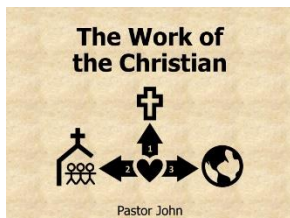


## The Work of the Christian

September 3, 2017

### Romans 12: 9-21

*<sup>9</sup> Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good. <sup>10</sup> Love each other as brothers and sisters and honor others more than you do yourself. <sup>11</sup> Never give up. Eagerly follow the Holy Spirit and serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Let your hope make you glad. Be patient in time of trouble and never stop praying. <sup>13</sup> Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home. <sup>14</sup> Ask God to bless everyone who mistreats you. Ask him to bless them and not to curse them. <sup>15</sup> When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad. <sup>16</sup> Be friendly with everyone. Don't be proud and feel that you are smarter than others. Make friends with ordinary people. <sup>17</sup> Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, <sup>18</sup> and do your best to live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Dear friends, don't try to get even. Let God take revenge. In the Scriptures, the Lord says, "I am the one to take revenge and pay them back." <sup>20</sup> The Scriptures also say, "If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink. This will be the same as piling burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Don't let evil defeat you, but defeat evil with good.*



In thirteen short verses, Paul sums up what it means to live as a Christian. If one looks at today's world, our world is complicated and complex. If one tries to understand what it

means to live as a Christian in today's modern world, we will find TONS of advice out there. There are books and videos and conferences and retreats and

experts. If one looks at the church landscape today, most churches are trying to help people to live the Christian life. This applies to the people already in the pews and to people out there who could be in the pews. To reach all people, we seek to invite others in, to engage people in conversation, to model what it looks like to live the Christian life. We search and we look and we ponder. In thirteen short verses, Paul sums up what it means to live as a Christian. Let us pray.

This list that Paul gives us in Romans 12 reminds me of a poem by Robert Fulghum that I have seen often over the years. It is called "Everything I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten". Here is his poem:

Share everything.

Play fair.

Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them.

Clean up your own mess.



Don't take things that aren't yours.

Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat.

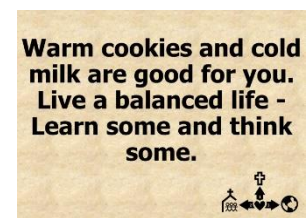
Flush.



Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life -

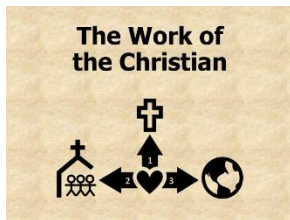
Learn some and think some.



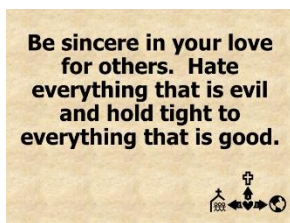
And draw and paint and sing and dance  
 And play and work every day some.  
 Take a nap every afternoon.



When you go out into the world,  
 Watch out for traffic,  
 Hold hands and stick together.  
 Be aware of wonder.

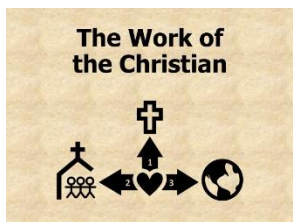


This poem just makes you smile doesn't it? The advice we find in this poem is pretty simple and straight forward. It makes sense. When we look at our passage from today, it too is really pretty simple and straight forward and it makes sense. It is well-aligned to what Jesus taught and modeled. Our passage today begins with these words:



*"Be sincere in your love for others. Hate everything that is evil and hold tight to everything that is good"*. It is much like Fulghum's advice to share and play fair and to not take things that are not yours. Paul goes on to remind us to rejoice in

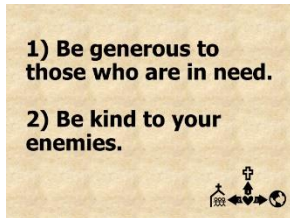
hope and to live in harmony with one another. He reminds us to not be proud but to be friendly with everyone. Similarly, Fulghum encourages us to hold hands and to stick together. All kindergarten stuff, right? Then why is it so hard to live as a Christian all the time? So simple, yet we often miss the opportunity or we gloss over what love is really supposed to look like. To illustrate how this can happen, I would like to share a story from the Cold War era.



*In the mid 1980's, when a cold war still divided Communist nations from democratic nations, and when concrete barriers and barbed wire fences divided East Berlin from West, there was a young man who passed through the Berlin Wall at Checkpoint Charlie nearly every day. Driving a pickup truck with a couple of bicycles tied to the top of the load, he would be stopped by the German guards, who would thoroughly search his possessions. Some days, under the bicycles and under the tarp, he would be carrying pails of sand, and the guards would empty every one of them onto the pavement, looking for contraband. Other days, when the guards pulled off the bikes and the tarp, they found boxes of books, and they would unpack every box and leave them scattered on the ground. Still other days, he would be carrying pallets of blocks, or rolls of sod. The routine was always the same: stop the truck, inspect the load, and send the man on his way. Now, the guards never found anything illegal, but each day the young man was required to reload his truck, tie the tarps down, and throw the bikes back up on top of the load. It was a daily inconvenience, as you can imagine.*

*After the Berlin Wall fell in 1988, this young man met one of the border guards at a tavern in downtown Berlin. Over glasses of beer, they reminisced about the loads he carried, and the daily ritual that they now laughed about. Then the former guard got serious, and said "Comrade, we know you were smuggling something, but we could never figure out what it was. Now that the danger has passed" the older man said, "tell me...what you were smuggling?" And the younger man answered "Bicycles. I was smuggling bicycles."*

If we look at Paul's advice in Romans 12 on how to live the Christian life, I think it can be boiled down to two basic directives:



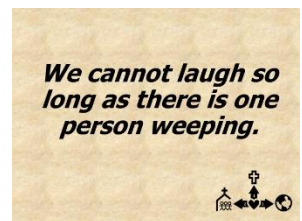
- 1) Be generous to those who are in need.
- 2) Be kind to your enemies.

Both are pretty simple, aren't it? Pretty simple. But too often these simple ideas can be the bicycles on top of the load. We look for the grand or the wonderful or the secretive, when God is really calling us to be Christians and to do the work of Christ in the simplest of ways.

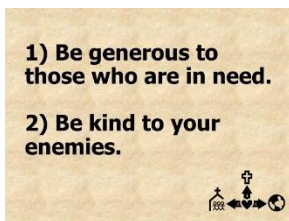
The kindergarten poem began with these words: "Share everything". It is talking about being generous. In verse 13, Paul puts it this way: "*Take care of God's needy people and welcome strangers into your home*". Learn to share. It is something we try hard to teach to our children. Generosity is the emotion that wells up when we see the pictures of Texas and the damage and destruction caused by the storm. But, in reality, it is something we can struggle mightily with. You saw it illustrated today in the children's sermon. Early on in life, children in the sandbox or out on the playground or in the nursery at church learn a word: *Mine*. We must consider where they learn it. We all are willing to share with one another or to give to another in need... when there is still enough left for us. And that leads us to the question: how much is enough? Enough is relative. When John D. Rockefeller, the billionaire was asked, "How much is enough"? he answered, "one more". There is enough food grown in the world to

feed the world's population with mountains of food to spare, yet people die of hunger every day. There are a dozen coats hanging in my front closet and by the back door, but people will go out tomorrow or next week feeling cold in the crisp morning air. There will be plenty of money in the next paycheck to meet our needs, but we will still want to put a good chunk towards the future. Be generous to those in need.

An ancient Jewish saying goes like this: "*We cannot laugh so long as there is one person weeping*". It is an interesting concept. Imagine our world if we all lived out this concept.



We would all be a bit uncomfortable until all people had enough to eat, until all people had a safe place to live, until all people were treated with justice and equality. In our passage today, Paul echoes this idea too: "*When others are happy, be happy with them, and when they are sad, be sad*". Walk in another's shoes. Take time to understand the other. Hear another's story. When we do these things, we are more likely to be generous to those in need.



Paul's second directive is equally hard to live out: be kind to your enemies. Our first reaction may be "Why?" or to dismiss it as easier said than done. In Romans 12, Paul quotes

Proverbs 25 when he writes: "*If your enemies are hungry, give them something to eat. And if they are thirsty, give them something to drink*". This is radical thinking for our day and age. Hate is what we are supposed to feel for our enemies, right? Loving them would be a sign of weakness, right? Giving them something to eat or drink would give them an advantage over us, right? When

someone mistreats us over and over, when someone abuses us over and over again, when someone lies to us over and over, it is hard to love them. It is hard to give to them. It is hard to see past our anger or our hurt or our pain that has been built up. And sometimes, a single event heaps huge amounts of anger or hurt or pain upon us and becomes a dividing wall between us and our enemy. And it can last and last and last. But this is not the love that Jesus calls us to. It is not what it looks like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is not the forgiveness that we receive from God and are called to extend to others in our lives.

*In 1960, Adolph Coors III, owner of the Coors Brewing Company, was kidnapped and subsequently murdered by a man named Joseph Corbett. Adolph Coors IV was just 14 years old at the time, and it sent his life into a tailspin that would continue for years. But in 1975, Adolph Coors IV came to faith in Jesus Christ, and one of the first things he did as a young Christian was to travel to the Colorado State Penitentiary in Carson City Colorado to forgive Joseph Corbett and to ask Corbett to forgive him for feeling intense hatred for him for 15 years. Ironically, Corbett refused to see Coors. So Coors wrote a letter. By offering forgiveness in a letter, Adolph Coors was relieved of the weight of hatred that had shackled him for half of his life.*

Coors chose to allow Christ into his life. He chose to allow the love of Christ to work in his heart to bring him to a place of forgiveness. In being kind to his enemy, Coors found personal healing.



These two directives are quite the challenge. They do not come easily. It takes real effort to be generous with what we have worked hard to get. It takes compassion and empathy and love to share what we see as our own, as *mine*. It takes work to see past the pain or hurt so that we can offer kindness and forgiveness to those who have wronged us. But imagine what our world would be like if we seriously undertook the work we are called to as Christians. Imagine how different our world would be if all Christians became more aware of those with simple needs and if all Christians were more considerate of those we did not like. Imagine if we loved them instead. Imagine if we worked to live in harmony and to understand them instead.

To close, here is the real reason we should undertake the work of a Christian. Here is the real reason we should work to live our lives following the pattern that Jesus himself established, loving God and loving neighbor. We may never change the other person by being generous to those in need or by being kind to our enemies. But we will change ourselves. And that is precisely what God wants to do. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Paul's first directive is to be generous to those in need. In what ways is this hard for you? How can you begin to work past this barrier?
- 2) Paul's second directive is to be kind to your enemies. Where is the greatest struggle to forgive currently? What would be a first step?
- 3) When you have shared generously or loved your enemy, how has it changed you as a Christian? How can this help you again in the future?