



Catalog No. 1770

Romans 12:11-12

5th Message

Bernard Bell

August 4, 2013

SERVING THE LORD FOR GOOD

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

Twenty-six years ago I started attending PBC in Palo Alto. I found an unremarkable building with little artistic or aesthetic quality. But the auditorium has one remarkable feature: a text inscribed across the wood panelling behind the platform. Over the years modifications have been made, but the text remains, as it has since the building was erected in the 1950s. What text did the elders choose for people to see every week? “You are not your own, you are bought with a price,” from 1 Cor 6:19-20. I don’t know the story behind the elders’ choice of that text more than fifty years ago. I doubt that any church consultant would recommend that text today. It is not a welcoming text; quite the opposite: people have been offended by it! But it is a text close to PBC’s core identity, a text that has had an impact on many people, myself included.

We belong to God. He has liberated us, set us free from our slavery to sin. But our freedom entails a new slavery, a slavery to Christ. We are to present our bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God. Presenting ourselves as a sacrifice means that we belong to God. We belong to him by virtue of creation, by virtue of redemption, and by virtue of our self-sacrifice, our surrender to him. We are not our own; we are God’s. But in his service lies our true freedom.

In Romans 12:1 Paul transitions from theology to ethics, from describing the great things that God has done for us in Christ and through his Spirit to the things that we should now do. He isn’t describing how to live our lives so as to win God’s favor, but how, now that we are in God’s favor, we should live as sacrifices presented to him, as those who belong no longer to sin but to God. After two paragraphs of preliminaries (12:1-2, 3-8), Paul begins the detailed instructions in verse 9. These begin with a call to love and goodness: “Let love be sincere. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (12:9). As we saw last week, true love is to love others with the same sort of love with which God has loved us, *agapē* love, even if we are never able to love with the same measure of love. We are to be on the side of good.

The rest of Romans fleshes out this call to love and goodness. Paul issues many imperatives on how to live the Christian life in the service of God. The first set of imperatives is a list of ten:

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom 12:10-13 ESV)

The ten items have the same grammatical construction—much clearer in Greek than English. This suggests that they belong together as a set. But why these ten instructions, in particular? Is there any discernible order to them? And what do they have to do with love and goodness? The verse division divides them into four sets of 2, 3, 3 and 2, respectively. In this case I think the verse division is helpful.

The first pair and the last pair (10, 13) are about how we treat other Christians. Their connection to love and the good is clear. The middle two triplets (11-12) are more abstract and general. They seem to have less connection to verse 9, and more to do with the interior space out of which we operate. The Christian who lives according to these six commands will be able to love and do good, and thus fulfill the outer four commands. We’ll look at these middle verses this week, and the first and last pairs in subsequent weeks.

1. Good Zeal and Fervent Love

Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. (12:11)

1.1 Unflagging eagerness

Do not be slothful in zeal. Don’t hesitate in being eager or diligent to discharge the duties of your new life in Christ. This, of course, assumes that we know what our new life is all about. As Paul wrote earlier,

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)

Don’t be timid or hesitant about walking in this newness of life. A characteristic of many new believers is their eagerness for the Lord. They are so transformed by what has happened to them that they are eager to live differently, eager to tell others, eager to serve the Lord. But sadly, too often the eagerness fades away; the newness of life is no longer so new; spiritual vitality is lost. Our Christian faith and life isn’t something that occupies just part of our life, as if it is one among many hobbies. It is something that affects our whole life, and about which we should therefore be eager. We present ourselves as sacrifices to God, living and holy and acceptable to him. It has been aptly said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can get back down off the altar. But we are to stay on the altar, offered up unto God, and now belonging to him. Therefore we should be eager to serve him. We should be eager in our pursuit of true love, and in our rejection of evil and promotion of the good. Elsewhere Paul warns, “let us not grow weary of doing good” (Gal 6:9).

1.2 Aglow with the Spirit

Be fervent in spirit. This second command seems similar to the first: do not be slothful in zeal. Zealous people have fervent spirits. But these commands are not necessarily the same. English versions and commentators differ over whether to render “spirit” or “Spirit.” To be fervent in our own spirit and fervent in God’s Spirit can be very different things.

The verb translated “be fervent” means “to boil.” As we saw last week, “God’s loved has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). When God’s Spirit

is in us our hearts are bubbling, not with our own passions but with God himself. As we sang,

Come down, O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.¹

The Spirit bubbling in us sets our spirits bubbling. Our service, in whatever capacity, should be the overflow of this bubbling action. Being fervent in God's Spirit exercises a control over our own fervor of spirit.

We are to be enthusiastic, energetic, zealous, fervent people. Unfortunately, "zeal" is a word often at odds with love and goodness. Zealous people are generally not characterized by love and goodness. Zeal and spiritual fervor raise plenty of red flags.

Many people are suspicious of an excess of eagerness. During the great revivals of the last few centuries many churchmen expressed disdain over what they called "enthusiasm." They hoped that the fervor of the new converts would dissipate over time. Today, relatives and friends can be concerned by the enthusiasm of a new believer who has "got religious" or of one who has finally gotten serious about the Christian faith and life. Sadly, all too often these concerns are raised by those who were once enthusiastic themselves but for whom their Christian faith and life have grown tepid.

Much harm has been done by religious people who are zealous, be they Moslems, or Jews or Christians. Paul himself is a case in point. When he received his rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel he was "zealous for God" (Acts 22:3), zealous for the traditions of his fathers as he advanced in Judaism beyond his peers (Gal 1:14). But how was that zeal directed? As he later confessed, "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (Phil 3:6). Having found Christ, or rather Christ having found him on the Damascus Road, he came to realize that everything he had gained was rubbish, that all his zeal was misdirected. He had found something of much greater worth:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. (Phil 3:7-9)

His eagerness was now focused on Christ. But he saw that most of the Jews were still stuck where he had been: "they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom 10:2).

We are to be zealous people, but we are to ensure that our zeal is well-placed, that it is consonant with love and good. As those whom God has redeemed and purified, we are to be "zealous for good works" (Tit 2:14), "zealous for what is good?" (1 Pet 3:13). I fear that much of the zeal in Christian ministry is actually selfish ambition. Indeed James alerts us to this danger, twice warning of the dangerous combination of "jealousy [zeal] and selfish ambition" (James 3:14, 16).

Another danger with Christian zeal is the common premise that if you are really zealous for God you will go into full-time ministry. But this creates two tiers: those who are really serious about God who are in full-time ministry, and those who are not in full-time ministry, who are obviously not really serious about God. An important element of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the priesthood

of all believers. Each one of us has a role to play in priestly service to God, the service described in verse 1. God has gifted each of his people with spiritual gifts to be used in service to him and for the common good. In verses 4-8 Paul has affirmed a role for all God's people.

We can have a zeal for the wrong things. We can be zealous for the minutiae of doctrine, or for church traditions, or for programs, or for a host of other things. To Augustine is attributed the saying, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity." In our zeal we can magnify the non-essentials into essentials, losing all sight of charity.

Churches can be known as places full of religious activity, but often this life is not centered around the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the church in Sardis, "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1). There are probably many churches like that today. Churches that are full of programs and activities, but have ceased to be about Jesus. Churches that are busy, but not busy with Christ. Churches that are zealous, but not for the Lord.

Zeal can be misplaced. We can find that it is not actually God for whom people are zealous, that the fervor that bubbles in their hearts is not actually the Spirit. How do we ensure that our zeal and fervor are correctly placed? The third command helps keep us in line.

1.3 Serve the Lord

Serve the Lord. These words are easy to say; they are part of our regular Christian vocabulary. We present our bodies as a sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship or service. The word in verse 1 is priestly service, service offered to God. But the word here in verse 11 is slavery.

Paul identified himself to the Roman church as the "slave of Christ Jesus" (1:1), though most English versions make the term more palatable with "bondservant" or "servant." But Paul was clear in his own understanding. He now belonged to God, as a slave belongs to his master. But it is a topsy-turvy world when it comes to slavery and freedom in the Christian life. To the Corinthians Paul wrote,

For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price. (1 Cor 7:22-23)

The Corinthian church, as many other churches throughout the Roman Empire, contained both slaves and free men, sometimes their own masters. Paul doesn't mean that the two have to change places, that the slaves become the masters, and the masters become the slaves; that's the dream of many revolutionaries who want revenge. All who are in Christ are simultaneously both free and slave. Christ has set us free from our bonds to sin, death and destructive life. We at last are free. But free for what? Free to be whomever and whatever we want? No, free to be whom God intends us to be. God has taken ownership of us, so now we are slaves to Christ, our perfect Master. But herein we find our true freedom: "whom to serve is perfect freedom," as the Prayer Book says.²

So we have to ensure that in our zeal and our fervor we are actually functioning as the Lord's servants, not exercising our own freedom in a way which rejects the Master. Our willingness to submit to the Lord, as slave to Master, is a good indication of whether the zeal and fervor in our hearts is from God or not. Such submission is not easy, but it is the path to ensuring that our zeal promotes love and the good, that it is good zeal and fervent love.³

Here I have found the writings of Eugene Peterson particularly helpful, as have others on the pastoral staff. Over twenty years ago he wrote three books about pastoral ministry, the third being *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (1992). In 1962 he headed a church plant in a new subdivision on the outskirts of Baltimore. The denomination required him to submit monthly reports. It said it cared about how he was doing as a pastor, but really all it cared about were statistics: attendance, giving, the building fund, and construction progress. Within three years the new congregation was able to complete a building. But then a surprising thing happened: attendance began to decline. Peterson tried to find out why.

I learnt to my dismay that nothing at all was wrong, it was just that there was nothing now to *do*. The challenge had been met successfully. I was advised by my denominational supervisors to start new projects immediately—recapture the people’s enthusiasm with something “they could get their hands on.”⁴

He learnt that people have enthusiasm more for religious projects than for God. These experiences led to a vocational crisis:

Being a Christian, more often than not, seemed to get in the way of working as a pastor. Working as a pastor, with surprising frequency, seemed to put me at odds with living as a Christian.⁵

Out of this crisis came his idea of vocational holiness which enabled him to reconcile his inner personal life as a Christian and his external vocational life as a pastor.

Our role as pastors is not to run programs, nor to provide you with religious goods and services, nor to give you things to do. It is to help cultivate in you a closer walk with God, a more ready determination to align yourself with God so that you offer yourself in service to him, a fuller participation in the Holy Spirit so it is the Spirit that is bubbling in your heart and overflowing, and a closer participation in Christ into whom you are being transformed. We want you to be energetic and fervent people, but want to ensure that it is the Spirit bubbling in and overflowing your own spirits. And this begins with ourselves.

2. Persevering Hope

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
(12:12)

These three exhortations have a different feel than those of the previous verse. The call to zeal and a fervent spirit is upbeat and exciting. The call to rejoice in hope and be patient in tribulation is more downbeat.

2.1 Rejoice in glorious hope

Rejoice in hope. We generally use the word “hope” to express merely a wish: I hope he’ll call me, I hope she’ll write, I hope it will all work out in the end. New Testament hope is not some vague feeling. It is an expectation. It is the certainty that it will all work out in the end. As Julian of Norwich said, “All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.” All is not currently well, but it shall be. God has placed us onto the trajectory toward all things being well. He has redeemed us in Christ to be the new humanity: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27). He has placed his Spirit in us to enable us to live as this new humanity in this newness of life. We are not there yet but we are on the way. The destination is certain, therefore we can rejoice in the present.

As we serve the Lord, loving as he loved us, and clinging to the good, in what is our hope? What trajectory do we see ourselves on?

That we will be successful? That we will have a problem-free life? That God will bless our endeavors? This is not our hope. God may not grant these things. If this is where our hope is placed then we’ll be left with shattered dreams, disillusion, and a sense of betrayal. So we have to be very careful that our hope is in the right place. When it is then we can rejoice no matter what.

2.2 In trouble stand firm

Be patient in tribulation. Tribulation is not restricted to a seven-year period at the end of this age, a period from which the church is conveniently removed in the Rapture. Tribulation is to be expected in this life, though the tribulation that most Western Christians face is minor compared to other periods of church history or other places in the world today. Some tribulation is a direct result of our following Christ, but plenty of it is due more generally to the broken state of the world. In many places in the New Testament we are told how to deal with tribulation: endure it. This isn’t stoicism, showing the stiff upper lip. Nor is it passive, but active. God will not necessarily remove the tribulation from us or remove us from the tribulation. He promises to keep us through the tribulation, not keep us from the tribulation. Patient endurance under such tribulation is itself self-surrendered service unto God.

Rejoicing, hope, patience and tribulation: Paul has used these four terms together earlier in his Epistle, though some of the words are translated differently (patience as endurance, and tribulation as suffering):

[W]e rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom 5:2-5)

2.3 Devoted devotions

Finally, be constant in prayer. In many places in the New Testament we are urged to be devoted to prayer, constant in prayer. We don’t keep praying so that God finally hears us and grants our petitions. We keep praying so that we finally hear God. We pray to get our mind, our heart, our will aligned to his, and not vice versa. Prayer is communication between the slave and the Master. We pray so as to align ourselves to our Master. When we see things God’s way then we will have hope and endurance. Prayer refreshes our hope and our patience. But there is more to prayer than that. God is also our Father who delights to hear us, his children.

One of the books I have people read is *Green Leaf in Drought* by Isobel Kuhn. It tells the story of Arthur and Wilda Mathews, missionaries in China around 1950. They arrived in China full of energy and spiritual fervor. They learnt the language. They moved far to the west, on the border with Tibet, so they could reach out to the people who came down off the high Tibetan plateau. They found a suitable meeting room and spent effort and resources getting it ready. All this preparation took several years. But it was all worth it for the hope of the ministry they were going to have to the Tibetan people. Just as they were all ready, the Communists took power. They slowly increased the pressure on Arthur and Wilda. They took over the room they had prepared. They restricted the Mathews to their housing compound, and then to the house itself, and then to the kitchen within the house. They prohibited them from having any contact with the Chinese people, the very thing for which they had gone to China and done so much preparation. This was far from

easy and the book does not gloss over the difficulties. The greatest difficulty they had was with the responses of their hearts. They struggled to submit their will to God's will. They struggled with the disappointment of their shattered hopes and dreams. They struggled to rejoice in God when they saw themselves as useless, cut off from ministry and service.

They prayed long and hard, pouring out their struggles to the Lord, but still they struggled. Until at last the turning point came:

A few nights later it came to Arthur like a flash: the Son had left Heaven, not *submitting* to the will of God, but *delighting* in it. Up to now they had been submitting; rather feverishly submitting because they felt they should press His promises... They had been acting like servants who don't want to do it but have to, because they can't get out of it. What a different attitude was the Son's! There came a day in June when together Arthur and Wilda knelt before the Lord and abandoned themselves to live on in that stunted little kitchen as long as He wished them to. And the peace of God poured in like a flood bringing such joy as they had not known before.⁶

Their attitude to being servants changed: instead of trying to submit they learnt to delight. They allowed God to help himself to their lives, and they delighted in him doing so.

There are a couple of reasons why I have people read this book. Firstly, can your view of ministry handle this book? The Mathews were so excited about the ministry for which they were preparing. But it turned out that too much of their identity, hope and rejoicing was in that, as yet future, ministry. Was their restricted life within the kitchen still service to the Lord? Secondly, can your view of God handle this book? Can God treat his people this way? Is God allowed to help himself like this to people's lives?

Arthur and Wilda were still serving the Lord, even though they seemed to be of no use to him. Actually they were of use, though they did not know it at the time. The Chinese, especially the Chinese Christians, who were about to undergo severe tribulation, got to see how these two faced tribulation, how they overcame with good by rejoicing in hope and being patient in tribulation. Similar testimony was one of the great evangelistic tools of the early church during the Roman Empire.

We are called to overcome with good. These six commands give us a snapshot of the Christian life. When we live life this way we will be inclined to love with true love and cling to the good. How? By our eagerness to walk in newness of life, by the overflow of God's Spirit bubbling within us, by our self-surrendered service to God to whom we belong, by our joy because we know the trajectory we are on and are confident about the end of the journey, by patient endurance in trying times, and by communicating with our Master, allowing our will to be bent to his. May God give us the grace to live life this way so that we are indeed able to overcome with good.

1. Bianco da Siena (d. 1434), "Come Down, O Love Divine," trans. Richard Littledale.
2. Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28. Cf. "God... whose service is perfect freedom," Second Collect for Peace, Morning Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer*.
3. In "Chapter 72: The Good Zeal of Monks," of his *Rule*, St Benedict instructs on "the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love."
4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 83.
5. Peterson, *Unpredictable Plant*, 2.
6. Isobel Kuhn, *Green Leaf in Drought* (Singapore: OMF International, 1958), 78.

© 2013 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino