

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 3 of 13)

A Recipe for Gospel-Centered Living

Romans 12:9-21

Mark Vroegop

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:9–21 (ESV)

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), the pastor of the famed Metropolitan Tabernacle in London during the 1800s, longed for his church to be saturated with the Word of God such that it affected their thinking and their living. Spurgeon held up John Bunyan, the author of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, as a great example. He said this about Bunyan and his writings:

Read anything of his, and you will see that it is almost like reading the Bible itself ... He had read the Bible till his very soul was saturated with Scripture; and, though his writings are charmingly full of poetry, yet he cannot give us his Pilgrim's Progress— that sweetest of all prose poems— without continually making us feel and say, "Why, this man is a living Bible!" Prick him anywhere; his blood is Bibline, the very essence of the Bible flows from him.

Those of you who have read *Pilgrim's Progress* will know exactly what Spurgeon is talking about. If you have not read *Pilgrim's Progress*, you ought to make it a goal this summer because you will marvel at Bunyan's Bible-saturated narrative. He does seem to bleed the Bible.

However, Spurgeon was talking about Bunyan in order to exhort his congregation about the importance of having their lives shaped by the Word of God. He envisioned Christians being like silkworms when it came to their consumption of the Bible.

Oh, that, you and I might get into the very heart of the Word of God, and get that Word into ourselves! As I have seen the silkworm eat into the leaf, and consume it, so ought we to do with the Word of the Lord; not crawl ever its surface, but eat right into it till we have taken it into our inmost parts. It is idle merely to let the eye glance over the words, or to recollect the poetical expressions, or the historic facts; but it is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in

*Scriptural language, and your very style is fashioned upon Scripture models, and, what is better still, your spirit is flavoured with the words of the Lord.*¹

The Flavor of a Christian Mindset

I love the concept of having a spirit that is “flavored” with the words of the Lord. That idea is central to where we are in our journey through Romans. We learned two weeks ago that living sacrifices are those who have a Christian mindset that involves three key statements: I’m Yours, Change Me, and Lead Me. And last week we looked at the first application of this mindset as it relates to spiritual gifts, which need to be used humbly, unitedly, and actively.

Our text today helps us take another step in understanding how Christianity works by giving us a list of virtues or behaviors that should be part of the character of a person who is a follower of Jesus. In verses 9-21 Paul gives us a recipe of what Christian character looks like. In other words, a Christian mindset is supposed to create attitudes, actions, and responses that are uniquely Christ-like.

Have you ever had it happen that when you were introduced to someone or when you listened to someone talk or be interviewed in the media, you just knew that they were a follower of Jesus? There was just something in them that reflected the flavor of a Christian. Romans 12:9-21 puts some handles on this for us, and as we examine this text, I want you to be thinking about your “flavor.”

How Should Christians Live?

This passage is very difficult to outline, so we are going to view it more as a recipe with fifteen ingredients. As you listen do not get overwhelmed with the entire list, but prayerfully listen for one or two aspects in your life that could use improvement, repentance, or encouragement.

I’m going to give you a series of adverbs that describe the way in which a Christian mindset is lived. Each of these qualities is important, but it is the collection of them that creates a beautiful and counter-cultural picture of what it means to be a Christian and that shows what a Christian community or church should be like.

This text answers the question: “How should Christians live?” Let’s see what we discover.

1. Sincerely (9a)

This list begins with a call for sincere love. Paul starts with love (*agape*) because of its prominence in the commands of Christ and in the life of the church. If there was one characteristic that was to mark the followers of Jesus and to make them unique in the world, it was love. Jesus said,¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) And He also said,³⁵ By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:13 that “faith, hope and love abide . . . but the greatest of these is love.” Love was to be the chief characteristic of Jesus’ disciples.

¹ <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2011/08/11/do-you-bleed-bibline/>

However, this exhortation calls for special kind of love. The Christian community is to be marked by genuine or sincere love. Paul is advocating for more than “niceness,” “friendliness,” or “civility.” Sometimes those character qualities, while commendable, can actually be self-serving or less than authentic. The vision of the church is more than just the absence of conflict or the presence of a welcoming culture. The biblical vision is a group of people who love one another with a depth and genuineness that is stunningly attractive and refreshing. Living sacrifices are sincere in love and affection for one another. Tertullian (155 – 240 AD), an early Christian apologist who lived in modern day Tunisia, said that the Romans would say “See how they love one another!” in reference to the early Christians. The church was to be marked by sincere love.

2. Purely (9b)

The second mark of a Christian mindset is living purely. Believers are to love one another, but they are to hate evil and cling to what is good. The ESV uses the words “abhor” and “hold fast,” and the point is that the believer’s posture toward good and evil cannot be passive. Evil is not to be tolerated; it is to be hated. Good is not just hoped for; it is to be clung to.

Impurity does not simply happen out of nowhere. It works its way into our lives, and we are no longer shocked or repulsed by evil in the world, in our culture, in one another, and in the church. Given the context of sincere love, Paul probably has in mind the kind of evil that destroys Christian relationships. Gossip, slander, bitterness, hurtful words, anger, lying, selfishness, racism, pride, sexual sin, and a host of other issues are not just harmful. They are destructive to the purity of the church and to the bond of love. A Christian mindset hates evil and clings to what is good. It cherishes purity.

3. Affectionately (10)

Our list started with love, and we find another angle on relationships inside the church. The word for “brotherly affection” is different than the word for love in verse 9. This word means the kind of love that one would have for family. In seasons of persecution this was more than just a feeling; it was very practical since following Christ divided families. For those of you who do not have believing families, you can probably relate to this. The relationships that you have in the body of Christ have a depth and flavor to them that is so different than even what you have with your own flesh and blood. Honestly, that is how it is supposed to be. We are to treat one another with family-like affection.

Additionally, Paul says “we should outdo one another in showing honor.” This is an extension of the affectionate love that we have for one another, and it reflects the kind of attitude that Paul talks about in Philippians 2 – “in humility count others more significant than yourselves.” (Phil. 2:3). The church is to be filled with people who are deferential to one another because we are part of the same family.

4. Passionately (11)

Verse 11 calls for believers to live with passion. In other words, your connection to the body of Christ should not be like trying to convince a five-year old to say goodbye to Uncle Jim who you only see at

reunions by giving him a forced hug. To be a follower of Jesus means that you are “all in.”

There are three statements here. 1) *Don't be slothful in zeal* – Believers are not to be lazy in their commitment to one another. They should make efforts to be engaged in one another's lives. 2) *Be fervent in spirit* – This is in contrast to the slothfulness that was just mentioned. The word “fervent” has the idea of bubbling, boiling, of constant activity. And the word “spirit” either means something inside of us or the Holy Spirit. Regardless, the point is simply that our hearts should burn to be engaged, involved, and pouring into other people. 3) *Serve the Lord* – While we are pouring into people who are part of the body, we are always aware of the fact that ultimately our service is an offering of worship to the Lord. We are sacrifices who live passionately.

5. Steadfastly (12)

The fifth description regarding how we are to live is a call to take the long view. Paul exhorts believers to live steadfastly with three statements in verse 12. 1) *Rejoice in hope* – this is the overarching theme of perseverance. The believers endure by rejoicing in the hope that awaits them. In Romans 5:3-4, Paul said it like this: ³ *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,* ⁴ *and endurance produces character, and character produces hope . . .* (Romans 5:3-4) The community of faith is to be marked by rejoicing in a future hope. 2) *Be patient in tribulation* – the word “patient” means to endure or to bear up under. Believers are called to face difficulties by not giving up, not becoming anxious, and by standing firm. During seasons of persecution, the church was to help one another remain steadfast. 3) *Be constant in prayer* – the community of faith is to be marked by a continual devotion to prayer, especially when the people of God are facing opposition.

Do you see the importance of the role of the church here? By gathering with God's people, we celebrate our hope, we help each other endure, and we pray together for God's help. Living steadfastly is a community project. You do not remain steadfast very well on your own. You need others to encourage you, help you, and support you, especially through trials and hardship.

6. Generously (13)

The body of Christ is also to be marked by generosity as it helps people in their needs. A Christian mindset is reflected in seeing your money and your possessions as the means of God's grace to others. This is where being a living sacrifice becomes very practical. Do you give regularly and sacrificially? Are you quick to meet the needs of people with your possessions or time? Do you open your home to people? Sacrificial giving and Christian hospitality make unique and clear statements to the world about who we are and what we love.

Sometime this summer we will retire the remaining debt on our facility at 96th and Towne, and it has been amazing to watch the Lord provide the money needed for this facility, especially since it was built in the midst of the Great Recession. But even more amazing to me is the fact that while we were building and funding this 20 million dollar facility, we had our largest Christmas offerings ever, two which were over one million dollars. I remember someone asking me, as we were getting ready to

raise money for our new facility, if we were going to stop our Christmas offering for a few years. I said that there was no way we would do that because the more we have given away, the more the Lord has blessed us. Generosity has been a part of this church's flavor from the very beginning, and I think it is part of the special favor of God. As we have started to plan for the 2016 budget, we are looking to give even more money away toward starting a Campus in Fishers in August, toward helping church plants inside the 465 Beltway, and toward increasing our percentages in Global and Local Outreach. Our preliminary plan is give over 30 percent to ministries beyond what happens at this campus. We want to model generosity with the church budget, and we want to encourage you in your giving because there is something uniquely Christian about sacrificial giving.

7. Graciously (14)

Verse 14 changes the direction of the text and highlights a subject that we will come back to in verses 17-20. Let me simply introduce it here. Paul provides instruction here regarding how believers are to respond to unfair treatment and persecution. The overall flavor of the Christian community is to be one of graciousness, even when the world would expect some kind of retaliation. Persecutors are not to be cursed. Rather, they are to be blessed, and the word "bless" is used twice for emphasis.

This is one of a number of revolutionary and counter-cultural dynamics when it comes to Christianity. Instead of seeking revenge, instead of being angry or striking back, a Christian mindset embraces blessing. As Jesus prayed for His persecutors (Luke 23:34), believers are to be gracious in the midst of unfair treatment.

8. Empathetically (15)

The next flavor of the community is one of empathy, as we enter into the emotional lives of other people. We share one another's burdens, and we share one another's joys. When people are hurting, we hurt with them. When people are rejoicing, we rejoice with them. The point is that our lives are connected to one another such that we are neither alone nor isolated, no matter what the circumstance. The body of Christ is marked by a radical other-centeredness. By belonging to one another, we enter into the joys and sorrows of each other's lives. To become a follower of Jesus is to no longer live for just yourself.

9. Harmoniously (16a)

The next dynamic is likely connected to an underlying racial tension issue in the church at Rome. Jews and Gentiles had generations of animosity toward one another, and Paul is urging them to love one another despite their differences. The Greek word here means to have the same mind or attitude. I love the translation "harmony" because it captures how individuality and differences, when played together, can create something beautiful and attractive. Diversity of background and gifts should advance the cause of unity not disunity.

10. Humbly (16 b)

The underlying source of harmonious living is humility. The church is to be marked by people who do not think arrogantly about themselves (“do not be haughty”) and by those who know that they do not know it all (“don’t be conceited”). Want to ruin a small group, a Bible Study, or a Vision Trip? Just be arrogant and act like you know everything. Instead, the church is to be characterized by people who love one another regardless of their status in life (“associate with the lowly”) and who care for people, even if those relationships do not help us climb some social, political, or relational ladder.

11. Kindly (17)

Remember the instruction in verse 14 about blessing persecutors? Verses 17-21 unpack this concept even further for us, and it is really important, especially as our culture becomes increasingly hostile to Christianity. How do you respond to people who treat you unfairly or in a manner that is evil?

Paul’s answer is twofold: First, believers simply should not repay evil for evil. The followers of Jesus need to resist the natural human tendency to seek revenge. Second, they should “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” This means that their lack of retaliation would be recognized by even non-believers as honorable and commendable. Responding to evil with kindness, control, and non-retaliation is a stunning statement to the world. The Christian community was to be marked by kindness in the face of evil.

12. Peaceably (18)

Living sacrifices, as much as possible, live at peace with people. Christianity is supposed to breed love, harmony, and selflessness between people. In the midst of a culture filled with animosity, conflicts and self-centeredness, the followers of Jesus are called to be the kind of people who create and make peace.

However, this is not always possible, no matter how hard a follower of Jesus tries. That is why Paul says, “as much as it depends on you.” Sometimes peace will not be possible due to a Christian’s commitment to Christ or the gospel. There are times when peace is impossible simply because the other party is filled with hatred and malice. And in those instances, the believer should do his best to live at peace while knowing it may not actually work. Sometimes reconciliation and harmony are not possible, no matter how hard a person tries. However, the believer should always long for peace.

13. Trustingly (19)

All of the descriptions so far have been directed toward relationships between people. Verse 19 adds an important dynamic as it relates to a believer’s relationship with God. Instead of seeking revenge, a follower of Jesus is called to trust in God’s ability to deliver justice. The text says to “leave it to the wrath of God,” which means that the final word of judgment has not been spoken until God speaks.

The hope here is that there is future accountability where the justice will be served. God will hold everyone accountable.

The hope of future judgment is what undergirds the believer's ability to set aside the desire for revenge and yet satisfy the real and appropriate desire for justice to be served. By loving enemies, blessing persecutors, or being kind to those who are unfair, the believer is not indicating that what has been done is fair or right. Instead, the believer is acknowledging that it is not his or her place to deliver justice. That belongs to God. Therefore, one can endure unfairness and mistreatment by "trusting in the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:22).

14. Mercifully (20)

Instead of seeking vengeance or retaliation, living as a believer means treating enemies mercifully. Verse 20 says that "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." There is tangible activity here. Mercy must be more than just something that takes place internally. Enemies are to be cared for as if they are friends, since this is the way that God, through Christ, has treated us.

But there is also future judgment in mind here too. The phrase "heap burning coals upon his head" is likely another reference to God's judgment (see 2 Sam. 22:9, Ps. 18:8, 140:10, and Prov. 6:27-29). The believer's kind actions in the face of unfairness or mistreatment only makes the judgment of God all the more poignant and justified. Believers are not merciful in order to create further judgment, but the hope of future judgment frees them to be merciful.

15. Intentionally (21)

Paul ends this list with another summary statement. Remember that he began with a call to love and a series of practical expressions. He now concludes with an exhortation about how to live in the midst of a world filled with evil: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Followers of Jesus are not to allow the evil that is done to them to overwhelm them such that they respond in a similar fashion. Instead, they are called to conquer evil by doing good to people who do not deserve it.

And the way that they do this is by placing their hope in God's ability to be God. Their hope in Him is what motivates them to love fellow believers deeply, and their hope in Him is what gives them courage to be kind to people who are unfair, unkind, and evil.

Their view of God is what informs relationships inside the church and out in the world.

How should a Christian live? What should the flavor of Christian mindset be like? What does it mean practically for a believer to be a living sacrifice? These fifteen adverbs describe the way that individual Christians should live, and they capture the potential beauty of a community of people who look and act like this.

This list is overwhelming. As I studied this text and worked through each word, I found myself reflecting on how much grace each of these words actually take. When taken together, this list would be impossible except for the grace of God in our lives.

This list is convicting. I hope that as we walked through a few of these words, you found yourself a bit convicted and exhorted. There are really important ideas in this passage, and I'm sure that we all could grow in a number of areas. Let's ask God to help change.

This list is counter-cultural. It is striking to me how radical these fifteen characteristics really are in comparison to the culture around us. This text has reminded me, once again, that the body of Christ is meant to be very unusual.

But this list is also really beautiful. College Park, this list is what we should look like personally and corporately. If we could "bleed" these fifteen characteristics, do you know how strong our witness would be the community and how winsome the gospel could appear to the world? If these words described you, do you know the kind of impact that you would have? If these words described your family, do you know how attractive that is? If these words described our church, do you know how unusual and powerful it would be?

May God help us to live sincerely, purely, affectionately, passionately, steadfastly, generously, graciously, empathetically, harmoniously, humbly, kindly, peaceably, trustingly, mercifully, and intentionally.

May we be His people – the kind of people that bleed the character of Christ.

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