

Display the Marks of a True Christian

Lesson Text: Romans 12:1-2, 9-21 **Devotional Reading:** Romans 12:3-8

Background Scripture: Romans 12:1-21

Time: A.D. 56 **Place:** from Corinth

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. ¹⁷Do not be conceited.

¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

LESSON AIMS

- Facts - to examine selected verses from Romans 12 that teach us how to relate to those inside and outside the Christian community.
- Principle - to teach the distinctives of the Christian lifestyle.
- Application - to encourage believers to cultivate the kind of lifestyle that will identify them as true Christians.

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul is well known for his prolific and theological epistles-Romans being one of his most popular writings to the Romans. Today's lesson is no exception, as it is taken from the 12th chapter and deals with the "marks of a true Christian." Personally, this chapter and lesson are hitting home with me because of a situation that I find myself in at work. There is a particularly... negative individual with whom I must occasionally interface in the course of my weekly responsibilities. This individual manages to always find something bad to say about everyone and on every occasion, and is very vocal with those findings. While most others choose to overlook this aberrant behavior, I find it inexcusable and disgusting. I maintain that corporate positive discipline should be the remedy for this behavior, but for whatever reasons this has not occurred (different discussion, different day).

Nonetheless, as a Christian, I find myself in somewhat of a dilemma because I know that I am accountable to God for my thoughts and actions, but I have been very tempted to give this individual "a

piece of my mind..." you know, "set the person in his/her place." But, that is when the Holy Spirit has stepped in and calmed me down. He speaks to me, telling me that I cannot afford to be the one to blow up in the workplace by trying to set matters straight. I was reminded that God does all things well, that His timing is perfect, and that I have been placed in this situation as a test that might lead one day to witnessing to this individual--who obviously has some serious personal issues. I was also reminded that as a Christian, I am to mimic Christ's dealings in difficult situations with people--both believers and unbelievers. My "light bulb" moment came after reading Romans 12--wherein I found: *"do not be conformed to this world"* (v.2), *"bless those who persecute you"* (v.14), *"repay no one evil for evil"* (v.17), *"If it is possible, as much depends on you, live peaceably with all men"* (v.18), *"do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good"* (v.21).

Romans 12 deals with practical Christian living. Most of Paul's letters begin with a doctrinal section and are then followed by a practical section. The doctrinal section of the letter concerns what to believe; the practical section concerns how to put those teachings to work in our daily lives.

As believers, we must recognize the importance of both correct doctrine and correct living. Trying to build a godly life on something other than the truths of God's Word (or doctrine) is like trying to build a house without a good foundation.

Conversely, having a correct understanding of Bible doctrine will be of little value unless it is "fleshed out" in a dedicated Christian life. Just as John the Baptist told the multitudes, "Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3:8), so it must be among those who have professed faith in Christ. If we talk the talk, we must walk the walk.

Living Sacrifices - Romans 12:1-2

Because of God's mercy, believers should willingly choose to use their bodies to serve and obey God (see Romans 6:13). Such giving of the body to God is more than a contrast with dead animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, it is "newness of life" (see Romans 6:4).

The concept of a living sacrifice was one that was foreign to both Jews and Gentiles. Since both Judaism and the various pagan religions offered dead animal sacrifices, the concept of a living sacrifice might have seemed very strange to Paul's readers. Since Christ offered a once-for-all sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 10:10), the days of offering dead sacrifices have ended. What God desires of His people today is a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1), that is, lives that are "holy, acceptable unto God."

1-In what ways can we present our bodies as living sacrifices? (v.1)

The word conformed means "to form" or "mold." Instead of being molded by the values of this world (age or era), the believer should be transformed (changed) by the renewing of the mind. Spiritual transformation starts in the mind and heart. A mind dedicated to the world and its concerns will produce a life that is tossed back and forth by the tides of culture. But, a mind dedicated to God's truth will produce a life that can stand the test of time. We can resist the temptations of our culture by meditating on God's truth and letting the Holy Spirit guide and shape our thoughts and behaviors.

2-How is the church being conformed to the world today? (v.2)

Loving One Another - Romans 12:9-15

Do you find it non-Christian like to hate something? This is what Paul means by the word abhor. There is room for hatred in the Christian life, but it is not a hatred of people. Romans 12:9 describes a loathing of sin and a sense of disgust at the destruction that it causes both in individual lives and in the fabric of society.

Too often Christians flirt with the world and thus begin to think that certain things are not all that wrong. The media is good for portraying evil in such a way that we may actually begin to sympathize with the evildoer. As children of God, we are to hate those things that God hates. Why, because He told us to be holy as He is holy.

In contrast to hating evil, we are told to "Cling to what is good" (v.9). Searching the Scriptures daily as the Bereans did (Acts 17:10-11) ensures that we know the difference between good and evil.

3-Why should we abhor evil? (v.9)

Christians should not lag in diligence when it comes to serving the Lord. Our services should not be offered half-heartedly or in a lazy manner. Instead, Paul encourages the Romans to serve eagerly and in earnest; to have a burning zeal for what is good. Because it is fed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, our fire can burn even through difficult times.

4-What are some ways people might be "lagging in diligence?" (v.11)

Paul probably had the poor in mind when he gave the admonition, "distributing to the needs of the saints." Just as God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), His children are called to assist many individuals who have needs. But Scripture emphasizes our singular responsibility for our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul writes, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10).

5-What are some specific ways we can distribute to the necessity of the saints. (v.13)

To be "given to hospitality" is another way we can meet the needs of the people of God. Being hospitable might mean opening our homes to visiting speakers or hosting a home Bible study.

I stand convicted! I am guilty of not being as hospitable as I could/should be. In fact, my husband and my children are more gracious in this area than I. It could simply be my intuitively female ways or my having a keener discernment of people. Whatever the reason, my excuses usually fall in the area of my being "too tired" when I get in from work in the evenings to invite anyone extra over for dinner. Or, the age-old excuse that the house is "not clean enough" to have someone visit. When in fact, if a truly hungry person were to come over for dinner, I doubt very seriously that he/she would comment on let alone notice that my hardwood floors need spot cleaning, or that the dining room table's pedestal is dusty!

While I know that it is healthy for believers to fellowship outside of the church building--getting to know one another better by developing friendships, I have always been a little bit selfish with my "free" time--"free" time as in those hours that I do not spend at work or at church. And, this is an area of my life that I am going to ask God to help me to improve in. As tight as my schedule already is, with some effort and juggling, I am confident that I can plan my evenings and weekends in such a way to better utilize the number of hours in each day that God has blessed me with. And, in so doing, I will be able to offer some of those "free" hours to God by being His mouth, arms, hands and feet to serve His people. I know that this is what Paul meant when he wrote that we should present our bodies a living sacrifice.

6-How can we show hospitality? What excuses do we often offer for not being more hospitable? (v.13)

Although this translation can be taken to mean a literal rejoicing and weeping, it can also be interpreted figurative as in when a believer is sincere or genuine in his expression of joy or sorrow for another's situation.

Case in point, I remember applying for a position that I knew I was well qualified to fill, but I was not considered. Another co-worker was promoted instead to the position. I remember the total letdown that came over me when I heard our supervisor make the promotion announcement afterwards. I am sure that my face said it all. I was truly not rejoicing for my co-worker. In fact, when I congratulated her on her promotion, I was not sincere in my words. It was so fake! Well, the Holy Spirit troubled my spirit so badly for the rest of the afternoon afterwards that I could not concentrate on my work. Honestly, I had to take five and get myself back together. I did this by first repenting to God for my poor attitude and for forgetting to remember that it was a blessing to even have a job in the first place. 1 Chronicles 29:11-12 weighed on my heart: *"Everything in the heavens and earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as being in control of everything. Riches and honor come from you alone, and you are the Ruler of all mankind; your hand controls power and might, and it is at your discretion that men are made great and given strength"* [TLB].

Now, being the student of God's Word that I am, I know that I was to have also gone to my co-worker afterwards and 'fessed up to my insincerity and asked for her forgiveness. That I have not done yet, but it is coming.

Christians suffer losses just as those who have never named Christ do. When believers are grieving, we are to "weep with those who weep." This includes not only the death of a loved one, but also such things as a layoff or serious illness.

Because believers are a body, when one part hurts, everyone feels the pain; when one is joyful, everyone can rejoice. Christians cannot be indifferent to the suffering or joy of their fellow believers (see 1 Corinthians 12:25, 26).

7-How can we rejoice with those who rejoice? How can we weep with those who weep? (v.15)

Learning Forbearance - Romans 12:16-21

This question addresses my particular work situation in the Introduction. All of us suffer because of those who do evil in our world-and because of those who are evil in our world. While the temptation to retaliate can be strong, this is not God's will.

The believer's aim should be to live peaceably with all people. But sometimes peace is not within our control; this is why Paul limits the command in verse 18. We are to strive to be at peace with everyone. If someone wants to argue or fight, we cannot prevent him from doing so, but we do not need to lower ourselves to act as he does (see Proverbs 20:3, 22).

8-How can we live at peace with those who do not want to be at peace with us? (v.18)

Quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35, Paul called on us to turn our hurts over to God. If vengeance is appropriate, it is a divine prerogative, and not ours. Freed from vengeance, believers can give themselves to mercy, even toward their enemies. Hallelujah! God will fight all of His children's battles for them. His eyes do not miss anything that happens or that is said. He knows just when His children are mistreated and when they are broken down in spirit. But, He promises that He "will repay" or punish those who are guilty of such behavior.

9-Why is vengeance a divine prerogative? (v.19)

Again Paul quotes from the Old Testament, this time, though, from Proverbs 25:21-22. He explained how to destroy an enemy: by making him a friend! Treating an enemy well can melt his heart. Vengeance is counterproductive; and retaliation only causes strife and fans the flames of resentment.

By acts of kindness, a believer can perhaps bring shame and repentance to an enemy. This is the phenomenal power of God's love that believers are connected to through Christ!

10-What does heaping coals of fire on the head of an enemy mean? (v.20)

CONCLUSION

- Christ gave Himself as the perfect sacrifice for us. We are asked to offer ourselves back as living sacrifices. This means that our lives will be transformed as our minds are renewed.
- Transformed believers relate to one another in loving, self-sacrificing ways. They also represent Jesus to the outside world in the ways in which they relate to those who do not believe.
- You are encouraged today to examine your own lives. Ask yourself what areas of positive distinction need to be cultivated in your life?

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Total dedication to God and His will means we truly serve Him (Rom. 12:1-2).
2. We reveal our love for God when we show love for other Christians (vss. 9-11).
3. Peacefully living with others reflects God's presence in our lives (vss. 12-14).
4. When a Christian feels superior to others, it only creates animosity (vss. 15-16).
5. Letting God deal with those who wrong us leaves the situation in perfect hands (vss. 17-19).
6. When we love our enemies, it means we are stronger than they are, not weaker (vss. 20-21).

PRAYER

To be like Jesus, our blessed Redeemer! That is our earnest prayer, dear Father. We ask that You will guide us in making Jesus' way of living a more consistent and visible part of our lives. Grant us wisdom to take the initiative more in demonstrating Jesus' way to others, and when we do so, help us to maintain a servant's heart. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"Don't be conformed; be transformed."