

Romans 12:9-21 – What Are You Living For? – Pentecost 14 – August 30, 2026

+In Nomine Iesu+

I saw a T-shirt recently with the image of Medusa. You remember. Medusa was the famous villain in Greek mythology known for having living snakes for hair. And if she caught your gaze, you would turn into stone. On the shirt—with a scowl on her face—and her hair a brood of vipers—she says, “First of all, I am a delight.”

This is a real perspective out there in our world—that we have every right to be difficult and demanding—filled with rage—and everyone else should just put up with it. We can be biting, sarcastic, and condescending—because that is just who we are—and because life hasn’t been fair to us. We shouldn’t have to change for anyone. And we certainly shouldn’t have to suffer any consequences for our attitudes.

Now, maybe you know people like this. Just daring someone to wrong them—and then they will unleash their fury. And this reveals a more fundamental problem. Even in our rage, we desperately want to think that other people are worse than us. They are the problem. We’ve been taught to villainize one another. We are very willing to be offended and angry.

And maybe it even feels reasonable. It’s a rough world out there. If we don’t look out for ourselves—who will? Our defensiveness becomes a shield against pain and disappointment. It becomes a way to get our needs met. We can do this passive-aggressively with self-pity too. But today, I invite you to reposition your gaze. Let’s find a healthier place to live.

We have been reading through Romans this summer with our Epistle Readings. I haven’t really preached on these texts since we are studying Romans in our Tuesday Bible study. But I thought I would give some attention to Romans 12 today. Remember how it starts. This was our reading last week.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

After eleven chapters explaining original sin—and God’s solution for it in the Gospel—Paul now calls us to sanctification. This is still God’s work in us. He renews our minds. And the Christian life is giving ourselves completely over to God and His ways. It is to live in the grace that He has given us in Jesus Christ. We have been forgiven much. We must remember that. And this becomes the source of healthy relationships with others.

I appreciate the pairing of this passage in Romans with our Gospel reading today as well—especially the second half of our reading. Here, Jesus says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

To follow Christ is self-denial. We no longer live for ourselves. We belong to Christ. He meets all of our needs. And He is our sure defense. And this means we do not have to be so defensive with one another.

And so, in our reading from Romans, Paul gets specific. He tells us the kind of life we have in Christ. He defines our attitudes and actions. He says, “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.” And the list keeps going.

Now the exhortations that Paul gives in verses 9-13 seem to be quite random. It feels like he just throws all of his ideas out there haphazardly. But they are actually arranged quite carefully. Specifically, verse 9 introduces love in a general way. And the verses following show how love is expressed. And what we find is that love is both genuine and careful. It is concerned with what is good. And Paul shows how it operates in nine specific areas.

Now, I won’t go on and preach a nine-point sermon. I’ll just pick up on a few of these ideas. And I won’t bore you with the grammatical details either. As tempting as that is. Paul does something unusual here. But I did read one translation that tried to make sense of it.

“In brotherly love being kindly affectioned to one another, in honor preferring one another, in zeal not flagging, in spirit fervent, serving the Lord, in hope rejoicing, in affliction patient, in prayer continuing instant, in the needs of the saints partaking, hospitality pursuing.”

For us, love can be a vague idea. It can be a feeling that comes and goes. It can be directed at self. It can mean we abandon virtue in favor of accommodation. It can be sitting in your basement posting on Facebook demanding the world does things your way—while you do nothing at all.

But for Paul, it starts with Christ. But maybe Jesus still says it best. In John 15, He says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends.” In Christ, we are forgiven. And we are made new—equipped to love, rejoice, contribute, bless, and live rightly ordered lives. All His goodness trounces evil and its deception. And all this He does because He loves, blesses, delivers, and redeems His people.

Jesus Himself put love for God and love for our neighbors at the heart of His New Testament ethics. And based on God’s love for us in Christ, our love is sincere, genuine, oriented around the good of others.

And we are even called to live at peace with one another—as far as it depends on us—and including our enemies. Now, *enemy* can be a difficult term to define. I don’t think he has the person on the opposite side of some national war in mind. It is more like the people who treat us poorly. It is the antagonist at work. It is the person in the family that is just plain difficult.

As far as it depends on us, we are to live at peace with such people. We honor them—as creatures originally made in the image of God. We don’t fight back. We don’t exchange biting remarks for biting remarks. We don’t get offended. We aren’t difficult people. We love our enemies.

Paul offers us one specific way to live at peace with difficult people. And it is also how we keep from being difficult people ourselves. It is found in verse 11. Here, he says, “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.” These three phrases are related—and inform everything else.

Zeal. We heard this word last week in our Epistle reading. The one who leads in the local Church should lead with zeal. And now, we see that this virtue extends to the whole congregation. The proper response to zeal for the things of God is to be zealous—for the things of God. This isn’t just passion—it is passion rightly directed. It is something more like dedication and determination.

Paul contrasts zeal here with sloth—laziness in the things of God. And then he says that we are to serve the Lord. The Spirit drives our passion into action—toward a self-sacrificial and willing submission to Christ.

He is our Lord—our Master—and we serve Him willingly. We give ourselves over to the purposes of God—Paul mentions things like prayer—contribution—and fellowship. This includes our devotional life—and our service to His body, the Church. We should think of our lives as service to God—rather than serving ourselves—or whatever movement or cause is popular online this week. Christ is our King. And that’s a really good place to be.

Let me mention one last exhortation from Paul in this passage. It is foundational to our relationships in the Church, family, and community. Paul tells us to never be wise in our own eyes.

Notice he doesn’t tell us not to be wise. I have always appreciated Jesus’ pithy words in Matthew 10, “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” We are to be wise—but not wise in our own eyes. We are not to be conceited. Or disrespectful. Or proud. Notice, Paul tells us to outdo one another in showing honor. And in this kind of humility, we can live in harmony with one another.

I have always appreciated C.S. Lewis’ commentary on pride in *Mere Christianity*. Pride is a huge problem in the world today. Perhaps we can say it is the lead problem.

Lewis says, “There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. The vice I am talking of is pride or self-conceit: and the virtue opposite to it, in Christian morals, is called humility.”

Paul picks up on so many of the same ideas in Philippians 2. He says, “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”

And so, in summary, let’s not be Medusa—filled with rage—making others walk around us on eggshells. A mature Christian is someone very difficult to offend. We love

those whom God has placed around us—even our enemies. And we leave all vengeance and wrath with God Himself. He will make all things right.

And let's not take ourselves so seriously. Let's not think about ourselves more highly than we ought to think. Let's not be so concerned with looking out for ourselves.

Leave such care with Christ. It is as Paul says in Philippians 4, "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." Instead—set free from obsessing over ourselves—we serve God—and we serve our neighbors. We are winsome, and kind, and genuine. Or as Paul says in Ephesians 4, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

For Paul, it always comes back to Christ. And we should be the same. And so, let's be zealous—passionate about the things of God—His Church, the prayers, the Sacraments, the hymns, the Scriptures—about Christ Himself. These are the perspectives that God works in our hearts. He renews us in the model of His Son.

It has been said, "Spiritual growth is going from having a thin skin and a hard heart to having a thick skin and a tender heart." I like that. Let me say it again. "Spiritual growth is going from having a thin skin and a hard heart to having a thick skin and a tender heart."

In closing, let me leave you with one more word from C.S. Lewis. This is also from *Mere Christianity*. He presents a positive picture which fits nicely with our text today. He presents a healthier way to live—all in the footsteps of Jesus. Practically, Paul's admonitions sound something like this.

"Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him, it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all."

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

+Soli Deo Gloria+