

“LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER, II.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Romans 12:14-16

Introduction.

As we continue to work our way through Paul’s admonitions in Romans 12 I want to remind you about the importance of this passage. This is a practical, personal fleshing out of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and what it means to be a Christian, a Christ-follower. If we say we believe the Gospel of Jesus, then this is what that looks like.

Remember how Paul started this chapter.

Romans 12:1-2 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Because of God’s staggering, undeserved mercies and grace shown to us, respond by surrendering and submitting your life as a living sacrifice to God, throwing off the world’s way of doing things and having a new mind and mindset, a new way of thinking and doing things.

You can tell how radical Gospel living and Gospel thinking is by how unnatural these admonitions are. We need the Holy Spirit to live and act this way and to fight every urge and temptation to do the opposite of these admonitions.

12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Remember who is writing this, Paul has been persecuted horribly, in countless ways, by enemies and false friends. He is not naïve. This is not pie in the sky platitudes.

Furthermore, Paul is writing to Christians who knew firsthand and painfully what it was like to be treated unfairly, unjustly, wrongly.

Paul wrote around the late 50's. Nero was the emperor of the Roman Empire. He is the first emperor documented as persecuting Christian, and he did so in the most gruesome ways. Both Peter and Paul died as a result of his persecution.

This letter is written to Christians whose bodies were literally becoming living sacrifices for the sake of believing in Jesus.

II Timothy 3:12 All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Those who live according to Romans 12 will face trials. To be Christian is to invite trouble.

This admonition is not limited to those facing religious or political persecution. Paul is writing to normal human beings just like us who experience trial, grief, conflicts in their marriages and families and friendships and business associates.

Who are those who persecute us today? Those who don't like us, those who say mean, false or bad things about us, those who mock, shun or ignore us; those who try to hurt us or hate us; those who oppose us or argue with us over everything, who cause us trouble or who take advantage of us, those who come between us and friends or opportunities.

Who are these people in our lives? And what is our attitude and response?

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

If ever there was a supernatural admonition this is it. This is not natural or normal. Our fleshly reaction starts in childhood and never completely leaves our hearts.

“You are stupid. Oh yeah, well you are stupid and ugly.” “You will never amount to anything and nobody likes you. Oh, yeah, well back at you and twice as much.”

We are so quick to become defensive, to take an offense and go on the offensive and attack back. When we are hurt we feel justified to repay. When our pride is wounded it is hard to die to our self and our reputation.

And Paul makes it even harder. If he had just said don't curse those who hurt you, maybe we could bite our tongue, keep a stiff upper lip, stuff our snappy come backs inside. It is one thing not to curse our enemies, but an entirely different thing to bless them.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives one example of what blessing looks like.

Matthew 5:43-45 You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

Jesus says love, and that's what Paul is talking about, love that is genuine. At the end of this chapter Paul says to actively bless, with food and water, with tangible expressions of kindness, caring, showing love.

The admonition is not just abstinence, not just don't retaliate, not just desire no harm to them, but it is to positively desire good should come to them. “Bless them!” And then Paul doubles down and repeats the command. Bless and do not curse. Pray for their well-being, for their salvation, for their forgiveness, be concerned for the eternal state of their souls.

Why does God want us to do that? What is the basis for behaving in this radically new way? Because of the mercies of God, because of the Gospel. While we were sinners, while we were enemies of God, while we were actively hating and neglecting and resisting God, He was actively seeking and pursuing and loving us and extending kindness and grace and mercy, every bit of it completely undeserved.

We are called to love our enemies in the way that God loves His enemies, doing good and giving good gifts to them. He shows mercy and kindness to all. Every day for thousands of years, day in and day out the Father shows love to His enemies. Imitate your Father in heaven, be like Him, do what He does, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

The guide for our behavior is not what others have done to us or how much they have done. Our guide is what the Father has done for us.

Ephesians 4:31-32 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

God says we are not to act the way the rest of the world acts, we are not to be like the ungodly. Get rid of bitterness, it corrupts your heart and thinking. Get rid of a victim mentality,

If you have a root of bitterness, if you feel pity, if you think others have done you wrong, if you have a victim mentality and think God owes you something that he hasn't yet given, then you don't know God. Do you complain about your life? Then you don't know God's glory and goodness and how He works everything for our good.

Stop complaining, everything is his appointment, everything comes through his hands. Your sin makes you more aware of your sin, and your sin makes you more humble and your sin makes you more aware of the glory of God's holiness and grace and mercy, and Jesus and the cross, and more aware of loving others in their sins.

Can you imagine making excuses to Jesus? And how are your excuses going to sound to Jesus who prayed, "Father, forgive them" and who taught us saying, "Love your enemies" and said "Do good to those who persecute us?"

We must learn every day to resist the desire to do the opposite. We cannot say our life totally depends on the unmerited mercy of by Jesus, and then

turn around and withhold that mercy from those who hurt us or we don't like.

Don't think this is all crazy talk. Millions of Christians all over the world are being persecuted and they are doing this very thing. They are blessing and not cursing. They are praying for their persecutors, and they are suffering far worse than any of us are.

Don't say you couldn't do that, you have the same Holy Spirit. You can do all things that God commands through the example, presence and power of Jesus Christ.

If Jesus as He was nailed to a cross can say, "Father, have mercy on them for they know not what they do," then by His same Holy Spirit in us we can say the same. Stephen, Erika Kirk.

My last pastorate didn't end well. I ended up resigning under some pressure from a few in the church.

I remember well a woman came to me and said, "Robert, as you leave please do not shake the dust off your feet." I took her meaning to be don't treat us as we deserve, don't send a curse on us for this injustice. Don't give a sign of rejection and judgment.

I didn't do that, but I had another reason, one a bit more self-serving, self-serving but biblical.

Someone else planted the seed of a thought in my mind about why I should not wish ill, wish bad things, wish harm or justice. I thought about what I needed and wanted.

1 Peter 3:9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, *bless*, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a *blessing*.

Luke 6:35 Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great.

I knew I needed forgiveness, I needed blessing from God, without it I would be utterly hopeless and lost. If I don't bless I won't receive blessing, if I don't forgive, I won't receive forgiveness.

Do you want your sins forgiven? Are you willing to forgive the sins of others against you? A forgiven and forgiving person does not resent injuries, quickly take up an offense, or insist on asserting our rights, or hold onto a grudge. Those things are not compatible with someone who wants to live by forgiveness.

12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

I wonder if the order matters, did Paul put the harder one first?

We are generally human enough to be moved by another's sorrow or tears or heartache. It takes a hard heart not to feel some compassion. But we all struggle to rejoice in other's joys especially if we resent it or wish we had it, or don't think they deserve it.

This is clearly another way to bless and not curse. When someone who has hurt us is suffering we don't rejoice, but enter into and share their sorrow.

Again here is an admonition that is unnatural and impossible without the Gospel. Are we aware of being overwhelmed by the mercies of God and grace of God?

I Corinthians 12:26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

This is a call not just to be Christian with Christians, but to be human with our fellow humans, to make time and room in our hearts to enter into other's real human joy and real human sorrow.

What hinders us from entering in another's joy/sorrow?

The root cause of not being the kind of people who feel genuine empathy with the weeping and the rejoicing is pride. We are resentful or envious

they have joy and we don't. Envy is the enemy of love. Envy rejoices when others weep, and weeps when others rejoice. We are too wrapped up in ourselves to rejoice or weep with others.

This command assumes we are Christians with the Holy Spirit, striving by God's help to be free from selfishness, self-centeredness, self-preoccupation. In other words, we are not full of ourselves and think more about ourselves than others. Rather we are Christ-oriented, Christ-preoccupied, reflecting Him.

Humility is a good start, but faith in Christ and trusting in His perfect goodness is even better. It is not just a matter of thinking less about ourselves, but thinking more about Christ. This is the ability to take our eyes off ourselves, and show genuine love and interest in another.

This is a challenge for parents to enter into the silly excitements and little sorrows and fears of our children. And you kids, do you notice when someone is happy or sad and share it? Can you be happy and sad with your siblings in their happiness and sadness, or with your parents, friends?

Who's joys or sorrows is the Holy Spirit calling you to enter into? Mariners fans, spouse, neighbor, coworker, student, stranger?

Implications and application.

Jesus is talking to us. This is personal. Jesus is being specific in a way that touches us where we live and work. He is saying "My grace in your life is meant to produce fruit, it's meant to transform how you live and act and think. My grace is so great that it can radically revolutionize your life. This is what it looks like when my grace takes hold in your heart."

The Holy Spirit is specifically calling you to action today. Please stop and listen now before your heart gets any harder and any colder.

There is unforgiveness in this room right now, and anger, grudges, resentments, bitterness, offenses, in a word unforgiveness. Some of you for a long time. There are people you won't talk to, you go out of your way to avoid.

How long have you been carrying a grudge? How long do you want to carry it? What good is that grudge doing you? Who is being more punished, you or them?

How long do you want God to carry His justified grudge against you? Do you want God to punish you for your sins? Or do you want to be free from all of them? Do you want blessing or curses? Have you asked God for a forgiving spirit?

If our Christianity doesn't impact our relationships with each other and especially those who hurt us or wrong us, if our Christianity doesn't work at this basic level of human interaction then it isn't working. Christ is real in our lives when it shows in how we deal with rights and wrongs, with injustice and unfairness, with rejoicing and weeping.

Jesus is calling us to do real good to people who really don't deserve it. This is real love and real grace that trumps the power of fear and selfishness.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Prayer: Father, I have a feeling many of us are going to have an opportunity to put these words into practice this week. These words are impossible in the flesh, but we take comfort and hope in the truth of your Word that what is impossible with man is possible with you, and we can truly do all things through Christ who strengthens us in our inner being by the Holy Spirit. Father, may the fruit of the Holy Spirit be very much in evidence in our lives this week enabling us to put into practice what you have commanded.