

“Love, not lists” A sermon by Lee Ireland  
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church  
September 3, 2017 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Romans 12:9-21

Let us pray together: **Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.**

When you heard the scripture I just read and followed along on the screen, what stuck in your mind? Did you focus on the verses about love: **Let love be genuine; love one another with mutual affection?** Or did you see or hear a long list of ‘dos and do not’s’:

From these verses, you might say it’s easy to think of Christianity as a list of rules – dos and do not’s: **be patient in suffering, contribute to the needs of the saints, bless and do not curse, do not be haughty, do not claim to be wiser than you are, do not repay anyone evil for evil, live peaceably with all, never avenge yourselves, do not be overcome by evil.** The explanatory heading added to this section in my Bible is ‘Marks of a True Christian.’ Is it implied that to be a true Christ-follower you have to do the things listed here? If you do these things will you be a true Christian?

Do you know someone who has said to you that to be a Christian you have to behave in a particular way? Has someone else told you you’re not a Christian if you don’t believe exactly as that person believes? Is it easier to turn Christianity into a set of rules than to open your heart to love someone- love your neighbor as yourself?

Is Paul telling us in these verses that each of us must believe and act in a certain way? Let’s remember that Paul was a very intelligent person who was a member of the Pharisees before his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Though the Pharisees were probably the most liberal of the Jewish groups in Jesus’ day, they were still the ones Jesus called out for creating rules and enforcing them at all costs instead of looking at people with love and forgiveness.

Could Paul’s background as a Pharisee be showing with this list of the ‘Marks of a True Christian’? No, I don’t think so. I don’t believe that Paul is telling us how to act and believe. He’s being descriptive, not prescriptive.

So, what are we to make of this scripture with a heading of the ‘Marks of a True Christian’? You probably remember that last Sunday we read the previous verses in Romans, Chapter 12, verses 1-9, where we learned that we must depend on each other to do God’s work in the world. As Christ-followers, we make up the body of Christ here on earth and each of us contributes to that body with our God-given talents. We also learned that we depend on each other for our growth in faith. We learned we need each other to be a Christian community both in faith and in action!

Now in the verses I read today Paul is giving us a bit of the detail as to what that Christian community looks like. **Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; associate with the lowly, take thought for what is noble in the sight of all, live peaceably with all.** Perhaps a better way to think about this scripture is to think of it as a partial list of the traits of a Christ-follower, of a community of Christ-followers.

But these traits, both the dos and the do nots, don't just sit there by themselves. Paul begins this section of Romans with words that we need to examine, words that we need to use as a filter when considering these traits. Paul writes: **Let love be genuine; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.** If we love one another with genuine love and as Paul said, 'outdo one another in showing honor': if we contribute to the needs of our fellow Christ-followers and extend hospitality to strangers; would we be the type of Christian community we discussed last week? I think so!

The key here is love. The key is what's in our hearts. The Pharisees didn't have love in their hearts, only rules. You may remember what Jesus said when he healed the man with the shriveled hand in Mark 3: 1-5: **Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They [probably the Pharisees] watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.**

Jesus was grieved at the lack of love in the hearts of the Pharisees who wanted to follow rules. So today and forever, let's not grieve Jesus, but love one another with mutual affection, outdoing one another in showing honor. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Just a reminder: it's love not lists.