

Romans: The Good News of God

Four Triplets of Duties

Romans 12:13-21

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans 12. Let's read Romans 12:13-21:

¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰To 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." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:13-21)

Introduction

All good biblical students know the importance of Systematic Theology. Indifference to the doctrines of the Word of God is a sure road to spiritual immaturity and difficulty.

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, whom some call the "greatest Reformed theologian of the 20th century among English speaking peoples," wrote in one of his lesser known, but significant works, "The Right of Systematic Theology," these words, "What, after all, is peculiar to Christianity is not the religious sentiment and its working, but its message of salvation—in a word, its doctrine. To be indifferent to doctrine is thus but another way of saying we are indifferent to Christianity."

Warfield, of course, was right, and there is no age that needs more to hear his words than our present age of evangelicals, who are so hyped on shallowness and superficiality, and negative to the great doctrines of the Bible.

We find this illustrated by the comments in a recent work on Romans. The author writes,

The title of this chapter, “How to Hug,” was suggested to me by a story I once heard. A man was walking down the street, and as he passed a used book store he saw a book in the window with this title, “How to Hug.” Being of a somewhat romantic nature, he went in to buy the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was a certain volume of an encyclopedia and covered the subjects from “How” to “Hug.”

I have often thought of the church as like that. Everyone knows that the church is a place where love ought to be manifested, and many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to discover an encyclopedia on theology. But I am grateful that God is changing this situation today. Thank God that hugs are returning to the churches. In the early church the Christians actually greeted one another with a holy kiss. You don’t see that too often these days, but perhaps it is coming back.

Now, there are several things seriously deficient in this analysis of things.

In the first place, while love is to be manifested in the church, love is not the most important thing that one should find there. *The truth*, the truth about God, the truth about man, and the truth about life is to be found there pre-eminently.

In the second place, it is foolish to affirm that the proper contrast to manifested love is “an encyclopedia of theology.”

And, finally, while I’m not against hugs in the church (so long as they reflect a mutual joy over the common truths that are shared, truths about God, man, Christ, and the divine saving work), I confess that I would be happier if the church were to regain its lost love for systematic Christian doctrine and its propagation.

Warfield, of course, knew that doctrine leads to life (and thus a life demonstrating Christian love), but he also knew that genuine Christian love flows only from orthodox Christian doctrine. In fact, the only life and the only love that has the approval of God is love in the truth of God, for as John writes, “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth” (3 John 1). Warfield puts it this way:

This fact is written large over the epistles of Paul, for example, by the very distribution he makes of this matter: it is ever first the doctrine and then the life with him. The transition at the opening of the twelfth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is a typical example of his practice in this regard. Eleven chapters of doctrinal exposition had preceded; five chapters of precepts are to succeed: and he passes from the one to the other with what has been called his “tremendous therefore”: “I beseech you therefore brethren”—“therefore,” because all this is so. In these “tremendous therefore” is revealed Paul’s conception of the relation between truth and life.

I could not agree with him more.

Lesson

The theme of Romans 12:9-21 is found in verse 9 in the clause, “Let love be genuine,”—genuine in the church (vv. 9-13), and in the world (vv. 14-21). We are in that section that has to do primarily with the world. There love is to be genuine and sincere.

In verse 12 Paul wrote, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” At verse 13, the beginning of the section we shall study now, he moves from the innermost region of communion with God to the wide field of duties in relation to the world, or, as Alexander Maclaren puts it, “from the secrecies to the publicities.” And Paul continues the presentation of his exhortations in the form of a series of triplets of virtues.

The last time I preached on Romans 12:9-12 I dealt with the first three triplets. Now, I shall continue with the next four triplets of duties.

I. The Fourth Triplet: The Law of Concern (12:13-15)

The fourth triplet is what we might call the law of concern.

First, we have concern in needs. We might call this, “The Law of Love,” speaking of love in the biblical sense. Zeal toward believers, expressed outwardly, is before us.

Paul tells us in Romans 12:13: **“Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.”** In our day of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, Unemployment Insurance, and other forms of governmental welfare we might be inclined to forget that benevolence toward the saints is often needed.

Hospitality was a needed thing in ancient days, when there were no Holiday Inns available. Such as were available were dirty and places of immorality. In one of Aristophanes’ plays one of his characters, Heracles, asks his friend where they will stay for the night, and receives the reply, “Where the fleas are fewest.” There were, then, “flea-bags” for hotels in that time. Thus, Christians needed **hospitality** when they traveled away from home.

The apostle urges believers **to show hospitality**. The word **show** means “to pursue.” Thus, Paul says, pursue hospitality. In other words, Christians are **to show hospitality** aggressively, seeking out opportunities to be hospitable.

Second, there must be concern in good will. Paul says in Romans 12:14, **“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”** This command expresses a responsibility that Christians have toward society in general.

And it applies even to the way we conduct ourselves in something as mundane as modern traffic. When someone does something that offends and upsets us, such as cutting in front of us dangerously, or stealing our parking place, we are not to roll down our windows and shout, “Idiot!”

And third, there must be concern in sympathy. Paul says in Romans 12:15: **“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”** Adjustment to others’ moods and tragedies is

the point. And we all know that it seems to require more grace to rejoice with the rejoicing than to weep with the weeping.

As Chrysostom said, “It is easier to weep with those that weep, than to rejoice with those that rejoice, because nature itself prompts the former, but envy stands in the way of the latter.”

II. The Fifth Triplet: The Law of Selflessness (12:16)

The fifth triplet is called the law of selflessness. All three of these duties deal with mental attitudes, explanatory of the preceding commands.

First, we have selflessness in true harmony. Now, when Paul writes in verse 16a, “**live in harmony with one another,**” he did not mean that we should see “eye to eye” on every point. To **live in harmony** is not opposed to wide divergences of opinion on many things.

The text refers to the cultivation of the deeper unity that has been given to all Christians in possession of a common basic body of belief, like that referred to by Paul in Ephesians 4:4-6. All Christians are partakers of the life of Christ and, thus, share in a common relation to him. The things that unite us should be before us always, even in the moments at which we differ over the details of faith and practice.

Second, we have selflessness in lowliness. Paul says in verse 16b: “**Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.**” Paul is encouraging us to remember that excessive ambition often festers into neglect of the more important things of life, the things of the Lord.

Pastor Stuart Briscoe once told a story that illustrates this point. There was a church in a nice, suburban neighborhood, not unlike our church. One day, a young man walked into the sanctuary just after the service started. The young man had long, dirty, unkempt hair. His clothes were torn and dirty. He had no shoes; he was completely barefooted. As he walked to the front, all the people glared at him. Briscoe says that even the fur on one lady’s

fur coat bristled! The young man walked all the way down to the front and sat down in the floor in the middle of the aisle just in front of the pulpit. The worshipers were aghast.

Then, one of the godly, old Ruling Elders of that church, who happened to be ushering that day, walked down the center aisle toward the scruffy young man. Every eye in the sanctuary was fixed on the approaching interaction between the old Elder and the scruffy young man. Finally, the Elder got to the front. He put his hand on the shoulder of the young man. Then he slowly sat down on the floor next to the young man, and the two of them worshipped God together sitting on the floor in the front of the sanctuary.

We have far more prejudices than we are willing to admit. We have much to repent of in this regard. The most powerful moment for me at one of our denomination's General Assemblies was after the adoption of racial reconciliation declaration. During that part of the Assembly I was sitting next to Dr. Oliver Claassen, whom some of you know as a previous Missions Conference speaker here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church, also a former South African, who recently went to be with the Lord. Basically, the Assembly adopted an overture affirming our sins "attendant with unbiblical forms of servitude—including oppression, racism, exploitation, manstealing, and chattel slavery."

Immediately following its adoption, the Moderator asked one of our black ministers to pray. As he prayed, thanking God for the adoption of this overture, Oliver and I, were silently weeping, thanking God for this opportunity also to repent of our sinful attitudes. You see, both of us grew up in apartheid South Africa, and we were thankful to repent of our sinful racial attitudes.

And third, we have selflessness in mind. Paul says in verse 16c, **"Never be wise in your own sight."**

A conceited young man was a great trial to D. L. Moody. One day he said to the evangelist, "You know, Mr. Moody, I am a self-made man."

To which Mr. Moody replied, "Young man, you have re-

lieved the Almighty of a great responsibility.”

III. The Sixth Triplet: The Law of Non-Hostility (12:17-18)

The sixth triplet refers to the law of non-hostility.

First, we have non-hostility in response to wrongs. Paul says in verse 17a, **“Repay no one evil for evil.”** These words, and the words of the remainder of the chapter for the most part, have to do mainly with duty in the face of hostility.

We are “as lambs in the midst of wolves,” as our Lord says (cf. Luke 10:3), and we should expect to be mistreated. Paul has principally in mind the attitude of the world to the believer. The world will hate us, because it hated Jesus. And Paul asks us not to respond in kind.

By the way, this is referring to our *personal* response. It does not refer to a *corporate* response to evil. Following the September 11 attacks in 2001, I received a number of emails from concerned, albeit confused, individuals quoting this text of Scripture, and urging me to preach against a military response to the terrorist attack on America. This verse does not apply to such a situation. Paul is quite clear in the very next chapter (cf. Romans 13:4) that God has appointed governing authorities to bear the sword to punish the wrongdoer.

Second, we have non-hostility in a righteous life. Paul says in verse 17b: **“But give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”** It is clear from this imperative that the apostle believed that the world had essentially correct notions of morality. In fact, Alexander Maclaren notes, “The worst of men has a rude sense of duty which tops the attainments of the best.”

I think of Joseph, the son of Jacob, in this respect. He was sold into slavery in Egypt. Eventually, he rose to the place of Chief Slave in the house of Potipher. Potipher’s wife took a liking to Joseph, and repeatedly wanted him to take advantage of her availability to him. However, Joseph refused to do so. He did what was right, in God’s sight and indeed, **in the sight of all.**

And third, we have non-hostility in peace. Paul says in verse 18 that well-known injunction, **“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”**

Peace depends both upon objective and subjective things. Objectively the Christian can never be at peace with the world, for it continues its quarrel with Jesus Christ by the persecution of his followers. In fact, it is our Lord who says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34).

The world has a sinful lord, the Devil, and he has many servants. We serve the Holy One, and there can only be conflict between the two princes and their soldiers.

However, from the subjective standpoint, that is, from our side, the Apostle asks that we give no occasion for conflict ourselves. **“As far as it depends on you,”** let there be peace. In other words, when the quarrel is struck up, let it be from the other side.

IV. The Seventh Triplet: The Law of Non-Retaliatio (12:19-21)

The seventh triplet refers to the law of non-retaliation.

First, we have non-retaliation in vengeance. Paul says in verse 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.’”** In the final verses Paul continues his stress on our duty in the face of the hostility of the world. It involves a denial of the natural instincts that come from the old man within. Just as a dog stretches out its neck to be patted, but snaps at a stick raised to strike him, so a Christian, in violation of his new nature, often tends to attempt the execution of vengeance himself. But the Apostle objects and points another way. In fact, what he says explains how we are to maintain peace in the world (cf. v. 18).

Paul reminds Christians to **“leave it to the wrath of God.”** It is he who shall **avenge**. We learn from the text that objection to divine retribution is both unethical and immoral. In fact, Paul sug-

gests that it is the Christian's duty to desire that divine justice be administered by the sovereign Lord.

The text has something to say to modern attitudes toward punishment of criminals. Punishment is for requital and does not aim at the improvement or rehabilitation of the criminal. Thus, punishment is in its own nature endless, and the Supreme Being is the only one who can inflict it.

Ultimately it is an offense against an infinite Being, and the wrong is always wrong, just as wrong ten years from the time of its doing as it was on the day it was done. Time does not reduce guilt. Such guilt can only be paid for by a method satisfactory to the divine throne. That method is the cross of Jesus Christ.

Man has no right to punish except as it is delegated to him in the office of the magistrate. Paul will speak of that in the next chapter. When men judge, they carry out a divine function, not a human function.

Second, we have non-retaliation in beneficence. Paul says in Romans 12:20, **“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.’”**

The injunction to feed and give drink to an enemy, because in so doing we shall **“heap burning coals on his head”** is a metaphor for causing keen anguish in those who oppose the saints.

And third, we have non-retaliation in conquering evil with good. Paul says in verse 21, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** Paul's concluding admonition is related to the preceding, and the Apostle seems to be saying that, if we do what he has just said, treat an enemy well, we may gain a friend.

To get rid of an enemy, then, may best be done by making him a friend. In this way evil will be overcome by good.

Conclusion

As one looks over the chapter it becomes clear that Paul's

emphasis is upon the necessity of *being* something first, and then of *doing* something.

This is always true. Right conduct can only flow from right being and thinking.

Thus, the first step in the fulfillment of Romans 12:3-21 can only be accomplished by the “Christian Offering,” referred to by Paul in verse 1, and the transformation of the believer by the renewing of the believer’s mind through the Word of God (set forth in verse 2).

That is the need of the hour, the “Christian Offering.” Dr. James M. Gray, former President of Moody Bible Institute, in an impressive sermon on Romans 12:1-2, once said,

Have you noticed that this verse does not tell us to whom we shall give our bodies? It is not the Lord Jesus who asks for it. He has his own body. It is not the Father who asks for it. He remains upon his throne. Another has come to earth without a body. God could have made a body for him as he did for Jesus, but he did not do so. God gives you the indescribable honor of presenting your bodies to the HOLY SPIRIT, to be his dwelling place on earth. If you have been washed in the Blood of the Lamb, then yours is a holy body, washed whiter than snow, and will be acceptable by the Spirit when you give it.

May the Lord enable us to make the offering, that the Spirit, who dwells in the temple of our bodies, may use us for the glory of God in the accomplishment of his divine purposes in this world. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Almighty God, we thank you for your Word. The Apostle Paul has taught us that we have tremendous responsibilities in light of your mercies to us. Help us present our bodies as living sacrifices that the Holy Spirit may carry out Jesus' work in us and through us.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.