

Christian Birthmarks – Part 4

Romans 12:14-15

March 17, 2019

Introduction:

This morning we're continuing on in our exploration of Romans 12 in what I have referred to as "Christian birthmarks." Just as many people have physical birthmarks that can help uniquely identify them, so also should Christians have unique markers that demonstrate they've been born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. But these birthmarks aren't some physical blotch on the skin; rather, Christian birthmarks are recognized by the character of your life. These birthmarks are evidenced by how you think, act, and speak. The second half of Romans 12 is chock-full of these birthmarks. In brief statements, rapidly laid out one after another, we're given identifying markers that should serve as proof that we've been redeemed by Christ and we're now offering our bodies to him as living sacrifices.

So the question each of us should be asking ourselves as we go through these is, "Does my life look like this?" If this were a checklist that someone observing me needed to check off as accurately characterizing me, how many of these boxes would be checked? If I look into the mirror of these verses, can I see my own reflection or are they describing someone I can't recognize at all?

So let's get started by gazing into the mirror of God's Word together by turning open your Bibles with me to Romans 12. This morning we'll be giving our attention to v. 14-15. You can find our passage on pg. 948 of the pew Bibles, should you need to follow along in one of those. Again, we're in Romans 12, which I'll be reading from the ESV, starting at v. 14. **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."**

Now before I draw out any points from this section of Scripture, I need you to recognize the radical nature of what these two verses expect of us, especially the call to bless rather than curse those who persecute you. This passage demands we do something that absolutely cuts against the grain of our natural, sinful inclinations. When people hurt us and make our lives miserable, the last thing we want to do is seek out blessing for them, right? Rather, our normal response is to fight fire with fire, to respond to evil with evil. If you hit me then I'm going to hit you back. So before we go any further, we need to remember that this passage is addressed to those who've been empowered by the Spirit of God to do these things. You first need to experience the life-transforming salvation spoken of in the first eleven chapters of Romans before you can put the commands of Romans 12 into practice.

With that important reminder out of the way, let's get into the details of the passage itself. So our first Christian birthmark we need to consider today is that...

1. Christians bless those who persecute them

Paul says in v. 14, **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."** It's not difficult to hear echoes of Jesus' words here. No doubt Paul is alluding to what

Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount, where he instructed his disciples to, “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matt. 5:44).

Now in light of what Jesus said, I think we need to recognize that the application of this verse isn't limited only to those who persecute us for our faith. While that's the primary application, it certainly also includes anyone who becomes our enemy, even if their opposition towards us may not be related to our faith. So then, does this apply to a supervisor at your job who ridicules you for your belief in Christ, or for those living under an oppressive government that economically penalizes Christian for their beliefs or throws them in prison? Absolutely, yes. But your enemy could also be a neighbor who has a property dispute with you or a Christian at church who opposes something you want to do. We don't need to think that just because we live in a country where we experience minimal persecution that this passage has little relevance for us. We can have people who oppose us for all kinds of reasons, both believers and unbelievers, so this verse has a broad application for anyone who persecutes us or opposes us.

So this describes what a Christian looks like when he faces people who hate him, who oppose him and try to harm him, people who aren't assuming the best and even actively plotting the worst. What identifies you as a Christian when facing such people? Well, her birthmark will stand out because she's the one responding to those persecuting her by blessing rather than cursing them. You can identify him because he's following in the footsteps of his Lord and Savior, who, when facing certain death on a Roman cross, after being mocked and beaten by his persecutors, instead of cursing them he prayed for them saying, “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*”

Jesus is our ultimate example of what this looks like because he modeled it throughout his life. Scripture tells us that “*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*” That's this verse lived out. We were enemies of God. By our sin, we showed that we didn't love God any more than any of the Jews who persecuted Jesus. Yet in spite of being his rebellious enemies, Jesus choose to bless us. He came to teach us about God and reconcile us to him though his atoning death. He blessed us by taking sin's curse upon himself so that we could have a seat at his table, not as his enemies, but as his friends, as adopted sons and daughters of God.

So then, Jesus' example is our example. Paul is inviting us to follow in the footsteps of our Lord who lived this out for us. It's a radical response, but one that reflects the image of God in us like nothing else can, because to bless our enemies instead of curing them, is to do something utterly foreign to the rest of the world.

For example, in one of the best movies you've never seen, the 2001 film entitled *To End All Wars* relates the true story of Earnest Gordon who was a POW under the Japanese during the Second World War. He and his other captive prisoners endured extreme suffering as they were forced to build a railroad to India through the humid jungles of southeast Asia. During their ordeal, these hardened soldiers became Christians and their faith began to transform how they related to their oppressors. In his book upon which the movie was based, Earnest Gordon relates this story.

“We found ourselves on the same track with several carloads of Japanese wounded.... These unfortunates were on their own without medical care. No longer fit for action..., they had been packed into railway cars [to be shipped away]. They were in a shocking state. I have never seen men filthier. Uniforms were encrusted with mud, blood, and excrement. Their wounds, sorely inflamed and full of puss, crawled with maggots....

It was apparent why the Japanese were so cruel to their prisoners. If they didn't care... for their own, why should they care for us? The wounded looked at us forlornly as they sat with their heads resting against the carriages, waiting for death. They had been discarded as expendable, the refuse of war. These were the enemy....

Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their rations and a rag or two, and with water canteens in their hands, went over to the Japanese train. Our guards tried to prevent us... but we ignored them and knelt down by the enemy to give water and food, to clean and bind up their wounds....

I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into their hands. Now these same officers were dressing the enemy's wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace, there in those bloodstained railway cars. God had broken through the barriers of our prejudice and had given us the will to obey His command, ‘Thou shalt love.’”¹

Or consider the story of Ruby Bridges, who was the first African-American to be allowed to attend the all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. The other parents pulled their children out of the school once six-year-old Ruby began to attend and only one teacher, Barbara Henry, agreed to teach her. So for Ruby's first year there, she was in a classroom of one while outside she was greeted every morning by an angry mob who shouted racial slurs at her and threatened to kill her. Each day her teacher would watch Ruby enter the school, past the mob, escorted by National Guardsmen, but one day Mrs. Henry noticed Ruby's lips moving as she made her way through the crowd. When she arrived in the classroom, her teacher said, “I saw your lips moving, but I couldn't make out what you were saying to them.”

Ruby replied, “I wasn't talking to them. I was praying for them.” She went on to explain how she normally prayed for them in the car on the way to school but had forgotten until she was in the crowd. She said she prayed, “God be with me and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.”

Though this command is radical, it's not impossible. If six-year-old Ruby Bridges could pray for the angry mob that cursed her every day, if Christian POWs could heal up the wounds of the enemies who imprisoned them, then what excuse do we have? The love of God in Christ, empowered by the transforming work of the Holy Spirit makes this kind of love, this kind of mercy and grace towards our enemies, possible.

So one of the very practical ways we can do this is to pray for our enemies. Pray for those who oppose you, who persecute you, who are making your life miserable. That's how you start blessing your enemies, just as Jesus said we should. Because here's the truth about praying for someone: it's hard to hate somebody while at the same time praying for them. Have you ever tried to be angry at someone and genuinely pray for their well-being? If you ever have, then you know by experience that you can't do both. Either you'll stop praying or your heart towards them begins to soften.

Let me challenge you to stop right here for a moment and think about who you need to apply this verse to. Is there someone persecuting you? Opposing you? Acting as your enemy? Do you have an image of their face in your minds? That's the person you need to pray for. The real-life application of this verse concerns how you respond to that individual. You especially need to work extra hard at blessing that person with your words and actions. If you've been cursing them in word and deed, it needs to stop. This verse isn't unclear in the slightest in its meaning. Both Paul and Jesus tell us to, **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."** This is what Jesus did with his enemies and therefore it's what his followers are to do as well.

But we might ask, why is this so important? Why should we do this? There's a number of reasons why this is absolutely necessary, four in particular: we need to love, bless, and pray for our enemies because of God first, second for ourselves, third for their sake, and fourth for the good of society. Let me break down each of these for a moment.

First, we do this because God expects it of us. We're created in the image of God to reflect the character of God and nowhere is the love, mercy, and kindness of God seen more clearly than in his gracious response to his enemies. God blessed us when we were his enemies (Romans 5:8 - *"for while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"*) and so we're to do the same. When we bless those who persecute us rather than curse, we bring joy to God's heart because we're reflecting his glorious grace in our lives.

Second, we do this for ourselves because it helps to break the hardening power of bitterness and unforgiveness in our hearts. This is good for us because it forces us to confront the sinful desires that want to lash out against those who hurt us and channels it towards prayer and acts of service instead. Love liberates our hearts; hatred can only enslave us. So for our own sake, for the well-being our own souls, we need to pray for our enemies and bless those who persecute us.

Third, we need to do this for our enemies because it can soften hearts and demonstrate the undeniable power of the gospel. One of the most powerful evangelistic tools we have is showing the transforming power of Christ in our lives. When we respond to those who hurt us in love rather than hate, when we pray for our enemies and serve them, when we speak words of kindness and respect rather than cursing and insults, people will take notice. It's hard to deny the power of the gospel when you're behaving opposite of what everyone else in the world expects you to do to your enemies. This is the kind of thing that will convict the hearts of unbelievers and will throw open the door to allowing them to receptively listen to the gospel.

Then fourth, we need to do this for the sake of our society. If we only respond to those who hurt us with hurt, then we'll face a never-ending cycle of violence. For example, ever hear of the Hatfields and the McCoys? They were two families in rural Kentucky who had a decades-long feud during the second half of the 19th century, that began over a disagreement about a pig and eventually left 13 people dead. Rather than praying and forgiving, there were years upon years of increasing hostility and violence.

Martin Luther King Jr. understood the danger of this for society and sought to take a Christian approach to the violence perpetrated against blacks in the South by calling them to non-violence and prayer. In his book *Strength to Love*, our *Tolle Lege* from last month, King wrote this,

“Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies – or else? The chain reaction of evil – hate begetting hate, wars producing wars – must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.”

So this is something we need to do: we're to bless rather than curse those who hate us. Christ did this, and so if we're his followers, we need to do the same, to demonstrate the reality of the transformation of the Spirit of God in our hearts. But moving on, in v. 15 we're given another Christian birthmark that gives evidence that we've been born of God, and it applies to how we respond to all people, but especially to your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. So the second Christian birthmark we'll be talking about today is this...

2. Christians empathize with others

Look back in your Bibles at Romans 12:15. It says simply, **“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”** What Paul's describing here are two sides of the same coin: one side is the joy side of the coin, when it speaks of rejoicing, and the other side is the sorrow side, speaking of weeping. But the coin itself is empathy. This verse is ultimately calling us to empathize with others. But allow me define empathy before I go any further. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. To empathize with someone means you're willing to enter into their world of emotions such that you experience in your own heart some of what they're feeling, be it joy or sorrow or whatever other emotion they're going through.

So how do we do this? How do we make sure this is a Christian birthmark that we possess? Well, there are some prerequisites that must take place first before this can happen, things this verse assumes be true, but which we need to unpack so that we're crystal-clear how we're to make this happen.

First, at the most basic level, you need to be in relationship with others in order to show empathy to others. Or to put it another way, Paul is assuming the church here. He's operating with the understanding that these Romans believers are gathering regularly

for worship, prayer, and fellowship with each other. He's assuming they're meeting together in homes, that they've developed friendships with each other, that they're doing life together in community with one another. You cannot show empathy to people you are not in relationship with.

So to begin with, to obey this, you need to have a local church home that you regularly attend. You cannot put this passage into practice if you're sitting at home, listening to a church service on the radio or the internet. Every Christian has been called to be a part of the community of God's people, which is the church. And not the church in an abstract sense but in a real, concrete sense, with people who know your name and whose names you know. The kind of empathy Paul is calling us to demands we be in meaningful relationship with fellow believers. So let me be abundantly clear that you cannot sit at home in isolation and do this. This verse and many, many others can only be obeyed in the context of a local church that you're regularly a part of.

And I need to add, this means more than just being a member or passively attending on Sunday mornings. You can be a member here at Grace Fellowship and come to church every Sunday, but if you just slip in and slip out, if church attendance is nothing more than a box you check on your spiritual to-do list, if your connection to people here never goes beyond a simple handshake and a quick "Hello", then you're failing to obey this passage. Your involvement in the church must extend far beyond just being a warm body that takes up space in a pew for an hour on Sunday morning. Live in community with others in the church. Serve along side them. Invite them over for supper. Spend time with them outside of church.

I understand that you can't be close friends with everyone, but there should be some here with whom you're closer to, who know you well and who you know well. I have many friends in this church, people who I interact with during the week, who I invite over to my home and play games with and go out to eat with. And because of that, these are the people who know me and I know them, in a way that goes well beyond a mere church acquaintance. We all need to those kinds of relationship if we're going to put this passage into practice the way Paul envisioned it.

So that's the first prerequisite that needs to be true if we're to **"rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep:"** we need to be actively involved in a local church where we are forming meaningful relationships with other believers. But once we have those relationships, we cannot be empathetic unless we learn how to practice the second prerequisite that undergirds this passage, and that is we need to know how to listen.

Now when I say "listen" I don't mean "hear." All of you can hear sounds. All of you are hearing the sound of my voice right now. But listening is far more than that. Hearing is a passive activity; listening on the other hand is proactive. True listening engages the other person; it intently tries to understand the other person. Listening means focusing on the individual you're with and instead of looking for pauses where you can interject your own thoughts, you attend to the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of another. It's a shift from focusing on yourself to focusing on someone else.

If you've ever been truly listened to, you understand how important this is. Think of those times when you felt listened to. How did it make you feel? Did it you feel affirmed? Valued? Loved? And then think of those times you didn't feel listened to, when you were constantly interrupted or the person kept using your experience as a springboard to launch into their own experiences or thoughts. How did you feel then? Was it affirming or discouraging? Did it help you or harm you?

One of the single greatest disappointments Karen and I have with people is that they don't know how to listen. It's very rare for us to find people who actually listen well. We do a lot of listening, but rarely do we find ourselves listened to. Karen will attend family get-togethers with her brothers and sisters in Milwaukee and will inevitably come home hurt and angry because nobody will truly listen to her. They'll go on and on about themselves, but never ask her any questions. The reality is most people don't know how to listen, how to stop talking about themselves and attend to another with careful, thoughtful listening.

So you cannot **“rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep”** unless you first listen. You need to enter into their feelings and experiences without bringing your own into it. James 1:19 tells us we should be *“quick to listen and slow to speak”* and that's just another way to say we need to love one another. Listening is loving. And if you don't know how to listen, then you don't know how to love. So that means when someone is talking about the loss of a loved one, you shouldn't launch into your own experience about the death of a family member years ago. Nor should you try to solve their problem, telling them immediately what they should or shouldn't do, which is a problem especially for men because we like to fix things rather than have empathy towards people.

I can remember many years ago where an individual was facing a difficult situation in his family that caused serious sorrow for him. In discussing it as an elder board, the question came up, “What should we do?” The person wanted to try to fix it, to do something about it. But my answer to the question of what should we do was simply, “We need to weep. We need to weep with those who weep.” It wasn't time to fix anything. What we needed was to be present with the individual, to listen, and then shed tears over the situation. To offer advice or tell a tale of our own experience would not have helped. But by listening and entering into his pain, we could share in what he was experiencing and lock our hearts with his in the sorrow he was going through.

Listening is hard work. It takes concentration and mindful engagement to enter into the world of thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another. It means you need to ask them probing questions. It means you're willing to put yourself in their shoes. It means more sentences that begin with “I see your point” than with “But I...” It means more of saying, “That must be really difficult for you” rather than, “Something similar happened to me...” It means you're trying to understand the how's and why's of what they're going through. But when you do so, when you listen well, then you'll discover that you'll indeed rejoice with them in their joy and weep alongside those who are sorrowful. The conversation

won't be about you getting to talk but about understanding them and entering into what they're experiencing. That's what is necessary to obey this: we need to listen to those we're in relationship with.

Every once in awhile I'll come across an article about loneliness and how sociologists say it's an epidemic in American culture. In light of how poor we are at listening, I can see why. A person can be in a room full of people and yet feel completely alone because everyone is more interested in talking about themselves than listening, and that's assuming they get talked to at all.

I have my daughter's permission to share this and so I will because it think it's a highly relevant application of my point. Autumn has been struggling for some time here at church, and without getting all the details about what has brought about her feelings of hurt and frustration, after talking with her in detail about it last week, the bottom line is this: she feels no one talks to her, most notably the older women. She feel neglected and uncared for. She want relationships with other women in the church and yet finds nearly no one comes up to her or shows any interest in her. She feels no one is going out of their way to initiate conversation with her. I'm not talking about her wanting a formal mentoring relationship or anything like that. She just wants to feel she matters, that people here care and are interested in her. She thinks other adults don't want to talk to her because she's a teenager. So she's hurt and disappointed and feels neglected and isolated because she doesn't think anyone here really cares about her.

I wonder how many other teenagers here feel like Autumn? I wonder how many people here regardless of their age feel this way? I share this not because she's my daughter but because we all need to recognize how important this is, to reach out to others and to genuinely listen to them, because while I feel for Autumn, I doubt she is alone. We need to learn to reach out and listen to others if we're going to obey this passage.

Conclusion

So then, these two verses present significant challenges to us. For those who oppose us, it's hard to bless them and pray for them. That's not easy. And to have empathy for others, to listen to them so that their joy and their sorrow becomes part of our own, is also difficult because we often aren't very good listeners. So if these birthmarks are going to be true of us, we first need to go to God and ask him to empower us to do these things. In our sinful flesh, we are vengeful, selfish people who would rather hit those who hit us and talk about ourselves rather than patiently listen to others.

But after asking God to help us, we then need to do it. Obeying these two verses takes work. It demands intentionality on our part. You have to make a conscious choice day by day to love your enemies and pray for those who oppose you. It won't happen naturally. You have to work at it, dying to your self in obedience to God. And rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep can only ever happen if we do the hard work of building relationships with others and then be willing to love them by listening to them.

Listening is skill you need to work at developing because listening is loving and loving is what Christ has called us to do.

Please join me now by bowing your heads as we close our time together in prayer.

Endnotes

1. Ernest Gordon, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, as qtd. in R. Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories and Quotes* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998), 68-69.

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