

Family Value: Peace & Thankfulness

Scripture: Psalm 105:1-6; Romans 12:1, 9-21

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

We have come to the third and final week of our series on *Family Values*. The God-given purpose of a family, of a household, is to be a nurturing environment in which its members come to know the love of God and can grow in the image of Christ. As one of our spiritual forbearers said, “[a] family is a little church,”ⁱ a place where we practice and promote the values Jesus taught. These are our “family values” as members of the household of God. The first week in this series, we looked at the value of *Deep Caring*, last week we discussed the value of *Unselfish Affection*, and this week we are talking about the values *Peace & Thankfulness*.

Later we will distribute copies of Belonging to God: A First Catechism. A catechism is set of questions and answers that can help us learn the good news of the gospel. Christians began developing catechisms shortly after Christ’s resurrection, and that process continues to this day. Belonging to God is one of three catechisms our General Assembly approved in 1998, along with a Study Catechism for adults and one for use by those who are considering joining the church by confirming their baptismal vows. These three catechisms are “take home” books. Although we certainly can study and use them together as the church, they are well suited for study and use in the home. And, notice that I said “study and use” – not “memorization.” It is wonderful to memorize the answers to the questions a catechism contains. But, the primary purpose of a catechism is not to develop our memory skills, but to help us hear and understand the good news that God created us and that we belong to God. Our homes are one place that hearing and understanding can happen, and later I will say more about how we can help that take place. For now, I want to read you the first 6 questions and responses from Belonging to God:

- Q1. Who are you? A. I am a child of God.
- Q2. What does it mean to be a child of God? A. That I belong to God, who loves me.
- Q3. What makes you a child of God? A. Grace — God’s free gift of love that I do not deserve and cannot earn.
- Q4. Don’t you have to be good for God to love you? A. No. God loves me in spite of all I do wrong.
- Q5. How do you thank God for this gift of love? A. I promise to love and trust God with all my heart.
- Q6. How do you love God? A. By worshipping God, by loving others, and by respecting what God has created.

Our Second Lesson addresses that final question, “How do you love God?” by giving examples of how we go about loving God. This passage is from a letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome. It comes about three-quarters into that letter, and up until this point Paul has been talking about what God has done for people of faith, about the mercy God has shown them. Now it is time for a “therefore” – for Paul to explain how we can respond to God’s mercy and grace.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. . . . Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.” No, “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.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The context for this passage is worship — the worship God wants in response to everything he has given to us. What God wants, Paul writes, is for us to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice.” When most

of us hear the word “sacrifice” we probably think about destroying or forfeiting something of value, about giving up something we care about and getting nothing in return. So, when we hear that God wants us to be “a *living sacrifice*” we can get quite a jolt. Is God asking us to destroy or forfeit our lives, to give up everything we care about? No! The God who showed his love by giving the world his only Son is not asking us to destroy anything or to be miserable – he is asking us to be *his*. The true meaning of the word sacrifice is “to make sacred,” to dedicate something to the purpose and use of God. That is what God wants us to do with our lives. God wants us to celebrate the amazing fact that he has created us in his image and then dedicate our lives to his purpose and use.

To explain how we do this, Paul brings us to the same point we were this past Sunday: talking about love. Last week we examined Paul’s beautiful description of love in his First Letter to the Corinthians. In that letter and in this one, Paul is writing about *agape*, a Greek word that means love, but not the love of romance or emotion. *Agape* refers to a love that does not depend upon how we feel about another person. *Agape* is a love that comes from God and that God wants us to deliver to the rest of the world. In today’s passage from Romans, we read, “Let love (*agape*) be genuine.” That *agape*, Paul writes – that love that God wants us to deliver to the rest of the world – make sure that what you share is genuine love, not some pale imitation. Make sure it is the same quality and strength of love that God has given to us – not something less. To elaborate upon this, Paul tells us to “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” On the face of it, that seems easy, and Paul follows it with a sort of spiritual pep talk – advising us not to lag in zeal, but to be ardent in spirit, to serve the Lord and rejoice in hope. Although all of these admonitions are actually more difficult in practice than they appear at first glance, the part of this passage that really grabs us is what Paul has to say about our enemies – the people who do evil and wish us harm. Paul writes that we are to do everything we can to live in peace with everybody – including our enemies – and that means doing everything we can to overcome evil with good.

For those of us within the household of God, this gives us two jobs. The first job is for us to “hate what is evil [and] hold fast to what is good.” This job goes far beyond merely disliking evil or avoiding it. Dislike and avoidance are passive, and Paul is telling us to get active. Paul is telling us to work against evil while working for what is good. As 18th century British statesman Edmund Burke is reputed to have said, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” To eliminate evil and promote the good, we must take the initiative and show courage. We work against evil when we speak out against a discriminatory joke at a party or on the job. We work against evil when we intervene on behalf of a child being mistreated in a store or at a neighbor’s house. If we remain silent and do nothing, we help evil prevail.

The second job is for us not to allow ourselves to be “overcome by evil,” but instead to “overcome evil with good.” We often face a nearly overwhelming temptation to match evil with evil, to counter pain with pain. But, when we entertain such thoughts of anger or revenge, we are allowing ourselves to be overcome by evil. God is not the source of such thoughts, and God’s Son did not teach them to us. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy,” and “blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ When Jesus said this, he was not talking about abstract situations far removed from our lives, but the kinds of up-close-and-personal wrongs that people can inflict upon each other. The cruelties of betrayal and abuse, humiliation and neglect. The ravages of addiction, murder, and rape. No matter what wrong we encounter, Paul writes, the Christian does not “repay anyone evil for evil” and never seeks revenge. From Jesus, to Paul, to today – the message does not vary; the lesson does not change.

But the lesson does not stop with prohibiting revenge; it goes on to tell us what we should work for, instead: we must work to overcome evil with good. For example, Paul said, if your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. I heard one good example within a Bible study group. A member of the group had posed a situation for us to consider: “Suppose a neighbor walked up to you and said, ‘I like your backyard, so I am going to invite my friends over to your backyard and throw a party.’ What would you say?” Different ones of us started offering up ideas for how we could oppose this bully of a neighbor and keep him from taking what was ours – ranging from “call the police” to “get a gun” – all except one class member. She said, “I would tell my neighbor, ‘Great idea! You invite your friends, I will invite mine, and we can all get to know each other.’” Her response was reminiscent of something Jesus said, that “if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”ⁱⁱⁱ Before you and I can make such a response, we must abandon our own goal of enforcing our rights and protecting our things and embrace the goal that God has given us: the goal of creating peace by overcoming evil with good.

Oh, but that temptation – the nearly overwhelming temptation to try to match evil with evil, to try to counter pain with pain – it sure keeps getting in our way. Sometimes it worms its way into our minds in the disguise of righteous anger, telling us that if we do not punish an evildoer, we are condoning his evil act. Phrases such as “I have to show him” and “she needs to be taught a lesson” pop into our heads, until revenge seems the only way to go. But, what does revenge show? What lesson does “getting even” teach? The only way to teach God’s lesson of grace and peace, Paul wrote, is to “bless those who persecute” us, to give food and drink and care to our enemy. In such ways, Paul wrote, we “heap burning coals” on our enemy’s head. That might sound like a backdoor way of getting revenge, but it is not. “Burning coals” refers to the pain of remorse your enemy might feel when he realizes his act of hate has been met by your act of grace. Such pain can bring healing by leading your enemy to repent — to turn around and walk a different path. As one person has put it, “Love’s magic is to win [our enemies] over by burning into their hearts feelings of remorse and repentance.”^{iv} If we doubt that this is possible, we have only to look to the cross, to see Jesus overcoming the hatred of crucifixion with the grace of his love, leading generations of us to repent – to turn toward God and follow in his way.

That is the goal. The goal is for good to overcome evil, so that all the people of the world can know God and live in peace – and you and I have our part to play. God calls you and me to be a living sacrifice – for us to dedicate our lives to his purpose of bringing his peace to the world. We begin by working for that peace within our own homes. By finding ways for preventing conflict and hurt feelings while strengthening the support we provide each other. Ways we can practice and promote the values Jesus taught, such as deep caring, unselfish affection, peace, and thanksgiving. You and I can help the other members of our households carry these values with them to work, to school, to a store. At the end of the day, we can talk about the dilemmas we have encountered, and when one of us is tempted to match evil with evil, to counter pain with pain, we can work together to discover and follow the will of God. We will need each other’s help, because the rest of the world will try to drag us away from the will of God.

Folks will call you a fool for believing that love can overcome hate, naïve for imagining that evil can be overcome with good. They will call you coward or doormat for refusing to wield the tools of violence and revenge. But it takes courage to face up to evil armed only with good. It takes courage and true faith – faith that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”^v When you and I face evil with good, we are rendering unto God the worship he desires. We are giving thanks for the mercy God showed when he “did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us.”^{vi} *Amen.*

ⁱ William Gouge, Of Domesticall Duties (London 1622)

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:7-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:40-41

^{iv} Carl E. Brataan, *Romans 12:14-21, Interpretation*, p. 295.

^v Romans 8:38-39

^{vi} Romans 8:32