

## Catching the Right Bus

The Grace Factor – Part I

Romans 12:9

### Introduction

A few weeks ago someone sent the stories of the Darwin Award winners for the past year to me. These awards are called the “Darwin” awards because they are bestowed upon, tongue-in-cheek, the least evolved human beings for acts of stupidity, usually. This past year, there were several winners. Let me tell a few of their stories.

A teenager ended up in the hospital to recover from serious head wounds received from an oncoming train. When asked how he got the injuries, the young man told police that he was trying to see how close he could get his head to a moving train before being hit. He is a winner.

The Ann Arbor News reported that a man walked into a Burger King in Ypsilanti early one morning, flashed a gun and demanded cash. The clerk turned him down because he said he could not open the cash register without a food order. “You’re going to have to order breakfast first,” he told the would-be robber.

So, the man looked at the menu and said, “I’ll have the onion rings.”

The clerk replied, “Sorry, onion rings aren’t available for breakfast; that’s a lunch item.”

The robber, totally frustrated by now, simply turned and walked away. He is a winner.

As a female shopper exited a New York convenience store, a man grabbed her purse and ran. She immediately called 9-1-1 and gave a detailed description of the purse snatcher. Within minutes, the police apprehended the guy. They put him in the car and drove the few blocks back to the store, where

the woman was waiting. The thief was then taken out of the police car and told to stand still so they could make a positive identification. He immediately said, “Yes, sir, officer, that’s the woman.” He is a winner.

Let me give one more. These are almost too hard to believe!

A bus driver, who was transporting twenty patients from a mental hospital in one city to another, stopped en route for a drink. This was against the law and his employee regulations. While inside, only briefly, all twenty patients escaped. When he realized his bus was empty, not wanting to admit what he had done, he went to a nearby bus stop and offered everyone waiting there a free ride. He then delivered the passengers to the mental hospital, but first, whispered to the medical staff that these particular patients believed they were actually healthy and living normal lives. The deception was finally uncovered – *after three days!*

I am not sure who gets the award for this one – the medical staff, who could not figure it out, or the people who took three days to prove they did not belong there.

Three days! That would be tough, wouldn’t it? How would you explain it?

“Listen, I’m not supposed to be here. I was standing at a bus stop when I was offered a free ride. I really do work for IBM; I really do own a house in town; I really am a student at Duke. I know, had I been in my right mind I would have gone to Carolina!”

What could you say to prove your sanity? Maybe it would take three days – or maybe the medical staff would have a right to be suspicious.

Suppose you had to prove to someone that you were a Christian. How long would that take? Would it take three hours, or three days, or three weeks? What would you say to prove it?

“I’m in church, aren’t I?”

Or perhaps, “I know the Bible starts with the book of Genesis and ends with the book of Romans.”

Neither of these will work.

Maybe you would say, “Hey look, buster, I’m a Christian because Christ saved me, whether you believe it not!”

That would be effective.

According to the apostle James, the declaration that we have saving faith is not as critical to a watching world as a demonstration of saving faith. We can gather in the church auditorium every day of the week and declare we have been born again and then, go outside and wear sandwich boards with Bible verses all over them, but that would not provide any real evidence to a world that is desperately in need of an authentic demonstration. What they need is a believer who says, “I belong to God and look – I am pursuing God-likeness.”

We call that “godliness”. But what is godliness?

Defining godliness is a little like trying to define sanity – everyone has a different definition. That is why Romans, chapter 12, is so critical to understand. In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul moves from a declaration of Christianity, in chapters 1 through 11, to a demonstration of Christianity, in chapter 12 through the end of the book.

Verse 9 of Romans, chapter 12, reveals to us the authentic demonstration of God’s character. This is the way you can know that you have caught the right bus and that you are headed down the right road.

In the last few verses of this chapter, Paul delivers in rapid fire delivery, one statement after another that defines authentic, godly living. You cannot miss it! In fact, the trouble we will have with this closing paragraph is not that we do not believe it, but that we refuse to demonstrate it.

## What is Godliness?

In Romans, chapter 12, verse 9, Paul delivers three short, staccato statements which begin his inspired thoughts of godliness.

## The principle characteristic of godliness

1. Paul’s first statement reveals the principle characteristic of godliness.

Paul writes in the first phrase,

*Let love be without hypocrisy. . . .*

It is little wonder that Paul would begin with love. To the Corinthians he wrote,

*If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (I Corinthians 13:1-3)*

Paul then goes on to describe the actions of love and ends his thoughts by saying,

*But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love. (I Corinthians 13:13)*

What is the greatest? Love!

Why is love the greatest? Because faith will not last forever – one day it will cease to exist. Hope will also, one day, be done away with. However, love will last forever.

So, in Paul’s list of actions that demonstrate authentic godly living, it makes sense that in Romans, chapter 12, this greatest, highest, eternal quality would also be listed first.

Would you notice, in verse 9, Paul says, “love like this – love without hypocrisy”. The word “hypocrisy” is from the Greek word “hupokrites,” which is a reference to Greek actors.

The theater of Paul’s generation did not use elaborate sets, costumes, and lighting. There was no backdrop or scenery. Instead, the actors carried masks so that the audience could easily see whether the character was tragic, comic, or melodramatic. The actor walked about the stage carrying his mask.<sup>i</sup>

Paul was saying, in effect, “Do not put up a mask of love and yet, be unloving in your actions. Do not be an actor who is playing the role of lover, while acting otherwise.”

In other words, do not be like the Christian who is, as D. L. Moody used to say, “always talking cream, but living skim milk.”<sup>ii</sup>

Take down the mask and love – for real.

This is the Greek love word “agape”. It was a word that was spurned by the secular writers of Paul’s day as boring. They used “eros,” for sexual love, or “philia,” for brotherly affection, or “storge,” for parental love, not “agape”. “Agape” was considered unfeeling and cold.

The truth is, it was. As we have previously learned, “agape” was the word for an intellectual commitment. It was a decision of the will to give your life for the best interests of the object of your “agape”.

A young man who tells a young woman that he loves her and will want her for a wife, not for a night, which is “eros,” – this is “agape” or love for keeps.

When I perform weddings, I usually refer to this kind of love as I inform the couple standing before me in their beautiful regalia that they are standing at the altar not because they fell in love with one another. They give me an odd look as I continue and say, “In fact, this entire wedding has nothing to do with you falling in love with each other.”

At this point, they are wondering why they asked me to perform their wedding. I then quickly add, “You have planned this wedding; this moment because you have chosen to love each other.”

That is “agape”. “Agape” is love which has made up its mind. There is no hypocrisy; there is no acting – it is for keeps.

It is the same way in the church – this love is for real. There is no fooling; no faking; no acting! You are not driven by emotion or fever or fantasy. You have chosen to love and have walked into the Christian family with your eyes wide open!

Paul says, “Love each other like that.”

That is the greatest demonstration of godliness.

Jesus Christ, in fact, said the same thing to His disciples, when He said,

***By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love [“agape”] for one another. (John 13:35)***

Do you know what He just did? He just told us that the world now has the ability to determine if we are godly or not.

Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are following after Me.”

That is tantamount to saying, “following after the character of God,” which is to say, pursuing godliness.

Everyone is going to know whether you are the genuine item or not, by the way you make up your mind to love one another; to look out for each other’s interests; to serve each other.

Did it work?

Minucius Felix, a Roman attorney living in the generation of this Roman church, wrote, “They love each other even without being acquainted with each other.”

Felix said, “If you can imagine this – they don’t even know anything about each other, but as soon as they discover they each belong to Christ, they instantly are committed to one another.”

Julian, the Apostate, a Roman emperor in the fourth century who hated Christ, said in derision of Christians, “Their teacher has implanted the belief in them that they are all related.”

The principle characteristic of godliness is love, one for another.

### **The price of godliness**

2. Now Paul gives us the price of godliness.

It is a two-sided coin. One side is negative and the other is positive.

Notice the negative side first, in verse 9 of Romans, chapter 12.

***... Abhor what is evil; ...***

In the entire New Testament, abhor appears only in this verse. It is a strong term that can be translated “hate or loathing”.

Moffatt translates it, “Regard evil with horror.” Williams emphasizes the present tense of this participle by translating it to read, “You must always turn in horror from what is wrong.”<sup>iii</sup>

Wait a minute! Why would the apostle Paul need to tell the believer to hate evil; to abhor sin?

Because the truth remains – becoming a Christian does not automatically mean you are going to hate sin. In fact, one of the traps for the Christian today is that we are surrounded by so much evil and sin that we get used to it.

Martin Luther, in his little commentary on Romans, said the truth is that “we are [even as believers] inclined to what is evil”. That is why Paul wrote this.<sup>iv</sup>

Sometimes, in fact, a Christian will approve of evil. Christians tend to manage it, not abhor it. We, as believers, schedule time for evil, flirt with it, and

see how close we can come to its flame. We do not want to offend or criticize evil; we dialogue with it and talk it over. We reassure evil that we are not judgmental or all that different.

Sometimes we buy a ticket to see evil or pay monthly to watch evil. We applaud when evil wins the girl or when evil seduces the man or when evil gets away with its crimes. Sometimes we give evil our business card and invite it to call. Sometimes we log on to evil. Sometimes we lust after evil and fantasize about evil things and decide to meet evil some place, some time. Sometimes we walk through the doors of evil or subscribe to it or sign up for it. Sometimes we sit with evil and laugh at its stories.

We hide evil and manage evil and, in our secret world, we plan evil in our minds and play with evil in our hearts.

This is what it means to catch the wrong bus. Let me warn you, Christian, you are traveling on the wrong bus and you are not on the road to god-likeness, you are on the road to god-lessness.

Do you know why Paul wrote this to Christians?

Because, like the great pastor of yesteryear, Charles Spurgeon, we confess our propensity toward evil as he did, in print, no less, “There are times when my imagination has taken me down to the sewers of earth. Sometimes when I feel the most devoted to God, and the most earnest in prayer, it often happens that at that very moment, the plague breaks out the worst.”<sup>v</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen, sometimes the Christian can get on the wrong bus. When that happens to you, then you are going to have to try to explain why you do not belong there – wherever it ends up.

Part of the pursuit of godliness is in the process of thinking differently about sin; this is part of the process of becoming God-like. When we are godly, we will develop a horror, distaste, and hatred for sin.

Leslie Flynn tells the story of a mother who was peeling vegetables for a salad when her daughter, home from college, casually mentioned she was going to a rather questionable movie later that evening. Without saying anything, the mother picked up a handful of garbage and dropped it into the mixing bowl and just kept on stirring. The shocked girl said, “Mother, you’re putting garbage in the salad.”

“I know,” she replied, “but I thought that if you allowed a little garbage in your mind, you wouldn’t mind a little in your stomach.”<sup>vi</sup>

What kind of evil have we allowed, when we should be abhorred?

I recently read an article that ran in the *New York Times* concerning an aerosol propellant with trichlorethane that was used in the spray cans of a household cleaner. This was toxic when used improperly.

In the early 1980’s, high school and college students discovered that they could get high by spraying the cleaner into a plastic bag and breathing the propellant fumes. At least one student died. So, the company put a warning on the label that said, “Death or serious injury if this product is inhaled.”

Still, liability claims kept coming in. Finally the company brass met with their attorneys to come up with a warning that would make a difference. They suggested making the label larger, but that was rejected because the youth would only assume there was now more propellant in the product. One attorney sparked the solution when he asked, “What do people fear more than death or injury?”

Another answered, “How they look is of utmost importance.”

So, they devised a new warning that sniffing this product could disfigure the face. It is true – nothing disfigures the face like death. The new warning read, “Inhaling this product may cause facial disfigurement.”

The abuse of that product ceased entirely. The abusers were not afraid of death; they were not troubled by possible injury. But they were terrified of being disfigured.

What terrifies you about sin? Is it the ugly consequences of sin? The painful loss? The disease? The addiction? The exposure? Death?

Would you note that Paul does not say that the person who is pursuing godliness, or the transformed life, abhors the consequences of sin? Paul says that this person abhors sin. We might hate the consequences of sin, but the process of becoming godly is evidenced by the development of hatred for sin itself, no matter what the consequences may be.

The principle quality of godliness is love; the price of godliness is the exclusion of, the staying away from, and the hatred of sin. The average Christian, however, is not willing to pay that price.

It is refusing to take a ride on the bus that goes anywhere near sin. As one early church leader said, “Yes, we call out to God for deliverance from the

tempestuous waves of temptation, but we also row away from the rocks.”

Now, let us turn the coin over and notice the positive aspect of this price we must expend if we are to become godly. First, we abhor what is evil. Secondly, Paul writes, in verse 9 of Romans, chapter 12,

*... cling to what is good.*

You might wonder, “What is good?”

Good is everything you are reading in this paragraph of Romans. In fact, it is the very same thing you learn to discover as your mind is transformed by the word of God. Then, you are able to do what verse 2 of this same chapter tells us is good. And that which is good will be acceptable to God, and that which is acceptable to God is pure, and whatever is acceptable to God and pure, is good.

Cling to good; pursue that and you will be pursuing the character of Christ.

Cling to it, or “κολλῶμενοι” in the Greek, which means, “to glue or cement together; to join firmly”.<sup>vii</sup>

The Bible does not just tell us what not to do – stay away from evil; it tells what to do – stay close to good.

This is the same word that was used when Philip was told to go up to the Ethiopian’s chariot and join himself to it (Acts 8:29). In other words, he was to get in the chariot; he and the chariot were to go in the same direction at the same time.

This is also the same verb that you discover in the Greek Old Testament which describes what a man does when he marries his bride. He is to leave his mother and father and cleave – that is the same word – to his wife (Genesis 2:24)

The man becomes one with his wife. His wife becomes his priority relationship; his mother and father no longer take precedence or priority. Everything and everyone else takes second place to that marital union. The husband and wife are cemented or glued together.

This is the picture of the believer and good. The believer is to be cleaving to good; cemented to good; desirous of good above everyone and everything else. Anything that is not good is not to stick to the hands and heart of the believer.

In other words, Paul is saying that the believer who desires to be godly will avoid evil and be attached to good.

## Application

Let me close with two principles of application.

### **The principle characteristic of godliness is not optional, it is essential**

1. The principle characteristic of godliness is not optional, it is essential.

Without love, you cannot demonstrate godliness to the world.

### **The price of godliness is not partial, it is comprehensive**

2. The price of godliness is not partial, it is comprehensive.

The original language in Paul’s letter to the Romans implies the comprehensiveness of this subject. *Everything* that is evil – avoid; *everything* that is good – cling to.

The pursuit of godliness involves everything you are, everything you have, and everything you do. We sing it, but do we recognize the comprehensive nature of the godly call?

*Love so amazing, so divine,*

*Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

While visiting Haiti in the early 1900’s, Dale Hayes heard a pastor illustrate to his congregation the need for a total pursuit of Christ-likeness, with nothing held back. He told of a man he knew who wanted to sell his house for two thousand dollars. Another man badly wanted it, but could not afford the full price. After much haggling over the price, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the asking price, with one stipulation – he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the front door. The man agreed.

After several years, the original owner wanted the house back, but the other man refused. They had settled on the price and he owned the house, all except for that one nail. So, the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from that single nail he still owned, just over the front door. It was not long before the house became uninhabitable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail.

The Haitian pastor went on to illustrate that giving ourselves to Christ must be comprehensive. We dare not leave one small nail for the enemy to control; we must give our entire house to Christ.

This is the message of Romans, chapter 12, verse 9:

- Love comprehensively – nothing held back.
- Abhor evil – not most of it, but clean house and get rid of it all. Do not leave even the smallest nail for the enemy to manipulate. You cannot imagine what he can do with one small nail-hold in your heart!
- Cling to what is good – not a passing fancy, this is not a one night stand – this is a wedding, this is a marriage where, as God is

your witness, you cleave to that which is good.

Do this, and you will be riding along a road that will be marked by your own demonstration of godliness.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 8/14/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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<sup>i</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, Romans: Volume 4 (Eerdmans, 1982), p. 61.

<sup>ii</sup> William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press, 1938), p. 469.

<sup>iii</sup> Ralph Earle, Word Meanings in the New Testament (Baker, 1974), p. 201.

<sup>iv</sup> Martin Luther, Romans: Translated by J. Theodore Mueller (Kregel Classics, 1954), p. 174.

<sup>v</sup> Robert J. Morgan, Nelson's Complete Book of Stories (Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 556.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid., p. 556.

<sup>vii</sup> Fritz Rienecker, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 376.