

SERMON TITLE: "Reviewing Romans: Do What Is Good"  
SERMON TEXT: Romans 12:1-2, 9-21  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 3, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

Like me, you've probably seen a lot of local TV news stories over the years that go something like this. The news reporter is standing on a street in a residential neighborhood. Maybe the wind is blowing the reporter's hair. Maybe it's raining or snowing or blazing hot. The reporter is contending with the elements while describing a terrible event that took place there on that street earlier that day. Maybe the police and ambulance are still there with their flashing lights. Maybe it was domestic violence. Maybe it was a case of murder-suicide. Maybe it was some other kind of act of human cruelty. But, for sure, the local news reporter is standing there on the sidewalk talking to the neighbors. Some of the neighbors might seem surprised that such a horrible thing could have happened to what seemed like an ordinary family. One of the neighbors might admit, in hindsight, that she thought the perpetrator was a little odd. But, if it's a typical case, at least one of the neighbors being interviewed will say something like, "I always thought he was a good neighbor. He loaned me his tools sometimes. He seemed friendly enough. He went to work every day. What they're saying he did doesn't make sense because he seemed like a good guy to me."

A good guy. That's a relative term, right? Have you ever found yourself rooting for the bad guy in a television program or movie? If the drama is well written, even the bad guys have some charming characteristics. And, truthfully, if a drama is well written, even the good guys have some flaws. So what does it mean to be a good person? The gospels tell us that someone came up to Jesus one time and called him "Good Teacher," and Jesus responded that no one is good but God.

And yet, here in today's scripture reading, the Apostle Paul is repeatedly instructing the Christians in Rome that they should do what is good. As we've been reviewing Paul's letter to the

Romans over these past few weeks, we've heard him urge us to get on board with God's Spirit of life. We've heard that we can be more than conquerors through God's love. And we've heard Paul's advice that we Christians should have believing hearts, confessing lips, and beautiful feet. As we wrap up this review of Romans today with this section from chapter 12, let's consider Paul's appeal that every Christian should do what is good.

### **1—DISCERN WHAT IS GOOD**

The word "good" occurs three times in these verses. In the first case, Paul urges the Romans and us to discern what is good. Before we can do what is good, we have to figure out what is good to do. We have to get things right in our minds. In Romans 12:1-2, Paul suggests that this begins with presenting our bodies as living and holy sacrifices to God. Paul didn't mean that we Christians should martyr ourselves or mortify our flesh the way some religious people have done. He simply meant that we who follow Jesus should have our minds focused on Christ instead of on the world around us. Our minds should be made new by our learnings of Christ's teachings. Our thinking and behaviors should be transformed by our adoration and worship of God. As we train our minds not on the customs of our society, but rather on the good and perfect will of God, then we will naturally change our way of life too.

These positive and good changes are most noticeable when a person first turns their life over to Christ. Sometimes the changes that come with conversion are quite dramatic. But even for us who grew up as Christians or have been Christians for many decades, the transformation of our minds and behaviors is an ongoing process. In verses 11-13, Paul continues describing what that transformation looks like. When we discern what God's good will is and align ourselves with that goodness of God, then we won't get tired or bored of the good God expects from us. We won't lag in zeal. Rather, we'll be ardent in spirit and eager to serve the Lord. The goodness of God will permeate our attitudes so that we rejoice in hope, so that we're patient in suffering, and so that we persevere in prayer. When we discern what is God's good and perfect will, our attitudes will brighten and our joy will be complete.

I grant you that it isn't always easy to discern what God's will is. That's why we are so blessed as United Methodists to have the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that teaches us to ask four questions: 1) What does scripture say? 2) What does church tradition advise? 3) What does the reason of science tell us? And (4) what learning do we gain from our own human experience? When we combine the wisdom of those four sources of authority, we can come up with some great answers to what is the right and good thing to do. And when we look to scripture, it never hurts to lean on Micah 6:8, which reads, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Figuring out the will of God isn't really all that hard. Justice. Kindness. Walking humbly with God. That's how we discern what is good to do.

## **2—HOLD FAST TO WHAT IS GOOD**

In Romans 12, Paul has a second idea about how to do what is good. In verse nine, he says we should "hold fast to what is good." Maybe all of us can be good for a moment. But to do good as followers of Christ, our goodness can't just be temporary or fleeting. That's why Paul surrounds this admonition to hold fast to what is good with instructions to "let love be genuine," to "love one another with mutual affection," and to "outdo one another in showing honor."

Doing good isn't sustainable if it comes from a shallow source. For our goodness to continue, it must be anchored deeply in love for God and one another. As Paul writes in verse 13, this love isn't self-centered, but instead "contributes to the needs of the saints." As Paul writes in verse 15, when we do good, we will "rejoice with those who rejoice," we will "weep with those who weep," and we will "live in harmony with one another." Paul is describing a kind of relationship that only happens through dedication. He's talking about a type of community that takes work to create and sustain through a variety of challenges and hardships. This kind of good can only happen when we hold fast.

It might make sense to us to do good by loving those who are close to us in our families, in our neighborhoods, and in our church. That's a great beginning. But Paul doesn't let Christians off the hook

so easily. When we do good because of God's love in our hearts, he indicates that we will also "extend hospitality to strangers." The deep Christian love that inspires us to be and do good won't allow us to be haughty and think too highly of ourselves. Instead, we do good when we "associate with the lowly and don't claim to be wiser than we are." In other words, doing what is good will take us out of our comfort zone. We won't be able to stay safely with just those whom we know well. To do good, we'll have to be willing to let down our guard and our pretenses. We'll have to admit that there's a lot we don't know and understand. To do good, we'll have to befriend those who are different and be willing to learn from them. This is what it means to hold fast to what is good.

### **3—OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD**

Of course, the Apostle Paul wasn't only talking about doing good with our fellow saints and nice strangers. In verse 14 and verses 17-21, Paul also discusses the very real struggle of how to do good when faced with evil and persecution. When others are attacking us, how should a good Christian respond?

Paul advises us to do the opposite of what might come most naturally. Rather than lash back, we are to "bless those who persecute" us. "Bless and do not curse them," says Paul. In verse 17, Paul writes that, rather than "repay anyone evil for evil," we are to do our best to do "what is noble" and to "live peaceably with all." This past week was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's "I Have a Dream" speech. In that speech, King said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." That's right, of course. When others go low, we go high.

If we are going to do the good that God has called us to do, then we need to leave vengeance to God's divine wisdom and timing. That eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth philosophy of the Old Testament never worked out so well. As someone once said, if we all practiced that policy, the entire world would be toothless and blind. Some people think that the end justifies the means. But our job as Christians is to do good always. Doing good is both the end and the means. As Paul writes in verses 20 and 21, "If

your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.” Our goodness will show up their evil for what it is. There’s no need to play their dirty game. There’s no need to play by their rotten rules. We will overcome evil by doing good.

### **CONCLUSION**

Good works has gotten a bad name in Christianity because some people took the idea too far and thought that our salvation was based on the number of good works we do. They thought of salvation like a scale. If our sins are weighing down one side of the scale, then we surely have to pile a lot of good works on the other side, so that good can prevail and win us a spot in heaven.

That’s certainly not what the Apostle Paul was writing about here in Romans 12. He’s simply saying that Christian people are good people. It’s like what Jesus said in the gospels about a good tree bearing good fruit. And it’s like what we read in Ephesians 2:10, which says that “we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”

In this review of Romans, we see clearly that God is the one who makes salvation possible. But we are participants in that life of salvation. By discerning what is good, by holding fast to what is good, and by overcoming evil with good, we fulfill the plan that God intends for us. As we worship God and love one another, we do what is good.