

“Christian Orienteering”
Romans 12:9-21
October 8, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

During my frequent visits to Oak Mountain State Park, I have sometimes noticed people walking in the woods with a map in one hand and a compass in the other. I was curious about what they were doing and discovered that they were engaged in a sport called orienteering. Orienteering is defined as “a competitive or noncompetitive recreational activity in which participants find their way over an unfamiliar course (as in the woods) using a map and compass.” The map commonly used is a topographical map, which helps the competitors decide such things as whether to go over a mountain or around it. The winners in competitive orienteering are the ones who check in at every checkpoint in the least amount of time. Though speed is certainly a factor in orienteering, decision-making is usually more important.

The passage before us today is a type of Christian orienteering. We find ourselves in a world where it is often difficult to know where we are and where we ought to go. What’s more, life is filled with such obstacles corresponding figuratively to such things as mountains, streams, ravines, and trees, all which must be traversed. Today’s passage orients us so that we can make good decisions that bring us to the flourishing life God intends for us. The passage easily divides into a section about life in the church and life in the world.

Before launching into the details of these verses, it is important that we orient ourselves as to how we should read the commands of the Bible. There are no less than thirty commands in these verses. Some read the commands of the Bible in such a way that they only serve to increase their guilt and load burdens upon them. I would submit to you that reading the Bible’s commands in that way is to misread them and to forget the very first thing Paul wrote in this chapter before giving us a single command. **“By the mercies of God,”** we are to undertake all obedience. To read the Bible’s commands in this way means at least two things. First, it means that wherever these commands remind us of our sin, we are to remember that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. Second, it means that we can read these commands as promises. Since God has promised to change our lives and make us like Jesus, these commands are a description of what God is doing in our lives right now. Read these commands as if you are opening presents from God. They should still be read as obligations, but as obligations God is working to make real in us.

I. In the Church – v. 9-16

Not surprisingly, Paul begins where he usually does when he talks about the kind of life we are to live. It is a life of love. **“Let love be genuine.”** The word literally means “without hypocrisy.” For 11 chapters Paul has been declaring the extravagant love of God, and now he moves from the love God offers to the love he requires. It is a love from the heart, because the gospel transforms us at a heart level. It is not enough to go through the motions of loving others. When we receive the love God offers to us in Jesus, we begin to grow in the ability to love others from the heart.

He explains further what a heart level love is like when he says that it involves deep emotions. We are to **“abhor what is evil”** and **“hold fast to what is good.”** Love requires hatred. It is not a hatred of people, but a hatred of the evil that destroys people. The various words for hatred are used about 200 times in the Bible. Some of these are the sinful form of hatred, but many of them are like our verse in speaking of the loving version of hatred. We are also to hold fast, or cling, to what is good. Both hatred and holding fast are passionate words that highlight the fact that indifference is a failure to love.

Verse 10 includes two more descriptions of this kind of love. **“Love one another with brotherly affection.”** He’s talking about our love for fellow Christians and says that it should be a family-type love. This is the love of a parent for their child, a love that is willing to make great sacrifices for the good of the child. It is also a love with a competitive side to it. **“Outdo one another in showing honor.”** The competition isn’t to make yourself look superior to someone else. Rather, it is a competition to lift others in the eyes of the community. Honor is necessarily a public activity. This kind of love requires that we look for occasions to make others look good before the community.

Verse 11 moves on to talk about another feature of life among God’s people. **“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”** If you were an employer, would you rather have an employee who finds the job boring and just does the minimum required not to get fired, or would you prefer an enthusiastic employee who loves the job? The former will tend toward sloth while the latter will be diligent. What’s good for the employer is also good for the employee. Have you ever had a job that was so boring that you spent most of your time watching the clock, which seemed to creep along at a snail’s pace? Contrast that with a job that you find satisfying, challenging and rewarding. The time flies in that kind of job. Imagine if all of life could be lived in that way. It can, and this verse tells us that the key is to offer whatever we are doing in service to the Lord.

Everyone is serving some master, which we could view as climbing a ladder. Imagine that you need to get to the roof of your house, which is 20 feet above the ground. A fifteen-foot ladder is leaning against the wall, and beside it is a twenty-five foot ladder. But you’re blindfolded and don’t know which ladder reaches all the way to the roof. You start climbing on the shorter ladder, get to

the top and find that it doesn't take you where you need to go. Anytime you serve someone or something other than the Lord, it's like climbing that 15-foot ladder, ending in frustration. When Paul tells us to serve the Lord, he doesn't mean to limit this to church work. Rather, he is talking about a reorientation of life to do all for God's glory. Doing so has the benefit of transforming a task of great drudgery into something divine.

Verse 12 begins a series of commands that assume the inevitability of hardships as we live in this fallen world. These hardships could take a dark turn and lead us into despair. Instead of that, we are to **"rejoice in hope."** No matter the challenges of the present, the future is a bright one for God's children. We are to meet these challenges with patience. God decides how long tribulation lasts. That's his job. Ours is to wait on him patiently. As we wait, we pray. We are to be **"constant in prayer."** And we don't confront life's challenges all alone. We are called as a church to support one another, not just with moral support, but in specific ways when that is needed. We are to **"contribute to the needs of the saints."** One such need is to welcome strangers. That's what the word "hospitality" means. The strangers were sometimes traveling preachers, and at other times those who had been displaced from their homes. Note the verb. It doesn't say to practice hospitality, but to *pursue* it, a much stronger verb. We are to look for those who are feeling their outside status and do what we can to welcome them.

The placement of verse 14 in the middle of these commands about how Christians are to treat other Christians is a bit puzzling. **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."** It would seem that this verse might fit better in the next section that describes how Christians are to behave outside the church and in the world. Perhaps this verse is something of a bridge between the two. Paul experienced some significant opposition from other Christians. He wrote in Philippians how some preached the gospel out of envy, intending to bring harm to Paul through their preaching (Phil 1:15-17). And Paul warned Timothy of a man named Alexander, who seems to at least at one time have been a professing Christian, saying that Alexander **"did me great harm"** (2 Tim. 4:14). Regardless of its source, the response is the same: blessing rather than cursing. Only God can bless or curse, so this is essentially a prayer that God bring good or harm, and we are to pray for good.

Paul closes out his commands for life within the church in these next two verses. We are to **"rejoice with those who rejoice, [and] weep with those who weep."** Both rejoicing and weeping are emotions. So God is commanding an appropriate emotional response to other people. Instead of becoming envious or resentful of those who are rejoicing, we are to enter into their joy with them. On the other hand, when we encounter those who are in a time of sadness and grief, we are to enter into that sadness with them, just like Jesus did when he wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. We sometimes think that our biggest need when ministering to the sad and grieving is to find the right

words. But Paul shows us here that our true need is to be emotionally present with them. It is usually the case that our desire to find the right words is more about meeting a need we feel in ourselves than a need in the one suffering.

He closes this section with a command to **“live in harmony with one another,”** after which he tells us how to do that. If harmony is to come in our relationships with other Christians, we must address the biggest obstacle to such harmony, and that is our pride. So Paul says, **“Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.”** Humble people listen well and love well, while the proud don’t think they need to listen because in their eyes they are always right, and others are wrong. Jonathan Edwards wrote, “The first and worst cause of errors that abound in our day and age is spiritual pride. This is the main door by which the devil comes into the hearts of those who are zealous for the advancement of Christ. It is the main handle by which he has hold of Christian persons, and their chief source of all the mischief that he introduces to hinder a work of God. Until this disease is cured, medicines are applied in vain to heal all other diseases.”

II. In the World – v. 17-21

The church in Rome was already experiencing opposition from those outside the church. When Paul made it to Rome a few years after writing this letter, he met with a group of Jews who informed him about the ‘sect’ he represented, that **“everywhere it is spoken against”** (Acts 28:22). How would Paul have Christians respond to opposition? It would seem that he regarded this to be a matter of great importance, because he emphasizes the proper response repeatedly. He does so through four negative statements about what we are not to do, coupled with the positive commands that are the opposite of those negatives. We’ve already seen one. Instead of cursing, we are to bless. Instead of repaying evil with evil, we are to live peaceably with all. Instead of seeking revenge, we are to leave the matter with the Lord. Instead of being overcome by evil, we are to overcome evil with good.

All these negatives are saying essentially the same thing. We are not to retaliate in kind to those who bring harm to us. That is our instinct, isn’t it? It is the same instinct we see early in the Bible with a man named Lamech. He said to his two wives, **“If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold”** (Gen. 4:24). We have abundant evidence of what happens when this path of revenge is sought. It always escalates to horrifying levels. It happens in marriages and in nations. Perhaps it is happening in our own nation even now when political disagreements are escalated to issues of morality. In this escalation, those who disagree with me aren’t just wrong, but immoral. The proper response to them is then not to talk with them but to cancel them. Alan Jacobs has written, “The great moral crisis of our time is

not, as many of my fellow Christians believe, sexual licentiousness, but rather *vindictiveness*.”

Let’s focus our attention on the positive things Paul says that will allow us to be able to turn from this revenge seeking. He says first that we are to **“give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”** What Paul is telling us to do here is to affirm what is noble and good in our culture, even among those who oppose us. Next, he tells us to do all we can to live peaceably with all. Paul knows that this is not always possible, so he introduces this command with the qualifier, “If possible.” There are at least two circumstances that will render such peace impossible. If peace requires compromising the gospel, we cannot do so. Or if someone is determined to maintain a hostile attitude toward us, peace would again be beyond our ability to achieve.

The next positive is found in verse 19 when we are told that instead of seeking vengeance ourselves, we are to leave it to the wrath of God. What is being forbidden here is not all earthly justice, because in the next chapter Paul authorizes civil government to have the power of the sword to punish the evildoer (13:4). What is being forbidden is personal vengeance, and what is being encouraged is leaving the matter in God’s hands.

What should be our personal response to the evildoer? **“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink”** (v. 20). The reason given for this is **“for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head”** (v. 20). What does this mean? One possible interpretation of this is that Paul is telling us to pretend to love people by doing loving things for them in order to lure them into a fiery trap of God’s judgment. That would seem to be quite an odd statement and completely unsuited to the overall context. A better interpretation sees this image of burning coals on the head as a metaphor for shame. To act kindly toward opponents may bring about the kind of shame that leads to repentance.

The final verse is both a warning and an encouragement. **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”** (v. 21). There is a dynamism to both good and evil. Evil will escalate if left unchecked, overcoming and destroying good. But good has the same feature. It will overcome and destroy evil.

CONCLUSION:

The hymnwriter said it well. “This is my Father’s world: the battle is not done; Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heaven be one.” We are warriors in this battle. It is not one fought with swords, or with angry posts on social media. Rather, it is a battle fought with a determination to bring good to others, even as God has brought good to us through Jesus.

Discussion Questions
Romans 12:9-21

1. Can you think of a time in your life when you were uncertain as to what you should do? How did God lead you during that time?
2. In verse 11, Paul tells us to “serve the Lord” and to be zealous and fervent. What might it look like in your daily life to keep this goal before you at all times?
3. Hospitality is commanded in verse 13. Hospitality means literally a love of strangers. It is showing kindness to those who feel like outsiders. Have you ever been in a place where you felt like an outsider? How might we as a church do a better job of welcoming those who visit us for the first time?
4. What might it look like in a practical way to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”? How might this help us when we seek to comfort those who are sad and grieving? What are some common ways we fail to do this?
5. In a sermon he once preached on this passage, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “It is a difficult sacrifice which Christ demands of us when he demands that we abandon our attempts at vengeance, perhaps it is the most difficult sacrifice of all. For it is entirely natural for humans to seek vengeance against their enemies.” Did Bonhoeffer violate his own counsel when he participated in the plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler?