

"What It Means To Be Saved"
Studies in Romans
Lesson Ten: "The Christian Life: Part Two"
Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
August 28, 2011
Text: Romans 12:9-21
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In last week's and this week's sermons, we are seeking to understand what it means to live the Christian life as a result of our being saved. We are saved *so that* we may live a certain way. Last Sunday we focused our attention on the first half of the twelfth chapter of Romans. In that first sermon of this two-part series we said that in general terms, the Christian life is a sacrificial life, a transformed life, and a gifted and graced life. This week, on the basis of what the Apostle Paul teaches in the second half of this chapter, we are going to examine some additional characteristics of the Christian life, what such a life should look like. Paul describes ten such characteristics, and I want us to spend a little time concentrating on each one.

The Christian life, first and foremost, is characterized by **love**. That should not surprise us at all. As we sing from time to time, the world around us will know we indeed are Christians by our love. Note that Paul insists that our love must not be any old kind of love, any garden variety love. It is to be genuine love, literally without

hypocrisy, and he goes on to describe what genuine love entails. Genuine love holds fast to what is good and detests what is evil. To be able to refrain from what is evil while clinging to what is good helps us to resist evil without becoming evil in our attempt to defeat it. Genuine love, according to Paul, is also mutualistic, being willing to receive love as well as extend love. It also is active and not merely passive. We are to work hard at love, even being willing rather competitively to outdo one another in showing respect, a crucial component of genuine love.

The Christian life is characterized by **zeal**. To live the Christian life is to be zealous without becoming a radical zealot. It is to be passionate in loving the Lord with all our being. God wants us to be aflame with the Spirit, our hearts on fire. Our Christian life of zeal means that *we consider our faith to be the most important aspect of our individual lives and our life together as the community of faith, the church*. It is to be of vital care and concern to us. As Paul makes clear, our zeal is to lead us to service, serving the Lord by serving our neighbors, especially those in need.

The Christian life is characterized by **hope**. Paul says that we are to rejoice in hope, but he goes on to add that the true nature of our hopefulness involves patience when it comes to suffering and perseverance when it comes to prayer. *The essence of hope is to wait*

on God. Therefore we hope even in the midst of our trials and tribulations, and we never quit praying, even when it appears that our prayers go unanswered. Another way of stating what Paul is suggesting here is to say that *the Christian never gives up on God, mainly because we realize that God never gives up on us.* That is the basis for our hope, and in that hope we can rejoice indeed.

The Christian life is characterized by **hospitality**. Here Paul maintains that authentic hospitality is more than what we think of as secular entertaining, having friends or business colleagues over for dinner. It involves contributing to the needs of the saints, that is to say, being willing to sacrifice of what we have in order to benefit other Christians—here and around the world—who are less fortunate than we are. And our hospitality is to extend to strangers, to those persons who are not a part of our church family.

Henri Nouwen says that *hospitality is the offering of a safe place where people feel free to come in without fear and be themselves.* Our hospitality as a church is a reflection of our openness—our willingness to open our minds, our hearts, and our doors to anyone and everyone who may be seeking a truly safe place.

Paul seems to have the most to say about another important aspect of the Christian life, what I would choose to call **magnanimity**. *To be magnanimous is to exhibit generosity of mind and heart.* It also

means to possess a loftiness of spirit that allows a person to bear trouble calmly. It means as well to disdain meanness and revenge.

And so Paul believes that in living the Christian life, we are to bless and not curse those who persecute us, those who treat us badly. We are not to repay anyone evil with evil, but instead, we are to take the high road and do only what is noble in the sight of all. We are to leave vengeance to God, letting God be the one to pay back whatever wrongs are committed against us. Instead, we are to feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them something to drink when they are thirsty. *We are to think of revenge only in showing kindness.*

These are hard things to do; they don't come easily. What comes easily is to hold a grudge. What comes easily is to strive to see that bad people get their just desserts. What comes easily is to seek to punish those who have hurt us in some way. But Paul is echoing Jesus' own commands for us to love our enemies, to bless them and pray for them.

This is perhaps the hardest of Jesus' teachings, and it is where our human capacities end and God's Spirit begins. Apart from God, this is impossible; only with God can it be done. Only as God's Spirit is in us can we begin to exhibit this characteristic of the Christian life, showing a magnanimous, generous spirit even to those who may hate us and seek to do harm to us.

Yet another characteristic of the Christian life is **empathy**. Paul says that we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Both of these require empathy, to give up our self-centeredness and focus our attention on what someone else is going through, be that bad or good.

When someone we know—a family member, a friend, a neighbor, a colleague, or a fellow church member—is celebrating something, no matter how we are feeling at the time, we need to be willing celebrate right along with them. And when someone we know is going through a difficult time, we need to be there to cry along with them, to feel their pain and suffering in solidarity with them. To do these things is to be a true friend, and that kind of friendship is hard to come by in our world. In the Christian life, however, it should be natural and automatic.

The Christian life is characterized by **harmony**. Paul says that we are to live in harmony with one another. One of the saddest things about church life for me, as a Christian in general and as a pastor in particular, is to see the lack of harmony in congregations. We don't give much of a positive and appealing witness to the world when there is dissension and division in the church. When such is the case, what we are saying to the culture around us is that to be in the church is really no different than to be in the world, because we don't get along

with each other any better than any other group of people do. But in Paul's mind, *harmony should characterize the church*, and I think the apostle's understanding is that harmony can and will take place in the church only to the extent that we have one mind among us, that is, the common mind, the mind of Christ.

And harmony can only come about if the church also is characterized by what Paul describes next in this passage of scripture, namely, **humility**. He says that we are not to be haughty, that is, stuck-up and conceited, with an "I'm better than you are" attitude. We are not to think too much of ourselves, especially when it comes to how smart we are and how much we think we know. Instead we are to associate with the lowly, those persons we may have a tendency to look down on, without being judgmental or condescending. If we do these things, harmony will result.

And another characteristic Paul mentions will result as well, the characteristic of **peace**. As Paul states, "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." By "all," Paul means to seek to live in peace *with everyone*, even those who are quite different from us. Paul is realistic enough to know that we can't control other people, but we can control our own actions, and they are to be aimed toward making and keeping peaceful relations with everyone with whom we come in contact.

Finally, Paul lifts up one more characteristic of the Christian life, that of **purity**. He says that we are not to be overcome by the evil of the world, but instead we are to strive to overcome evil with good. That involves purity, seeking to remain unstained by the world, to rise above what is worldly and attempt to live on a higher plane with a different and more godly set of values and priorities. To be pure means to be *in* the world but not *of* the world and to model goodness in such a way as to allow what is good, over time, to overcome whatever is bad.

These are ten characteristics of the Christian life, the life of a person who has been saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit. These characteristics give us a rather detailed picture of what the Christian life looks like. In case you've already forgotten this list of virtues, they are as follows: **love, zeal, hope, hospitality, magnanimity, empathy, harmony, humility, peace, and purity.**

I want to make a suggestion this morning as to what we do with this list. Let us use it to evaluate and improve our own Christian lives. Maybe we ought to put this list on the refrigerator or on our bathroom mirror or in our purse or wallet. Perhaps we want to stick it inside the door of our locker at school. We might want to use it as a screen saver on our computer at home or at work. One way or another, we would do

well to keep these characteristics in front of us from day to day and week to week, reminding us of what it truly means to be a Christian and live the Christian life [Inspiration for this sermon comes from "How Then Shall We Live? The Christian Life: Part II," preached by H. Stephen Shoemaker at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, November 6, 1994.]