

97-04-13b

Okay, we're back from our break and we're continuing our observations in Romans chapter 12. And as we have seen both last week and this week, it isn't a matter of trying to figure out what Paul is asking for in chapter 12. It's much more a matter of figuring out how to fulfill this calling, how to genuinely produce the obedience of faith.

And the key to that, of course, is one that is often overlooked, and that is to concentrate on our faith. And that's why we believe that it is valid to concentrate and to set a priority on the study of the Word of God and on meditation in the Word of God. And one of the risks that we run, as those who do value the study of the Word of God, is to remember that it's not just the study, but also the end for which we study that is important.

And that is, it's not enough to simply take in or assimilate the Word, but it ought to be making a difference in our thinking. This is really what Paul is calling us to in chapter 12, is that if you do ask and seek and knock, and if you do pursue an understanding of the Word of God, then it ought to make a difference. We ought to be different.

We ought to have more peace. If we wind up at odds with other believers, who is it that ought to be taking the high road? Who is it that ought to be more relaxed? Who is it that ought to be more flexible? Who should be the first to put others ahead of himself? It should be us. If we are all that we think we are, if we are in fact latching on to the genuine nature of God's plan and the real truth of the Word of God, then it ought to make a difference.

We ought to have a peace. We ought to have a joy. We ought to have a power in our lives that exceeds people who don't understand these things.

And if we look at ourselves and say, you know, I've had all these thousands of hours of Bible study, but when it comes to facing a crisis or getting through a day or facing a pressure, I fall apart and unravel just like everybody else. That ought to alarm us. It ought to draw us up short and make us ask the question, where have I missed my calling? Where have I missed the closure of that loop of faith and hope and love? And we always have to start with faith because faith is the means.

And it's a real thing. It's not an abstract. It's not just, well, I have my Bible in my hand or I have my notebook on the shelf or I heard a lesson or I read a book.

Faith is taking the information, the principles and the promises and the doctrines, the truth of the Word of God, and saying, if that is the case, how should I then live? And if Francis Schaeffer had not already written a book and given it that title, a wonderful book could be written on how should we then live in the light of these things. It ought to make a difference. And that's the difference that Paul is pointing out when he says in verse 9, it's a wonderful, this would be a great verse to just put in the Greek on your wall because there are just two words here and that's love and

unhypocritical in verse 9. Love, unhypocritical.

No hypocrisy, no false motivation, no subterfuge, no hidden motives, no strings. We love because it's a reflection of what's on the inside. When we're under pressure, when we're in tribulation, when we're facing an obnoxious person or a bad situation, what spills out of our soul is love because that's what we're made of.

That's what's going on in our soul. And where does that love come from? We know it comes from faith and it comes from hope. So we have to already have done the faith routine.

We have to already have developed the hope and the confident expectation. We already have to have that viewpoint in our soul so that when this pressure hits, love is what issues forth from us. And it's not hypocritical.

We're not seething and boiling and unhappy and grumbling on the inside as we do these things. It's genuine right to the core. What we're doing is a reflection of who we are because of that faith and hope cycle.

And if we see ourselves doing anything else, it would be better to stop. It would be better to suspend a ministry. It would be better to stop an action than to do it for the wrong reasons because if it's not issuing from faith, it's displeasing to God.

It's sin. Love has to be without hypocrisy. We have to abhor what is evil.

We have to get away from it, separate from it, stop it, and cling to what is good. And with that in place, and let's assume for the moment that we are progressing and operating in that way and we do have the Word of God and it is making a difference and we say, okay, I am going to set this priority. I do trust God.

I think God will vindicate me. God will look out for me. God will provide for me.

God will resolve this issue for me if I trust Him to do it. And if I function in love, if I am doing this with my eyes on God and with my expectations in God, God will judge. God will vindicate.

God will provide. God will defend me. I don't have to defend myself.

I don't have to look out for myself in this area. And we do that. We can be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love and in honor give preference to one another because we have our eyes on God and we know that if there is anything coming to us, the old principle, if God promotes you, you are genuinely promoted.

And if God doesn't promote you, you are not promoted. The only things that can come to us in a genuine and meaningful way are things that come from God anyway. So why would we look to someone else to advance us or to promote us or to take care of us in some fashion? We can give

preference to one another, not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

That's the whole key is that our service toward one another is really serving the Lord. We treat it as though Jesus Christ had walked into the room and said, Would you mind doing this for me? Could you go over and take care of this person? Could you go over and let this person do what they're doing? Let them have their way. Just be at peace.

Keep your joy. Keep your peace. Operate in patience.

Don't worry about this situation. Can you do that for me? And if the Lord came and addressed a specific situation in our life and said, Would you please just trust the Father in this situation and take it for granted that He knows this and He's already figured out the end. He knows how it's all going to turn out.

Just rest in that. Could we do it? Hopefully we could and hopefully we can because that's exactly what we are called to. And that's the triumph and that's the victory of our life.

That's where our calling is fulfilled. It's not in evangelizing the world. It's not in influencing one another for good.

It's not in making an impact or any of the other physical measures that are so much a part of popular Christianity today. Our calling is to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. It is to be renewed in the inner man, to put on the new man that is created in righteousness, to bear the fruit in the soul of love and joy and peace and patience.

We need these occasions. How can you bear the fruit of patience and long-suffering if you're never in a situation that calls for patience and long-suffering? How can you be self-sacrificing if you're never placed in a situation where there's a need for self-sacrifice? How can you be loving to the unlovely unless you come in contact with the unlovely? It's a necessary thing. And here is the chance to serve God.

God allows this into our life and this is our opportunity. This is where we begin to see the possibility of rejoicing in tribulation, of welcoming the chance to bear this kind of fruit. How could I be joyful in tribulation unless God allowed some tribulation in? It's all in how you look at it.

Is it a bad thing or a good thing? Is it an injustice and a wrong that has been done me and I'm going to get upset about it and I'm going to fume and fret and stew and worry over it like a dog with a bone? Or am I going to look at it as, now here's a chance that God has given me to show what's in my soul. Here's a chance to serve Him. Here's an opportunity.

This is it. It's got neon signs and big international distress orange markings all over it that say, here's the test. Here's the opportunity.

You're on. Somebody else has queued off the stage. Now you're there.

Here's your chance. Here's your chance to serve God. Here's your chance to reflect His glory.

Here's your chance to operate in faith and hope and love. And it all depends on what's most real to us. Are our circumstances real or is the plan and purpose of God more real? What does that go back to? It goes back to faith.

This is the obedience of faith. Rejoice in hope. Patient in tribulation.

Continuing steadfastly in prayer. One of the underused resources that we have in the plan of God is prayer. We've talked about prayer a little bit in the past and by way of reminder, remember that prayer is not our means of going to God and getting Him to change the circumstances, is it? This person is being unjust.

This situation is unjust. I'm under pressure. All is not going well.

And we say, oh God, take this away. Change it. Make it go away so that I'm not under pressure anymore.

We're saying, oh God, I don't want to be on the stage. I don't want to reflect Your glory. I don't want to have the obedience of faith.

I don't want the occasion to even come up. Just keep me in the cradle. Keep me swaying gently in the breeze with all going well.

I don't want to participate in the conflict. I don't want to be a combatant in the spiritual realm. I don't want to wage war against the principalities and powers.

I want to be back in the rear with the gear, doing something safe and non-stressful. What is prayer? Prayer, if we can't just ask for God to take the stress away, then why would we continue steadfastly in prayer? Prayer is our half of the conversation with God, isn't it? The most wonderful conversations that we have with one another are often when we are exploring an issue together. And when we find areas of agreement, we see things the same way.

We are of the same mind. It's one of the great benefits of Christian fellowship. We bring something up and discuss it.

And although we have different experiences and maybe slightly different perspectives on things, we find that we agree on the substance of things. And our prayer with God, our communion with God in prayer, is an agreement with God about His viewpoint and His perspective, which is a viewpoint and a perspective that we should share. But it's wonderful to bring these things out in conversation.

Many times we know that we share a viewpoint and we share an understanding of things, but there is a blessing in bringing it out in conversation because it's reinforced. And in the act of

discussing something, it stimulates our thinking. We're suddenly thinking more about something than just taking it for granted.

And when we go to the Lord in prayer and we say, Lord, here's this situation. I know this is an opportunity for me. I know that this is an occasion that You have allowed or caused in my life so that I can trust in You.

I know that this person or this situation is unlovely. It's not a bright spot in my day. And as we start to converse with God about this in prayer, it is a stimulation to our own thinking.

It reminds us of things that we know, but if we just don't think about it, they don't come up and provide that strength that is a part of the truth of God. You may recall a time or two when I, every time I think personally about this issue of all truth is God's truth, the big contrast between general truth in the universe or in the earth, in the world, versus the truth of God is that the truth of God has inherent divine power. And when we go to the Lord in prayer and we mention to Him the principles and the promises and the doctrines that He has communicated to us, the very act of handling those in our soul, they are like radioactive materials.

They have divine power. And when we bring those up and have them in our hands as we talk with the Lord, the power of divine truth radiates in our soul and it changes our thinking and changes our perspective. And prayer is an opportunity.

It is an exercise in bringing these things up, bringing them to our own mind as we commune with the Lord. Who would be a better person to have a conversation with about the truth of God than God Himself? And when we do that in prayer, that activates the power of those things in our soul. It's not enough to have heard a divine truth and to have accepted it as fact.

We have to have it as a part of our conscious thinking as we're going through the test. And that's one of the things that continuing steadfastly in prayer does for us, because when we pray, we should be going before God and as we go before Him, being conscious of the fact that our viewpoint needs to match His. And so when we bring this subject up, we bring this situation up or this person up, and we say, Lord, here's this situation.

This is causing me some stress. I feel pressure in this area. And then we start talking to Him about what we know.

We know where they stand. We know what's required of us. And we tell the Lord, I'm having trouble keeping a grip on this thing.

I'm having trouble remembering that love should be based on who and what I am and not who and what this person is, that there is a principle of self-sacrifice, and that I do need to be trusting You, that You will provide, that You will vindicate. You've made promises. You see and hear in Heaven.

You know what this is doing. You know where the justice is. You know where the injustice is.

And just in the process of rehearsing those things, we find the peace of God entering our soul, and we find our joy returning, and we find the ability to put these things in perspective and to let them go and to be all of the things that this passage calls us to be. So another important point, we recognize, first of all, like we saw in our first lesson, that this is obedience that springs from faith, and we've got to focus on the process of our own faith. We have to remember the Word of God and make it the object of faith, make it our reality and live in the light of it.

Secondly, we don't want to underestimate the importance of prayer, continuing steadfastly in prayer is one of the keys to making this work. It isn't continuing steadfastly in close personal fellowship with another believer. It isn't personal accountability.

It isn't small group. It isn't discipleship and let me mentor you and let me impact you for good. This is communion with God.

We are our own priests. We are our own representatives. Jesus Christ has given us access to the Holy of Holies.

We have an anchor that extends behind the veil to the very presence of God Himself. We're not the bread on the golden table in the holy place and God's presence is in the Holy of Holies and in between you have this big veil. We have entered with Christ behind the veil and we're right there with the Father and He should be our first place of fellowship, our first source of strength, our first person to converse with and to receive encouragement and comfort and motivation.

Remember what Paul says that through the encouragement and comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope? That's God talking with us and us talking with God. So distributing to the needs of the saints, giving to hospitality, blessing those who persecute and so forth. One of the ways that we do that is continuing steadfastly in prayer, laying these things before God and right away, just like when we talk to each other, if you bring up a subject when you're talking to someone else, we immediately think about what that person thinks about that subject.

Do they like this or do they dislike it? And that conditions how we talk about it. When we take somebody, all of us have done this sometime, when you're attending a big church and there are pews and a pulpit and a whole bit and you take someone and you want them to come and listen or maybe they're going to hear a tape of a lesson and you're listening with them. Well, immediately you start hearing everything through the ears of that person, don't you? And you're thinking, well, I wonder what they're going to think about that.

Oh, I bet they're not going to like this. I've heard them say this before. I bet they're really going to like that.

They're going to identify with this. And we start thinking about everything through the eyes and

the ears of this other person. Well, same thing with God.

When we start bringing these things before God, we start looking at it with the eyes and ears of God and that rehabilitates our own viewpoint. And because we do that, we are going to be able to minister to the needs of the saints. There's a great song that was written many years ago that you've probably heard where the main refrain of it is talking about God.

It's set to the tune of Danny Boy. And it says, talking about God, it says, He looked beyond my faults and saw my need. That's what we should be doing with one another is looking beyond the faults and seeing the needs.

And that's why this next section says, distributing to the needs of the saints or ministering, being aware of the needs. We all have faults. Can we look past our faults and see the needs? If someone is obnoxious, if someone pesters us, if someone is constantly coming up and abrading our nerves or whatever, and we think, boy, that's really a fault.

That's a flaw that person has. They're constantly coming up and they're wanting to gossip or they're wanting to talk about other people. And I know that that's wrong and I don't want to participate in that.

I don't want to join in with gossip and so on. Yet every time this person is around me, all they want to do is talk and it always seems to trend toward criticism of other people and so forth. And we see that as a fault.

Do we ever look beyond the fault and see the need? Is this person hungry for fellowship? And maybe that's the only kind of fellowship they've ever had is, I want to have something to talk about. Well, let's talk about other people. And maybe there is the need for encouragement.

Maybe there's the need for fellowship. Maybe there's the need for communion and the opportunity for speaking the truth in love. And can we look beyond the fault and see that there's a need there? And if we can find a way to turn the conversation into constructive channels, this person's need for contact with other believers can be met as an example.

But that's what love does. Love says, I can look past this bad thing, this wrong thing, this thing that annoys me or grates on my nerves and realize that maybe the reason this person is... We do this with children. We see children who disobey and even a primitive level of psychology tells you that sometimes a child is so hungry for attention that they'll do bad things because they get attention.

Even though it's bad attention, at least it's attention. And so they'll disobey because they just want somebody to pay attention to them. And when they're not disobeying, they don't get what they need.

And it's been very helpful even in the secular realm to realize this and to pay more attention and

spend more time with a child. And a lot of times their level of disobedience will drop because that need is being met. Well, the same thing happens in the spiritual realm.

So given to hospitality, distributing to the needs of the saints, whatever that may be, people may just need time. They may need fellowship. They may need encouragement.

They may need prayer. They may need to hear the truth that is spoken in love. And we have to put up with things to do that sometimes.

And that's what love and that's what this kind of orientation is going to allow us to do. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse.

This is a tall order and we cannot do this apart from faith. We have to trust that if there's any cursing that needs to be done, God will do it. If there's any disciplining that needs to be done, God will do it.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

We have to have the ability to put ourselves in someone else's position, to empathize with them. And this is an outward looking type of sensitivity. We're not looking around saying, I'm weeping.

How come nobody else is weeping with me? I'm happy and I want everybody else to rejoice with me. We instead are busying ourselves looking at where others are. Be of the same mind toward one another.

Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. This is the antithesis of what we saw in Romans chapter 2. I am the lighthouse on the shore guiding all of these stray boats into where they need to be.

We're not high minded. We're willing to associate with the humble, with those who are impoverished, with those who are not glamorous, with those who aren't particularly noteworthy, who don't shine. We don't see this much in popular Christianity.

We tend to want to associate with the celebrities. We find that some celebrity has become a Christian or is a Christian and that's who we want to put on the podium. That's who we want to mention.

Oh, you know at our church we had so-and-so speaking the other day. This person that you know and have heard of and seen on TV. They were at our church.

We tend to want to associate ourselves with that. We want to associate ourselves with popular ministries. We want to associate ourselves with successful and popular things.

I think this is one of the reasons that a lot of times when you ask somebody what is the nature of their faith and they'll say, well, I'm this sort of an ist or I believe in this kind of an ism instead of simply saying I'm a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. They say, well, I'm part of this denomination. I'm a part of this theological persuasion.

Why is that? Well, we want to associate with something that's well thought of, something that people will respect. We want to associate ourselves and sort of get that to rub off on us instead of just saying, well, you know. Paul says, associate with the humble.

Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.

And he is looking squarely at the case where we are receiving evil from some quarter. He says, you're going to receive evil. Don't give evil back.

Give good back. We can't do that apart from faith because we have to believe that where this evil is existing, God is going to address it. It's God's place.

It's God's time. This is what David did with Saul. David did not burn down Saul's castle.

David didn't physically attack Saul on the occasions when he had the opportunity. David didn't bad mouth Saul. David didn't undercut his authority.

David didn't try to rouse the rabble to revolt against Saul and say, I've been anointed by God to be the next king. Let's overthrow the current evil king. David returned good.

David was loyal to Saul. David served in his army as a good general and did his job as unto the Lord. He didn't tell his men, well, we're serving an evil king, so just pay attention to me and ignore him.

David didn't do that. We're not to do it either. Repay no one evil for evil.

Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. And this goes back to what we saw in verse 9. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.

And this goes back to what we mentioned in the first session. It's never the case that something is all black or that something is all white. There is no ministry that's 100% perfect in the eyes of God.

There's no ministry of the Word of God or the things of Christ that is 100% evil in the sight of God. You think of the worst denomination, the worst TV ministry, the worst thing in Christianity that you can think of, the thing that you want to get as far away from as you can. And if you look at it closely, there is something good there.

They may be abusing the Scriptures or misinterpreting them, but at least they're in the Scripture. They're not teaching human wisdom. They're in the Scriptures.

They're at least looking at the Bible. They may be messing everything else up, but maybe they do give the Gospel. We are guilty often of characterizing something.

We find a smudge on the pot and we say, the whole pot is bad. Throw it out. Have nothing more to do with it.

We can look at ourselves that way and say, I've got a flaw in this area. I'm worthless. I'm hopeless.

God can't use me for anything because I've got this area where I'm weak or someone else is weak. And we say, can't have anything to do with them. There's no good coming of that because here's this area of weakness.

We have to realize that in everything there's going to be a mix because we're in a fallen world and God's in the process of rehabilitating. So we cling to what is good and we shun what is evil. If there's an organization, if they're doing a good thing, we can encourage and participate in that good thing, but we shy away from what is evil.

I mentioned the promise keepers in the first session. They encourage Bible study. They encourage participation in the local church.

Those are good things and I encourage that and I welcome that and I'm happy to talk with them about that. But when they try to motivate one another with peer pressure, that's evil and I shun that and I stay away from it and I don't have anything to do with it. It's one of the reasons I don't go to their meetings because that goes on.

But they do good things and I can support and encourage the good that they do. That's what we're called to do here. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.

If somebody says, what's your opinion of X? Well, try to think of the good things and emphasize the good as something they do. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men to the extent that we have it in our power, we should encourage, seek and live in peace. And that's with all men, not just believers.

And Paul is broadening his scope here to look at not only the realm of believers that he's been talking about thus far, but also now to the rest of the world. And when we pick up next time, we're going to see in chapter 13, the tail end of chapter 12, and in chapter 13, that now that we've addressed our relations with one another as brethren, we will now look at what our responsibilities are to the rest of the world. But let's close here in prayer.

Father, we thank You that You have not left us alone in the world. Christ said He would not leave

us orphans, but that He would come to us, and He does come to us through the ministry of God, the Holy Spirit, and the Word that is present in our soul. We thank You for that ministry.

We thank You for that power that comes from You. And we pray that we will be sensitive to these things in the daily battles of life, the things that we encounter, both good and bad. We pray that as a result of having seen these things and having the opportunity to meditate on them and think about them in the context of our challenges, that we will be transformed in our thinking, that our view of life will more closely align itself with Yours, and that as a result, we will be able to reflect and exercise genuine love toward our fellow believers and toward the world in general.

We pray that our lives will reflect Your glory in that way. We pray that the Holy Spirit will constantly remind us of the reality of these things and give us that foundation and grounding of faith that makes all of these things possible. We thank You for the hope that we have of vindication from You, that You have all of these circumstances under Your absolute control, that there is no test that befalls us but those that You have allowed and that You have provided a way of escape from.

And we pray that the reality of these things will impress us to the point of faith, to the point of hope, and the ultimate result, which is love. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.