have an Other Orientation**. Allow me to read verses 9 & 10 from the *New Living Translation*, "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other."

Paul begins his instruction here with love. Everything with God begins with love. God demonstrated His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (**Romans 5:6-8**). God first loved us, we did not first love Him (**I John 4:19**). Our love must be sincere; we are not to be phony with others. Part of loving others, as verse 9 teaches, is to "abhor (or hate) evil." To hate something is to be horrified by it. While we are hating some things, we must also be loving other things – clinging to them. The English term translated "cling" is the root of the Greek word for *glue*. Real love doesn't love everything. "We can't love rightly without hating rightly" (Keller, 118).

Paul takes it one step further when he says that we Christians are to love each other as if we were related (we are brothers and sisters in Jesus!). The command is in verse 10 which reads "Be kindly affectionate to one another." "Kindly" is used here in its original sense, referring to 'kin.' 'Kin' is a family word we don't use much in these parts, but you'll hear it often in southern locations.

The clause continues in verse 10 "with brotherly love" (*Philadelphia* in the Greek). One commentator notes, "The bond that unites the members of this spiritual family are far more secure and lasting than those which bind together the members of a purely physical family." (Hendriksen, 414) Another commentator on this passage observes, "The contemporary church will never have the power of the early church until today's Christians love one another as a close-knit family." (Boice, 1599)

The first point comes to a close with this command in verse 10, "in honor giving preference to one another." *The Message* paraphrase says we should "practice playing second fiddle."

Throughout high school, I played the cornet in band. My freshman year I was third part, last chair. I moved up to 2nd cornet my sophomore year, and I was first part for both my junior and senior years. Even though I was first part, my best friend Troy was always the chair ahead of me – first trumpet, first chair. I really didn't have any problem being second chair – not only was Troy better than me, he was my good friend.

Not only are **Christians to have an Other Orientation**, they are also to **Serve the Lord**. How we do that is given in the opening parts of verse 11 – "not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit," In place of "not lagging in diligence," the *New International Version* reads, "Never be lacking in zeal." This means we should be occupied with the things of God. In fact, we should pursue the things of God (spiritual disciplines, worship, and fellowship) with a sense of urgency and with hunger and passion. A lazy, uninterested Christian is an anomaly. In fact, our approach as Christians is

to be “fervent in spirit;” which means we are to be boiling with activity having received the gift of eternal life from Jesus.

So, diligent, zealous, and passionate are terms that would describe the believer in Jesus Christ who is seeking to “serve the Lord” well. Indeed, every good thing we do is a testimony to our barometer in serving Jesus Christ. But, in the middle of this paragraph, we find the command to “Serve the Lord.” *How, precisely, do we do that?* Jesus tells us in many places, but consider just one for the present - **Matthew 25:35-40**, where we read about the sheep and the goats. There, Jesus teaches that serving those in need (hungry, thirsty, friendless, naked, sickly, & imprisoned) is the same as serving Him.

So, **Christians are to have an Other Orientation** and they are to **Serve the Lord**. Our third point is **Christians are to put into action Practical Practices**. There are five characteristic marks of the genuine Christian described in verses 12-13. Look there again with me, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.”

Rejoicing has not been my default position the last 7 ½ months. I’ve really had to work at it. Given what we were faced with, closing the church for everything except live-stream worship was the right thing to do – for a short time. Even so, that was not an occasion for rejoicing, and there wasn’t much hope evident, either. I ‘hope’ we never go through that again.

Two terms we don’t assign much worth to are “patience” and “tribulation.” But, there they are in verse 13. Living as a Christian means we are going to have much opportunity to exercise patience with others, and we are going to have to deal with much trial, trouble, and tribulation – together.

We’ll explore the last three traits of this passage – continuing in prayer, meeting the needs of others, and hospitality – as we consider how to exercise them in a time of pandemic and the separation and isolation it brings.

Prayer is something we could also do more of...much more of. We have so much to pray for during this present distress. I often pray for this congregation’s harmony and unity. You are divided – just look at worship – some of you are here in the sanctuary, some are down in the fellowship hall, some are back in the east classroom, some are still participating in your homes, some are traveling, and, this is the group that worries me to death - some are not listening/participating at all. We should also be praying in repentance for the private sins of selfishness and lack of true love of our enemies. And we must repent of the public sins of abortion and sexual licentiousness and greed.

Providing immediate, tangible care for our neighbors needs demonstrates our love for them. **Mark 12:30-31** reminds us: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.” Text frequently and pray daily for people whose health or age makes them vulnerable both to COVID-19 and to gripping fear. Learn their needs. Make their comfort your priority.

One way we can attend to the needs of the saints (other Christians) is to remember the 6th commandment. “Thou shalt not kill” requires us to pursue all lawful actions to preserve our own lives, and the life of others. Faced with COVID-19, there are things we should do, and there are things we should not do. In all things, we seek the glory of God and the good of our neighbors. If we truly abide by this, there will be no room left for self and our rights.

By generally avoiding close contact, by taking care of our own bodies, and by giving help to others, we uphold the 6th commandment. Thinking Christians do not want to unintentionally cause the death of others by spreading a virus that spares some and kills others. Obeying the civil magistrate’s order to distance or quarantine is actually obedience to God’s law. We learn more about this in the next chapter of Romans – the 13th.

In the weeks ahead, our lives may change in ways we cannot even imagine. And our faith may grow in ways we could not have even imagined without the trial of COVID-19. Christian hospitality shines brightest in days of persecution and plague. During hard times—dangerous times—when Christians demonstrate that real love takes courage, we model Christ to a watching world.

Every Christian household needs to be a place that attracts those who are in need, and believers need to be prepared to welcome guests regardless of what their politics or lifestyle might be at the time.

COVID-19 is not going to overcome the world. Christ is. “For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4).

MP1 – Christians are to have an Other Orientation (Sincere, brotherly love);
MP 2 – Christians are to Serve the Lord (passionately, diligently, and fervently);
MP 3 – Christians are to Put into Action Practical Practices – hope, patience,
continuous prayer, meeting the needs of others, and practicing hospitality.

I began this message highlighting one of the pillars of the Reformation – *Do you remember what it is?* Sola Scriptura – *Which means?* (Scripture Alone). I think this closing illustration is unforgettable.

In July 1863, Robert J. Thomas and his wife boarded a big ship that was leaving their homeland of England for China. Shortly after landing in Shanghai, Robert's wife fell ill and died. He agonized over her death. *Why had God brought her to China only to take her so soon? Why could he not have a partner in faith?*

In 1866, having evangelized a few months in neighboring Korea, Robert boarded an American ship, intending to spread the gospel in Korea. The ship was christened the *General Sherman* and took the route of the Taedong River. Because of its size, the *General Sherman* became grounded on a sandbar in the river. Seeing a big ship aground on their shore, Korean soldiers seeing it became afraid and suspicious. They were not used to foreigners, and they boarded the ship, heavily armed. They began shooting – Robert held out his Korean Bible to the soldiers. His last two words – “Jesus, Jesus.” The Bible lay in a small pool of blood.

Twenty-five years later, some people came across a small guest house along the banks of the Taedong River in the area where the *General Sherman* had run aground. The house was unique in that it was wallpapered with paper of strange design – a design that had Korean characters/letters printed on it. The owner of the house explained that years earlier he had torn the pages out of Robert Thomas' book and pasted them onto the wall in order to preserve the writing. Many people came to stay in his guest house, and many people had read the walls, including himself. Thomas's life had not been in vain. God had used his death mightily.

Although there is much persecution of Christians in North Korea, the secret, or underground, church there is estimated to be more than 100,000 people. The Word of God never returns to Him empty. It accomplishes what He desires and achieves the purpose for which He sends it.