

Sunday, August 30, 2026

Marks of the True Christian

Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 16:21-28

Quite a few years ago, someone that I thought was a friend started saying some really cruel things about me. I'm not sure why. I thought about how I had treated her and spoke to her. I couldn't see anything that I had done to her, so I could only assume that evil had whispered in her ear and she had believed what she was told.

So, what did I do? Did I call her out? Did I talk badly about her? Did I decide to unfriend her? No. Now, here's where Matthew 6:6 tells me not to tell you what I did. Matthew 6:6 says, *"But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father, who is in secret and your Father, who sees in secret, will reward you."* And I think about Matthew 6:3, *"But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing."*

So, I don't say any of this to brag, to receive some kind of glory; I say it to tell you that we must all learn to be bigger and better than the feelings that come over us.

What I did was pray for her, for peace to overcome her, for our relationship to be restored. And ... God heard and restored what we had!

It's so easy to let the evil of the world crawl inside of us and tell us how our lives would be better, how our bank accounts would be bigger, how we could have grander homes, happier lives if we just behaved like the rest of the world.

It can be too easy to hate the evil of this world and to respond in equally evil and violent ways. It can be too easy to be smug in our righteousness and to have contempt for those with whom we disagree.

We have to be careful that our reactions to the wrong, to the evil in this world are not as violent as the original action, the sin, that we hate. When we face those who do evil with anger, we are more likely to continue and spread that same evil.

So, what is a Christian called to do? We are called to the ways of Jesus.

When Jesus told the disciples what was to happen to Him, the great suffering that He was to endure at the hands of the elders and chief priests, how He would be killed, Peter, horribly upset, said, *"God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."* But Jesus told Peter that he was not to be a stumbling block to Him, that he should set his mind on divine things.

Matthew 16:24 finds Jesus telling us to take up our cross, deny ourselves and to follow Jesus. And how does Jesus live? Jesus responds to those who do evil with forgiveness, with peace, with compassion, mercy and kindness.

There's probably little that seems more absurd and more difficult to do. We have to set aside the violent anger that builds up inside of us when we see wrongs being done, people being ignored or hurt and we are to turn to prayer. We have to follow Jesus' ways so that we have a chance to make a change in this world, a chance to replace evil with good, injustice with justice, war with peace.

Don't get me wrong. We are to **"hate"** the sin. We aren't called to ignore the wrongs of the world, but to instead be more passionate about showing love, about spreading joy. We should not ignore evil; we should fight it with love.

In the Romans passage, Paul is probably speaking to Roman Christians who were facing hatred from their families and friends that couldn't understand the changes that were happening in the lives of their kin. For instance, they were no longer worshipping idols, so they were refusing to attend public events.

That's something we still face as we avoid a lot of the movies and music out there because of their sinfulness and then our families and friends laugh at us for being prudes.

When Paul says to love one another, to live in harmony – he’s not approving evil. So much of what we see today is evil ... divisive, hate-filled speech and violence being right up there. But rather than repaying evil with evil, in verse 17, Paul tells us to *“take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”*

We aren’t called to throw evil words back or, as one writer said, leave bags of dog poop on doorsteps, but we’re not called to be silent either.

A while back, I read about the small German town of Wunseidel, located in northeast Bavaria, which, maybe unknowingly, put Paul’s commands into action. In 2014, sponsors agreed to donate money for each step marched by the Neo-Nazis who came to their town to demonstrate every year. It was billed as Germany’s most involuntary walk-a-thon.

Instead of greeting the group with protests, they put up banners welcoming them to the “Nazis Against Nazis” walk-a-thon. All along the route, the Neo-Nazis were encouraged to keep walking to raise more money. Organizers even put out a table of bananas to help them keep up their energy.

They painted numbers on the ground so the Neo-Nazis could see how much money “they’d helped raise.” They handed out bottles of water so the marchers had the energy to walk farther and raise more money. They made banners that read: “If only the Fuhrer knew!”

At the end of the march, the organizers of the Nazis Against Nazis “walk-a-thon” handed out certificates reminding the Neo-Nazis how much money they had helped raise to fight Nazis ... close to \$12,000 to be used to promote programs to help neo-Nazis defect from the extremist programs. It was so successful, other communities have used the same strategies.

As Paul said in verse 20, *“if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”*

Paul doesn’t call us to be silent nor to ignore evil, but to be creative and loving in our response.

So, the marks of a true Christian ...

Verse 9. *Let love be genuine.* God loves even the sinner and calls to him to turn from his sin, to accept Jesus as his Savior and to allow the Holy Spirit to guide his steps. God gives us until our last breath to turn from evil and accept good. That’s how much we’re loved and how a true Christian loves.

Verse 9b. *Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.* We are to turn our backs on all evil. Pray for the ability to do only good, to be God’s goodness, to be an example of God’s love. Cling to what is good.

Verse 10. *Love one another with mutual affection.* Some versions say brotherly love, implying that this love should be for other Christians, a love filled with kindness and tenderness that is mutual and reciprocal.

I agree with that, but we are to also love our enemies, because they are created by God, without requiring us to spend time with them or to give them gifts or to entertain them. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for them. Prayer changes things and who has the right to limit God’s ability to change the heart of an enemy?

Verse 10b. *Outdo one another in showing honor.* Be the first to show honor and respect, also referring to other Christians. Don’t wait for others to show you respect before you show it. Don’t assume the worst of another Christian. Don’t be jealous of them. Speak honorably about them.

Verse 11. *Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.* Be zealous, be excited about God’s Word, about your prayer life, about hearing and sharing what God has to say to you, about what God calls you to in ministry. True Christians are eager, enthusiastic, and filled with passion as they serve God in any way they are called.

Verse 12. *Rejoice in hope.* There’s my word rejoice – Joy! Have joy in the knowledge that our hope is in the Lord, that when our days are done, we will be with God, that God uses all things for good for those who love Him, that the Spirit is always present in our lives, that we never walk alone.

Verse 12b. *Be patient in suffering.* Sadly, we know that just because we’re Christians it doesn’t mean we’ll escape suffering. What it does mean though, is that we’re not alone. Rather than complaining to God or accusing God of

ignoring us, know that God has given us His Spirit to comfort and uplift us. Be patient through our trials, knowing that our reward in heaven awaits us.

Verse 12c. *Persevere in prayer.* There is always a need for prayer. We pray when someone is sick or going through a rough time. We pray over our food and for safe travels. We should pray for God's guidance; pray in thanksgiving for everything that we receive. Be in constant prayer. Prayer strengthens us. It brings us closer to God and reminds us of His presence!

Verse 13. *Contribute to the needs of the saints.* Food, clothing and shelter, but also include companionship and encouragement. In our love of others, a true Christian does what they can to fill the needs of those around them.

Verse 13b. *Extend hospitality to strangers.* Respect, love, necessities – all to be given cheerfully, in proportion to our ability to give. In Genesis 19:1, Abraham and Lot sheltered two strangers, protecting them from evil, not knowing that they were angels. It's not that we should do good to others just in case they are messengers of God, but it certainly doesn't hurt to think about it that way.

A caveat on this ... if we are not physically, mentally or financially able to open our doors to strangers to allow them to actually live with us, God does not expect it. We are required to do what we can in proportion to our abilities. If we feel it is unsafe to literally let a stranger into our home, there are ways to provide hospitality. We have phone numbers to call to help a stranger find a warm bed and food. We can tell a person how to contact the facilities available to offer them help. Be safe and wise when offering hospitality.

Verse 14. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* Some of us may have felt discrimination or persecution because of our faith. Many have suffered greatly around the world. We are to pray for those who do evil; pray that they see their evil, that they are repentant and turn to Jesus, and that God would forgive them. We are all sinners. Just because some sins are more evident and more hurtful than others, doesn't make our sins any less hurtful to God.

Verse 15. *Rejoice with those who rejoice.* In everything that is good and from God, rejoice. Don't be jealous or envious because someone has had more success than you. Don't be jealous of their families, of their homes or of their jobs.

Verse 15b. *Weep with those who weep.* Jesus wept with Mary when Lazarus died. We are to have sympathy when others suffer or feel loss. We are to be present with them, sometimes in silence, sometimes with words – sometimes in tears.

Verse 16. *Live in harmony with one another.* Not all Christians practice their Christianity in the same ways. We need to show respect for their observances. They love the same God.

Not all Christians are easy to live with. In fact, some of us can be kind of difficult. Live in peace with them anyway. Try to ignore what you see as their peculiar ways, their strong perfume, their snoring, their habits of tapping their fingers on the desk, the way they wear their hair, or cross their legs. I always say that we all have things that aggravate other people, it's just harder to see our own idiosyncrasies.

Verse 16b. *Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.* Get over yourself. Don't think you are better than everyone else and put yourself on a pedestal. Don't think you deserve nicer things, a better paycheck, more respect or honor than anyone else.

A true Christian offers friendship, guidance and companionship to people that others might look down their noses at. And remember, you don't know everything so don't say that you do.

Verse 17. *Do not repay anyone evil for evil.* I think I've covered that pretty well. Remember that it includes evil words, as well as evil actions.

Verse 17b. *But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.* A true Christian remembers that the world is watching them. We are to do all things knowing that we reflect God, including how we react to evil in the world. It's a very difficult time in our country right now and some don't know how to react to the evil in this world.

Some are so hurt by the hatred and ignorance of others, by their lack of compassion or patience or understanding, that they are lost for how to respond and sometimes respond violently. We are to restrain from doing evil. We are not to be silent, but to find ways to change our world that reflects well on God. Just like the people of Wunseidel, we have to be innovative in our fight against evil.

Verse 18. *If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Whenever possible, seek, pursue and cultivate peace. Peace with our spouses, our children, our families, our friends, our neighbors, our world.

Verse 19. *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

The Old Testament says an eye for an eye. Jesus said to turn the other cheek, to avoid revenge for personal attacks. Yes, we should be against sin, we should fight for the downtrodden, the ignored, the lost. We should respect our court system when judgments and punishments are fairly made. But, private revenge is not ours. Let God be the Judge.

Another caveat, my opinion anyway. I don't believe that this passage means that Christians should stay together in a violent relationship nor that we should stand by and do nothing when we or others are being hurt. But our response shouldn't be controlled by our human nature, turning it to retaliation.

Verse 20. *If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.* Acts of kindness confuse people. Promises to pray for a person sometimes make them laugh when they've been insulting you. It's against our nature both to do this and to understand it.

I don't believe the burning coals always represent an expectation of God's punishment, but also the hope that when we provide for their needs or pray for them, our enemies would be aware of the evil they have done, be repentant and change their ways.

And finally... Verse 21. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* A true Christian doesn't repay evil with evil, doesn't try to avenge themselves. A true Christian feeds, clothes and prays for his enemy. A true Christian shows God's love in the hopes that her enemy will know and love God, too.