

The Service of Christian Love

Romans 12:11-13

Let's remind ourselves where we have been in Romans so far. Paul focused our attention in chapters 1-11 on the "mercies of God" in salvation. God's salvation is according to His mercy, it is His gift of grace by faith in Jesus Christ. These mercies in Christ provide the foundation and motivation for our Christian living. In chapters 12-15, Paul will describe the kind of behavior which the "grace" of God enables and expects.

I want to be careful in each of these lessons in this section of Romans to make it clear that I am not just giving you a few tips or even requirements for happy living and success in the Christian life. The section of Romans assumes that you have personally experienced the abundant mercies of God that are to be found in knowing Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. If you have not trusted in Christ, then none of this will work for you, because it has to be God at work in you through His Holy Spirit as you walk by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. You must first come to the cross and trust Christ.

Or, maybe you have trusted in Christ, but your love for Him has grown cold because you have forgotten the many mercies of His love for you on the cross, then you need to park yourself at the foot of the cross. The mercies of God are the foundation and motivation for Christian living.

So, remembering that, verses 1-2 of chapter 12 are a call to consecration, to offer up our bodies as living sacrifices to God through a life of service. The exercise of our spiritual gifts is spoken of in verses 3-8 as one dimension of our sacrificial service. He talks about our serving one another out of humility. He talks about serving one another out of our unity and diversity. Now, in verses 9-21, Paul describes our sacrificial service as a walk in love. We are to demonstrate love toward the brethren (verses 9-13) and toward those outside the faith (verses 14-21). Last time in verses 9 and 10 we saw what love means. Christian love is sincere, discerning, affectionate, and self-denying.

Continuing that theme of love verse 11 describes the energy, diligence and service which love stimulates. Verse 12 points to the future hope which enables Christian love to endure present hardship and adversity through prayer. Verse 13 highlights practical two ways in which love should manifest itself in our relationships with one another: giving and sharing.

Today as we focus on verses 11-13 I want us to not only understand what these verses are calling us to be and to do—really they are fairly straight forward—but I also want us to use these verses as a thermometer for our love. Let these verses test the warmth and the quality of love in your walk with Christ.

Romans 12:9-13,

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

10 Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another;

11 not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

12 rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;

13 distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

1. Love serves enthusiastically (12:11)

Love energizes service. Love not only gives us a willing spirit to serve, but a fervent spirit to diligently serve the Lord. There are three exhortations that go together in this verse. Paul first gives us the negative, then the positive, and then the focus of the instruction.

a. Love is not lazy.

Verse 11 begins, “**not lagging in diligence.**” Lagging is a word that means lazy, slothful. Jesus used the word in Matthew 25:26 to describe the “**wicked and lazy servant**” who didn’t bother to invest his master’s money that had been entrusted to him, but just buried it in the ground until the master returned. That lazy servant did not trust the Master and put his own convenience above the Master’s purpose.

The book of Proverbs has a lot to say about the lazy person. The King James Version used the term sluggard for a idle, slothful person. Proverbs 6:6 says, “**Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise.**” The ant works hard to store up food for the winter. So one characteristic of the lazy man is that he does not plan ahead for the future.

Another characteristic of the sluggard is that he will not begin things. Proverbs 6:9 says, “**How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep?**” He deceives himself into thinking that he can always get up later and do things later. In the next chapter Paul reminds us of the urgency of serving in love saying, “**And do this, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation *is* nearer than when we *first* believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.**” (Romans 13:11-12 NKJV).

We know that we’re being a spiritual sluggard if we keep putting off dealing with habits and sins that are harmful to our spiritual lives.

One of my favorite proverbs about the sluggard is Proverbs 26:15, “**The lazy man buries his hand in the bowl; It wearies him to bring it back to his mouth.**” So here is a man eating his lunch, and he goes hungry because he is too lazy to lift his hand out of his bowl. Now that’s lazy!

Love is not lazy in diligence. It works. Galatians 6:9 says, “**And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart.**” In 1 Corinthians 15:58 Paul writes, “**Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.**”

Don’t be lazy! Love works hard. It does not just sit back and wait for things to happen. Love gets its hands dirty. Love sweats from hard work. So negatively, love is not lazy. On the positive side,

b. Love is fervent in spirit.

This second phrase in Romans 12:11 literally reads, **"In the spirit boiling over."** In other words, we bring enthusiasm, zeal, fervency, a spark of excitement to our acts of service.

In the book of Revelation Jesus writes to the apathetic and complacent church at Laodicea. The church there was far from fervent in their love or their service. He says to them, (Revelation 3:15-16) **"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth."**

Materialism was the energizing force in the lives of the Laodiceans, loving money and things more than God. Jesus urged them to **"be zealous and repent."**

If there is no excitement in our service, no enthusiasm to give of our time and energy to others, then perhaps we've grown cold in our love. For love is the foundation of our zealous service. If we love little we likely serve little. If we love much, then it shows up in our service.

c. Love serves the Lord.

As I have implied already the focus of the first two parts of verse 11 is on the third part. The focus of our diligence and fervency is **"serving the Lord."**

Zeal must be in our hearts and then work its way out through our hands. We need to be eager and active, passionate and practicing, feeling and focused. If we are fervent for the Savior we will be faithful in serving Him. And it also works in reverse. If we have stopped serving it may be because we have lost some of our love for the Lord.

It's helpful to come back to what the word "serve" really means. It comes from the Greek word *doulos*, which refers to a slave or one who is in bondage or bound to another. Verse 11 says serving who? THE LORD! Jesus is Lord. He is supreme in authority. We are not simply "volunteers" signing up for an hour or two of our time; we are servants who are bound to our Master and what He wants.

Jesus illustrated this Luke 17:10: ***"So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'"***

Do you view yourself as a slave of Jesus Christ? If that sounds harsh, remember the alternative. If you're not a slave of Christ, then you're a slave of the devil and sin. Christ is a loving, caring Master, who never abuses His servants. The devil is a conniving, self-serving tyrant, who has no concern for his slaves. It is far better to be Christ's slave than to be enslaved to Satan and to sin.

So love serves the Lord, serves diligently and fervently.

Secondly,

2. Love joyfully endures hardship through prayer (12:12)

12 rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer;

Behind these three phrases lies the hope of our Lord's return. While we wait for Jesus to return from heaven, we must be patient in hard times, constantly praying, and rejoicing in the hope of better days to come.

The staying power of love is closely related to its constant companions, faith and hope. Here Paul emphasizes love's endurance in the midst of adversity. The

Christian life is not a warm fuzzy; it is a war. Love must be able to handle the hard times which are sure to come.

Romans 12:12a, **“rejoicing in hope.”** Does that describe you, especially when you’re going through a difficult trial? But biblical joy comes from walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. Biblical joy is a solid undercurrent that is not affected by the surface storms of life.

How do we get this joy? Paul says here that it comes from hope. And hope comes from focusing your mind on the sure promises of God for the future. The Bible tells us that we can set our minds on certain things that are true of us in Christ, (Colossians 3:1-2) **“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.”**

Set your mind on the hope of eternal glory and joy in the Lord will follow.

Romans 12:12b: **“patient in tribulation.”** The way to persevere in tribulation is by rejoicing in the certain hope of eternal life. So persevering is not a matter of gritting your teeth and grimly enduring it. “Rejoicing in hope” is how you persevere in tribulation.

In Romans 5 Paul wrote about how love, hope, and perseverance are all related:

(Romans 5:1-5) **1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only [that], but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; 4 and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.**

Romans 12:12c: **“Continuing steadfastly in prayer.”** I could preach a whole sermon on that phrase, but for now let me just point out that it is our trials that often drive us to be devoted to prayer. You’ve probably had the same experience that I’ve had, where you work through your prayer list, but without much intensity or fervency. But then a trial hits and you pray often and fervently. The more intense the trial, the more intensely you pray. As you think about the trial often during the day, you cry out to God for help. Prayer is the lifeline that lays hold of the living God to supply our needs during times of tribulation. Being devoted to prayer is the only way that you can rejoice in hope and persevere in tribulation.

Love joyfully endures hardship through prayer. Then finally,

3. Love shares generously (12:13)

13 distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

Paul calls for two particular expressions of love for the brethren in verse 13. These two expressions of brotherly love involve first the wallet and second the home. Paul exhorts Christians to “distribute to the needs of the saints” and to aggressively practice hospitality.

“Distributing” (Rom. 12:13) is the Greek verb, *koinoneo*, often translated as “fellowshipping” or “sharing together.” It is used in reference to sharing material goods in

several other places (Acts 2:44; 4:32; Rom. 15:27; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:13; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:15; 1 Tim. 6:18; Heb. 13:16). It means more than just tossing a little money to a need. It calls for participation, involvement, and engagement.

“Saints” refers, of course, to fellow believers. By mentioning the saints, Paul is not denying the need to help unbelievers, but rather emphasizing that our priority should be towards fellow Christians. Paul writes in Galatians 6:10 **“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”**

Christians are to be conscientious when it comes to the needs of the brethren and to seek ways to participate in their needs. Sometimes it is money that is needed; other times it is a hand in a task; still other times the need is one of presence more than money. In our text, the primary focus is on Christian benevolence, seeing need among the brethren and seeking to meet it.

Where does hospitality fit in? That’s another one of the needs in which believers’ participate. Since the only inns or lodging places in those days had notorious reputations, traveling missionaries or relocating Christians had few decent offerings for places to stay. The church had the opportunity to assist by being “given to hospitality.” The phrase “given to” means “pursuing” hospitality. It means we are looking for ways to be hospitable. Hospitality literally means, ‘fond of strangers,’ implying taking in strangers as guests in the home. In the New Testament this is particularly focused on the saints traveling from their homeland to another city. Those in Rome, with all its visitors, would have plenty of opportunities to pursue hospitality.

We are blessed with some incredibly hospitable members. But maybe some of us have come up short on this end. I would encourage you to pursue someone for whom you might show hospitality. Minister to them around your table, enjoying fellowship in your home. This verse calls for participation. Do it!

God is the original “lover of strangers.” For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). While we were estranged from God, He sent his Son to the earth. And we who were once strangers and aliens on the earth have now been brought near to God by the blood of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:11-13).

We are no longer strangers, no longer aliens, no longer orphans, no longer far away from God. We are now as near to God as His own Son is, for through the blood of Jesus we are brought into His family. Because He loved us when we were strangers, we are strangers no more.

That same thing happens today when we show hospitality to others. We are only doing for others what God did for us.

Have you allowed God to test your love today? Is God’s love in you? Do you serve the Lord diligently and enthusiastically? Are you persevering through the troubles of life with hope in Jesus Christ? Is it driving you to steadfast prayer for yourself and others? Are you sharing your possessions, time, and home with others as an act of love in service to the Lord?