

What Does A Real Christian Look Like?

Romans 12:9-21

Introduction. 1). We live in a day when finding authenticity, the real thing, is more and more of a challenge. So many things are now generic or imitation. Add to that the outright fraud and deception that is more often the rule than the exception, and it is easy to become cynical and skeptical. I heard recently about a man who lied not once, but twice, about his wife who was killed when the World Trade Centers were destroyed on 9-11. The man was not married (*CNN*, 8-03). Finding authenticity and integrity is becoming increasingly difficult it would seem.

2). This condition is not altogether surprising in the world. It is, however, a great tragedy when it takes place in the church. Unfortunately, the church has been influenced by the world more than the world has been influenced by it. If we would be brutally honest, we would have to admit there are too many generic or “imitation” Christians who think, talk and live not a whole lot different than their lost neighbor and co-worker. Things have arrived at this point, I fear, because our churches are filled with unregenerate, lost church members. There are people who have joined the church, been baptized, attend regularly, and even give some money occasionally and yet they are lost, they have never been born again by the Holy Spirit of God.

3). The situation is so desperate we now struggle to answer a basic and fundamental question, “what does a real Christian look like?” What are the characteristics? What is the evidence? There are certainly a number of biblical texts that address this subject, and the passage before us does so in a most excellent fashion. In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul addresses the universal problem of sin; the provision of salvation in 3:21-5:31; the process of sanctification in 6:1-8:39 and the plan of a sovereign God in 9:1-11:36. Then, beginning with ch. 12 he discusses the Christians response to all of this in terms of the transformed life (12:2). The transformed life is a surrendered life in which we present out total self to God as a living sacrifice, being transformed daily by a renewing of our minds. This transformed, radically new life, results in service to one another as we exercise our spiritual gifts (12:3-8). This transformed life also results in a radical character metamorphosis that becomes the very life of Christ in and through us. Paul is not theoretical or mystical when it comes to answering the question, “What does a real Christian look like?” He is practical, concrete and basically in your face. What then does Paul set before us as the non-negotiable, quintessential characteristics of a real deal Christian? He challenges us to live our lives for Jesus in 3 specific ways.

I. Love Others Sincerely. 12:9-13

- These verses are a grammatical goldmine. It is filled to the brim with participles that function like imperatives, as well as a number of direct imperatives, words of command. There are at least 25 that pepper the text. These are not suggestions or friendly advice. These are commands, marching orders for the soldier of Jesus Christ. This is God’s will and expectation for you and me in our daily lives. He begins with sincerity, pointing out what we should love and also what we should hate.

1. Hate What Is Evil. 12:9

- Paul starts with what is most important: love. He tells us love should be sincere, genuine, without hypocrisy (*anhypocritos*). Real love is a matter of the heart, not

the face. Masking your real feelings and intentions with superficial niceties is an act, a charade you will not be able to sustain. Choose to love others as God chose to love you.

- “Abhor” (a strong term for hate, present tense) what is evil. The word has the idea of “shrinking from.” A real Christian will not be passive or indifferent about evil. He will hate it, be repulsed by it. He will despise what injure and harms others and dishonors God.
- Complementing hatred for evil, we will cling (pre.) to what is good. We will cleave, cement, glue, join firmly to those good things as defined by Scripture. As a faithful man or woman will cling only to their mate in marriage, we are to cling only to that which is good, that which will always glorify God.

2. **Honor Others.**

12:10

- “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love.” This command addresses how we treat one another in the family God. “Paul conceives of the church as a family that is even closer than one’s biological family” (Schreiner, 664). Jesus teaches us in John 13:35, “By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
- “In honor give preference to one another” echoes the words of Phil. 2:3. With an attitude of genuine humility we should honor or esteem others ahead of ourselves, our wants, our desires. Such a word is timely and needed in our churches, and also in our marriages. Here is a real key to finding the joy and satisfaction designed by our Creator and Master.

3. **Serve The Lord.**

12:11

- The three commands of this verse are closely connected. They feed and support each other.
- “Not lagging in diligence” speaks to the sin of laziness. We are not to be seduced into slothfulness, inactivity in doing good. Proverbs 26:16 warns us of the foolishness that is the companion to laziness, “The lazy man is wiser in his own eyes, than 7 men who can answer sensibly.”
- The flipside of laziness is fervency. Paul challenges us to be zealous, to burn like a vibrant flame in spirit. Christians are to burn, be red hot in their spirit as the power of the Holy Spirit works in our lives. What is the goal of such fervency, zeal and passion?
- “Serving the Lord.” As a slave to our Savior, we are to bring all of our life under His lordship. His will, His purpose, His plan and purpose for my life is to be my all-consuming passion.

4. **Rejoice With Hope.**

12:12

- We do not live as Christians in despair and dread, gloom and doom. Rather we have a hope, a settled confidence in the sovereign plan and purpose of our God, our Father. Therefore we can rejoice continually in hope, regardless of the circumstances that surround us.
- We can be patient (cont.), bear up under the load of tribulation, the “pressures of life.”
- All of this is possible as we wrap all things in prayer, pouring out our heart to our Father, telling Him that even when we cannot trace His hand, we can still trust His heart. When trials and difficulties hit and hit hard, a Christian living in faith,

living in hope, will respond in a distinctively different way that the lost will not understand. It can be a catalyst in opening their heart to the gospel.

5. Care For Fellow Believers.

12:13

- Two very definite and practical actions will mark the Lord's church: giving to those in need and showing hospitality. Those who are hurting financially, materially, personally and spiritually, and who are a part of our fellowship should have their needs met by us. I am convinced that if we see a brother or sister in need, have the means to meet that need, and do not, we sin, and sin seriously in the sight of God. Wise policies, principles and procedures should certainly guide us in this area, but we dare not neglect it.
- Showing hospitality means we take the initiative in graciously and generously opening our home to others. To friends and strangers alike our home should be open. The author of Hebrews reminds us, "by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels" (Heb. 13:1). Again, wise decision-making is always in order and necessary, but such decisions should flow from a gracious and open heart naturally given to hospitality.

Transition. By these 5 means Paul provides a pattern of how we as real Christians can love others sincerely.

II. Bless Others Graciously.

12:14-16

- There is a clear shift in tone beginning with v. 14. In some sense it will run through the remainder of this chapter, growing in intensity as it moves toward the end. Paul is again quite comprehensive in what he teaches. Living under the lordship of Jesus Christ does not leave off any area of our lives.

1. Be Kind In What You Say.

12:14

- Paul twice commands us to bless (bless is a pre. imp. in both uses) and not curse (also a pre. imp). Paul understands the power of the spoken word to build up or tear down, to help or to harm, to point others, like our children, toward success or failure.

Illustration. Go away. Leave me alone. Not like that stupid. Boy you are really dumb. You can't do anything right. What is the matter with you? You will never grow up to amount to anything. You're a real loser.

- Paul would not limit our words to this kind of personal relationship. In fact, he clearly has in mind those who oppose us, our enemies. His words reflect those of Jesus who in Matt. 5:44 said, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use and persecute you."
- Our words can have a "prophetic quality" laying the foundation for future activity. Be kind in what you say, even if you don't receive a similar word in return.

2. Be Kind In What You Do.

12:15

- Verse 15 is fascinating and probably gives us insight into the depths of the depravity in our heart. "Rejoice with those who rejoice." Why tell us this, and why start with this command rather than the one about weeping with those who weep? John Chrysostom probably got it right when he said the command to rejoice with those who rejoice is placed first because it is more difficult to do! (Schreiner, p. 668). We are usually inclined readily to hurt with those who are

hurting, to sympathize with those who are sorrowing, but envy, wanting what others have and feeling that I deserve to have what others have can seize our heart and hinder us from truly rejoicing when good things happen to others. In Phil. 4:11, Paul says, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.”

Contentment in Christ will free you to rejoice when good things come to others, and to weep when things are not so good as well.

3. Be Kind In How You Think.

12:16

- The key to the Christian life is the mind. Again and again Scripture drives home this truth.
 - Proverbs 23:7 “As a man thinks in his heart so is he.”
 - Rom. 12:2 “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”
 - Phil. 2:5 “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”
- Paul’s words are again reflective of what he wrote to the Philippians (2:3-4). Four words of instruction address our thought life.
- “Be of the same mind” points us in the direction of harmony and unity, but not uniformity. People are different and God has gifted us differently (cf. 12:3-8), yet there will be a oneness of mind as we honor and esteem one another above ourselves (v.10).
- “Do not set your mind on high things” addresses the sins of pride and arrogance. Think rationally, spiritually, have an accurate self-evaluation, knowing who you were without Christ and who you are in Christ. Watch out and be in tune with your aspirations and goals. It is easy to get off track. Remember, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 15:18). Prov. 16:19 adds, “Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil (or gain) with the proud.”
- Paul actually picks up this theme and says, “associate with the humble.” Treat well those who are under you and cannot aid your agenda. This is a true mark of one whose heart is knit to the Lord Jesus. It was He who humbled Himself, becoming obedient to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:7).
- “Do not be (pre. imp.) wise in your own opinions” hits hard at what we think about the person most important to us: me! Do not let yourself be deceived in cultivating an empty opinion of yourself. Never forget who you are and what you have come from the Lord. Don’t get full of yourself.

Transition. Love others sincerely. Bless others graciously.

III. Live With Others Peaceably.

12:17-21

- There is another shift at this point and what amounts to an expanded discussion of v. 14. How we respond to our enemies is a telltale sign of the genuineness of our faith and devotion to Christ. First Peter 2:23 reminds us that when our Lord was scourged and crucified, “when He was reviled, did not revile in return, when He suffered He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.” Here is the pattern for our response as well.

1. Always Do the Good Thing.

12:17-18

- We should not retaliate with evil against evil. When we are wronged on the personal level, we must fight against the urge to get even. Rather do the right and proper thing, the good and kind thing. Respond in a way that all men will see the grace of God in your response.

- Go a step further and as much as you possibly can, pursue peace with everyone. Such peace will not always be possible, but if not, do not let the failure be laid at your feet.
- It is well said that you can tell what you really are not by your actions but your reactions. React with good things and pursue peace regardless of the response of others.

2. **Always Trust The Good God.**

12:19-20

- Paul recognizes the difficulty of doing what he is saying and so he tenderly addresses the Roman church as “beloved.” He then grounds his argument in his ultimate proof: the sovereignty, providence and justice of God. We are not to avenge ourselves, take matters into our own hands. We are instead to give place, space, time to wrath, the wrath and judgment of God. Why? Paul cites Deuteronomy 32:35, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” God says you place the fate and destiny of your enemies in my hands, not yours. Give them to me, I will take care of it and make all things right.
- In verse 20 Paul cites more scripture in support of his position, drawing upon Prov. 25:21-22. If your enemy is hungry feed him, thirsty give him a drink, “for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” This last phrase is unclear and debated. It may mean your enemy will: 1). Experience burning shame and remorse for their wicked behavior toward a Christian when the Christian responds in kindness (Augustine); 2). Show repentance in line with an ancient Egyptian custom in which a person who demonstrates publicly their sorrow and repentance carried a pan of burning coals on their head (Moo); or 3). Experience the fullness of God’s divine wrath and judgment (Chrysostom, Schreiner, 675). The context supports this 3rd option. Just as believers are to refrain from revenge because God will judge (v. 19), so they are to be kind and do good because it is God who will punish their enemies. We don’t have to seek revenge and we are free to do good because a just and sovereign God will at the judgment make things right. Such truth frees us to love others, pray for others, bless others, and do good to others.

3. **Always Pursue The Good End.**

12:21

- Paul’s closing word in this passage is short and concise. Christians must not let the evil that comes their way master them and overpower them (pre. imp). No, we are to master evil and overpower it with good. We can do this when we accept by faith that our God is a righteous and just judge who will make right every wrong and set straight every evil.

Conclusion. I do not know where you are in light of this rather thorough spiritual examination. If you conduct an honest, personal inventory you may say, “I am nothing like this,” and you are most certainly lost, you have never been saved. If you walk through the list and say, “Well, I see some of these characteristics in my life, but not all, and to be honest, that doesn’t really bother me all that much,” then you too are almost certainly lost, you’ve never truly been born again. Why? Because you could not be satisfied with such an answer if you were. Maybe you look all of this over and you say, “I’m doing much of this and getting better, and those areas that I am weak in, I’m not satisfied with that. I long for all of these to be true of my life, I will not rest until each of these characteristics is a real and genuine reality in my life. My Lord deserves my best and nothing less.” You are no doubt a child of God and moving in the right direction of

looking and living like a real Christian. It is sad that the ranks of these kind of Christians is so thin. By the grace of God, for the glory of Christ, and for our good, may we help swell their ranks, increase their numbers, and show the world the real deal, what a real Christian looks like.