

Sunday, September 17, 2017

Rev. Robert W. Brown

h u m i l i t y :



Romans 12:9-21 The Message (MSG)

INTRODUCTION:

If you were here last week, you might remember that we read from The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. The writing is more of a persuasive logical, elegant systematic presentation of the core principles of Christianity. Paul thoroughly explains God's plan for the salvation of all humankind.

He describes a Trinitarian God of overflowing grace and unconditional love, a God who suffers and sacrifices as humans do, a God that calls us to know forgiveness and restoration, and live in harmony with God and all creation.

Today we are reading from chapter 12. If Paul was a blogger, today's reading might have the enticing headline;

"12 Proven Steps For Living A Tranquil Life"

Live this way, Paul suggests, and you will begin to know this loving God and live in peace. Hear now "12 Proven Steps For Living A Tranquil Life"



Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't **quit** in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. Don't hit back; discover **beauty** in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it." Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise [your enemy] with goodness! Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.



That's quite a prescriptive list of dos and don'ts! I wonder how many of these lessons-to-live-by you might argue with. How many of us would counsel our gifted and talented child violinists to shoot for second chair, or be content with runner up or a vice-presidency? Have you ever even considered blessing your enemy? Paul says that we should never hit back, instead, he writes, "discover *beauty* in everyone." This sounds like Mr. Rogers moralizing to preschoolers. The truth is that most of us think it's not really very practical in the real world. I know from experience that when I get hit in the head or the heart, my shadow self explodes like Daenerys Targaryen's Dragon!

All I want to do is attack with ruthless vengeance, breathing fire and destruction in every direction. And when I see my enemy suffering my first instinct is *never* to sooth their hurt or invite them to dinner. Seeing my enemy in pain somehow evokes a feeling of smug satisfaction! I feel justified and vindicated.

Frankly, I'd rather just skip over this section rather than wrestle out what it means because it would mean that I'd have to change a lot of my behaviors. The problem is that I can't dismiss Paul's words so easily if I really want to follow in the Way of Jesus. His instructions for living in harmony with God are almost exactly in line with Jesus' sermon on the mount. I really want to be like Jesus, but is it even possible to truly live this way? What instincts and default behaviors would have to be questioned? How do I even begin?

Well, probably prayer's a good start...

Good and Loving God, Your ways are not our ways. Sometimes You ask of us what seems beyond our ability and even against our understanding of life. And so we bring our doubts and questions to you. Fill us with understanding and ways that we might begin to live as you have created us to live. Quiet our busy minds. Wake us up to your radical way of living. And, may my words and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

I heard this podcast recently that told the story of a friendly outdoor dinner party. Several couples were sitting comfortably around a candle-lit table in the back yard, sampling glasses of expensive wine, enjoying what came off the grill and generally laughing the night away. Without warning, a man with a gun appears out of nowhere. He points the weapon at their head and demands all their money. Things quickly get worse because not one of them had a penny with them! The man grows more and more unhinged with every passing second. The victims plead with the gunman and try to bargain for their lives. This only adds to the would-be-robber's anxiety and agitation. At that moment, the host gains her composure. She calmly looks into the man's eyes. "We really don't have any cash." she says, "but we do have some wine

here and a bit of food. Won't you sit and join us?" A tense moment passes as the gunman processes this odd invitation. No one saw this coming. The robber's entire demeanor begins to soften. He slowly lowers the gun into his waist belt and sits down at the table. She pours him a glass of wine. After about an hour, he finishes a second glass, kindly thanks the host for her generous hospitality and walks away, disappearing into the night.

This situation could have quickly gone in so many tragic directions, but in this case the woman defused a potentially lethal confrontation by overcoming her panic and fear. She did the exact opposite of her instinct by offering the assailant a place at her table.

Normally, in our human interactions, our instinct is to mirror, or match the emotional state of the other. Like when you get cut off then flipped off on route 2, or your spouse texts you IN ALL CAPS! Or when a co-worker ignores your request for information. This mirroring of emotional engagement is called "complementary behavior." When someone greets you kindly most of us respond in like fashion. If a person projects hostility, most of us will quickly assume a defensive posture and respond with matching aggression of one sort or another. It is completely normal when feeling threatened or fearful to return anger with anger. (I might tailgate.) We see this all the time on TV and radio talk shows. But we do it too. See if you can't observe complementary mirroring behavior in yourself or others this coming week. If you want, email me the story.

Interestingly enough, social researchers have discovered that one of the most powerful and effective tools that human beings have for diffusing anger and conflict is to resist our mirroring instinct and instead, when faced with hostility, offer kindness, calmness and compassion. Often times your enemy will begin to mirror you! They call this "non-complimentary behavior." The reasoning is that most aggressions and conflicts are rooted in some sort of fear, fear of losing something, fear of being hurt, fear of becoming irrelevant or marginalized. All of us suffer all kinds of worries and anxieties. A multitude of fears, worries and concerns are constantly churning below the surface. Unchecked fear will very often trigger a variety of angry, harsh reactions.

Practicing non-complimentary behavior is not easy. Countering a lifetime of following our instinct and instructions from parents, coaches and bosses is a tall order, especially when you are stronger, richer and more privileged. So how do we begin to practice a better, more peaceful way of living? Paul suggests that we begin with adjusting our default position from being offended and lean instead toward loving the enemy. If we can imagine that the aggressive, illogical behavior of the other is rooted

in some instinctual reaction to a very real fear or need, perhaps we can more easily let go of the offense and find a compassionate response. Anyway, when you think about it there really is no such thing as “getting even”.

If you are able, without judgment, try to notice the roots of fear and loss in your own reflection. If we can dismiss our bruised ego, the possibility of genuinely tending to an enemy becomes a real possibility. We can then attempt what Paul suggests, “If you see your enemy hungry, buy her lunch, or if your enemy’s thirsty, get him a drink.”

Complimentary behavior will only harden our heart. It holds us hostage, bound in our own fear. But if our desire is to live a peaceful life, if our goal is to live with a quiet heart even when everything around us screams chaos and panic, if we seek meaning and a genuine sense of purpose, the first step is to notice our own instinctive complimentary behavior and deny its power. Then we are free to practice behaving in the exact opposite way. This is the massive superpower of humility.

Humility is knowing that your self-worth does not come from someone else’s recognition or approval. Humility is what gives us the strength to bless our enemies and the courage to sit with the brokenhearted even while maintaining our own quietness of heart. Can you imagine never feeling offended no matter what happens to you or the ones you love? Can you imagine the vast freedom that comes when praise and criticism are received with equal weight? This is the massive superpower of humility. A humble and quiet heart can never be defeated because it cares nothing for victory and accepts God’s ultimate justice and sovereignty.

To follow in the way of Jesus is to find humility within you. Prayerfully ask God to humble you so that you might practice living humbly every day. It doesn’t mean you think less of yourself, it just means that your safety, status, well-being and human rights are no more or less important than anyone else.

Martin Luther noted that God created the world out of nothing, and so long as we are nothing, God can create something out of us. If humility is the superpower of a quiet heart, then only our super powered God can give it to us. And just like all spiritual gifts that God offers us, we have to be willing to receive it, nurture it and practice it day by day. This week, notice your own complementary behavior and try practicing non-complementary behavior in places where tension arises. Reserve mirroring only for following in the Way of Jesus and you may very well discover the superpower of a quiet heart. - Amen