

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Brick by Brick, Part 3

Scripture: Romans 12:13

Code: 45-95

Let's open our Bibles to Romans chapter 12 tonight, and we're going to look again at this passage on the practical aspects of the Christian life. We're not in any particular hurry to go through it because we do want to give a careful amount of our attention to each of these injunctions, commands, principles for Christian living that Paul gives us in verses 9 through 21. We come back to that very wonderful section. And this is part 3 in a look at the duties of practical Christianity.

Lenin, responsible for philosophical communism, once said, "With a handful of dedicated people who will give me their lives, I will control the world." And he really set out to accomplish that and it is still in the process of being accomplished, at least from the standpoint of many communists. What he was saying was this: The world belongs to the disciplined. The world belongs to the committed people. It belongs to the dedicated people who give up their life for a cause they believe in.

It's really true. The world does belong to the disciplined people. And I suppose that's what makes it so fearful to look at contemporary American culture and much of the rest of the world and to realize that for the most part, we are losing sight of the need for personal discipline, personal self-discipline. Our society now features relaxation and recreation. We say we are under great stress. We say we're living at such a fast pace that many of us are winding up in mental hospitals and taking drugs and committing suicide, but this is really the frantic activity of the undisciplined.

A properly disciplined life is not out of control. An out-of-control life is an undisciplined life. And very often, the lack of discipline and the out-of-control kind of style of living is a result of a rather passionate effort toward self-improvement, self-fulfillment, success, money, material things, something more than what you have. A desire for drugs and alcohol and all of that gets mixed in with it, and there's a furious effort to have a good time out of life and discipline goes by the wayside. In fact, our society loves to play. Sports in our society has gone beyond any reasonable proportion. And when play exceeds a balanced place, it becomes the mark of a decadent society. This is not philosophizing; this is history.

You see, it takes a great amount of discipline in a society, a great amount of personal discipline to produce great thinkers, great writers, great artists, great musicians, great theologians, great technicians, great doctors, great attorneys, great leaders. It takes absolutely no skill, it takes absolutely no discipline to watch a ballgame or to play tennis or golf—the way most people play tennis and golf. There's no real mental discipline in that at all. It's just relaxation.

Richard Shelley Taylor, who has written some interesting things on the subject of discipline, says, "There was a time when intercollegiate debating drew big crowds. Now the debates are held in side rooms while the crowd cheers at the basketball games. This shift of interest from the intellectual to the recreational has occurred even in Christian colleges so widespread is the accent on relaxation. It must be emphatically asserted that the shift of excited popular interest from debate to basketball is a sign of cultural decline." It is the mark of superficiality, it is the mark of overindulgence, it is the mark of shallowness, and recreation and relaxation and games and fun can never return to the society that we live in what we're putting into them. There's no way. It does not have that capability, for bodily exercise profits what? Little, says the Scripture.

The discipline of the mind is on a far higher level. And I see this even in the ministry. When I meet young men who have a very, very hard time having a disciplined mind and staying with the task at hand. Teddy Roosevelt once said, and I quote, "The things that will destroy America are prosperity at any price, peace at any price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living and the get-rich theory of life." He was right. And what he feared is coming to pass.

In the battle for ideas, in the battle for the truth, in the battle for the preservation of a society and a culture, the victory belongs to the disciplined mind. The disciplined mind has the advantage because it can evaluate, it can analyze, it can critique, it can select, it can plan, it can concentrate, it can respond with accuracy. And I see, even in Christian circles, the loss of the disciplined mind where everything is accepted and Christians are even concerned that there be a sort of recreational approach to Christian living. I remember being involved in a very large pastors' conference, and the pastors' conference was to end with a great message at the end relative to going out and doing the job and conquering the community that the men came from for Christ, and the speaker gave a message on how to relax and enjoy recreation. And everybody went out saying, "Hey, I better just take a few more days off," and the people who were in charge of the conference were very distressed.

There is a real movement toward that, but it is a sad thing because in the long run, we're going to have a generation of people without disciplined minds, without the ability to think analytically, critically, to evaluate, to understand truth. It is also true that the person with a disciplined mind is more likely to express himself clearly. He is more likely to be persuasive with his logic and his reasoning. And when evangelical minds become undisciplined, we're going to lose our persuasiveness, the power of our message. Disciplined character belongs to the person who achieves a balance in his life— a balance— by bringing all his faculties and powers and abilities under control.

And Taylor, whom I quoted earlier, further says, "The disciplined person rises courageously, even heroically, to meet life and conquer it. He resolutely faces his duty. He is governed by a sense of responsibility. He has inward resources and personal reserves which are the wonder of weaker souls.

He brings adversity under tribute and compels it to serve him. The strong character of Madame Guyon enabled her, though in prison, to rise in spirit and to sing and she wrote these words, 'My cage confines me round; abroad I cannot fly. But though my wing is closely bound, my heart's at liberty. My prison walls cannot control the flight, the freedom of my soul.'"

And there's power in that kind of a life, the kind of life that is disciplined, strong in character. And I'm sure you're aware of the fact that it is only disciplined character that can carry through in the positions of great responsibility, whether you're talking about industry or education or business or the church. And there are many people who have great ambitions for success in all those fields, great ambition and great desires and great goals and dreams and aspirations that they will never in their lifetime realize because they do not know the meaning of discipline. And it doesn't have anything to do with their mental inabilities; it has to do with the matter of discipline. The deficiency is not in their natural endowment or in their lack of giftedness, but in their character. They lack the capacity to put their nose to the grindstone, to put it in the vernacular, and stay with it.

Many a young person, for example, would like to be a doctor, like to be a corporate leader, like to be a professor, like to be a teacher, like to be someone in industry moving through to a successful position, like to be someone who made a difference in the world, a top-flight scientist or engineer, but it never happens because they never learn discipline. They never learn how to handle the demanding years of hard study to get there. Many young people would like to achieve a certain amount of artistry and mastery in music, proficiency in the arts. They never get there because they will not face the long hours of monotonous practice year after year after year after year.

Chris Parkening, who's in our church and is probably the leading classical guitarist in the world, he and I are friends and we talked a lot about this. By the time he reached 30 years of age, he was a master of his instrument. And it didn't come easy. He told me all his young life he wanted to participate in games, he wanted to participate in fun things, he wanted to be involved in sports. But he had to practice the guitar at least five hours a day. That's tough when you're 13, 12, 14, those years. I'm thankful he did that because he is at a level of proficiency now with which he can glorify God like no one else on the face of the earth can, with an instrument that no one else can use to the degree that he can use it. But he paid a price. But the sweet taste of accomplishment will be his the rest of his life. There are a lot of musicians out there who just float along on their natural talent. There are few great artists. I wonder how many being produced in our generation.

I say all that just to give you a sense of this, this urgency of discipline. And it's so necessary in the church. I see so many people in the church who lack discipline. And the church, if the church allows an undisciplined approach to Christian living, is going to produce an undisciplined generation of Christians out of which will rise its future leadership. And that lack of discipline is going to bring about ultimately mediocrity.

Now, what is self-discipline? Let's talk about it. And I'm warming up to this passage, by the way. Taking the circuitous route. I have some things I want to say and I'm going to make them fit. What is this self-discipline? What is it? The best definition that I could come up with for self-discipline, and maybe it's not the best one you've ever heard, but it says what I want to say. Self-discipline is the ability to regulate your conduct by principle and sound judgment rather than by impulse, desire, high pressure, or social custom. Let me say it again. Self-discipline is the ability to regulate your conduct by principle— and actually, we could say divine principle in the case of a Christian— and sound judgment rather than by impulse, desire, high pressure, or social custom. You got it?

Most people regulate their behavior by either impulse, desire, what they want to do, high pressure applied to them, or what is socially acceptable around them. That's not discipline. To put it simply, self-discipline is the ability to subordinate. It is the ability to subordinate the body and the emotions to what is right and what is best. And not everyone is willing to do that. Most people don't know what it is to subordinate their body, to subordinate their emotions; that is, to bring them under control. They do whatever they feel like doing. They do whatever society dictates for them to do. They follow the flow. They're like a dead fish floating downstream, they don't know what it is to fight the current. Self-discipline is the ability to subordinate. Now, for the Christian we can define it very simply. Self-discipline is to obey the Word of God. It is to bring my desires and my emotions and my feelings and all that's in my life under the control of God supremely so that I live an obedient life, which has as its goal the glory of God. That is a self-disciplined spiritual life.

Now, I thank the Lord. I struggle with self-discipline like you do, but I thank the Lord that somewhere along the line in my life— and I don't even remember exactly where it was— I made a commitment to be a disciplined person. And that has been the bottom line in terms of my ministry through the years. It is not that I am specifically bright or intelligent or brilliant. It is not that I am more clever than other people. It is simply that somehow by God's grace and nothing of my own, really, somewhere along the line He prompted my heart and I made a choice to cultivate a disciplined life. And that has been the most blessed choice really ever, apart from choosing Christ, to try to live a life where you subordinate things to the Word of God, to what is right and what is best.

Now basically, men and women need this to be imposed on them. And that is why you must work so hard with your children. If you don't do anything else in your life, try to do this with your children: Teach them self-discipline. Teach them to subjugate their desires to what is right. Teach them to subjugate their emotions to what is good and proper. Don't let them get away with doing what is wrong, what is strictly an impulse, what is strictly a reaction of their emotions, what is their desire, be it right or wrong. Don't let them flaunt that. Don't let them throw tantrums. Don't let them do that. Confine them to a self-disciplined pattern with love. And if you don't, you'll raise a criminal. May not get caught, but he'll be anti-social, she'll be anti-social.

Scripture tells us that we are to teach our children the proper principles, that we are to reinforce them by punishment so that when they're undisciplined they pay a price. There are no disciplined children who didn't pay a price. Basically what happens is they learn discipline because the consequences of an undisciplined life are too severe. I mean, if you do wrong and get hit enough times, you're going to stop doing it. It's just basic. Teach self-discipline.

Now you say, "Well, what about adults?" Oh, adults need it too. We all need that. We all need imposed discipline. That's right. We need to put ourselves in a position of accountability where we have an imposed discipline. We need rules. We need laws. It's absurd to think that you can just live any way you want because you're a Christian, you don't need any rules, you're just free to live any way. No, no. You need the imposition upon you from an outside power and an outside authority of certain rules and laws which you learn to keep, and if you violate, there are consequence. And that's why the Bible says when you break the Word of God, you violate the Word of God, the Lord will do what? He'll chasten you so that the consequences of misbehavior are severe enough to chase you back to doing what is right. God wants to cultivate a self-disciplined life.

Now, God has given us then these imposed laws, and that brings us into Romans 12. And what you have here are the principles that are lived out in a disciplined life. As you look at these and look at your own life and see whether they're there or not, you can determine whether you have a self-disciplined life or you don't— in the spiritual dimension. We are to subjugate our emotion, subjugate our desire, subjugate our self-will to the Word of God.

It is human and natural to be hypocritical sometimes. It is human and natural to be evil. It is human and natural to be possessive, self-centered, and unkind to other people when they intrude on your space. It is human and natural to be lazy. It is human and natural not to care about other people but only to pad your own bed. It is human and natural to get mad at people who are mean to you. It is human and very natural to treat people differently because some you like better than others. It is human and natural when someone hurts you to want to hurt them back, to want to avenge. And when your enemy is starving, you're happy— that's human and natural. But all those things are wrong, and a Christian needs to cultivate a self-disciplined life where he is no longer doing what is human and natural but doing what is right and what is good by God's standard.

And so he eliminates hypocrisy from his life and fills his life with genuine love. He eliminates evil and fills his life with that which is good. Instead of being selfish, he is unselfish and humble and reaches out to be kind to other people. Instead of being lazy, he is very diligent. Instead of being possessive and self-centered and self-indulgent, he gives what he has to other people. Instead of hating those who hurt him, he loves those who hurt him and he blesses them. Instead of treating people differently, he treats them all the same. Instead of giving back hurt for hurt, he gives back love for hurt. Instead of being filled with vengeance, he has no vengeance. You say, "Well, what kind of person is that?"

That's a disciplined person. That is a person who has brought his natural desires under control, who subjugates them to the controlling principles of the Word of God.

So what we're talking about in this passage, beloved, is the fact that this is how a disciplined believer lives. And I think it all starts back in chapter 12, verse 1 and 2, where you present yourself, your body, your soul, your mind, your will, as a living sacrifice unto God. And your mind is transformed and you don't do what the world does anymore; you're different. You do God's will. You subject your will, your emotions, your impulses, your desires, the high pressure, the social custom to the authority of the Word of God. That's really it. And the Christians who live out the principles of Romans 12 are the Christians who have learned by God's grace to be self-disciplined. To be self-disciplined.

Now, somebody might say, "Well, John, how do you get self-disciplined? I mean, how do you— I'm not very self-disciplined, how do I get moving on this?" Let me give you little practical hints and then we'll get back to the text here. How do you become self-disciplined? You say, "I'm not too disciplined. I want to know how." Let me just— this is just some practical advice, all right? Don't expect to find this in a Bible verse. But just trying to think that through, you say, "I'm kind of undisciplined, and I look at these principles in verses 9 to 21 that we've been working on for the last few weeks and I say to myself, 'Boy, I don't see all that in my life. How do I get disciplined?'"

First of all, let me suggest that you start small. Start very small. Here's a simple one: Start with your room. Clean it and keep it that way and learn when something is out of order to put it in order, and when something is out of place, put it in place. Pick it up, put it away. And then go to your house. Some of you have a silly grin on your face. You're saying, "It's beyond recovery."

Let me give you a second principle: Be on time. It doesn't sound too spiritual but, boy, it's a good one. Be on time. If you're supposed to be somewhere on a certain time, be there at the time you're supposed to be there. Cultivate the ability to sublimate your desires, your activities, the things that pull at you, to be where you're supposed to be on time. Little things like clean-up-the-mess and be-on-time will begin to cultivate an attitude of self-discipline.

Thirdly— and this one has really helped me: Take the hardest job and do it— what? First. And you will force yourself to cultivate discipline.

A fourth one: Organize your life. Plan a little, don't just react, plan. Go buy a piece of paper and write on it, "Today I will do this." Don't just react. If you don't control your life, everything else will. Everything else will.

A fifth: Be grateful for correction. Be grateful for correction because correction helps to make you more disciplined because it shows you what you need to avoid. Don't shun criticism; accept it gladly.

And another one— and this has really been a help to me: Practice self-denial and practice it in a simple way. Want a great big hot fudge sundae? Want it, and order iced tea with NutraSweet. You say, “But I’m thin.” It isn’t a matter of thin; it’s a matter of cultivating self-restraint. Learn to say no to your feelings. I’ve done that through all my life. Tried to train myself not always to fulfill my desires. When I want a great big doughnut or something, to say to myself, “No, I’ll not have that.” Now, I’m not out of control. I could have a doughnut and it wouldn’t be the end of me. But I need to cultivate self-restraint so that I learn to bring some things into control. And just that kind of cultivation will spill over into the spiritual dimension. It really will.

And finally, a seventh principle, welcome responsibility. Welcome responsibility. When you have an opportunity to do something that needs to be done, volunteer for it. Welcome responsibility. It forces you to organize yourself.

Well, there are some simple things. Start small. Clean your room or your house or your car. Be on time. Take the hardest task and do it first. Organize your life. Be grateful when you’re corrected. Practice self-denial or self-restraint. And welcome responsibility. That’s so important because those are the little things that begin to cultivate in your life self-discipline. You know, we work on that with our kids all the time. “Clean your room, clean your room.” Why? Because we think we’re going to have a bunch of people in their room? No, we don’t have people come and see their room. We don’t have a sign that says, “Please come and see Matt’s room, Marcy’s room.” We don’t do that. But it is learning to do that that teaches the whole issue of a disciplined life.

Be on time is another one. If you’re going to be there, don’t be late; be on time. All these things are things that I’ve learned in my own life that transfer into the spiritual dimension. I’m trying to make it as practical as possible so that we don’t think that living a disciplined spiritual life is something so far off in space that it belongs only to the super holy. It’s a question of learning to establish certain habits and patterns in your life that ultimately result in a disciplined life.

Well, all of that just takes us, really, to our text, doesn’t it? And some of the principles that we’ve started to look at? Let’s go back there for a moment and I’m not going to take much time tonight to cover these things, I just want to finish covering what we sort of started last time and then we’ll pick it up next week and wrap it up.

The apostle Paul here is saying, “Look, when you get down to the nitty-gritty of living a disciplined life, here are the principles that you need to know. Here are the practical duties of a disciplined life.” Now, in verses 9 through 21, there are four phases or four sort of sections of these principles and it’s like an ever-widening circle. Each new phase sort of encompasses all the rest as well. Phase one has to do with personal things. Phase two, with the Christian family. Phase three, with everybody. Phase four, with your enemies who have done harm against you. Paul expands the circle of responsibility for

the disciplined life.

Now, remember verse 9? We saw the first phase, the personal? It says let your love be without hypocrisy, or a genuine kind of love, hate what is evil, and be stuck to that which is good. Those are the three basic attitudes for the disciplined life. Love genuinely, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Those are bottom-line principles in a disciplined life. Then we saw the circle go a little wider in verse 10 through 13 where Paul says, "Now let me widen this circle of Christian duty to embrace the Christian family, other believers." Verse 10, "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love." And we noted the fact that that really is saying that we are to love people because they're a part of our family. We're to love them with a family love.

Another very important element of Christian living, of a disciplined life, is to be gracious, to be affectionate, to be demonstrably affectionate to someone else in the family, to love them in the sense of a Biblical love which reaches out to meet their needs. And then he says in verse 10, "Furthermore, in honor, we are to prefer one another." In other words, love in humility. We are to love with kindness and affection and we are to honor folks. We talked about the fact that basically the idea here is to be in a hurry to give honor to someone, not reluctantly, but to be in a hurry to give honor to someone else rather than yourself.

Then in verse 11 we saw three other critical commitments, and this is kind of where we were last time when we closed out. In verse 11 he says, "Not lazy in zeal, fervent or boiling in spirit, and serving the Lord." Three critical things as we serve the family of God. We are not to be lazy, we are to be at a hot pace, really after the work. And the work, of course, is serving the Lord. This is the life that is disciplined. It is a life committed to love, a life committed to hating evil, loving what is good, caring for each other, honoring each other. A life that is given in zeal, in passion, in courage to the service of Christ.

C.T. Studd, who possessed so much of the world's goods and gave it all away to go as a missionary, wrote: "Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell. I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell." I like that spirit. And that's what he did. John Wesley was a man of zeal. He said, "Give me a hundred men who love God with all their heart and fear nothing but sin and I will move the world." He did.

Jim Elliot, martyr of Ecuador, was really a remarkable young man. And one day he was reading in Hebrews chapter 1, verse 7, and he read, "He maketh His ministers a flame of fire." And the day that he read that, he wrote in his diary these words: "Am I ignitable? God, deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things." Isn't that good? "Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be a flame. But flame is transient and often short-lived. Canst Thou bear this, my soul? Short life? In me there dwells the spirit of the great short-lived whose zeal for God's house consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, flame of God." It's a great statement.

He said, "A flame is what I want to be but a flame doesn't burn very long, and if that's the way it has to be, that's the way I want it." And he identified himself with another who lived a very short life whose flame was very brief, our Lord Jesus Christ, and his was brief. That last line that he wrote in his diary that day, "Make me Thy fuel, flame of God," he got from a poem and that poem was written by Amy Carmichael. It's a marvelous poem. I won't read it all to you but just the last stanza. "Give me the love that leads the way, the faith that nothing can dismay, the hope no disappointments tire, the passion that will burn like fire, let me not sink to be a clod, make me Thy fuel, flame of God."

Every disciple, I suppose, would like to be like this one that Bishop Ryle, that great man of God, describes. Listen to his words. "A zealous man in religion is preeminently a man of one thing. It is not enough to say that he is earnest, hearty, uncompromising, thorough-going, whole-hearted, fervent in spirit. He sees only one thing, he cares for one thing, he lives for one thing, he is swallowed up in one thing, and that one thing is to please God. Whether he lives or whether he dies, whether he has health or whether he has sickness, whether he is rich or whether he is poor, whether he pleases man or whether he gives offense, whether he is thought wise or whether he is thought foolish, whether he gets blame or whether he gets praise, whether he gets honor or whether he gets shame, for all this, the zealous man cares nothing at all. He burns for one thing and that one thing is to please God and to advance God's glory. If he is consumed in the very burning, he cares not for it. He is content. He feels that, like a lamp, he is made to burn, and if consumed in burning, he has but done the work for which God appointed him. Such an one will always find a sphere for his zeal. If he cannot preach and work and give money, he will cry and sigh and pray." That's a zealous man. That's a man who, is fervent in spirit serving the Lord. A disciplined life.

Paul was like that. Paul has always been my model of a disciplined life. Remarkable. If there was a principle, he lived by it, that's all. If there was a divine pattern, he followed it. He was a man of one thing: to please God.

Someone has tried to capture the fervency of Paul in quite a unique sketch. I don't know if you've ever heard this— it's fascinating. The writer says this: "He is a man without the care of making friends, without the hope or desire of worldly good, without the apprehension of worldly loss, without the care of life, without the fear of death. He is a man of no rank, country, or condition; a man of one thought, the gospel of Christ; a man of one purpose, the glory of God; a fool and content to be reckoned a fool for Christ. Let him be called enthusiast, fanatic, babbler, or any other outlandish nondescript the world may choose to denominate him. But let him still be nondescript. As soon as they call him traitor, householder, citizen, man of wealth, man of the world, man of learning, or even man of common sense, it is all over with his character. He must speak or he must die, and though he should die, he will speak. He has no rest but hastens over land and sea, over rocks and trackless deserts. He cries aloud and spares not and will not be hindered. In the prisons he lifts up his voice. In the tempest of the ocean he is not silent. Before awful councils and throned kings he witnesses in behalf of the truth.

Nothing can quench his voice but death and even in the article of death, before the knife has severed his head from his body, he speaks, he prays, he testifies, he confesses.” It's quite a testimony, isn't it?

And he's right. If you call Paul enthusiast, fanatic, babbler, or anything like that, that doesn't bother him. But if you say of him, “Oh, he's a citizen, he's a man of wealth, he's a man of the world, he's a man of learning,” and so forth, he is very bothered because he doesn't want to be known as that. He's a man of one thing, a fervent man.

Now, living a fervent life as it's indicated in verse 11 is not easy because there are going to be all kinds of difficulties. You live a self-disciplined life, a life of true love, a life that hates evil and holds to what is good, a life that reaches out to others, a life that prefers others, a life that is not lazy, a life that is fervent, a life that serves the Lord, and you're going to have some difficulty, and so verse 12, as we saw last time, really comes to the aid of the person in difficulty and says, “Here are some other patterns of this self-disciplined life: He rejoices in hope, he is patient in tribulation, and continues constant in prayer.”

These are necessary to maintain the disciplined life because a lot of times you make the supreme effort and the end result can be very disconcerting. A lot of times you go through all you go through to accomplish what you feel is right before God, and the dividends are minimal—minimal. And I want you to know that, as you've learned, it can be very discouraging. And I get discouraged, too. But in those times I have learned in verse 12 to rejoice in hope, that it's always going to be tough here, but there's coming a day when it's going to be glorious, right? There's coming a day when we're going to see the Lord Jesus Christ and all our efforts are going to end. I don't mind being disciplined now, I don't mind paying the price now, and I need to pay it even more than I do, and I need to be more disciplined than I am, but I don't mind the little bit of discipline that I endeavor. I don't mind that because I know there's going to be a day when it's all going to be over and I'll rest forever in the glories of perfection with the Savior. I rejoice in that hope.

I get weary. There is a tolerance level that all of us have, and I don't know about you, but I seem to be on the edge of it most of the time. And some people would say to me, “Well, why do you keep taking more projects on? Why don't you just back away?” Well, I don't know what you mean by that. There's nothing I can't not do because of what God has put in my heart. And in the midst of the doing and looking ahead, you say, “Well, aren't you looking forward to retirement?” I'll never retire. From what, the gospel? You may dump me long before I'm ready to go but— I mean, this is a life commitment. As long as I have my senses. And the discipline for this time seems a small thing when you think about the hope of eternity, doesn't it? And that allows us to be patient in our tribulation. And, of course, to carry us through, he says we continue diligent or we literally continue constant in prayer. Those things maintain the disciplined life, the life that lives by God's standards. You just have to stay plugged in in prayer, just, “Lord, keep me faithful, keep me disciplined, keep me moving.”

God would have us all live a life that subjects personal will, personal desire, emotion, impulses, high pressure, social custom to the divine priorities. And, beloved, that's really what we have endeavored to do in the ministry of Grace Church, is to see God build a people who know the meaning of a disciplined life, whose desire is to obey the Word of God. And bless His name, I have rejoiced all through the years at Grace Church because I have seen that in your lives, and I rejoice for that, I really do. And when I hear, as I was telling you earlier, that our little children go away to some kind of a Bible knowledge thing and come back the winners of every single division in the whole thing, I rejoice because that means that they are learning to subject their own desires and their own ideas to the authority of the Word of God. And that gives hope for the next generation. So we rejoice to be what God would have us to be.

The flow in the passage then is rather clear, isn't it? A Christian should be one who lives this way, with a pure love, hates evil, sticks to what is good, is tenderly affectionate to other believers, is humble, seeks to honor rather than to be honored. His service to Christ is that which is total, enthusiastic, wholehearted, zealous, obedient and diligent. The resulting trials that are going to come will be overcome by a strong hope in God's promise for the future glory which allows him to endure patiently everything he has to endure, as he constantly commits himself to the Lord's will and the Lord's care. That's the kind of life.

And then Paul concludes this little part of the circle related to the family of Christ in verse 13 with two more things. I'm so glad he mentioned these: distributing to the need of saints and given to hospitality. A couple of basic principles of Christian duty, very simple, and we don't need to spend a lot of time on them. He says we need to be committed to distributing to the needs of saints. In other words – mark this– the world is bent on getting; Christians are bent on giving. That's what he's saying. The flow of our life is not in but out. It's out. You know what the word– beautiful– the word “distributing” – in the Authorized, the Greek word is *koinonia*, communion, sharing, partnership, fellowship. It's the word for fellowship. Fellowshiping, sharing, being partners in the needs of saints. What does that mean? That means I'm partners with other saints, and if they have a need, we're partners.

Our resources are for each other, right? I don't own anything, by the way. Oh, I mean there are some things I own in terms of earthly goods, technically, but spiritually I don't own them. I only manage them for the Lord, and where there are people with needs, my resources are equally theirs because we share as partners. We share as partners. And it is a Christian duty for us to do that. In Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 4, it describes the early church. They were selling the things they had when someone had need, taking the money gained from the sale and giving it to the people who had the need. That's just the way it was. They were all doing that all the time. If someone had need, someone was selling, and someone was meeting the need. And you remember the writer of Hebrews in chapter 13, verse 16, says that here's a sacrifice God is pleased with: to share. To share. I love

that. To take the resources I have and give them to someone else.

First Timothy 6:17, "Charge them that are rich in this age." That would certainly be us, most of us. We have so much more than most of the world. "Charge them—" verse 18 "—to do good, be rich in good works, eager to distribute and willing to share." Isn't that good? That's part of Christian duty, make others your partner. Make others your co-partner so that all you have is theirs if they have need. You say, "Well, now wait a minute. How do I know who to give it to?" It's very simple. Jesus was asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus told a story, you remember, about a guy lying on a road on the way to Jericho. And the point of the story was this: Your neighbor is the guy lying in your path in the need. He's not saying, "Pack up all your money in an envelope and ship it overseas and let somebody there pass it out." He's saying, "Hold on to what you have, and when God puts somebody in your path with a need, meet the need."

I had lunch with a pastor on Friday and he said to me, "What do you believe about this matter of distributing to the saints?" And I said, "I believe this: I don't believe that it's writing a check every once in a while and sending it off to a relief organization." I think there's a place for that. And all of us are concerned about areas of the world that are in famine, and Grace Church is concerned about those things as well. And we have those kinds of projects. But distributing to the needs of the saints, that's believers. And what we're really saying here is: When somebody is in your path with a need, you meet it. And what sometimes amazes me is I'll get a phone call. "By the way, John, did you know so-and-so and so-and-so has a great need? Could the church give them some money?" And I have a standard answer: "Did you know about that need?" "Yes." "Do you think maybe the Lord brought that need in front of you so that you might meet that need?" "No— really?" "Right."

There is no Grace Church, you're it. You're it. You tell us somebody's got a need, we've got to give them something. We're going to have to go find somebody besides you to get it from. Or one of us. But I think— and all of us are willing to do that, but the point is I think we need to learn that part of Christian living is just being partners, isn't it? Meeting needs. I'll tell you something. No matter how much I understand that, I always feel like I never do what I should do. I'm always sort of under the pressure of guilt, of failing to be sensitive to needs I ought to be sensitive to. But we need to cultivate that. Make others your partners. That's the best way to get the concept. Think of other people as partners.

And then, the end of verse 13, the last one we'll look at tonight, he says, "Be given to hospitality." Literally, and this is a very strong statement, "Pursue the love of strangers." Pursue the love of strangers, not reluctantly, not saying, "Oh brother. We've got somebody else coming over? Somebody else going to eat food here? We can't keep this up." No. Pursue that, pursue it. Don't do it reluctantly. Pursue hospitality, the love of strangers. Of course, in that day, you know, there was— if you didn't stay in someone's home, you had to stay in one of those crummy inns and, boy, in those days you were taking your life in your hands. There was a great need for that and as Christians

moved around, they opened their homes. The people in various places opened their homes for those traveling Christians, traveling preachers, because that was the best place for them to stay. And so the New Testament is literally loaded with those kinds of things.

It tells us in Titus chapter 1 that an elder is to be a lover of hospitality, not a reluctant lover of strangers, but a lover of loving strangers, is to love that, desire that, share all that he has. First Peter 4:9, it says, "Use hospitality one to another without grudging." See, the assumption is that it isn't going to be always easy for us. And so he says do it without grudging, be eager to do it, pursue it here, and the elder is to be a lover of it. You know, we can do it because we don't have any choice, but we ought to love to do it, we ought to be eager to do it. We ought to be generous to guests, give them the best of what we have, share our love with them.

Second Timothy 1, Paul says, "The Lord give mercy to the house of Onesiphorus for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain. And when he was in Rome he sought me out very diligently and found me. The Lord grant unto him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that day and in how many things he ministered unto me at Ephesus, thou knowest very well." What a dear person. His house served the needs of Paul. Generous, gracious hospitality. That's part of Christian duty. It's pretty practical stuff.

You remember Luke 14 where Jesus says if you're going to have a feast, don't call your friends? Call the handicapped and the outcasts and have them over because the rest of the folks, they get invited all the time. You invite the folks that don't usually get invited. Good to think about, isn't it, in this holiday time? For all of us. Learn to cultivate in your life the fact that everybody that you belong to in the family of Christ is, in a sense, a partner. And if they have a need, you have a partnership to share with them. Yours is not yours; it's ours in that sense. And learn to cultivate a spirit of love toward those that aren't a part of your inner circle, family, and friends and reach out to them eagerly, anxiously, without grudging and loving to do that. That is what it is to do your Christian duty. But in order to be committed to these things, you've got to be disciplined to do the things you know God wants you to do. God help us to live that kind of disciplined life where we anxiously and eagerly come under the standards the Scripture says and live by them with joy and gratitude.

Well, next time we'll look at the third and the fourth phase of the circle in this passage. Let's bow in prayer. Just spend a moment in silent prayer, would you tonight? And ask the Spirit of God to just confirm some things in your heart. I know the Lord has spoken to me as He always does in the teaching of the Word and perhaps in a very special way, He's spoken to you as well about some things in your life that you want to see changed, some attitudes, some areas that are not under control and you want to be that disciplined kind of Christian that really lives a life of honor to the Lord. Just spend a moment in prayer and commit yourself to that.

Father, we thank You for the fellowship we've enjoyed tonight. What a wonderful evening we've had and we've seen this new life, these little ones. Oh, Lord, how we pray they would be raised to know the discipline of the Lord. That all of us would begin to bring into control the fragmented areas of our lives. That we might live in a way that would bring You glory. That we might be people of one thing, not controlled by the whims of the world around us, by social custom, high pressure, desires, emotions, but doing what is right because we have learned discipline. Not just by our creating human habits but by submissiveness to the Holy Spirit. That's our desire. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

I want to share something with you before you go. I want you to listen very carefully because it'll pull this whole message together and I want it to be a part of the tape and everything because I think it's important. I know that all of us have a desire to be disciplined, and I gave you some principles that we can use to discipline ourselves. But I was reading this week something I thought was so helpful from Oswald Sanders, a little book on *Enjoying Intimacy with God*. And he gives an insight that really has to be given, to keep balance, because I've given you some practical things but we have to understand something: If we're going to live a disciplined life, it isn't only a question of cultivating good habits; it's a question of dependency on the Spirit of God, isn't it?

Listen to what he says. "When Ulysses and his men set out on their journey of conquest, they were warned by Circe to avoid the sirens at all costs." This is Greek mythology. "She told them the sirens' voices were alluring but fatal to all that stopped to listen. The unfortunate listeners became rooted like a tree and could not tear themselves away, until they died of hunger. 'Fill your companions' ears with wax,' she told Ulysses, 'and if you yourself want to listen to their song, first let your men bind you securely to the mast.' Ulysses heeded her advice. 'If the melody beguiles me,' he ordered his men, 'I charge you, disobey my word and bend more strongly to your oars.' At length Ulysses heard the beautiful strains that stole into his mind, overpowered his body, and overcame his will. As the music became sweeter and sweeter, Ulysses' love for home weakened. He struggled with his shame, but at last the bewitching voices of the sirens prevailed. 'Loose me and let me stay with the sirens,' he raged. He threatened and entreated. He promised his men mountains of gold with desperate signs and gestures for they couldn't hear with the wax in their ears. His men only tied him more tightly. He raged and tore at his bonds. It was agony for him to leave the spot, and not until the last sound of music died away did they let him loose. He had passed out of the way of temptation. Jason and the Argonauts set out in search of the Golden Fleece. Medea warned Jason and his men of the menace of the same sirens as they began to hear their bewitching strains. All around they could see the shore strewn with the bones of those who had succumbed to the sirens' charms. On board the boat was Orpheus, the king of minstrels. 'Let them match their songs with mine,' he challenged the three maidens whom they could see and whose silvery voices stole over the moonlit waters, attracting the sailors. There were seagulls in long lines and shoals of fish that came to listen. The oars of Jason's heroes fell from their hypnotized hands. Their heads drooped, and their heavy eyes closed. Then Medea cried to Orpheus, 'Sing louder, wake up these sluggards,' and Orpheus struck his skillful hand over the strings of his lyre, and his music rose like a trumpet. The music penetrated the souls of the

infatuated men and their souls were thrilled. Orpheus kept on singing and singing until his voice completely drowned out the voice of the sirens. Once again the Argonauts took up their oars, and Jason and his men sailed on to victory. ‘Sing the song again, Orpheus,’ they cried. ‘Sing the song again.’”

And then Sanders says this: “Those stories strikingly illustrate the two possible ways of gaining victory over the desires of the flesh. One is the way of negation and prohibition. They are of some help and have their place. Ulysses was bound; otherwise, he would have yielded to the cravings of his heart. His men had wax in their ears or they, too, would have yielded. But it is an incontrovertible fact that to concentrate the mind on the desire of the flesh if only to conquer them seems to intensify the desire. How much better is the music of Orpheus than the wax of Ulysses? With the heavenly Orpheus on board as we listen to his heavenly music, the voices of the sirens lose the power of their appeal and our spirits are set free.” Isn’t that a graphic illustration?

We are better off with the power of the Spirit of God than just a list of prohibitions. Right? The prohibitions help but if we spent all our time focusing on what we’re not supposed to do, all it will do is intensify our desires. If we listen to the sweet music of the Holy Spirit, it will drown out the voices of temptation. I trust that’s helpful. Let’s stand together for a closing word of prayer.

Our Father, we thank You for this wonderful day we’ve enjoyed. We bless You. Make us the people You want us to be for Christ’s sake. And everyone said: Amen.

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