

Christian Birthmarks – Part 2

Romans 12:11-12

February 3, 2019

Introduction:

Last week we began our message talking about birthmarks and how one of their uses is as a unique identifier of an individual. For example, you might more easily distinguish between two identical twins if one of them happens to have an observable birthmark not possessed by the other twin. Birthmarks are a useful way to help distinguish one person from another. So I'm using this idea of a birthmark as a metaphor for how we can think of the various calls to action Paul gives us in Romans 12. These commands can be looked at as birthmarks that should identify us as those who've been born again.

So as we did last week and will continue to do over the next few weeks, we're going to carefully think through each of these birthmarks together. We're being called to live lives characterized by these identifying markers that demonstrate us as those redeemed by Christ, regenerated through the power of the Holy Spirit, living not according to the flesh but in pursuit of righteousness. In essence, Paul is saying through these verses: "This is what a Christian looks like. This is how a Christian acts and speaks and thinks."

Without any further ado then, let's dive right into our passage. This morning we're in Romans 12, which can be found on pg. 948 in the pew Bibles. We're only going through two verses today, v. 11-12. So let's read these two verses together first and then we'll go back over them point by point and think through what they mean for us. So please follow along as I read Romans 12:11-12. **"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."**

As you can see, there is plenty to talk about in these few short verses, so let's begin with the first birthmark given in v. 11, which is that...

1. Christians serve the Lord with zeal

Paul says three things in v. 11, but they all hang together as one idea. He says, **"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord."** Serving the Lord is the main thrust of the verse, while the first two commands relate how we're to go about serving the Lord. So let's consider what it means that we should not **"Be slothful in zeal"** when it comes to serving the Lord. This is the negative side of the coin, how we ought not be. We ought to be zealous. We ought to be serving God with energy and enthusiasm. Instead, there's the danger that we can instead be **"slothful."**

We have a certain number of words that come from the animal kingdom because some animals seem to exemplify certain human character traits. One such animal is the sloth. A sloth is a slow-moving mammal. They don't make any sudden movements. They will slowly grab fruit off a tree and then take forever to bring it to their mouth. Whatever they do, they do very, very slowly. People can be like that, can't they? Slothful people are those who never seem to have any energy. They're lazy and unwilling to lift a finger to

help if they don't have to. They drag their feet when a task needs to be done. Maybe you've worked with someone like that. You ask them to do a simple task that should take only a couple of minutes and four hours later it still isn't done. They're always looking for how they can do the minimal amount of work and still get away with it.

Being slothful is just another word for laziness. As Christians, we need to watch out that we don't slip into slothfulness in our zeal to serve the Lord. Scripture repeatedly warns us of this. For example, in Galatians 6:9 we're told, "*And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.*" Don't grow weary because weary people become slothful people. They become half-hearted in their devotion and service to Christ. Instead, we're to do what it says in Eccl. 9:10, "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might...*" Serve God with effort and diligence. Don't get lazy: God has called you to serve and love others in the church, so in whatever way the Lord has gifted you, don't become slack. Don't drag your feet. Don't throw in the towel half-way through the race and give up. Keep loving God and others with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength.

John MacArthur once said, "Too many Christians rust out when they should wear out." In other words, they check out too early. They have something still to give in service to the Lord but instead they park themselves in a pew and rust out because they refuse to serve anymore. Thankfully, Grace Fellowship has had some wonderful examples of believers who've refused to rust out. I think of Jim Earnest, who was serving as an elder and was teaching a Sunday school class until the day he died. He had retired from his career but he didn't retire from serving Christ. Jim was not slothful in his zeal in serving the Lord, even at age 80. There was no rust to be found on him.

Then just a few months ago Rose Earnest died. She was still serving faithfully every Sunday while she had the physical health to do so as our church organist. As an 85-year-old, she could have stopped serving long ago and nobody would have faulted her. Yet she didn't get lazy or slothful: God had given her a gift and she insisted on using that gift to serve our church for 65 years. Rose didn't rust out: her body wore out, but as long as she could, she kept serving God to the end.

Jim and Rose are fantastic examples for us of how we ought to be, serving the Lord faithfully and not checking out early or being slothful. And I will say there are many people here today who are following their example, who are continuing to be diligent in doing the work of the kingdom regardless of their age. But nevertheless, we all need to be reminded of this caution not be slothful in our zeal. Don't be inactive. Basketball teams may have benchwarmers but churches don't. We need everyone on the court. Everyone needs to be in the game. Don't come here and rust by just sitting there on a pew every Sunday morning. Get involved. Roll up your sleeves. Don't sit back and let someone else do it. You can't do everything but you can do something. If you've been slothful in your service lately, then listen to what God's Word says to you here and start using your spiritual muscles to serve.

The second part of this verse is the flip side of the coin, the positive characterization of how we ought to be and that is we're to "**be fervent in spirit.**" We're not merely to do

lots and lots of things while being apathetic about it; we're to feel fervency, a zeal, an inner passion, a glowing desire in our spirit to serve God.

In fact, the word here translated as “**fervent**” could be translated literally as “boiling.” It carries the idea of boiling water. Have any of you boiled water before? How would you describe that temperature of the water? It isn't cold or lukewarm, is it? It's boiling hot! That's how we're to be: our spiritual temperature should be running hot, not cold. In fact, what does our Lord say to the church in Laodicea (and by extension to us) in the book of Revelation? He expects us to be hot when it comes to our love for him. He expects us to have a zealous passion for him that burns red hot for his glory. And if we're not, if we're lukewarm, what will he'll do? He'll spit us out of his mouth.

People can be fervent about all kinds of things. You can be passionate about a favorite sports team. You be fervent about a hobby or a particular cause. You can be quite enthusiastic for that person you just started dating, when love is new and all you want to do is spend time with them. There's nothing wrong with that, but the question is: in all those things you're passionate for, do you also have a passion for the Lord? Do you possess a burning zeal for him? Or are you far more impassioned about your favorite football team than you are for Christ? Is loving Christ and serving his people something you are passionately committed to or indifferent and apathetic about?

This is a verse that is worth examining our hearts against. We each need to ask, “Have I been slothful in zeal for God's kingdom? Am I boiling hot in my love for Christ? Is my service to God a passionate pursue or a careless neglect?” And if you find yourself coming up short, let me give you a few steps you need to take to begin getting your heart right once again. First you need to come to God and ask him to ignite a fire in your heart for him. Start with prayer. Second, dig deep into the Word of God and let your mind drink deep of the wonderful truths of God's love for you in Christ. Saturate yourself with Scripture. And then third, start getting involved in ministry. You don't need to wait for the feelings to come before you act; sometimes by acting the feelings will follow. So if you've been lethargic in your service and devotion to God, the best way to get over it is to choose to do something different and start by serving in a new way. Do not settle for sitting on your hands and doing nothing if you're slothful in zeal and not fervent in spirit. Jesus' warning to those who are lukewarm is too serious to ignore. Take action and seek God earnestly to change your heart.

Moving on now, Paul mentions three items in v. 12 that could be considered in isolation from each other - as three separated, unrelated commands - but I think they go together and are connected to each other. I think what Paul says in v. 12 hang together as one considers how we're to respond to trials and tribulations. So please look at v. 12 in your Bibles again. Paul tells us, “**Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.**” So our second Christian birthmark we're going to consider is this...

2. Christians rejoice in their hope

The main imperative here in the first clause is a call to rejoice, something which God's people are often called to do throughout Scripture. You'll find invitations to rejoice in

God all throughout the Psalms and especially in Philippians 4:4, where Paul tells us to *“Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, rejoice!”* So Paul’s echoing what he has said before and what we’re call to do elsewhere in Christ: to rejoice.

Rejoicing is the verb form of the noun “joy.” People who feel joy rejoice and those who rejoice do so because joy is bubbling up in their hearts. Paul expects us to be people who have joy and then express that joy through our actions: by rejoicing. So the first thing we need to recognize here is that joy is something that should characterize us as Christians. Joyfulness is a Christian birthmark. We ought not be sour, moody, dark and dreary people. Even in the midst of difficult circumstances and trials, we should be marked by a joyfulness that shines forth.

Now this joy isn’t a fake, “put on a happy face” or “grin and bear it” façade. It’s not a call to look happy and cheerful just to present to others a good front. It’s a genuine joy that is rooted in something real, and that reality that our joy is fixed upon is our **“hope.”** We are called to be those who **“rejoice in hope.”** And what is our hope? Our hope is in Christ. Our hope is the salvation he gives us, the forgiveness of sin and the resurrection of our bodies fit for eternal life with him. We don’t have that yet: we have the down payment in that we have the Spirit dwelling in us, causing us to be born again so the penalty of sin have been paid and the power of sin has been broken, but we don’t possess the fulness of it yet. We know our team is going to win, but we’re still in the third quarter. It’s coming, but it’s still out there, still awaiting us. We have been saved and are being saved and will one day be saved, fully and finally. That’s our hope.

But because our hope is certain – not a guess or wishful thinking that we hope maybe, possibly will happen but we can’t really be too sure of it – because our hope of salvation is certain we can rejoice in the present because it’s coming for us, guaranteed. So what that means is during the trials and sufferings of this life – which is what I think Paul has in mind here because he mentions tribulation right after this – we can rejoice in spite of our circumstances because we know our hope will not fail us. We know what’s to come and it far surpasses any temporary situation we face. What God has laid upon you on earth pales in comparison to what God has laid up for you in heaven,

It’s important to be reminded of this because we can easily become overwhelmed by the struggles and frustrations of life. I know that’s certainly true of me. I have to fight to remind myself of the hope I have because life can bring me down. It can discourage me at times and I can wallow in my misery more readily than take joy in what Christ has promised me. You all know how it is. I’m not a special case. We need passages like this to awaken us to the reality that no matter what we’re going through, we can be joyful because our hope cannot be taken from us. It is preserved for us secure, where rust and moth cannot destroy nor thieves break in and steal. The promises of eternal life are never threatened by our circumstances but they cause us to forget the reason we have to rejoice, and so we need to be reminded of this, to **“rejoice in hope.”**

So Grace Fellowship, rejoice, because your God has saved you. He has redeemed you from the penalty of sin through the cross. He has given you his Spirit to indwell in you so you can live free from sin’s enslavement. He has a glorified resurrected body

awaiting you after you die, that will never grow old and will be fit to live in his presence for all eternity. Fight for joy in your life. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by whatever it is you're going through nor should you allow your temporary circumstances to set the agenda for your feelings. Reflect upon the staggeringly amazing promises God has given to you in Christ and rejoice in those. We are Christians and so we have every reason to brush away the clouds of despair and live daily in the sunlight of the joy of the hope we have in Christ.

And we have to fight for joy because as we all know, life is full of trials and tribulations this side of heaven. So when facing those struggles, Paul gives us another birthmark that should identify us, and so point number three this morning is this...

3. Christians are patient when enduring tribulation

In the middle of v. 12, Paul instructs us to “**be patient in tribulation.**” God doesn't promise life will be a piece of cake. No matter who you are, at multiples points of your life you will have to deal with people who will cause you trouble, or circumstances that are difficult, or have health issues that are painful and debilitating. And Jesus never said by following him that we'd get a “Get Out of Jail” free card for any of it. Instead, he told us that we'd have to take up our cross and follow him, that people would hate us on account of him, and said point blank to his disciples in John 16:33 that, “*In the world you will have trouble.*”

So what are we to do in the midst of trials and tribulations? “**Be patient.**” We're to “**be patient in tribulation.**” That's hard to do, isn't it? I'm not a terribly patient guy. When I'm going through difficult times, I just want whatever it is to be over. If it's a person, I want them to stop harassing me. If it's a situation, I want to problem resolved. If it's a health issue, I want God to heal me as soon as possible. Once again, I'm probably not unique in that regard. I think it's pretty safe to say that this would be an area that we all have need to grow in.

Then what does it mean to be patient in tribulation? I think we can get some help by going back to that passage I read in John 16 where Jesus told us that in the world, we will have trouble. Let me read the entire verse for you of John 16:33. Jesus says this, “*I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*” We can be patient in our sufferings because our Lord has overcome the world, and that includes our suffering. He is Lord over all. That person at work who is causing trouble for you, the financial struggle you're facing, the health concern that weighs upon you – Christ is sovereign over it. Nothing is spinning out of his control: he's overcome sin, death, and the devil. He will work all things for the good of those who love him, and so we can be patient in the midst of sufferings because we can trust that God will make it right. We can wait for his return when he will make all things new and reconcile all accounts.

You see, we demonstrate our faith when we look patiently to God in our trials. Being patient in tribulation is a Christian birthmark because it reveals to the world that we're trusting in God and not ourselves. It shows that our faith rests in what Christ has done

and what he will do. We don't need to be anxious and afraid because we're trusting the good and sovereign hand of our Lord and Savior to work all things out for our good in accordance with his wise timing and pleasure.

So my friends, if you're facing troubles right now, afflictions of health or circumstances, trials and tribulations that weigh upon your heart, wait on your God. Look to him in faith and trust that he is your ever-present help. You will never face something that escapes his firm, wise, and loving control. That's not to say your trials won't be hard; they may be excruciatingly difficult. God doesn't promise you a trouble-free life. But he has made promises that we're to cling to. The same hope that should cause us to rejoice should also make us patient in affliction because we can rest in the rock-solid certainty of it. In time, God will have his will done in your life, and his will is never to harm you but rather to bless and benefit you, to strengthen you and purify you. So no matter what the trial you're wrestling with right now, wait patiently on God, trusting in him to resolve it in his own timing, according to his infinite wisdom, for your good and his glory.

This then leads us to the final point we have to consider this morning. One of the key ways we pursue a heart of joy and patience is through prayer. So our final Christian birthmark we need to look at is this...

4. Christians are constant in prayer

What Paul says here is similar to what he says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 when he calls believers to "*Pray without ceasing.*" That's basically the same thing he says at the end of v. 12. He calls his Roman readers to "**be constant in prayer.**" I think this makes sense here in this verse because in order for us to be patient in tribulation and to rejoice in hope, we're going to need to be people of prayer. Joy doesn't come naturally for us and neither joy nor patience is our first reaction to trials and tribulations, so it's no wonder Paul calls us to be constant in prayer because we need to be dependent upon God for these things to characterize us. Furthermore, the call to be zealous in our service to God that we talked about in v. 11 depends on relying on God to change our hearts. Jesus said apart from him, we can do nothing, and so we need to remain connected to Christ through consistent prayer.

But what exactly does this mean to "**be constant in prayer**"? Are we to be praying every minute of the day? Does God expect us to have our hands folded and heads bowed down in prayer every waking hour? No, it's not a call to become monks and live in a monastery where we walk around in coarse brown robes and pray all the time. The guy who wrote this letter to the Roman didn't even do that. Paul was busy writing letters and making tents and preaching and planting churches. So like him, we need to work at our jobs and spend time with our families and write out checks and do a million other things that we're responsible for. So it doesn't mean praying every waking minute.

Rather, it means that prayer should be a constant part of your life. It should be what characterizes us overall, such that we easily and readily pray in all kinds of situations and at different times. So let me give a couple of examples. First, it of course includes what we would recognize as typical ways we pray: as part of our personal devotions at

home, when we gather in church or for a Bible study or when we're with a friend who is going through a difficult time and they ask us to pray for them. Regular, disciplined times of prayer should be worked into the daily and weekly fabric of our lives. It looks similar to what we find the early Christians doing in the book of Acts. It says in Acts 2:42 that they *"devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."* They were devoted to praying together. It was a regular habit they had. It was a commitment they made; it didn't just happen haphazardly: they devoted themselves to prayer.

So then, are you devoted to prayer? Have you committed yourself to it in your personal life, such that it is part of your regular daily devotions? Furthermore, is prayer something you are devoted to here at church? Is it part of your weekly practice to gather with your church family to pray? There are many of you who don't come when we pray. We do it every Sunday at 8:30 and once a month we gather for a special time of prayer down in the Large Fellowship Hall. It saddens me to say this but most of our members don't come. There may be some valid reasons that some of you can't make it, but I think those are the exception and not the rule. Most of you who don't come simply don't want to come, because you aren't devoted to prayer. Because if it truly was important to you, you'd find a way to attend, it's that simple. So one clear application of this command to **"be constant in prayer"** is to consistently join with your church family when we pray. It's hard to claim you are obeying this command if you never come to pray with your church family when they're gathered together for prayer.

The second example of how we can be **"constant in prayer"** is by fostering a habit of praying throughout the day in whatever situation we're in. There's a famous little book written by a 17th century monk entitled, "Practicing the Presence of God." In it, he talks about how he would use those moments when his thoughts were free to focus them on prayer, such that he would be lifting up short prayers throughout the day, even while washing dishes or sweeping floors. That little book had a big impact on how I think about prayer and how I can put into practice what Paul is instructing us to do regarding prayer. It helped show me that I can pray at all points throughout the day if I only train my thoughts to go to God when those free moments arise.

Now this is a good habit to try to develop, but it's a hard one. I know I struggle to keep my thoughts from wandering. It's not easy to remember to focus my thoughts on God in prayer when given the chance. And this is made even more difficult because of our cell phones. Most people use those times when they have a moment to themselves to pick up their phones. We've become proficient at practicing the presence of our gadgets and not our God. For example, perhaps you're at a restaurant with a friend or spouse and they leave the table to go to the bathroom. What do you do for those couple of minutes while they're gone? Lots of people will reach for their phone, almost instinctively. But those are God-given moments where we can take that time to commune with God. If we turned our minds to prayer instead of our phone in those situations, could we not make obedience to this a command to be **"constant in prayer"** a reality? If you're able to say about yourself, "I'm constantly on my phone," then by disciplining yourself and refocusing your behaviors, you could just as easily say, "I'm constantly in prayer."

Now I'm not going on a rant here about iPhones or anything – I have one myself – but we need to also be honest about the pull they can have on us, such that we become addicted to them, substituting prayer for phones with our precious opportunities we have with our time. Technology isn't good or bad – only how we use it. But if your phone is not helping you to be constant in prayer, then it's a detriment to your spiritual life, not a help. So I would encourage you to seize those opportunities when you can pray in the pocket moments of life – waiting at a doctor's office, taking a short ride in the car, being alone for a bit while your friends are busy with something else temporarily. We can be **“constant in prayer”** but we need to discipline ourselves to take advantage of those opportunities instead of squandering them away in lesser distractions.

Conclusion

So I need to wrap this up and I want to do so by encouraging you to take to heart these Christian birthmarks we've discussed today. These aren't suggestions. They aren't recommendations that would be really nifty if they were true of us. This is what a life that has been redeemed by God ought to look like. Each of us should be characterized by a zealous, passionate pursue of God and service to him. We're to be a people who are joyful as we recall the hope we have in Christ. We're to suffer patiently through affliction, trusting the hand of our God and sovereign God through whatever we face. And finally, God expects us to be constant in prayer. He doesn't want us to only come to him on rare occasions, such as when we're really desperate for him to get us out of a sticky situation. He expects that prayer will be a hallmark of our lives.

So don't walk away from this sermon without examining your heart. Do these verses describe me? Am I the kind of man or woman this passage says I should be? And if not, what do I need to do to make the changes so that I am?

With those challenges in mind, please bow your head with me and let's go to God in prayer. Let's pray.