

LOVE IN ACTION

Romans 12:3-21

Key Verse: 12:10

Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.

In the first part of Romans 12, St. Paul urged us not to conform to the pattern of this world so that we may follow the will of God. In view of God's mercy to us, we should offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. This is possible only when we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. In today's passage, Paul teaches us how to offer our bodies practically as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

I. HUMBLE SERVICE IN THE BODY OF CHRIST (3-8)

Look at verse 3. *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.* To live a life of faith in this world, there are many ways our minds need to be renewed. Paul focuses on humility first. Pride and ingratitude are the two original sins of mankind. The mark of a sinful man before he is transformed in Christ is his pride. Paul says we must be humble. In fact, the Bible declares that God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble (Ja 4:6; Pr 3:34). We really need to take humility seriously.

What does it mean to be humble? One dictionary defines it as "a modest or low view of one's own importance." I don't think this definition captures the full meaning of humility in a spiritual sense. Of course, as Paul says in this passage, we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Rather we should know who we are through a sober judgment in accordance with the faith God has given each of us. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "A wrong view of self is the source of nearly all evil." We need to have a right view of ourselves so that our relationship with others may not be crooked. But to be humble does not mean we put down ourselves unnecessarily. It certainly does not mean to have an inferiority complex (Ge 1:31). One Bible scholar (Stuart Scott) describes humility in this way: "When someone is humble, they are focused on God and others, not self. Even their focus on others is out of a desire to love and glorify God... A humble person's goal is to elevate and encourage others."

St. Paul says in Philippians 2: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Php 2:3-4). And Paul presents Jesus as a perfect example of someone who practiced this humility. Jesus is God. But he humbled himself to come to this world in human form in order to serve sinners like you and me. The Almighty God took the nature of a servant. It was more than Queen Elizabeth becoming a housemaid in London. Then Jesus humbled himself again when he obeyed God's will to die as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Php 2:8)

To be humble also means that we should not look down on others for whatever reasons. We cannot build up others if we are conceited. Above all, we cannot glorify God when we become proud. Paul teaches us to be humble with the unity among believers in mind so that we may build up one another in the body of Christ. Look at verses 4-5. *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* The Key Verse of our ministry this year is from Ephesians 4. It is about the unity of the Spirit. Paul says in Ephesians 4:1-3: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Again humility is the first of the several characters he urges us to pursue in order to keep the unity in Christ.

St. Paul often called the church “the body of Christ.” He uses this metaphor more than 20 times in his epistles. Just as each of us has one body with many members such as head, eyes, hands and feet, we Christians form one body in Christ. The head of this body is Christ and we are the members of the body. Just as the members of our physical body are different, we the members of the body of Christ are very different in our character, looks, talent and disposition. Some of us are loud and some are very quiet. Some of us talk before act and some act before talk. But we all belong to the same body. And just as each member of our body is important, each person in the body of Christ is important. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:21: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don't need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don't need you!’” When danger comes, the hand protects the eye. If the hand doesn't protect the eye, it will be seriously injured. Likewise, the head cannot say to the feet, “I don't need you!” When a fire breaks out, who will carry the head without the feet? The body will perish. It is important to recognize that we are the body of Christ and each one of us is an important part of it (1Co 12:27). Only then we can humbly build up others so that we can serve the Lord together as the body of Christ.

Look at verses 6-8. *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.* All of us have gifts in one form or another. The first thing we should acknowledge is that our gifts are from God for the benefit of the whole body “according to the grace given to each of us” (6). So we should not boast our own gifts while putting down those with other gifts. Such prideful behavior does not build up the church. Besides, what would a person with a great singing talent do if no one would accompany him or no one would come to hear him at the service? If a person is an excellent Bible teacher and has many Bible students, how can his sheep be raised up as disciples of Jesus without other coworkers to help them with food, encouragement, counseling, friendship, and fellowship? It takes a village to raise a child. It takes the whole fellowship to raise up one disciple of Jesus. The attitude of a person who says, “I am the best” or “I can do everything by myself,” is a spiritual pride before God. Such attitude can harm the fellowship by causing divisions. We should never look down on others who seem

to have unimportant gifts. Neither should we be jealous of those who seem to have honorable gifts. In his grace, God has given each of us spiritual gifts so that we may use them to encourage and build up others, not to satisfy our own ego.

In our ministry, one young shepherd can talk easily to others, both young and old. It is a gift given to him by God. One missionary makes insightful comments during our Bible studies. One missionary loves to buy birthday gifts for our children. She would spend hours in stores in Carlisle or Chambersburg to find their gifts. One missionary smiles a lot when she talks to our Bible students, making them feel loved and welcomed to our fellowship. Everyone has something to contribute to building up others in Christ. We should not be critical of their efforts. Instead, we should encourage them to continue and be encouraged by their efforts. If we try to find some shortcomings in another person, we will find them. But that is not the way to build up others. We should find some good in them and encourage them. May God help us to use our gifts with humility so that we may build up each other in the body of Christ!

II. BE DEVOTED TO ONE ANOTHER IN LOVE (9-21)

The main theme of verses 9-21 is love. Our love relationship with God was broken because of sin. But Jesus came to save us from sin and to restore our love relationship. He showed how to love God and love each other. I said earlier that the mark of a sinful person is pride and ingratitude. But the mark of a transformed person in Christ is love. Jesus said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). To love is a command from our Lord, because we don’t naturally love God and others.

Look at verse 9. *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.* What is sincere love? Paul uses the Greek word “*agape*” to describe this love. It is the love shown to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. Sincere love is unchanging love. It is based on Christ’s love which is unending, unlimited and unchanging. Selfish love is conditional. Notice again that to love is a command, not a suggestion. So we try hard to love one another, but often with pretense and plastic smiles. That is not sincere love. Sincere love comes from the heart that is transformed in Christ. We can love others with sincere love when we remember Christ’s love for us. Jesus said, “As I have loved you, you should also love one another” (Jn 13:34). Jesus didn’t just talk about love. He loved us by sacrificing his own life on the cross. So we should also love others sacrificially. But this isn’t easy. Because of our sinful nature, we cannot love others naturally, if we rely on our feelings. We must obey Jesus’ command by making a willful decision to love others. And we need God’s help on this. We must remember how much God loves us. That’s why Paul reminds us in Romans 5:5, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

Paul also teaches us to hate what is evil and cling to what is good (9b). Love must be based on truth, not just feelings. It should help others overcome their temptations and grow in faith. When we truly love someone, we hate the things that cause a damage to the person. What would you do if you find out the brother you love is addicted to porn? We should love a person by hating the sin in him. That is what our Lord Jesus did. Once a rich young man came to him to ask how he could secure eternal life. Jesus looked at him and

loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mk 10:21). Jesus loved this man. But he hated the sin of selfishness in the man. In essence, Jesus urged him to repent his sin.

Let us read verse 10. *Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.* In this verse, Paul uses the Greek word “*philadelphia*” for love. Still this is a command, not a suggestion. We should be devoted to one another in brotherly love. What does it mean to be devoted to one another? Devotion is commitment. It does not change with circumstances. As we love one another with brotherly affection, we should also honor one another above yourselves. ESV translates this as: “Outdo one another in showing honor.” If we love a person with genuine brotherly or sisterly love, we can take delight in honoring the person.

Paul also teaches us how to show our sincere love for each other in very practical ways as we serve the Lord together. Let us look at verses 11-13: *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.* There are eight items on this list, and each one deserves our attention. May God help us to love one another by accepting and practicing these teachings!

It is easy for us to love someone who is lovable. But what about those who are unlovable? Look at verse 14. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* God’s love is not reserved for only those who are good. After all, God loved us when we were not good at all. He demonstrated his own love in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Ro 5:8). So, how should we react and act toward those who are bad to us? Paul says we should bless them and not curse. He continues this teaching in verses 17-21 in which he says, “*Do not repay anyone evil for evil*” (17), “*Do not take revenge*” (19) and “*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink*” (20). Why should we not seek revenge against bad people? Many would say to us, “Don’t get angry; get even!” But we shouldn’t retaliate. Why not? The answer is in verse 19. *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.* And Paul says in verse 21: “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*”

During the Armenian Genocide (1915-17) under the Ottoman Empire, a Turkish soldier pursued a young Armenian woman and her brother down a street. He cornered them and then mercilessly shot the brother and let the sister go free, but only after she saw her brother’s brutal murder. Later, the woman was working as a nurse in a military hospital when the Turkish soldier who had killed her brother was brought into her ward. He was critically wounded and if she had left him alone, he would have died. At first, she wrestled with the desire for vengeance. But she realized that the Lord wanted her to treat this man with kindness, so she gently nursed him back to health. One day the Turk, who recognized her, said, “Why didn’t you let me die?” She replied, “I am a follower of Jesus who taught me to love my enemies.” The man was silent for a long time, but finally said, “I never knew that anyone could have such a faith. If that’s what it does, tell me more about it. I want it.”

In verse 15, Paul says we should live in harmony with one another (15). He repeats this in verses 17-18. *Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.* Look at verses 15-16. *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.* Because of our sinful nature, when something good happens to other people, we don't feel happy. If something bad happens to others, we feel relieved and say, "Lucky me." But this is not the way we who are transformed in Christ should live. We should rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Once again Paul brings up the sin of pride. He says, *"Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."*

In today's passage, we learned that, in view of God's mercy, we are called to live a transformed life that reflects who Jesus is—his humility, his love and his forgiveness. May God help us to live a life of faith that is so different from the pattern of this world so that those around us may want to know who Jesus is because of our changed life!