

The Truly Practical Christian

Outdoor Worship -- August 30, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The Epistles of the New Testament are often comprised of two parts. The first portion of the letter commonly addresses matters of doctrine, that is, teachings of God's plan of love and salvation for us in Jesus Christ. The letters then conclude with teachings on practical Christian living, that is, how we can live in ways which are true to our beliefs. Romans is a classic example of this as chapters one through eleven give a full explanation of God's rescue plan for the world since the human race's rebellion on to the time of Christ's return. Then, beginning at chapter 12, is an extensive set of instructions on how we are to live in light of God's saving work. Many lay people will tolerate, or perhaps find mild interest in teachings from the beginning theological/doctrinal section of an Epistle, as it often seems too lofty or confusing to fully understand or appreciate. Interest in the scripture greatly increases, however, once we enter into the latter portion which addresses practical Christian living. One will commonly hear people praise these sections of scripture as these seem so practical, with no fancy and confusing theological words. "Don't tell me fancy religious notions. Just tell me what to do and I will do it," is a popular attitude. While this attitude is understandable, it can also turn our faith into a "to-do list," and lead to a dangerous misunderstanding of Christianity.

Romans 12, our lesson, is loaded with practical exhortations and instructions for living and each verse is rich with meaning. Here we find practical instruction which echoes the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, as well as advice from the Proverbs. It is all too easy to only view this chapter as a list of assignments, but there is more and we dare not miss it. Beyond the list of tasks, we find a focus and strategy for the believer as they tackle daily life. I see three guiding stars which help us navigate and can lead us to a truly practical Christianity.

Romans 12 reminds us that **a truly practical Christian loves Jesus**. Consider the opening verses of our lesson. *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.* As we first hear the teaching, we are reminded that we must be sincere and energetic in our faith, and this sounds like a wonderful idea. But on second look, and over time, we realize that there is a problem with these commands, at least from a “to-do list” perspective. How are we to find the emotion and endurance to keep up such enthusiasm? There are days when this teaching may come naturally, but there are many others when we just can’t muster the strength! There are moments when we feel loving toward all, and there are days when love seems to have abandoned our hearts. What is a believer to do?

How can we have genuine love that we can pass on to others? We look to Jesus. We look to Jesus in worship and in devotion. A “to-do list” Christian may see that as only a duty to be honored on occasion, and here is where the “to-do list” Christian goes so terribly astray for it is in worship and devotion that we regain our strength. I may be struggling to love someone as I cling to memories of past un-kindnesses, and what is to change my heart? Simply telling myself to love seldom works. But to pause and worship at the foot of the Cross on a Good Friday service can change a heart as I am confronted with the love of the Savior who forgave us in our betrayal of Him! We must spend time with Jesus to keep that relationship strong, and as we draw close to Christ, we find power for living. Love and zeal appear in our hearts.

When we get to the second half of Romans, we must still remember the first half! Those doctrinal/theological sections of the Scriptures remind us of just who God is and all that God has done for us. They remind us how we can come to know God and be one of God’s children. This is not “mere doctrine.” A loving and zealous Christian life requires a truly Christ centered life. Some have become so captivated by a particular social justice crusade or ministry that they have lost their focus upon traditional matters of faith and devotion. I have known pastors who seem to have gone into Christian ministry more out of a love for the Civil Rights movement or some other important social cause, than for a real devotion to Christ and the Church. This often does not end well as these high minded though misguided pastors begin to lose the power and zeal which only God can give. They began their ministries thinking that they were focusing upon the real and practical matters of the faith, but ended up losing touch with the real source of power and change.

Practical Christianity means loving Jesus, but this is more than a matter of emotion. The truly practical Christian loves Jesus and **seeks wisdom**. Jesus' followers are to be more than mere do-gooders. Wisdom can be defined as practical strategies for living in a broken and hostile world. How I love verse 18: *If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*. Such a beautiful mix of love and reasonableness. Do all you can to get along, but also realize that many folks cannot find it in their hearts to get along with much of anybody! Waste no time in feeling guilty or feeling like a failure because peace could not be made. Paul doesn't tell us what to do once we realize that we cannot live peaceably with someone. He offers no easy answer for he knows that there seldom are easy answers in this messy world. He is encouraging us to be wise. Note also in the verse before it how we are called to wisely consider the matter of appearances. *Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all*. In telling the Romans to be gracious he reminds them how this will be a good witness to those around them. It may sound vain or manipulative to speak of being careful of how we are perceived, but this is certainly not our first and only concern. Paul calls us to wisdom, that we would not be completely careless as to how we are perceived. Try to make a good impression on the world, for this is a path of wisdom.

Being good, as important as this is, is not the only concern for the believer. I often remember and celebrate a wise professor from my seminary days who regularly reminded us of our need to pursue wisdom. In a class on counseling we would frequently discuss case studies. As young and idealistic students, zealous to do the right thing, we would view these cases from a very moralistic perspective. Our only thought was often only toward matters of who was right and who was wrong. So many times, Dr. Pendleton would urge us to ask ourselves an additional question: "What is the *wise* course of action." It is not enough to only identify good and evil in a situation. Wisdom invites us to consider the successful and practical ways of dealing with the matter, but as young people we had trouble grasping that deeper concern.

Wisdom means having a strategy. What Paul presents us in Romans 12 may not seem like a strategy in the worldly sense of that term, but he is calling us to be part of a larger plan and purpose. We are urged to be humble and to associate with all classes of people. We are told to love our enemies. All this is done, among other reasons, as a strategy for Christian witness! As Paul summarizes: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*. Christ's suffering, death and resurrection were not only a demonstration of his love and purity. It was the very means by which sin and death were defeated! Paul introduces the theme of loving one's enemies in verse 14. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them*. Doubtless, Paul was remembering Stephen the martyr as he penned this command. Stephen, though completely innocent, was stoned to death by angry Pharisees who despised the message of Jesus Christ. As Stephen died, he blessed those who were stoning him, and as he looked toward his accusers and executioners, he saw young Paul who was

assenting to his death. That amazing love left its mark on even the hard-hearted Paul, and in time he too would become a believer like Stephen. Pardon me if you think I am speaking crudely but it all reminds me of the old saying "Kill them with kindness." Love has a strategy!

Along with loving Jesus and seeking to act wisely, the truly practical Christian **trusts in God**. Paul exhorts us to good Christian living wanting us to trust that God is in control of the situation. The "to-do list" Christian thinks much in the way of "how must I fix this," but the truly practical believer trusts in God to do the real work. Note Paul's words in verses 19-20 which he has drawn from the Proverbs: *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."* Show others the love of Christ and trust that God will do the rest. These kind deeds will either win a person to Christ, or add to their judgment for having rejected God's grace. One of the challenges that any pastor faces in their work is the requests for assistance which come from vagrants and others in need. It is so very difficult to know who is telling the truth and who is making up a sob story. What is a pastor to do? I was refreshed by a pastor friend who once explained that he wastes little energy worrying over whether a story of need is true or false. He freely gives assistance trusting that the Lord will take care of it from there. If the need is genuine, the assistance will be a blessing. If the pastor is being swindled, then the swindler will have to answer for it someday.

Can we believe in this present time that God is truly in control? Such faith is not easy, but let us remember that the human situation has always been a grim one. We hardly know how to pray when the problems of the world seem so overwhelming and beyond solution, but let us pray anyway and trust God. God turned a crucifixion into the greatest victory of all time, so God can transform most any situation. And let us trust the future to God's care. We don't like to think of the future as we have trouble visualizing our hope, but with this attitude we underestimate God!

To be a truly practical Christian does not mean ignoring faith and doctrine and looking only to our behaviors and feelings. Truly practical Christianity needs both faith and practice. One needs to be in relationship with Jesus Christ, and there is found the power to do the "to-dos." A works-only approach to faith may be tempting as it first seems both simple and manageable, but the real power comes from a life of faith in Christ. Truth be told, being a practical Christian is a very spiritual matter.