

## I. Set Up:

A. This is the final week of our three week focus on Romans 12, the passage that is shaping our year-long focus on renewal. Today Mike will be walking us through Romans 12:14 – the end, with a focus on Christian civility that is just in time for Thanksgiving with your family.

## II. Introduction

A. Last week I filed away a brief devotion from a friend – a high school buddy who played a small part in my coming to faith, who ended up in campus ministry at an Ivy League school. We lost touch for twenty some years and then reconnected a few years ago. He writes a daily devotion that I read most mornings.

1. This one was framed as advice from the Apostle Paul for Thanksgiving. The idea was that, with turkey and football just a few days away, there are some things we can do now to ensure that the worst thing that happens on Thursday is that we eat too much, gain weight and spend several hours in a food coma.

2. In a clever play on words – based on Colossians 3 – he talks about the importance of what we wear to the meal. His suggestion is that we clothe ourselves with mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. That we put on our new nature in Christ.

B. After reading it, I tucked it away for future reference. It's not really my style. A bit too clever. But it fits the passage for today and it allows me to speak to one of my immediate concerns – your upcoming week.

## III. After reading it, I guessed that over the last forty years, my friend has learned some of the same things that I have learned – that is that holidays can be very stressful.

A. Growing up, my family had big gatherings at Thanksgiving – and especially Christmas - with grandparents and great aunts and uncles and cousins, and we had relatively few of what I will call, “extended family dynamics,” and even fewer that I clued into. Consequently, I did not realize until a few years into ministry that not everyone looks forward to holidays.

1. Not every family gets along. Not everyone wants to answer Aunt Polly's questions about their love life, or their job, or how much they weigh. Not everyone wants to be compared to their cousin.

2. Not everyone reads the memo to not drink too much.

3. It turns out that lots of twenty year olds do not want to sit at the kid's table. It turns out that not every twenty-year-old wants to sit at the adult table.

4. It turns out that not every family agrees on politics, CRT or the vaccine.

B. One of my big surprises in becoming a pastor was how hard the Thanksgiving-to-New Years-corner of the calendar turned out to be. Maybe not for you. If you are only excited about the next few weeks, be thankful. You win the holiday lottery! But you still need to pay attention to what I am going to say.

C. If you are somewhat apprehensive, or very anxious, or just out-and-out depressed about the whole thing, you particularly want to pay attention to what Paul writes.

## IV. We are in Romans 12. Last week I noted that:

A. Romans was written by Paul, the zealous Jew who had:

1. Learned that we are saved by grace – he had this profound and dramatic conversion in which he understood that “religion” was a dead end. We cannot be good enough. We cannot earn or merit God’s favor. We need to humble ourselves, admit our sins and embrace Jesus – not just as a life-coach but as Savior and Lord.

2. After he did that, and spent a few years being coached – disciplined - he was appointed an apostle to the Gentiles and he then set out to plant churches. And as he was doing that he wrote a lot of letters to those churches – or people in them – about God and life and the way forward.

B. I also noted that eventually he wrote a letter to the mostly Gentile church in Rome that ends up being many people’s favorite. It is longer and it is profound.

C. And last week I noted that when you get to chapter 12, it pivots to the practical. Last week we continued through the grocery list of things to do. It continues today. Hear it as advice for the week ahead. Hear this as a way to navigate your conversations with your weird Uncle.

1. By the way, every family has a weird Uncle – or Aunt. And if you don’t know who that is for your family, it just might be you. Just saying.

V. Let me walk us through this passage. This advice for your week. Romans 12:14

A. **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.** As you can see, this is immediately counter-cultural and practical stuff.

B. **Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.** By the way, there is a lot of truth to the idea that when we share in the joy of others, joy doubles. And when we share in the pain of others, we cut pain in half. The world would be a lot happier if people “rejoiced with those who rejoice and mourned with those who mourn.”

C. V16: **Live in harmony with one another.** Right, I can see that you have not met my cousin. She will – and here is where you say:

1. She is going to show up at Thanksgiving wearing a MAGA hat;

2. Or she is going to want to praise the last press release from the Squad;

3. Or she is likely going to set her gun on the table and talk about her open carry permit and ask us all to support the NRA;

4. Or she is going to insist that we all try her Vegan turkeyloaf or bring up what was said at the last school board meeting or, whatever she is going to do. How do I get along with her? Well, he keeps going:

D. **Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position** (that is, those others do not want to hang out with. Those others think are somehow beneath them).

E. **Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.** Well, that is impossible! Maybe, but maybe not.

F. And then here is our verse V18. **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.**

G. V 20: **On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

1. This burning coals thing surprises people. It is a first century metaphor that appears a couple times in the Bible. And it is debated. Some say it means that if they act like jerks and you act kindly back, they are likely to have a guilty conscience. They will feel a lot of shame.

2. Burning coals also symbolize judgment and spiritual purification. God is compared often to fire. So another understanding of “burning coals” is that our right response to those who do us harm allows God’s own power and judgment to fall upon that person. When we relinquish to God our right to take revenge, we show faith in God’s justice. He will work this out.

VI. So what are we being told?

A. Let me start by saying, this is not a suggestion that you try kindness. You might hear it that way. I am not against kindness. It certainly beats cruelty. And it is one of the Fruit of the Spirit.

1. It has a lot to commend it. Some of you should give it a try. But this is not simply that. This goes beyond that.

2. This is a call to civility. This is a call to figure out how to get along with people you want to write off. This is a call to decide to love and treat well those with whom you disagree.

B. My views on the importance of civility have changed over the years. I was reminded of that this week in working on the podcast on William Wilberforce.

1. In the Saturday history podcast, I am now moving through the 18<sup>th</sup> century and have taken up the issue of slavery. It was not a fun topic to research. But there were some bright spots. And Wilberforce – who was a young member of parliament when he came to faith, and who was then disciplined by John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*.

2. He did two things. He is most famous for his life-long work to end the slave trade, first in Britain and then in the British Empire – and then beyond.

3. In addition to that he worked to reform manners, culture, civility. He even wrote a book about it:

a) *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians in the Higher and Middle Classes in This Country, Contrasted With Real Christianity.*

4. I was very dismissive of this work. I originally heard it was about manners. Yes, not really. It was all about how we treat each other. And it turns out to be more important than I thought.

VII. It wasn’t just Wilberforce, I had to take a longer look at civility when we hosted a discussion on Pluralism as some of the initial pilot work on the Foundation we are starting.

A. Our interest was more on the format of getting people together for longer, conflicted discussions than the topic. But the topic did force me to think about

1.

B. As an aside, I would direct you to the [Tim Keller and Jonathan Haidt discussion](#) on this as part of a Veritas Forum – I link to it in my sermon notes.<sup>1</sup>

VIII. It turns out, all of this is more important than I thought.

- A. In order to work, we need a society that is civil and virtuous. That is, in fact, the only chance we have for longer-term freedom.
- B. And to that end I think the biggest news is in the first part of Romans 12. It is the call to joyful hope. It is the command to set our mind on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father. It is the command
- C. Men and women, be assured:
1. God wins and that changes everything. It settles everything.
  2. The future is more certain than watching a rerun of yesterday's college football games.
  3. There is no need to be anxious.
  4. Bet on Jesus. Go all in. If you are in Christ, this ends well. We have the promises of God about his kingdom to come.
- D. The biggest part of the answer as to how to live well here and now – as to how we get along with our crazy uncle at Thanksgiving - is to be profoundly shaped by the joyful hope that comes from Christ.
- E. The biggest part of the answer as to how to get along with whoever who says whatever at the Thanksgiving table is to
1. Is to carry hope and joy into that meal, not anxiety or anger.
  2. Remember the illustration about anger. It's like liquid in a glass. And if you are already filled up with anger, it doesn't take much for it to spill out and get all over everyone else. But if you have very little in your glass, you can be jostled without any problems.
- F. We do not need to win now. In fact, let me say it again, if your dream is some version of the American Dream, then do not follow Jesus. He will lead you in the wrong direction. You owe it to yourself to read the Sermon on the Mount and realize, Jesus will lead me somewhere I do not want to go.
1. Blessed are the Poor in Spirit.
  2. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst now.
  3. Blessed are you when men hate you and des.
- G.
- IX. I feel like the big point from Romans 12 comes earlier in Romans 12 – it is that joyful hope that comes in Christ.
- X. What we get as we look at the second half, is almost more of a set of tactics. That is not an entirely fair description. But .
- A. But between now and then, no idea how things unfold. But I know we do not out yell or out argue or
  - B. I know that anger is not a good look.
  - C. ..
- XI. Will this be easy? Can be. Do I think it's challenging out there? Yes. Crazy days and crazy nights. I think all the objective measures suggest as much.
- A. I find myself increasingly drawn to Yeats' poem – his provocative lament:

1. Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere; The ceremony of innocence is  
drowned; The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>2</sup>

B. Yeats was looking at a world ravaged by war:

1. At civilization divided by cultural conflict and at an institutional church unable  
or unwilling to provide the moral leadership required to speak to the problem.

2. The key line in the poem – the most memorable – is the suggestion that the  
center cannot hold. But right behind that is the phrase: the best lack all conviction,  
while the worst are full of passionate intensity.

3. I worry that University of Chicago historian, Martin Marty, is right when he  
observes that “people who are good at being civil often lack strong convictions and  
people who have strong convictions often lack civility.”<sup>3</sup> We Are Called to Live with  
Holy Conviction and to do our best to get along with others.

XII. Look, this has never been easy.

A. Some argue that America has never really been a genuinely pluralistic, perspective-  
diverse, free society. We’ve never been a place where people who deeply differ with one  
another - whose views offend and outrage one another - treat one another with respect and hear  
each other out.

B. Those who have held the reins of cultural power have excluded unpopular voices and  
minority views that fell on the wrong side of the public morality of the day. Many white  
Christians in the 1980’s and 90’s wanted to occupy those places of power and showed little  
concern at the time to create a society that respected communities with sharply differing moral  
visions.

C. Today cultural power has shifted, but those newly come to power seem to show as little  
interest in genuine pluralism as did the cultural elites in the past. If anything, observers argue  
that different perspectives and viewpoints are treated with even less respect and courtesy than  
in the past. The agenda has become not to engage, but to marginalize and silence.

XIII. What will it take to get along in this kind of a world? I think it will take the advice we find in  
Romans 12.

A. I do not think the answer will come with victory in the court room or at the ballot box. I  
am not saying those do not matter, but I am saying, the wins I am looking for will not be won  
there.

B. I believe they will come when we see more love, humility and patience.

C. By the way:

1. Love doesn’t mean we have to go along to get along.

2. Humility doesn’t mean we have to question our own beliefs.

3. Patience doesn’t mean passivity.

D. But it does suggest that we need to stop speaking ill of others, of demonizing them, or  
ascribing evil motives to them.

E. It does mean we should find ways to be humble rather than defensive.

F. It does mean to listen.

XIV. I was asked this last week how to talk about Christ in these contentious conversations. And I  
said, “It is a new day”.

- A. For some that means they are more interested than ever in hearing about Christ because it is increasingly clear that what they were signed up for is not working.
- B. For others it means finding ways to love and support and pray and wait for the Holy Spirit to provide an opening.
- C. There is a person I have . .

XV. Is there hope that families can get along at Thanksgiving?

- A. I don't know about your family, but it seems to me that Romans 12 suggests we be quick accept responsibility for what is going on – that we own our part in all of this. That we own our mistakes and missteps. We may need to apologize for
- B. We need to model the behavior we are hoping for from others.

XVI. Men and women, you are not expected to win the debates this week. You are commanded to love – even your enemies.

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<sup>1</sup> Click [here](#) for my notes on a related discussion between Tim Keller and Jonathan Haidt

<sup>2</sup> William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

<sup>3</sup> Martin E. Marty, *By Way of Response* (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1981).