

Romans: A Call to Diligence

Romans 12:11-16

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February 20, 2002

If you have your Bible's I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 12. Let's remind ourselves where we've been in Romans chapter 12. In verses 1 and 2, Paul sets forth a Magna Carta for Christian life. It's a grand declaration of some first principles for Christian living and he continues in verses 3 through 8 by talking about how Christians should relate to other believers in the context of addressing the Spirit's gift to the church. He speaks about our platforms for using those gifts in the church. He talks about our serving one another out of humility. He talks about serving one another out of our unity and diversity. He talks about serving one another because the spiritual gifts that God gives to the church are for the purpose of mutual benefit and mutual encouragement.

At that point, Paul moves from this discussion of the employment of these spiritual gifts to talk about virtues that he is interested in seeing in the Christian life, its evidence of the graces of the Spirit. The first one that he chooses to talk about is love. He does that in other places. He does that in Galatians chapter 5. He does that in I Corinthians 13. He transitions from talking about the gifts of the Holy Spirit to talking about the priority of love in the Christian life. This is not an unusual thing that he does. In verses 9 and 10 he basically spells out what love means. He describes Christian love as sincere, as godly, as affectionate, and as self-denying and so basically says to us that our love must be real love, discerning love, fervent love, and selfless love.

Now, tonight he begins to talk again about character qualities that he expects to see cultivated in the lives of believers, as well as discussing ways that we need to relate to one another and attitudes that we ought to have about ourselves. Let's hear God's word in Romans chapter 12 beginning in verse 11 and reading down to verse 16. This is God's word.

Not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and curse not. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in

mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Amen. This is God's word, may He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord and God, as we study this passage filled with grand directives, we pause and acknowledge that just having heard these things, having them in our ears, we realize how far short we fall from what Your Spirit would have done in the lives of Your people and in the body of Christ. We ask, O Lord, that You would grip us with the desire to be like this and that by Your Holy Spirit You would work this growth in grace so that we would resemble not only this description given by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul, but so that we would resemble Your Son, our Lord. That we might bare His likeness and people might see our discipleship, our trust our belief in Him in the quality of the transformed light evident in our character. This we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

What are the character qualities of a Christian? How does a Christian relate to others, even persecutors? What ought the Christian attitude be to ourselves? Paul is concerned in this passage to speak to each of those questions. He doesn't say everything that could be said, but he does highlight several important things. He's not going to be finished, for instance, just in these verses addressing the issue of how Christians should relate to non-Christians and to their enemies and to those who persecute them. He's actually going to turn back to that subject again later in this chapter and in this section of the book of Romans.

In this passage tonight he does speak to each of those three questions. What are the character qualities of a Christian? You see that in verses 11 through 13. How does a Christian relate to others, even enemies? You'll see that in verse 14. And what is the Christians attitude to himself? You'll see that in verse 16. Let's look at the passage together.

I. The character qualities of a Christian.

First at verses 11 through 15 where he describes a faithful Christian disciple. A faithful Christian disciple, he says, works, toils. That is going to be the mystery statement. Think about that for a minute, a faithful Christian disciple toils. That is literally what he says, but I'll have to explain that a little bit. He works, he toils, he serves, he rejoices, he perseveres, he prays, he gives, he shares.

Paul gives us eight qualities in this passage. Eight qualities of the disciple of Jesus. Let's just walk through these qualities. I've got to give you a disclaimer at the outset. I've got eight points under point one, three points under point two, three points under three, there is no way I'm going to get through this stuff. It's rich and we will take our time and we will work through what we can get through and do justice to it. Paul starts off by saying, "Not lagging behind in diligence." He's exhorting us as believers in love, not to lag behind in diligence. He is telling

us not to be slack in zeal. He is warning us against spiritual laziness. When he tells us that he doesn't want us to lag behind in diligence, the word that he uses combines the ideas of urgency and diligence. This is a stricture against spiritual laziness in the Christians life and a corresponding call to do the opposite comes in the very next phrase.

Now, this is not an argument from Paul against planning. It's not an argument from Paul against being deliberate and careful and measured. Remember, Paul's the one who is going to talk about doing all things "decently and in order" in I Corinthians 14, in the very context of talking about spiritual fervency and diligence. So, those things for the apostle are not mutual exclusives, they are not opposites, they are not things that can't fit together, but Paul is talking about a real urgency and diligence in the Christian life and he's warning Christians against an attitude or posture of spiritual laziness.

That's very important because very often in the Christian life you will hear people talk about sanctification in terms which are, for instance all passive or mainly passive, as if the main thrust of growth in the Christian life was sort of to sit back in your easy chair and 'let go and let God.' That type of view of growth in grace and the Christian life actually contradicts these kinds of Pauline imperatives that we are not to lag behind in diligence. This kind of imperative is typical of the intensity with which the apostle expects us to live the Christian life.

Now again, Paul in this phrase and in the very next phrase is not calling on us all to be the same personality type. He's not calling us all to do the same things or to be the same way. There is going to be a diversity in the Christian church. He's already talked about that. He wants all of us to avoid spiritual laziness and that is where he begins in this list of qualities.

I've always appreciated my mother's attitude towards this. She never felt imposed upon in her duties in the Christian life, but she took them up with gusto and she loved the work, and she loved to work for the Lord, and one of her mottos in life was, "You may be smarter than me, but I'll out work you." She lived that in front of us day by day. She never felt like she was being pushed into doing something against her will. She served in the Christian church. It was something that she delighted in doing. So this kind of call to diligence and avoidance of spiritual laziness certainly came home to her in her Christian experience.

Paul goes on, secondly, to say in contrast to this we ought to be fervent in the Spirit. We are to work with spiritual energy. There should be drive and intensity in our ministrations. This passage translates literally "in the spirit toiling." That's how Paul puts it. He's emphasizing to us something of the intensity that ought to characterize our desire to serve in the Christian church. Isn't it interesting that in Revelation 3:15, one of the charges, one of the severest charges that Jesus brings home against one of the seven Christian churches is the charge of lukewarmness. He goes on to say, "I would rather it be that you were hot or

cold." Anything but lukewarm.

Here the apostle is talking about one or the other of those particular manifestations in the Christian life, in this case toiling, that is, in the Spirit. He's calling for a certain enthusiasm in Christian experience. The Christian is to be on fire for God.

Again, this is not a personality description, he is not asking us to act more like Pentecostals in our demeanor in relating to one another. Fire in one's belly can manifest itself in very different ways. On the one hand, there can be people with very obvious outward zeal for the Lord. They may have a zeal for truth, they may have a zeal for love, they may have a zeal for some particular cause that is being threatened in their day and time. On the other hand, zeal can often be manifested in quiet determination. A person who sticks to a particular course and does not vary one way or another. The person does not draw attention to one's self, the person isn't trying to make a name for himself or herself, but he quietly with determination presses on in a particular cause. You need this kind of spiritually derived energy in order to walk faithfully in that way. So, however the manifestation comes, Paul is asking for us to work with the spiritual energy.

That kind of energy is manifested in different ways. For instance, in preaching there was a minister last century named James Henley Thornwell, and as he preached, a person once remarked, "This man preaches as with logic on fire." The comment was, he's clearly, intellectually equipped, he's clearly literate in the Scriptures, but there is an intensity and an enthusiasm about his preaching that is very evident. That is a person who evidencing this kind of spiritual energy in his work.

Thirdly, Paul does on again in verse 11 to say that we ought to be serving the Lord. Serving the Lord. If you're going to be a servant, serve. The apostle, notice again, is concerned that spiritual energy be put to work in Christian service. What's the manifestation of spiritual energy for Paul? Some ecstatic experience that the individual has? No, the great manifestation of spiritual energy in the Christian life is serving the Lord. Not serving our own interest, not seeking to build up our own reputation, not pressing our own agendas, but genuinely doing what we do because we want to please the Lord. From time to time ministers and those involved in Christian work have to ask themselves, "Why are we doing what we are doing?" Sometimes, Christian service can be incredible self-gratifying. When you go out and you teach a lesson and it really helps somebody and they express that to you and it feels good. Or you counsel with somebody and they come back in several weeks later and say, "You know, what you said helped me more than anybody else has helped me," that feels good. After a while you can find yourself serving because you want to hear those kinds of encouragements and you want to be built up by the compliments and the help of the saints and you have to stop and ask yourself, "What am I doing here? Am I serving the Lord, or am I serving myself?" The apostle here is calling us again to

serve the Lord. The true evidence of a spiritually originated inner fervency in the Christian life is not ecstasy, it's serving the Lord. Serving Him. Period. Serving His agenda.

Fourthly, look again at verse 12, where Paul says that we are to rejoice in hope, rejoicing in hope. The faithful Christian disciple rejoices in hope. He has an ability to rejoice in light of this profound hope of glory and of salvation to come. Present circumstances cannot remove that rejoicing because present circumstances cannot, in the long run, impact that hope. The hope of future glory in salvation is able to animate our rejoicing even in the midst in the most real and severe and overwhelming trials in this life. If our ultimate hope was derived even from the desire that bad situations we are in now will eventually become good, we could not rejoice in all circumstance. Not all the bad circumstances that we are in now will be good in the long run in our lives. There will be some things that will never be rectified in this live. That hope of glory, however, enables us to rejoice in every circumstance Paul says, rejoicing in hope.

Then fifthly he says, that we are to be persevere in tribulation. His language is to say that we are to endure in the midst of deep and serious trouble. That is an important and a practical New Testament imperative. When the Spirit enables us to perseverance, the spirit enables us to not simply bear up under stress, to survive the things that we are going through, but the Spirit enables us to continue to be useful in kingdom service despite that stress and despite that trial. Paul is calling on us to manifest this in our Christian life and experience. Persevering in tribulation.

Look again at verse 12, "Devoted to prayer," he says. Pray faithfully and constantly. Be devoted to prayer. Persistent prayer is of course a part of the Christian life. We could pile up examples of the statements of godly men about prayer over the years to emphasis this. C.H. Spurgeon, for instance said, "A prayer-less soul is a Christ-less soul." Matthew Henry once said that "Those who live without prayer live without God in this world." Calvin believed that prayer was the summary evidence of everything in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul is here calling us to be faithful and persistent in our prayer as a necessary part of the Christian life.

Seventh, he goes on in verse 13 to speak of our giving generously to needy Christians without any condescension. Notice in his phrase, "contributing to the needs of the saints." That is a very interesting passage and it's harder to translate than it might sound. "Contributing to the needs of the saints" sounds fairly straight forward, but the word for *contributing* here is actually the verbal form of the word that you frequently hear translated as *fellowship*. You use the word even in English *koinonia* to talk about Christian fellowship. That word actually means to share in or having a share in. This is the verbal form of that particular word. It's speaking of a sharing between Christians. Paul is calling on Christians to give generously to those Christians who are in need. There is a

connection between fellowship and sharing in the church. Fellowship is actually shared life. Paul is calling on Christians who are part of the Christian fellowship, or shared life to tangibly share with one another especially those who are in need.

Then he adds to that, in verse 13, practice hospitality. When I first looked at this, I thought, well maybe he's saying the same thing in two different phrases. That is of course possible, but it's more likely that Paul is thinking in the first part of that phrase about Christians who are part of the local congregation and in the second part of the phrase he's thinking about Christians who are not part of that local congregation. The word hospitality actually means, kindness to strangers. Of course, that is a very important part of life in the early Christian church. If you were persecuted in one region and fled to another, the only family you might have to go to is the Christian congregation in that other region, and if you were a member of the Christian congregation in that other region you might find yourself bringing someone in your home who you've never met before only because that person is a Christian. When Dr. Doriani was here he talked about the importance of realizing there is not only a natural family that the Bible talks about, but there is a spiritual family and we have a kinship to one another. Jesus talked about that constantly in His own stories to the disciples. Do you remember where He talked to the disciples about if they gave up their natural families for His sake, that the Lord would give them one hundred fold what they gave up in the earthly family. So Paul here is giving this exhortation to us to take in brothers who are strangers for the sake of the gospel, to practice hospitality to brothers in the Lord who you don't know.

Now, our congregation has opportunity to do that from time to time. You do that in the missions conference. The word hospitality here shouldn't immediately cause your mind to run to china and silverware and crystal and perfect houses. This is kindness to strangers who are brothers and sisters in Christ in time of need. Willingness to take them in and care for them and to show them love. When I went to Britain to study I was taken in by Christians who were total strangers to me and to whom I was a total stranger and I was shown many manifestations of Christian love for which I am profoundly grateful. They were practicing what Paul speaks of here as hospitality. Paul is saying, when you see these kinds of things in a person's life, you are seeing the grace of the Holy Spirit at work.

I'd like to suggest to you that a very helpful exercise for you would be not simply to go through this list and ask, "Well Lord, to what extent does this characterize me," but actually go through the list and say, "Lord, cultivate this quality in me. Lord, you called me not to lag behind in diligence. Make me diligent in your kingdom, Lord. You call me to be fervent in the spirit, so by your Holy Spirit cause me to be on fire for God. You called me to serve the Lord. Make sure, O Lord by Your Spirit that I don't serve myself or my own self interest, but that I serve the Lord." Turn it into a prayer; reverse it. You see the character qualities

listed by God? Well, pray them back to Him. You can be sure that He will be anxious to respond to that particular prayer. So there you see some character qualities of the disciples of Jesus as set forth by the Apostle Paul. You see why you really can take much longer to do justice to this passage.

II. How the Christian relates to others, even enemies.

In verse 14 and 15, Paul turns from the subject of character qualities to talk about relating to others. He talks about relating not only to those with whom we might be on a friendly basis, but about relating to those who are enemies. He tells us here that the faithful Christian disciple blesses and refrains from cursing and sympathizes with others. He gives us three imperatives for relating to others.

The first one you see in verse 14, it's perhaps the most surprising where he says, "Seek God's blessings on your persecutors. Bless those who persecute you." Then he repeats just in case we didn't hear him the first time. "Bless and do not curse." He knows how hard this particular directive is and so he repeats it and states it in the negative. This is an utterly otherworldly approach to ones enemies. You know, you've heard a lot in the media over the last few months how Islam and Christianity are the same. It's these kinds of directives, in comparison to the coordinate directive in the, Koran that set Christianity and Islam in bold relief. Look at how Islam used those outside of the brotherhood of Islam and then look at these kinds of directives peppered throughout the New Testament, and you'll see one of the real ethical divides between those two religions. At any rate, Paul is calling on us here to bless those who persecute us.

This isn't the only thing that Christians are to do in relation to persecution, this isn't a directive saying that, for instance, that you are never to do anything to avoid being persecuted. It doesn't say that you can never protect yourself and seek legal protection from persecutors. Paul, interestingly in the course of his ministry, took at least two different tacts to those who were persecuting him. Sometimes Paul let himself be persecuted, despite the fact that he could have sought legal refuge from that persecution. The choice that he made was usually dependant upon what would best serve the interest of the kingdom. Other times, Paul avoided that persecution by seeking legal protection. You can watch him do it on his missionary journey. Paul is not telling you everything about how you relate to persecutors, but he is saying, "Here is the big picture." I do not want your hearts to grow narrowed and hardened against those who are now your enemies and the enemies of God. I want your hearts to be large with them and to desire God's blessings on them.

Then he goes on to give two other words about relating to others. "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." For one thing this reminds of that the Christian has a generous spirit in relating to others and has a tremendous concern for the state of hearts for others. The Christian isn't

insensitive to the state of another person's heart. The first directive I think, here in verse 15, is the hardest of these two directions. I think that it is harder to rejoice with those who rejoice than it is to weep with those who weep. Many of you, just because God has cultivated a Christian Spirit in you, find it easy to sympathize and empathize with those who are going through difficulty. Of course, there is always the challenge of ministering to someone who is going through something that you have never, ever gone through. I understand there are all sort of choices and difficulties there, but in rejoicing with those who rejoice, I think we manifest our Christian love in an extraordinary way. It is perhaps harder than mourning with those who are in mourning. Why?

Often times we are called upon to rejoice with other people for whom God has granted a certain blessing that he has not granted to us. When my wife and I were at Reformed Seminary, we longed to have children and we were unable to. A ministry really developed for my wife and we discovered there were several other young women at the seminary who were unable to have children and she developed a community of fellowship with many of those woman because they knew that she understood what they were going through not being able to have children. When we conceived Sarah Kennedy, it is amazing how difficult it was for some of those women to be able to rejoice with Anne. Now, I don't say that as a criticism. I understand that entirely. We ourselves had experienced that when friends conceived and were going to have children. It is difficult to rejoice with them in the very thing that you are waiting upon for the Lord to do in your own experience, but isn't it a mark of grace when you are able to do so. Paul is calling on us here to rejoice with those who are rejoicing as well to weep with those who weep. So, those imperatives he gives for our relating to others.

III. The Christian's attitude toward himself.

Then we come back to verse 16. Again he give three directives regarding our attitude towards others and our own self-estimation. He tells us that basically the basic Christian disciple is humble. He tells us in verse 16, the very first part of the verse, "be of the same mind toward one another." In other words, have the same concern for all the brethren. Favoritism is pandemic in life. Favoritism is everywhere, it's universal. Paul is saying that in the Christian church we ought to contradict that epidemic. We ought to have a love for all the brethren, have the same concern for all the brethren. It doesn't mean that you don't have friends that who are especially close, but it means that you guard against the spirit of favoritism in the congregation.

He goes on to say, "do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly." In other words, don't think too highly of yourself. Don't think that there are some people within the Christian church who are just frankly, beneath you. An over estimation of one's own self importance is a sure sign that gospel humility is lacking in an individual. When a person becomes too important to do something,

well that's not a good spiritual sign. I will not tell his name because there are family relations present, but my wife once went to a seminary and met a person who was a high ranking official at that seminary. She was with me while I was teaching there for a couple of week, and the administrator, at the end of the day, was going around the classroom emptying trash cans. My wife caught that immediately and loved him on the spot for it, because there was a person who could have thought of himself as above certain things, who was giving himself to even menial tasks in the church. Paul is saying that that type of attitude in service ought to also be there in our relationships. Even when we are really different from other people, even when people are from a different socioeconomic standing than us, even when they are in different social situations than we are in , we ought to be ready to associate with everyone in the Christian church.

Then he goes on to conclude by saying, "Do not be wise in your own estimation." Don't be conceited, don't be wise in your own sight. This again is a mark of a lack of spiritual grace in a person's life. Humility is one of the great graces of life and Robert Haldane says that "self conceit is an evidence both of a weakness of mind and of ignorance." I once knew a very gifted seminary student who went off and did graduate study. He sat through many false teachings during his Bible studies and came back to minister, thinking himself much smarter than those who were his teachers in seminary and his pastors growing up, and even his family relations and friends back home. He thought very highly of himself. I had four conversations with him. I have never gotten a word in edgewise. I remember a friend of his, who is now a church planter, saying to me, "So and so is educated beyond his intelligence." It was a very apt way of explaining this person. Though he may have been educated beyond his intelligence, he was far less intelligent than he thought himself. The apostle is bringing this to bare on all of us. None of us ought to think to highly of ourselves. When we do, we are waiting for a fall. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, these words are so practical and they hit so close to home with all of us that we now pray that by your Holy Spirit You would give us a heart that we would want to be like this. That we would want to manifest the graces of the Spirit in our lives. That we would show humility and that we would show sympathy, and that we would show these qualities of life that are brought in your people by the Spirit of God. Bring this about, we pray, that we might be a better testimony to You and the world and that we might please You. For we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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