

The Fine Arts of Godly Living

The Grace Factor – Part III

Romans 12:12-13

Introduction

The producers of *Psychology Today* sent a survey to more than 50,000 of their subscribers. The survey asked the recipients to respond by telling the ways in which they found happiness and what they considered happiness to be. Responses were received from all over the country – with insightful results. Those on the poorer end of the economic scale believed they would find happiness if they became richer. In fact, their most common hope was related to winning the lottery. However, the wealthier subscribers to *Psychology Today* admitted that they were not happy either, even though they had all the things needed to sustain life and leisure.

I read a copy of the note written by a wealthy executive, before taking his life a few years ago. His note was printed only recently in one of the newspapers I was reading; in fact, this past week. He wrote, in effect, “I’m bored and I’m tired of playing games; I’m tired of accumulating things and I’m tired of living with me.”

He had everything but happiness.

The editors of *Psychology Today* recognized from the results of their survey, what this man tragically admitted.

In this magazine survey, the editors realized geography and climate had nothing to do with happiness either. People were just as unhappy in Florida as they were in Minnesota. There was no consistent path or pattern to happiness; in fact, most of the people who responded were convinced they were not genuinely happy, and they did not know how to find it.

I find it tragically ironic that the founding fathers of America put into print what is nothing less than the frustration of the human heart. Signed in 1776, on July 4th, in Philadelphia, the document read,

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In a way, they were prophetic! You have life; you can have liberty, but you can only pursue happiness.

It is not in the pursuit of happiness, but in the pursuit of holiness, that you will ever discover real living; genuine liberty, and authentic happiness. If you pursue god-likeness, you will discover happiness along the way. Why? Because the discovery of godliness is a deeper discovery of the character of God.

Jonathan Edwards wrote,

True happiness with which our souls can be satisfied, is the enjoyment of God . . . Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends . . . are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean.ⁱ

Ladies and gentlemen, genuine life, real liberty, and authentic happiness are not found by pursuing *them*; they are found by pursuing *Him*. Those who will truly pursue God will pursue His character. This is god-likeness.

What does god-likeness look like? How do we measure up? Are there guidelines to help us on our journey?

Absolutely, yes!

I want to wrap up our series that I have entitled, “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Godliness,” today, as we come to the end of Paul’s sentence that began in Romans, chapter 12, verse 10. Let us back up to the beginning of his thoughts along these lines to verse 9.

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

“Cling” means literally, “to be glued to good things”. Continue to verses 10 and 11.

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

Now look at verses 12 and 13 for our study today.

Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Several qualities of the believer’s life are found in these two verses. We could call them “The Fine Arts of Godly Living”. Let us look at these.

The Fine Arts of Godly Living

Rejoicing in hope

1. Look again at the first fine art of godly living in verse 12 of Romans, chapter 12.

rejoicing in hope . . .

This is the art of matching your emotions with your convictions. In regards to that which you confidently hope – rejoice! This is nothing less than being in a state of spiritual optimism.

Why? Because our theology is grounded in the promises of God. We have:

- a living hope (I Peter 1:3);
- a dying hope (I Corinthians 15:55);
- a blessed hope (I Corinthians 15:51-52);
- an eternal hope (Titus 3:7).

Not long ago, one of our astronauts lay strapped in his capsule, ready to be launched, when a reporter interviewed him via radio.

“Are you worried?” the reporter asked.

The astronaut replied, “How would you feel, if you were sitting on top of 150,000 parts, each of them supplied by the lowest bidder?”

Is not our faith constructed by the Creator of the universe? Is not our hope built upon the Rock?

We are strapped by our faith to the unchangeable purpose of God. And we are ready to hurtle, at any moment, straight into the city of God, and the glory of heaven.

What bride will walk down the aisle toward her beloved with a frown on her face? That will probably come later!

We happen to be wearing the garments of the bride of Christ. We are walking down the aisle of history toward our Bridegroom – in whom we will never be disappointed.

We have joy because we have Christ within us, even now, who is the “hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).

When Paul writes to rejoice in our hope, he simply means to look like you believe it is true!

This is the art of developing the emotions that match your convictions.

Persevering in tribulation

2. Notice, however, that spiritual optimism does not rule out spiritual realism. The very words Paul wrote, in verse 12b of Romans, chapter 12, were these,

... persevering in tribulation . . .

No one is throwing rose petals in the aisle of life. The word “tribulation” could refer to trials of any kind.

The Jerusalem church, at the time of this writing, was suffering through a famine. To make matters worse, believers had been disinherited from their families – Paul included.

Paul, the realist, would write in his journal,

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed. (II Corinthians 4:8-9)

Rejoicing in hope is spiritual optimism. Persevering in tribulation is spiritual and mental determination.

I would define this as the art of running the race no matter how often or in what way the goal line gets moved. You thought next week would bring relief –

it did not. You thought that problem would be resolved – it was not. You thought the report from the doctor would be positive – it was not.

Notice that Paul does *not* say, “persevering *if* tribulation,” but,

... persevering *in* tribulation ...

Nowhere in the New Testament is the believer promised freedom from tribulation, or “thipsis” in the Greek, which means, “pressure, trouble, tribulation”. It happens to be a part of life and a part of the pursuit of godly living.

You cannot choose whether or not you will suffer. You cannot even choose how you will suffer. You cannot choose when you will suffer. You cannot choose how long you will suffer.

You can choose, however, to endure; to persevere. The Greek word for this literally means, “to remain under or to bear up under”.

In other words, the art of endurance is more than just hanging on or running away. It is outlasting it . . . it is staying at it . . . and it is ultimately defeating it by becoming better because of it.ⁱⁱ

One problem, however, is that the average Christian has been taught that their belief in God provides a vaccination against suffering. Most Christians expect to get through life unscathed . . . without ever being bruised . . . and we cry out if we are ridiculed or mocked or ignored as if some unexpected wrong has been performed.ⁱⁱⁱ

The average pastor today is being pulled into the current of accommodation. Whatever we do, we cannot look out of step or intolerant.

I heard one internationally known preacher, on *Larry King Live*, being asked the question, “Do you believe homosexuality is a sin?”

He looked down, stammered a bit, and then said, “You know, I believe there are a lot of kinds of sin in the world. Pride is one of them . . .”

He completely refused to answer the question.

Another (supposedly) evangelical pastor and well known, best-selling author, was asked, on prime time television, “Do you believe in hell?”

He answered, “You know, I choose not to talk about that . . . I want to focus on the positive side and talk about Jesus.”

How can you talk about Jesus without talking about what Jesus did? He came to rescue us from what? Hell.

How can you talk about Jesus without talking about what Jesus said, on several occasions. For example, in Matthew, chapter 23, verse 15, Jesus is condemning the religious, pious, hypocrites of His day, and said,

Woe to you, . . . because you travel around on sea and land to make one convert; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

In other words, “Your disciples are twice as likely to die condemned and bound in hell because of your hypocrisy.”

Later, in that same message, in verse 33, Christ said,

You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?

The average church and the average Christian would never talk so intolerantly today.

How many times since 9/11, have you seen someone push a microphone toward a Christian leader or pastor and pigeon hole them with the question, “Do you believe that Muslims are going to hell if they don’t believe in Jesus?”

I have yet to hear anyone answer, “Yes, that’s why we’re dedicated to the missionary enterprise . . . we happen to believe that Jesus Christ is ‘the way, the truth and the life’.”

Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus Christ knew how politically incorrect He was when He added,

. . . no one comes to the Father but by Me. (John 14:6)

Do you want pressure at work; ridicule on the campus; affliction in your family? Do you want to be passed over at the job? Do you want to be left out of the circle?

All of this is another way of asking, “Do you want to pursue godliness?”

Peter wrote to Timothy, his young disciple,

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (II Timothy 3:12)

So Paul writes to the believer in Romans, chapter 12, verse 12, assuming that his audience wanted to pursue holy living, not to tell them that they might suffer affliction and tribulation, but to tell them what to do because of it! Paul is literally saying, “In regards to your tribulation – endure it!”

In other words, “Stay at it; remain under it; accept it; don’t run from it; don’t retreat from it;

expect it. You're joining in the fellowship of His sufferings. You're not the only one with scars – your Savior, in fact, chose to keep five of His scars forever."

Devoted to prayer

3. The question immediately arises, "But how can I make it through?" Paul quickly adds the answer in the last phrase of verse 12,

... devoted to prayer,

This is not simply an act of prayer – this is a life of prayer.

The word translated "devoted" means literally, "to hold fast to; to give attention to; to be faithful in".^{iv}

Paul is literally saying, "In regards to your prayers – continuing."

This is a fascinating exhortation. It is right where we live!

Our problem is not that we pray too little – it is that we do not pray. When we do, we easily tire; there seems to be little fruit from it; the answers do not come fast enough . . .

Martin Luther, the reformer, wrote in his commentary on Romans, "There is no work quite so difficult as praying to God."^v

This is why Paul is not exhorting us to be more eloquent in prayers or to be longer at our praying. As a matter of fact, he is not really referring to the act of prayer as much as he is the attitude of prayer. Continuing in prayer; being devoted to prayer is not a five minute exercise, or a sixty minute exercise – it is a way of life.

Paul is saying, "Walk through life continuing in conversation with God."

This is the art of developing a conversational lifestyle with God.

It does not have to be eloquent. God is not counting scripture references. It is conversation with God. Saying "Amen," really only means, "To be continued!"

I am reminded of a story that I recently read about D. L. Moody, the great evangelist and church leader of the 1800's, who was an incredible worker and pioneered so many different ministries. He was traveling with some colleagues and it was late at night when they finally finished their ministry tasks. One man wrote that he observed Moody rolling into

bed and saying allowed, "Lord, I'm tired. Amen." And he fell asleep.

I read, some time ago, about a believer who had lived a rich life for God and was marked by his close relationship with the Lord. He lay dying with cancer in his hospital room and the hospital chaplain stopped in to visit. The chaplain saw, beside the man's bed, an empty chair. He commented to the old gentleman, "Ah, I see you've had a visitor."

The gentleman responded, "Oh no, I haven't had a visitor come for a while now. But you see, when I became a Christian, early in my young life, a friend told me that praying was like talking to your best friend. When I heard that, I decided that every day, I would pull an empty chair toward me, wherever I was, whenever I could, and invite Christ to sit there and we would just talk."

I read the account provided by this man's daughter, who wrote about her father's passing away,

My father seemed so content in his hospital bed that I left him for a few hours. When I got back, I knew that he was gone. He'd gone to be with his Lord. But the interesting thing was, his head was not resting on his pillow. His body had turned and his head was resting on the seat of that empty chair . . . as if on the very lap of Christ.

Wouldn't you like to die like that?

The apostle Paul is not asking if you want to die like that – he is asking if you will live like that!

As it relates to your praying – continuing as if it were a never fully completed conversation!

Pursuing godly living is the art of developing a conversational lifestyle with Christ.

Contributing to the needs of the saints

4. Fourthly, pursuing godly living is developing the art of an open hand and an open heart. Paul writes in verse 13 of Romans, chapter 12,

contributing to the needs of the saints, . .

As it relates to the needs of the saints – contributing.

It is fascinating that the word "contributing" comes from the Greek word "koinoneo". The noun form is the well known word "koinonia," which means, "communion; fellowship".

We talk about the “koinonia” of the early church – the fellowship they enjoyed. Paul is telling us to fellowship in regard to the meeting the needs of other believers.

Whenever the word “needs” appears, it normally refers to those things which are met by financial contribution. A few weeks ago, I received a letter from an inmate who is listening to our Sunday morning sermons through the *Wisdom for the Heart* radio ministry. He wrote,

I'm not given money in this prison, so I can't contribute to help you in that way, but I do earn postage stamps – and I'm gonna begin sending you a portion of my weekly stamp allotment to help you spread the word.

He is developing the art of an open hand and an open heart.

These are the godly ones who happen to know what it means to fellowship financially.

I received, last night, an email from the pastor of the church in Louisiana that our church is going to partner with to help after hurricane Katrina. He talked about the tangible ways we can help, and we will be giving information to you on that as we develop this art as a church family.

The pursuit of godliness requires the development of the art of an open hand and an open heart.

Practicing hospitality

5. There is one more fine art of godly living. The last part of verse 13 says,
...practicing hospitality.

Christianity is not only the religion of the open heart and the open hand, but the open door!^{vi}

Someone said, “Hospitality is the art of making people feel at home even when you wished they were!”

Biblical hospitality is vastly different. Biblical hospitality is developing the art of making people feel as if your home is their home.

You need to understand something of Paul’s generation. Believers were without homes; messengers were traveling from church to church; exiles were wandering about. In fact, our Lord Jesus did not own His own home, but depended upon the hospitality of others for a roof and a bed.

The inns of Paul’s day were few and far between – and they were usually run by organized crime. You

could be risking your life to stay in an inn, not to mention your health. Records indicate bedding infested with lice and bad food as the normal course of affairs for the Roman Inn. These were the places that criminals came to plan their next series of crimes. They were the last place you would ever want to stay.

The solution was simple – Paul told the believer, “Practice hospitality.”

By the way, “hospitality” and “hotel” do share the same etymology. “Hostel” and “hospital” share this as well. In fact, it was the Christian church that developed the hospital as a more advanced way to meet the needs of others in need of specialized help.

Paul is challenging the early Roman believers to, “Practice opening your home to people in need.”

Hospitality is a compound word (“philonexia”), which literally means, “love of strangers”.

In other words, practice inviting into your home those whom you do not know very well or at all.

Isn’t it odd that since this is a mark of the godly believer, hospitality would be something we usually reserve for people we already know – and already know we like?

This is not what Paul is talking about. Hospitality is a demonstration of helping strangers.

We can practice it every Sunday, by the way, as we welcome strangers into this church, our other home, right?

My wife Marsha and I will never forget attending the huge First Baptist Church of Dallas when I was in seminary. We attended the service and as we were dismissed, the grey headed couple in front of us turned around, introduced themselves with wonderful smiles, and said, “Please come home and eat dinner with us today.”

We did not know what to say! We had family visiting that afternoon and were unable to go, but to this day, I regret not being able to take them up on their offer. We talked to them for a while and asked them questions like, “How often do you do this unusual practice of inviting people over to your home for dinner?”

They said, “Every Sunday. We especially look for visitors to invite to our home. We have extra food already prepared for guests.”

How many of you have ever been invited to someone’s home after church? How many of you would like to go to someone’s home after church?

Why not start that practice? Remember, you are not trying to impress anyone. It is not your place settings that matter, or the condition of your carpet, it is your heart that matters.

John Piper recently challenged his church family from this same text. He wrote,

Greet people and welcome people warmly to [this church]. Invite them to Sunday school. Show them where the nursery is. Let them read the hospitality of God in your smile.

The context of this text could be arguably dedicated to showing hospitality to strangers among the Christian community. In other words, opening your own home to other believers who have lost their homes.

In the first century, this would not be uncommon. Many Christians were in exile. Pastors and evangelists were traveling, like Paul, from city to city, and were entirely dependent upon the homes of believers for sustenance.

Have you ever shown hospitality to another believer?

I remember being deeply moved after teaching a class in Chennai, India, to some of the Hindustan Seminary students. It was sweltering hot – in the middle of July. As I was leaving the building, an Indian woman who had been in an earlier class I had taught, was standing on the walkway holding an umbrella up in the air, open. She smiled and asked me to come with her to meet her husband who was still at home. She held the umbrella up over my head as we walked – which I learned later was a little like washing someone's feet. She guided me to their apartment, which was nothing more than a cement square – cement walls, cement floor, cement ceiling. I sat on a chair and enjoyed fellowship with a couple so filled with the love of Christ for someone they had never met.

Later, I visited a small church in one of the villages. When we arrived, the auditorium was without any chairs, simply because people sat on little rugs or garments. But there were three chairs, placed for myself and two others. The people, of all ages, gathered around and sat down as we shared greetings and messages. Then, they went to get their treasures – they brought to us, our own Coca-colas in glass bottles. Let me tell you, there are few things more difficult to the American southerner who has everything with extra ice, than to drink a warm Coca-cola – but it was hard to drink it, not because it was warm, but because I was drinking something the

children around me had never tasted. It was for visiting guests of honor. What hospitality!

I have sat in a dark hut in Africa – block walls and thatched roof – while the wife of the church leader brought to me a tin cup with sweet tea – tea leaves boiled with sugar and water and milk. What hospitality! I have never drunk from anything finer than that tin cup.

Four college students invited me to their apartment near North Carolina State University recently. They wanted to fix a special meal for me – deer. At first, I thought they were kidding, but they were serious. I had never tasted deer before. They had killed the deer, dressed it, prepared the most tender portion, I would later learn, and cooked it for me to eat. We sat down and had a splendid feast, sharing together love between strangers who happened to belong to the same family.

Practice hospitality.

This does not mean you have to have it all together. Paper plates are just fine. Paper napkins and plastic forks work!

Entertainment and hospitality are two different things. Entertainment focuses the attention on the host and hostess – what they have planned; what they are serving. Hospitality focuses on the guest – who they are and what they need.

One of the marks of the growing believer is a desire to entertain less, and share their love for Christ and His church more!

Conclusion

Are you in hot pursuit of god-likeness? This is the way you can tell – you are developing these spiritual fine arts:

1. spiritual optimism – developing the art of matching your emotions with your convictions;
2. mental determination – developing the art of running the race no matter how often the goal line gets moved;
3. private devotion – developing the art of a conversational lifestyle with Christ;
4. financial generosity – developing the art of an open hand and an open heart;
5. physical availability – developing the art of making people feel as if your home belongs to them.

I highly recommend that you begin the last one today!

Do not leave church today saying, “This church is so big that I didn’t know anyone around me.”

Instead, say, “This church is so big that every time I come, I get to meet someone new.”

Do not leave church today saying, “Yea, hospitality alright – no one invited me to dinner.”

You missed the point. Paul is challenging each of us personally. You do the inviting!

Everyone is hearing this same message today, so no one will think you are strange. In fact, you will

probably convict them all the way down to their socks for not asking you first.

Single guys, this is your golden opportunity! If I have ever given you an opening – you can drive an 18-wheeler through this one. You can thank me later!

Let us end this service by having you stand and make some dinner plans – for either after church or after our programs tonight. Go ahead – stand up and find out who is joining you for dinner.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/11/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Jonathan Edwards, Heartcry!, Issue 6 (2003).

ⁱⁱ Roy Laurin, Romans (Kregel, 1988), p. 429.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (Augsburg Publishing House, 1936), p. 771.

^{iv} Fritz Rienecker and Cleon L. Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 376.

^v Martin Luther, Commentary on Romans (Kregel, 1954), p. 176.

^{vi} William Barclay, The Letter to the Romans (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 167.